

# Foundations

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# Foundations

Foundations is an international journal of evangelical theology published in the United Kingdom. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics, and to indicate their relevance to pastoral

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## EDITORIAL

About ten years ago I sat in a lecture room and listened to Dr. Mike Ovey give an impassioned plea to young theologians to take theological education seriously. Mike was committed to the importance of life-long learning, and its importance in both equipping and protecting the saints (to combine Ephesians 4 with Acts 20). As unusual bedfellows as Ovey and Prof. Karl Barth would be, I think Mike would agree with Barth when he wrote,

Theology is no undertaking that can be blithely surrendered to others by anyone engaged in the ministry of God's Word. It is no hobby of some especially interested and gifted individuals. A community that is awake and conscious of its commission and task in the world will of necessity be a theologically interested community.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, if you want to be a true witness you need to be engaged in theology. It cannot be left to some class of élite professionals or dismissed as irrelevant in the "I just want to preach the Bible" sort of way. Barth continues,

Theology would be an utter failure if it should place itself in some elegant eminence where it would be concerned only with God, the world, man and some other items, perhaps those of historical interest, instead of being theology for the community. Like the pendulum which regulates the movements of a clock, so theology is responsible for the reasonable service of the community.<sup>2</sup>

Theology doesn't belong in the academy only; it must serve the church in being a witness – from the community, for the community. Without robust theology the community becomes a clock telling the wrong time; without the community all you have is a pretty pendulum in a cabinet that has been disconnected from the clock's movements.

In essence, leaders are readers and teachers are students. If you want to edify and build up then you must start at home. There are many ways and places to continue our theological learning and reflection, and I hope Foundations may provide just one such watering hole for your ministry. Whether it feeds you as a sole pastor, stimulates you as an academic or lay-person, or is used in a variety of team situations, I hope it serves in some small measure to "equip the saints".

My second hope is that Foundations provides a space in which a younger generation of emerging scholars may begin that process of learning and training through contributing. It's an exciting opportunity to be able to encourage a generation of younger scholars to "stretch their legs", so to speak. They need somewhere to write that first piece, and some encouragement to employ their gifts over a lifetime for the edification of the church and its

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

leaders. Foundations, I hope, may be a place to do something small towards that end.

The greatest privilege I'm discovering lies in the reading of a range of excellent articles. The opportunity to think, reflect, and interact at a deeper level is already having pay-offs in my own ministry. To that end I'd encourage you to carve out time, perhaps on your own, or perhaps with other leaders, to read and reflect on the articles in this edition.

Dr. Jamie Grant has written on "Imprecation in the Psalms". Considering the genre and its function in relating to injustice is important for Christians to grapple with. The vocabulary of the psalms provides a way for human beings to express human emotions back to God. Jamie encourages us to think about how we unapologetically appropriate what imprecation has to offer us today.

Heather Harper has written on "Isolation in Job", reflecting on the ways in which Job's experience may serve to inform the spiritually struggling today. She skilfully weaves careful examination of the text with practical and pastoral application.

Jon Putt has written a fascinating theological exploration of culture, class and ethnicity, considering some of the implications for ministry that stem from a robust biblical understanding of these concepts. He includes pertinent reflections from some of the overspill from the recent MLK50 and T4G conferences.

Fiona Gibson is currently conducting doctoral research into *acedia* or "sloth" as it has also been called. She has written an engaging piece on the fourth century desert Father Evagrius' understanding of sloth as a "capital sin" from which others flow. After outlining the nature of *acedia*, she offers reflections on what we could profitably learn today in a culture in which busyness can, ironically, be a mask for spiritual laziness.

Finally, Daniel Stevens is a PhD student at Cambridge and has provided a review article on the Tyndale House Greek New Testament. The THGNT is a significant contribution to the editing of the Greek New Testament and Daniel helps us to think through why it is important and what it has to offer.

So why read any further? Richard Dawkins has written,

What has "theology" ever said that is of the smallest use to anybody? When has "theology" ever said anything that is demonstrably true and is not obvious?... What makes you think that "theology" is a subject at all?<sup>3</sup>

Cyril Georgeson responds,

It is a subject because of its Subject. Where Christianity is lived well, the charge that theologians can engage only in the pursuit of theology devoid of contemporary issues should sound false to the ears of this generation. For all truth is God's truth.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Dawkins, "The Emptiness of Theology", *Free Inquiry* magazine, Vol 18, Number 2.

<sup>4</sup> Cyril Georgeson, "Theology as a Subject" <http://rzim.org/a-slice-of-infinity/theology-as-a-subject/> np. Cited 20 April, 2018.

Each of the articles in this issue combine rigorous theological engagement with practical and pastoral application. As such, they have much that is useful to academics, practitioners and the church more broadly. Theological reading and reflection is critical to a fruitful ministry. So I commend the articles that follow and pray they may stimulate your minds, shape your practice and encourage your hearts.

*Martin Salter*

*May 2018*

# CRISIS, CURSING AND THE CHRISTIAN: READING IMPRECATORY PSALMS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

*Jamie A. Grant\**

Many Christian readers of the Psalter balk at the psalms that call down curses on particular people in response to wrongs that have been perpetrated by them. We are uncomfortable both with the language and the ethical implications. Effectively, these psalms are omitted from the life and worship of the church. This article argues that this should not be the case. When understood in the light of the constraints of genre and when understood as prayers offered to the Sovereign, these psalms provide us with a spiritual vocabulary which enables us to deal with the horrific injustices of life before the throne of God.

## *Introduction*

When writing a commentary on Psalm 79, amongst the others in Books 3 and 4 of the psalms, it struck me that there are two elements of that prayer which make contemporary Christians profoundly uncomfortable. The first is its imprecatory content: we are uncomfortable with the idea of asking God to do nasty things to other people (see, for example, Ps 79:6, 12). This type of prayer is known as imprecation, and psalms that include such elements are described as imprecatory – psalms that ask the Lord to take vengeance on an individual or a group of people. Secondly, we are uncomfortable with the lament aspects of many of these psalms. How is it that the psalmist dares to tell God that his people have suffered enough? How dare he insist, as he clearly does, “We have suffered enough! We get the point! It’s time to show mercy!” There is an undercurrent of complaint in this poem, and our contemporary brand of Christian spirituality finds it difficult to accommodate such a manner of approaching God. Properly speaking, imprecation is a subset of lament and each form is marked by a directness of approach and a sense of covenantal expectation that is alien to our normal spirituality.

We are not alone in finding these poems uncomfortable and several scholars suggest that we, effectively, do away with the voice of imprecation from the Psalms. Let me give a few examples: C. S. Lewis describes the

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imprecatory psalms as “the refinement of malice” and “contemptible”. He goes on to suggest,

We must not either try to explain them away or to yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious. We must face both facts squarely. The hatred is there – festering, gloating, undisguised – and also we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it...<sup>1</sup>

Francis Watson has also called into question the continuing validity of the imprecations for Christian readers of Scripture, saying of Psalm 137,

Christian victims of oppression could never legitimately appropriate this psalm in its entirety, however extreme their sufferings, and its use in Christian liturgical contexts can in no circumstances be justified.<sup>2</sup>

While Watson makes clear that his interpretative problems with Psalm 137 are driven by his understanding of New Testament ethics, rather than by any sense of neo-Marcionite superiority, other scholars are sometimes less careful in their outright rejection of imprecations. Several scholars follow the somewhat problematic approach of understanding the imprecations as true reflections of the psalmists’ mental state but argue that this presentation is not exemplary. This is, effectively, a visceral human response before God and one that we, as Christian readers, should always be able to rise above. Alfred Martens summarises this view accordingly:

Ultimately, of course, Christians at prayer will keep in mind that in praying the psalms they find themselves within a pre-Christian and sub-Christian ethos, on a level far surpassed by the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, at least within contemporary Western brands of Christianity, we are uncomfortable with the imprecations. In most of our lectionary traditions, imprecatory voices are not read, and the same is true in traditions where psalms are sung. Equally clearly, many interpreters are sceptical about the continued validity of such expressions in the Christian era. What, therefore, are we to do with psalms such as Psalm 69 that calls for the death of enemies or Psalm 137 that appears to eulogise the killing of babies? While remaining troubled by these voices in Scripture, many Christian readers are instinctively cautious about removing, either literally or functionally, sections of Scripture simply because they make us uncomfortable or because

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: G. Bles, 1958), 20–2.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 121. For a similar expression of opinion, see also Watson’s interesting dialogue with Christopher Seitz in “The Old Testament as Christian Scripture: A Response to Professor Seitz”, *SJT* 52/2 (1999), 227–32.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Martens, “Praying the Christian Psalms” in *Liturgie und Dichtung*, vol. 2 (eds. H. Becker and R. Kaczynski; St. Etienne: EOS, 1983), 503.



they are difficult to understand. So, the question remains: should we, can we, adopt such words as our own in our experience of worship? Before rejecting a category of the canon outright, Erich Zenger's cautionary words need to be heard. He suggests that we should read the psalms of enmity,

...without jumping into the conversation too quickly, without shoving them aside in know-it-all fashion, without expressing judgment out of a sense of Christian superiority, we need to try to understand these texts in their historical context, their linguistic shape, and their theological passion. That is the first task.<sup>4</sup>

If we are to follow Zenger's sage advice, then four considerations should shape our thinking:

1. Imprecatory psalms follow clearly-defined genre patterns;
2. Imprecations take injustice seriously;
3. Imprecations are prayers;
4. Imprecations are speech-acts.

Careful consideration of the imprecatory psalms as literature, should lead us to a position whereby the reader can actually attest their continued validity and importance, rather than being slightly embarrassed and generally uncomfortable about their inclusion in Scripture. My aim is to provide a robust apology for the continued and vibrant use of imprecations as part of Christian worship, both private and corporate.

### 1. *Imprecation as a Genre*

David Firth wrote a book about the imprecatory psalms entitled *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms*.<sup>5</sup> Surrendering is precisely what occurs in these texts. Rather than encouraging God's people themselves to seek vengeance against the Babylonians or the mocking Edomites, the psalmist encourages the people of God to offer these offences over to him in prayer. What is more, the psalmist seeks only that retribution from God which is appropriate to the wrongs meted out against his people. In fact, the imprecatory psalms follow a fairly formalised genre structure that indicates that they might not be precisely what they are presented as being.

The underpinning assumption of those who reject the imprecatory psalms is that they are something base, vociferous, hate-filled and vindictive. However, a genre analysis suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Firth comments:

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<sup>4</sup> Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: WJKP, 1996), 25.

<sup>5</sup> David G. Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms: Responses to Violence in the Individual Complaints* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).

The psalms within each group model a response to violence that is appropriate to the nature of the violence that was experienced... [A] consistent pattern covers all the psalms examined. This pattern reveals itself in these areas: the consistent imminence of violence, the rejection of the right of human retribution and the limitation of the violence that could be sought from God.<sup>6</sup>

Firth's observations are telling. These poems are not visceral, bile-laden outpourings of rage. They are rather carefully crafted poetic (and prayerful, as we will see in a moment) responses to violence that has already been perpetrated on the psalmist and his community. Tellingly, these prayers are grounded in the *lex talionis*. They *respond* to the evils experienced by the community of faith by asking God to revisit *similar and proportionate* experiences upon those who committed the injustices in the first place.

A good example of this is found in that most unpalatable of enmity psalms, 137. According to historical record, the invading Babylonian armies, such was their rage after the long siege, hurled the children of survivors from the Temple Mount to be dashed on the rocks below. Therefore, the psalmist prays:

O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,  
blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us!  
Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones  
and dashes them against the rock! (Ps 137:8-9, ESV)

A gross wrong has been done and the psalmist prays that Yahweh will meet that injustice in kind, effectively reflecting back the horrors that the people had suffered and calling for a proportionate response from God.

However, again from the historical record, it appears that neighbouring nations, such as Edom, sided with the Babylonians but did not participate in the attack on the city. They mocked both Yahweh and the Judahites (Psalm 79) and egged on the attackers but did not participate in the ensuing atrocities. We see this reflected carefully in the psalmist's prayer:

Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem,  
how they said, "Lay it bare, lay it bare,  
down to its foundations!" (Ps 137:7, ESV)

Careful reciprocity comes into play. It is almost as if the poet doesn't know how he should pray with regard to the Edomites. They are not tarred by the Babylonians' horrific actions, yet neither are they entirely guiltless. So the psalmist simply prays that Yahweh will "remember" their actions, the implication being that God will know the proper response to this wrong, even if the poet himself does not.

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<sup>6</sup> Firth, *Surrendering Retribution*, 139.

Firth's observations are important because they address the underpinning presupposition that the imprecations are somehow base, vile and vicious. They are not. They are carefully crafted poems, reflecting an accepted poetic style, and they must fall within certain parameters to be included in the canon. They respond to violence, they cede any right to seek revenge and they limit the response that they seek from God to the extent of the harm perpetrated against them.

## *2. Imprecation and Injustice*

Erich Zenger further questions the underlying attitudes behind contemporary Christianity's reluctance to accept and adopt the imprecations. Is it really the result of ethical tension or does the church no longer believe in a God who intervenes in current human events?

It may be that the directness of the challenge to God and the certainty it expresses that God must be at work in history and society form the real provocation of these psalms for a Christianity whose belief in God has exhausted its historical potential in soteriology or postponed it to an afterlife by a privatist and spiritualising attitude. Here the shrill tones of the psalms of enmity can serve to shock Christianity out of the well-regulated slumber of its structural amnesia about God.<sup>7</sup>

Zenger's point is a valid one. The imprecations force us to ask ourselves a series of questions: Do we really believe in a God who actively intervenes in the events of human history? One who intervenes to declare wrong that which is wrong and right that which is right? Or is our faith limited to questions of personal salvation and only eschatological judgment? The psalmist clearly believes in an interventionist God.

Zenger goes on to develop his ideas in the light of a series of critiques of contemporary Western spirituality by making some observations drawn from the imprecations. Firstly, enemies are taken quite seriously and literally.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of broader questions of causation and the ultimate origins of immorality – the devil may well be having a field day – evil tends to have a human source; all too often people perpetrate wicked acts against other people. The psalms treat the human identity of evildoers seriously and brings the perpetrators before God in prayer. This is significant. A desire to rise above the harm done to us in response to Christ's call to "turn the other cheek" (Matt 5:39) does not imply any sort of pretence that the events never happened. Rising above evil out of a genuine Christian ethic does not result in spiritual mutism. Surely, our Father wants to hear about the traumas that

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<sup>7</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 74.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-69.

we have suffered at the hands of others, including the identity of the human perpetrators.

Secondly, Zenger contends that violence is offensive to God and runs counter to creational norms.<sup>9</sup> If we genuinely believe that Yahweh created a world that is good (Gen 1), a cosmos with his ways ingrained in its warp and woof (Prov 8), then all things that diverge from his goodness and his ways are in some sense counter-creational. They are inherently anti-God. The imprecatory psalms force us to describe evil as evil and to publicly declare that there are actions which are simply abhorrent to God. Reading the imprecatory psalms forces us to question our thought processes: Why do we shy away from proclaiming actions to be wrong, evil and abhorrent in God's eyes – a flagrant breach of his creational norms? Such evil clearly exists in our world, so why do we tend to reject these poems that give us a vocabulary of approach to God in the context of the experience of this evil?

Thirdly, the imprecations bring attention to violence suffered by the weak.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps our reluctance to appropriate the psalms of enmity is rooted in the comfort of our lives. We face no great harm and we seldom experience personal evils. Most of us would not consider ourselves as having "enemies" *per se*. Therefore the language of enmity seems alien and, in some sense, inappropriate. There are many people throughout this world – Christians and not – who experience the reality of enmity in ways unimaginable to the majority of us. The imprecations give us a prayer language to address such evil. Whether this is the persecuted church in parts of the Arab world or girls trafficked from abroad and abused on our own doorsteps, the imprecations encourage us, as readers, to personally embody the traumas of others and to declare before the Creator, "That's not right! You must do something about it!" The wrongs in our world are flagrant, obvious and raw. The imprecations force us to side with the persecuted and to call for cosmic justice.

Fourthly, Zenger contends that the imprecatory psalms challenge our ambivalence towards injustice. As quoted above, their "shrill tones... serve to shock Christianity out of [its] well-regulated slumber".<sup>11</sup> Do we even see the evil in the world around us anymore? In a generation of twenty-four-hour news, we have become inured to those atrocities of life that should horrify us to our very core. The imprecations force us, as praying people, to bring the horrors of life before the throne of grace, *as horrors*. There is no need to polish or beautify or make more polite and acceptable that which God sees, and which he sees as tragically gross perversions of his created order. The existence of evil in the world should be heart-breaking to every believer. The

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<sup>9</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 73-79.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-86.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

psalms of enmity force us to experience that heartbreak in the presence of God rather than apart from him.

Zenger's careful analysis of the dynamic of imprecation takes us on to a third consideration.

### *3. Imprecations as Prayers*

Importantly, imprecatory psalms commit all injustice into God's hands for his response.<sup>12</sup> They give over the act of retribution into his hands, who will respond to the prayers of his people precisely in the manner that *he* sees fit. Humans pray in accordance with their best, but inevitably limited, understanding. There is security in such prayer because we know that the Sovereign will respond to our prayers from a position of perfect knowledge. We may pray towards a particular end but we do so in the sure knowledge that Yahweh will respond to this prayer in the way that *he* knows to be best and that may or may not be aligned to the tenor of our specific requests. Significantly, however, we must recognise that imprecation breaks the cycle of violence because prayer is the best substitute for a violent response to violence.<sup>13</sup>

In the Psalms, human beings reach out to God; the initiative is human; the language is human; we make an effort to communicate. He receives; he chooses to respond or not, according to his inscrutable wisdom. He gives his assent or withholds it.<sup>14</sup>

Imprecation leaves the question of right response entirely in the hands of God. He knows what is best, so offering prayer to the One who is able to do all things is the best response to violence and injustice. Clearly everyone who prays to the God of Scripture knows that there is no place for selfish vindictiveness in our prayers. God will not tolerate such an attitude which would, in itself, also constitute a denial of the divine plan for life on earth. The whole point of imprecation is that we must let that prayer be an honest assessment of reality in the light of God's design. In giving these matters over to him, we acknowledge that he alone truly knows what course of action is appropriate to the circumstances:

Imprecations affirm God by surrendering the last word to God. They give to God not only their lament about their desperate situation, but also the right to judge the originators of that situation. They leave everything in God's hands, even feelings of hatred and aggression.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 76-80.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-44.

<sup>14</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayer of Ancient Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 15.

#### 4. *Imprecations as Speech-Acts*

One final consideration is important for a proper understanding of biblical imprecation: these poetic prayers are divine speech-acts as well as being human words. Therefore they should never be passed over lightly. Through the process of canonisation these, very human, words have become the word of God to his people. This should not be forgotten. As the name suggests, a speech-act arises where an action occurs out of speech – *saying* something also *does* something.<sup>16</sup> Kit Baker argues cogently with regard to the pedagogical intention (the illocutions) of the imprecations that they function as speech-acts which were not only legitimate in their original context but which also remain relevant to the current community of faith.<sup>17</sup> Baker contends,

In short, the illocutionary stance of the Psalter should be counted as the illocutionary stance of God... [The imprecations are] consistent with the illocutionary stance of the Psalter... and the New Testament is consistent with that of the imprecatory psalms.<sup>18</sup>

His carefully-developed argument suggests that it would be inappropriate to marginalise the imprecatory psalms by reading them critically. As readers we tend to side with the psalmist in our reading, even when his experience is different from our own. The arguments laid out by Lewis and others above, suggest that it would be somehow inappropriate for the Christian reader to so read the text. The inescapable conclusion of Baker's argument is that, should we fail to associate with the voice of the psalmist in the imprecations, we fail to grasp the didactic voice of God. The poets' prayers reflect the divine voice for his people. God *teaches* his people through the psalms of imprecation not to reject the psalmists' voices but to embrace them as a spiritual vocabulary through which we can process the undeniable evils of this world as we seek to live life *coram Deo*.

Baker goes on to deal with the argument that, while such language may have been appropriate under the Old Covenant, it certainly is not so in the Christian era. Through careful analysis of the way in which imprecatory psalms are used in the New Testament and of how they are adopted by Jesus, particularly in John's Gospel, he shows that the psalmic teaching does not "misfire" in the NT (i.e. the basic teaching effect continues into the NT) but that cursing is no longer "a necessary response". In fact, Baker suggests that

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<sup>16</sup> See Richard Briggs' helpful article "Speech-Act Theory", in D. G. Firth and J. A. Grant, eds., *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 75–110.

<sup>17</sup> Kit Baker, *Imprecation as Divine Discourse: Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship, and Theological Interpretation* (Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements 16; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Baker, *Imprecation as Divine Discourse*, 214.

John actively presents Jesus as an exemplar imprecator in his account (e.g. Ps 69 in John 2 & 15-16 etc.). Ultimately, Baker concludes,

The primary divine illocutions, occurring at a genre level, are invitations to both “suffer without cause” and “seek God” in times of oppression... God affirms the stance of the psalmist within the psalm: his voice, his boldness, his innocence, his zeal, his loyalty and his desire for justice and deliverance. Simultaneously, God reminds the reader of his loyal love, faithfulness and compassion when circumstances suggest the contrary... These original divine illocutions continue to function and the Christological use of the NT supports and expands their illocutionary force.<sup>19</sup>

So, the teaching force of the imprecatory psalms revolves around honest life before God in a world that is impregnated with evil. Ignoring the atrocities of this world in the hope that they will go away does no-one any good. Being nice in the face of great social wrong is not commendable. It is, rather, a terrible abrogation of our duty as God’s people in this world and before his throne. These psalms teach and they teach powerfully: Evil in the created order must be named and condemned for what it actually is. We must call upon the sovereign God who commands armies (Yahweh *tsevaot*, the Lord of hosts) to intervene in this world to bring an end to injustice and to see justice done. This is the radical prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”. The imprecations give us a spiritual vocabulary to deal with the wrongs that we witness in life. These poems are affirmed for us by Jesus himself and they should be part of our prayer speak, both private and communal.

### 5. Conclusion

I suspect that much of our reticence with regard to the psalms of enmity is culturally rooted, rather than being derived from some sense of ethical discomfort. It is not so much that we feel we *should not* speak this way. It is, rather, because we *do* not speak in such a manner that we have grown uncomfortable with the challenging discourse of the imprecations. However, biblical norms and principles should always be allowed to challenge our culturally-derived presuppositions.

The imprecatory voice is every bit as important to the community of faith today as it was in the days of the psalmists. Obviously, there is a teaching task related to this challenge. It would be wrong to appropriate the imprecatory psalms in public worship without first teaching what they are and how they work. Their interface with New Testament ethics is an interesting question and one that creates a slightly different dynamic. However, the essence of what imprecations are and what they do remains

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<sup>19</sup> Baker, *Imprecation as Divine Discourse*, 216.

essentially unchanged. All of the psalms provide us with a spiritual vocabulary for encounter with God in every circumstance. The psalms of enmity provide the Christian reader with the means of dealing with the evils of human experience in a way that is true to the divine abhorrence of social injustice and to our own loathing of the moral abominations that are all too prevalent in our world. Far from removing ourselves from these psalms, given the world in which we live, we should embrace them as our own.



# THE BOOK OF JOB AS A THEOLOGY OF ISOLATION

*Heather R. F. Harper\**

Suffering is an inescapable part of life. As Christians it is difficult to comprehend that a God who is both omnipotent and benevolent could allow his people to endure such agony. This raises the issue of how Christians should respond to suffering. To answer the question this paper will firstly reflect on the aspects of isolation caused by suffering in the book of Job, paying particular attention to chapters 2, 3, 29, 30 and 31. Secondly, it will consider Job's response to isolation caused by suffering, with particular attention to his lament and Job 42:7-17, and use this as a paradigm of how Christians should respond to God, our own thoughts and emotions, and others during times of suffering.

## *Introduction*

In many ways, the book of Job reads as a theological reflection on the problem of isolation caused by suffering. The issue of suffering is challenging for the Christian as it is difficult to comprehend that God, who is both omnipotent and benevolent, can allow his people to endure the agony caused by such things as poverty, cancer or persecution – but life experience suggests that he does.<sup>1</sup> The unpleasant, often horrendous, circumstances faced in daily life can lead the believer to feel isolated from family, friends, society and God as one struggles, like Job, to maintain theological integrity whilst seeking answers to the most difficult “why” questions in life.

In order to explore this in more detail, the paper has been divided into two sections: The first will examine isolation in the book of Job, and the second contemplates Job's response and how Christians may respond to suffering. The study will conclude that reading the book of Job as a theology of isolation can assist Christians in understanding how to communicate with God, respond to their own thoughts, and support others during times of suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> D. W. Amundsen, “Suffering”, in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson & David F. Wright (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1988), 667.

### 1) Isolation in the Book of Job

Job is internationally renowned and surrounded by family, servants and wealth; he enjoys a blessed life which is attributed to his “exemplary response to God through his piety and his moral conduct”.<sup>2</sup> However, when the question “Does Job fear God for nothing?” is raised in the heavenly realm, it becomes apparent that Job’s world is about to change. The question sees Job removed from a place of safety, and plunged into immense suffering and confusion, testing his pious integrity and transporting him to the depths of total isolation.<sup>3</sup>

The intensity of Job’s isolation develops throughout the story, beginning with his wife and friends, and moving to his relationship with God, culminating in a sense of inner turmoil, as the gap between Job and the framework of his existence widens (chapters 29, 30 and 31).

#### *Job’s Wife*

Job’s wife is an equivocal character, and much scholarly debate exists in relation to whether she is an advocate of the Satan, or an ally for God and Job.<sup>4</sup> Whilst both are plausible, I propose her role is an amalgamation of the two; on one hand, her words “curse God and die” were not merely uttered to occasion an outward display of anger on Job’s part – rather, they are used to drive Job away from God by urging him to commit blasphemy as a means of escape from his current situation.<sup>5</sup> Such an outburst would have been seen as an act of rebellion against God, one that would result in death, and thus as Habel argues, “was a form of self-destruction”.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, her words prompt Job to seek the theological truth behind his suffering.<sup>7</sup> Whilst Job is not a Hebrew, the basis of his inner conflict lies in a theological understanding similar to the Deuteronomic Covenant code (Deut 27 & 28).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Louisville, Kentucky: WJKP, 2012), 35.

<sup>3</sup> James L. Crenshaw, “Job 3: Between Text and Sermon”, *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69:1 (2014), 88.

<sup>4</sup> For the Satan: F. I. Anderson, Augustine, Calvin, N. C. Habel and T. Longman III; for God and Job: C. L. Seow, Pope and F. R. Magdalene; both: D. C. Hester, D. Schweitzer and J. G. Janzen (although he leans more towards the Satan).

<sup>5</sup> Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia: WP, 1985): 96. It is worth noting that Longman suggests that Job’s wife may be so heartbroken at seeing her husband suffer that she views “Death as a relief”; Tremper Longman III, *Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 98.

<sup>6</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job*, 96.

<sup>7</sup> F. Rachel Magdalene, “Job’s Wife as Hero: A Feminist-Forensic Reading of the Book of Job”, *Biblical Interpretation* 14:3 (2006), 214; Donald Schweitzer, ““Curse God and Die”: Was Job’s Wife Completely Wrong”, *Touchstone* (September 1996), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Susannah Ticciati, *Job and the Disruption of Identity: Reading Beyond Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 61. It is worth noting that Job was not a Hebrew. Rather, the author uses his name,

Thus, he envisaged a certain amount of correlation between a person's actions and the receipt of divine blessing or punishment.<sup>9</sup> Whilst he seems to fully accept God's sovereignty, acknowledging that both blessing and curse are gifted by him (1:21), the omission of the gifting terminology in his rebuke (2:10) is noteworthy, as it may imply that Job is beginning to doubt his beliefs. As Seow proposes, the move between the two verses is "indicative of a deviation in Job's attitude or in his pious confidence".<sup>10</sup> In essence the rebuke provides a glimpse of the unseen conflict which manifests as Job comes to terms with the fact his theology is no longer reflected in his life experience.<sup>11</sup> In short, Job comes close to doing what he rebuked his wife for. As Pardes contends, "[Job's] wife dares to say something which is on the verge of bursting through his own mouth."<sup>12</sup>

Irrespective of the intention of the conversation, the exchange highlights disharmony within their marital relationship due to theological differences.<sup>13</sup> The support which one would expect from a spouse, is not forthcoming and Job's isolation has begun.

### *The Friends*

From a Western perspective the silence between Job and his friends is unusual as we would expect a cursory greeting. However, the grief experienced upon seeing Job's appearance, which had changed so drastically since they last saw him (2:12), meant all they could do was sit quietly (2:13). As Janzen points out, "[t]heirs is a condolence so deeply felt as to be inarticulate".<sup>14</sup> The friends' actions (2:12) mirror those of Job (1:20) and convey a sense of solidarity.<sup>15</sup> The customary nature of their act may lead us to view their compassion as superficial, but even deeds carried out as part of

and imprecise location of Uz, as a literary device to distance the reader from the issues, before seeking a solution (Janzen, *Job*, 34-35).

<sup>9</sup> Ticciati, *Job and the Disruption of Identity*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> C. L. Seow, *Job 1-21 Interpretation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013), 297.

<sup>11</sup> Ticciati, *Job and the Disruption of Identity*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> I. Pardes, *Contradictions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 148-9, quoted in Magdalene, "Job's Wife as Hero", 239.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Schweitzer, "Curse God and Die: Was Job's Wife Completely Wrong", *Touchstone*, (September 1996), 34.

<sup>14</sup> "The Hebrew verb *nud*' may suggest physical forms of communication such as rocking were used in place of verbal communication to demonstrate a unity with Job in his suffering." (Janzen, *Job*, 56-7).

<sup>15</sup> It has been suggested that the friends' actions are similar to those of Moses in Ex 9:10, and the ashes were used as a means of "calling forth the same sickness on themselves in an act of total empathy" (Habel, *The Book of Job*, 97); Janzen, *Job*, 58.

the social norm can be both expected and sincere; for example, the sending of a condolence card. As Andersen suggests, the friends' actions "need be no less heartfelt because they followed etiquette".<sup>16</sup>

Janzen suggests the silence demonstrated by the friends (2:13) indicates their desire to help Job find a way out of his bereft state.<sup>17</sup> Although it is difficult to make this claim with any degree of certainty, the silence does stand in sharp contrast to Job's soliloquy (Job 3).<sup>18</sup> Thus, one possible conclusion would be to view the silence as a container in which Job's resentment and rage have festered, and will soon erupt.<sup>19</sup> As Habel contends, "[t]he silence sets the stage for the violent verbal outburst of Job which follows".<sup>20</sup>

### *The Soliloquy*

Silent suffering cannot persist; it requires an outlet and for Job this comes in the form of a "curse", not directed at God, but at "the day of [his] birth" (3:1). The soliloquy echoes Genesis 1, but is given a greater depth of meaning when considered in relation to this text and the prologue (Job 1 & 2).

God created man "in his own image" (Gen 1:27) and declared the world "very good" as a result, suggesting man was the pinnacle of creation, "his real counterpart with whom he will speak and have communion".<sup>21</sup> God's statement as to Job's character implies he is also the pinnacle of humanity: "there is no-one on earth like him" (1:8; 2:3). Unfortunately, Job is not privy to this information, and from a human perspective it would seem that by cursing his birth he almost rejects this honour.<sup>22</sup> As Andersen states, Job "threatens to cancel his belief in the goodness of God in making him man".<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, if, as Seow indicates, the Hebrew term *geber* is more often associated with a grown man than a male infant, Job's words are amplified,

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<sup>16</sup> Francis I. Andersen, *Job* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1976), 101.

<sup>17</sup> Janzen, *Job*, 57.

<sup>18</sup> It is also reasonable to assume that the friends' silence demonstrates empathy with his plight. However, it is difficult to conclude with any degree of certainty their exact intention. For instance, as Moster contends, the friends may well console Job but could at the same time harbour resentment towards him (Julius B. Moster, "The Punishment of Job's Friends", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 25:4 (1997), 215).

<sup>19</sup> Job 3 is a soliloquy and as such is not directed at the friends; rather it is a speech whereby the one speaking is also the one listening. If anyone in the immediate area overhears the dialogue, this is unintentional (Janzen, *Job*, 68-69).

<sup>20</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job*, 98.

<sup>21</sup> F. Horst, *Gottes Recht*, (Kaiser, 1961) in Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: SCM Press, 1972), 59.

<sup>22</sup> The epilogue affirms that Job was the only one to speak correctly of (or most likely, to) God. As such, the lament did not affect his status from the divine perspective. This raises the issue of Job's non-isolation from God which will be discussed in more detail below.

<sup>23</sup> Andersen, *Job*, 106.

implying that he moves from cursing his own birth, to cursing the creation of man in general.<sup>24</sup>

Seow's argument is probably warranted, particularly when we consider that Job's desire for the "darkness" to consume the "day" of his birth (3:4ff) is reminiscent of the "let there be light" and "evening and morning" statements of Genesis 1. It would appear, as Janzen proposes, that Job is attempting to "reverse the primal creative word".<sup>25</sup> His theological belief system is undermined to the point where he begins to question God's goodness in creation. He is searching for the "why" and in doing so comes close to believing that whilst God exists, he is "an arbitrary God who overturns justice".<sup>26</sup> The sense of inner turmoil is immense, and forcefully conveyed in 3:26 with the use of the synonyms peace, quietness and rest. It is little wonder that Job "long[s] for death" (3:21).

However, Job's cry appears unanswered; his suffering is unrelenting and death has not come. It seems hopeless. However, it is God's silence and the inevitable sense of isolation that Job experiences as a result, that forces him to question his theology.<sup>27</sup> Or, as Janzen suggests, Job awakens "from the 'dogmatic slumber' in which he had formerly lived in creatural piety".<sup>28</sup> Therefore, as Hester argues, the soliloquy should not be viewed in terms of Job giving up on life; he is asking questions; he wants to understand. In short, he "clings to life".<sup>29</sup> But God's response is slow to arrive, and Job's search for meaning and desire to maintain his integrity will put him increasingly at odds with his friends and his sense of isolation grows.

### *Fall from Grace (Job 29-31)*

Whilst chapters 29-31 deal with separate issues, beginning with Job's memories of better days when he prospered under God's protection (Job 29), his intense protest against his current state (Job 30) and his final defence (Job 31), the three chapters are intrinsically linked.<sup>30</sup> They form a response to various passages throughout the speech cycles, and reveal the enormity of the battle raging within his being.<sup>31</sup> He is trapped by the desire to reconcile with God, his friends and society whilst "maintaining [his] righteousness" (27:6), a point made by Thomson when he writes that "Job wants to affirm both his faith in God and his own integrity. But in the context of his

<sup>24</sup> C. L. Seow, *Job 1-21 Interpretation and Commentary*, 319-320.

<sup>25</sup> Janzen, *Job*, 62.

<sup>26</sup> Ticciati, *Job and the Disruption of Identity*, 57.

<sup>27</sup> Whilst Job experiences a sense of isolation from God due to his human perspective, the epilogue suggests that at no point did God feel isolated from Job.

<sup>28</sup> Janzen, *Job*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> David C. Hester, *Job*, (Louisville, Kentucky: WJKP, 2005), 23.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>31</sup> Ticciati, *Job and the Disruption of Identity*, 95.

alienation, the attempt to affirm both is blocked.”<sup>32</sup> Job’s realisation that retributive justice is incompatible with his current situation (27:2-7), and his suffering confirms that he is, in fact, speaking truthfully. As Ticciati affirms, “[Job’s] experience of wretchedness becomes at its deepest point the very certainty of his integrity”.<sup>33</sup> This insight moves Job from simply questioning God, to building his defence (Job 29-30) and vehemently confronting him by means of a negative confession (Job 31).<sup>34</sup>

Chapters 29-30 reveal that Job understood his personal worship and sacrifices were necessary, but lacking if his piety was not demonstrated by his social conduct. Andersen agrees:

[F]or [Job], right conduct is almost entirely social; his private duty to himself as a man is not discussed, his duty to God in the cult is touched on only in the matter of idolatry (31:26f).<sup>35</sup>

However, despite the fact Job was meticulous in practising moral justice towards others (29:7-17), even those rejected by society, God continues to subject him to a life of extreme suffering and he has become a social outcast (30:1-14). Job, a man once admired by society and renowned internationally, is now the “brother of jackals and a companion of ostriches” (30:29).<sup>36</sup> Job’s sense of isolation has become all-encompassing and consequently, in his mind, the God who once defended the blameless has become “cruel and unjust”.<sup>37</sup>

In chapter 31 Job attempts to call God into action with numerous statements which proclaim that he is blameless, having lived his life in accordance with God’s commands.<sup>38</sup> His grievances in relation to the unsubstantiated accusations made by his friends (particularly Eliphaz in 22:5-11), and the unfair treatment he has received from God are derived

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<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Thomson Jnr., “Out of the Whirlwind: The Sense of Alienation in the Book of Job”, *Interpretation* 14:1 (1960), 57.

<sup>33</sup> Ticciati, *Job and the Disruption of Identity*, 95.

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

<sup>35</sup> Andersen, *Job*, 249.

<sup>36</sup> The “wilderness” metaphors of Job 28-31, including the jackal and ostrich, convey the sheer depth of Job’s despair; he has lost hope of finding a way out of his current situation. Janzen points out that in all instances “in the Hebrew Bible (excluding Isa 43:20) where jackals are mentioned they... give voice to the desolation and sterility of the wilderness” (Janzen, *Job*, 210). Similar wilderness metaphors are used in the Yahweh speeches of Job 38-41, paradoxically communicating hope as Job comes to a new understanding of God’s relationship with creation and humanity.

<sup>37</sup> Hester, *Job*, 75. F. Rachel Magdalene, “Job’s Wife as Hero: A Feminist-Forensic Reading of the Book of Job”, *Biblical Interpretation* 14:3 (2006), 246.

<sup>38</sup> The confession relates to various aspects of life including “lust, dishonesty, adultery, oppression, miserliness, avarice, idolatry, vindictiveness, parsimony, hypocrisy and exploitation”. It was common practice in ANE cultures for the defendant to reject an unsupported accusation made against them by insisting the plaintiff bring evidence to support their claim (see 1 Sam 12:3). The negative confession differs as it is made direct to God and “appeals against human judgement”. (Andersen, *Job*, 257, 260-264).

from his “reap what you sow” theology.<sup>39</sup> In other words, Job lived with the expectation that if he treated others well, he would receive like treatment from them and from God; likewise, if he was guilty of wrongdoing a similar fate would befall him (e.g. 31:9-10).

Job has been rejected by society, treated with contempt by his friends and his theological framework has been destroyed. Ticciati illustrates this well when commenting that a person in a similar situation to Job would,

no longer be able to find any coherence in the world, which will consequently cease to be for [him] a habitable place. Rather, its ultimate non-sense will overcome [him] and prevent [him] from finding [his] bearings among the mass of fragments the world has become.<sup>40</sup>

In short, Job has become completely isolated by the chaos of his experience.

## 2) *How the Christian should respond*

God’s decision to reward Job for his appropriate response to suffering and isolation, but severely punish the friends (although they are not punished in the end but sternly rebuked), is one of the most perplexing elements of the entire story.<sup>41</sup> As Hester affirms, “the friends are the ones who seem steadfastly defenders of God, while Job’s aggressive argument with God borders on blasphemous”.<sup>42</sup> This section will assess Job’s response to isolation by examining the epilogue (42:7-11) and the divine response to lament in more detail.

### *The Epilogue (42:7-17)*

The structure of the epilogue serves as a reminder that isolation caused by suffering involves both vertical and horizontal relationships. As Ngwa suggests, vv. 7-9 deal, in most part, with God’s relationship with humanity, whilst the general emphasis of vv. 11-17 is “on the human-human dimension”.<sup>43</sup>

#### (i) The Vertical Relationship

The epilogue is vital in understanding that God is always present, even when we do not sense him. That is to say, God’s declaration in 42:7 contradicts

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<sup>39</sup> Andersen, *Job*, 257-258; Janzen, *Job*, 209.

<sup>40</sup> Ticciati, *Job and the Disruption of Identity*, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Moster, “The Punishment of Job’s Friends”, 211. The fact that the friends received a firm rebuke rather than severe punishment will be discussed in more detail below.

<sup>42</sup> Hester, *Job*, 101.

<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting that there are elements of the horizontal and vertical in each section, therefore the structural division should not be unduly exaggerated; Kenneth Numfor Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the “Happy” Ending in Job 42:7-17* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 94.

Job's statement in 9:11 by implying that he was aware of every word uttered by Job and his friends throughout the story.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, as Hester contends, "every speech... is indirectly directed to God".<sup>45</sup> If this is correct, it indicates that whilst Job felt isolated from God, God was never, at any time, far removed from Job. This concept serves to further develop the theory that Job's perception of theological isolation stemmed from his understanding of retributive justice which led to a negative view of God's character. As Hulme affirms, "Job's doubt is not about God's existence, but about God's character."<sup>46</sup>

God's chastisement of the friends in 42:7 provides a hermeneutical key not only for the epilogue but the entire story, stressing that whilst the friends made an attempt to defend God's character, this defence was flawed by their resolute understanding of retributive justice.<sup>47</sup> Whilst holding onto one's belief is often commendable, in this case, their theological "correctness" meant they erected unassailable dogmatic barriers between Job and themselves. As Ngwa states, "the rebuke calls attention to what the friends did *not* say; they have not articulated a theological response that adequately addresses Job's situation".<sup>48</sup> This occurs because, unlike Job, they do not allow themselves the freedom to embrace new understanding.<sup>49</sup> That is to say, when Job responded to his plight by challenging God with the most difficult "why" questions in life, instead of repenting, he began to break down the theological barriers that caused him to feel isolated from God. This concept gains warrant when we consider God's action in 42:8-9.

Job had been searching for an advocate, someone to act as "a kinsman redeemer" who could reconcile him with God (6:14; 9:33; 16:20ff; 19:5-22), but his search was in vain.<sup>50</sup> However, in the epilogue Job steps into this role on behalf of his friends, successfully praying that God would "not deal with [them] according to [their] folly" (42:8-9). Job was only in a position to do this because he accepted and understood God's sovereignty (42:1-6).<sup>51</sup> As Habel contends, Job's open-mindedness means "God is not bound by a moral code of retribution; Job is free to move God to deliver the friends from death."<sup>52</sup> Thus by the end of the story, both he and his friends are reconciled to God.

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<sup>44</sup> Hester, *Job*, 70.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> William E. Hulme, *Christian Caregiving: Insights from the Book of Job* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1992), 22.

<sup>47</sup> Numfor Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the "Happy" Ending*, 102; Marvin H. Pope, "Job: Text, Translation and Notes", in *The Anchor Bible Volume 15*, eds. William F. Albright & David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 350.

<sup>48</sup> Numfor Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the "Happy" Ending*, 103 (emphasis author's own).

<sup>49</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job*, 584.

<sup>50</sup> Janzen, *Job*, 134.

<sup>51</sup> Numfor Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the "Happy" Ending*, 105.

<sup>52</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job*, 584.



## (ii) The Horizontal Relationships

In 42:11 Job has left the ash heap and returned home where he partakes in a celebratory meal with his family “and everyone who had known him” before his plight began. This is a pivotal moment for Job, marking the end of his isolation and a “return to the normal social routines of life”.<sup>53</sup>

Teaching in relation to “reward and punishment” is endorsed throughout Scripture (for example, Lev 26; Deut 28; Gal 6:7). However, the friends’ view of retribution linked sin and punishment to the extreme. This, as Waters states, “limited God to predetermined actions...”. This was the mitigating factor in their treatment of Job right from the very beginning, prior to any proclamation of his innocence.<sup>54</sup> In short, the friends were immediately stunned by the severity of Job’s suffering. As Ngwa states,

the disproportionate nature of Job’s pain renders the friends (and potentially their theological view) deficient. Job’s experience is not a normal one; it is beyond the norm and the friends recognise that.<sup>55</sup>

This highlights that feeling uncertain of what to say in this type of situation is perfectly normal. As van Wolde contends, “[w]hat more can you do in such a situation? Words fall short in suffering, real suffering... Any talk disguises the unfathomable depth of sorrow.”<sup>56</sup> However, whilst the incomprehensibility of the situation alerted Job to the fact that his initial theological response was not fitting to his current situation, his friends remained ignorant.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, when their attempts to frighten Job into repentance failed, Eliphaz decided to openly indict Job of serious social misconduct (Job 22).<sup>58</sup> As such, God’s anger in the epilogue is not the result of the friends’ mismanagement of an ordinary situation in terms of retributive justice, rather it relates to the “limiting framework” the friends used to address Job’s extreme situation, which only served to increase Job’s agony.<sup>59</sup> As Phillips states, whilst the doctrine of “reward and punishment” may exist,

... the friends inhabited a “flat deistic universe” and they failed to perceive and/or acknowledge the vast complexity of the powers and principalities in the heavenly court.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job*, 584.

<sup>54</sup> Larry J. Waters, “Elihu’s theology and his view of suffering”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (April – June 1999), 151; Moster, “The Punishment of Job’s Friends”, 212.

<sup>55</sup> Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the “Happy” Ending*, 105.

<sup>56</sup> Ellen van Wolde, *Mr and Mrs Job*, tr. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1997), 30.

<sup>57</sup> Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the “Happy” Ending*, 106; Elaine A. Phillips, “Speaking Truthfully: Job’s Friends and Job”, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18:1 (2008), 37 & 40.

<sup>58</sup> Phillips, “Speaking Truthfully”, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the “Happy” Ending*, 107. The “limiting framework” occurs when the concept of retributive justice becomes so entrenched in the minds of the friends that it leaves no scope “for the working out of God’s justice in the lives of His people.” (Waters, “Elihu’s Theology”, 151); Phillips, “Speaking Truthfully”, 35.

<sup>60</sup> Phillips, “Speaking Truthfully”, 35.

Thus, if the friends had better understood God's sovereignty, they may have been more flexible in their approach, they may have dealt with Job's problem in a more empathetic manner, and consequently reduced the isolation Job felt. In other words, *empathy* would have enabled them to enter the gap of isolation, and perhaps they would have reconciled with Job sooner, and supported him in a more appropriate manner. As Janzen states, when we offer support "we attempt to cross the chasm somehow through sympathetic, perhaps symbolic, identification, hoping to draw the other back with us into the familiar world."<sup>61</sup>

In short, the epilogue encourages the Christian to consider the type of response God truly desires when experiencing isolation caused by suffering.<sup>62</sup>

### *The Divine Response*

Job's suffering and subsequent sense of isolation changed his entire world and everything he knew and loved was gone. As death was not forthcoming (3:20-21; 7:15-16), Job had to find a way to live in the "now" of his current situation. Consequently, *silent* suffering was not an option as he had to express his loss, anger, and desperation (7:11ff), in order to break through the barriers of isolation. In effect, deprived of all else, one thing remained – his voice, which he used as an outlet for his pain in the hope that God (and his friends) would hear and respond. As Byrne points out, once he is "[s]tripped of everything – family, friends, health, status, and a sense of God's support and comfort – Job is left with only one thing, his lament".<sup>63</sup> But, why was Job's lament so pleasing to God?

Job had first-hand knowledge of what it was like to live a purposeful life intimately connected to God, through the blessings that this relationship had brought upon him (1:1-5). But, contrary to Eliphaz's belief that this relationship could be maintained solely through human action (5:8), Job understood that this connection was a gift from God, and as such could only be sustained by him. As Andersen contends, "[o]nly God can maintain, as only God can give, that relationship".<sup>64</sup> It is his growing isolation and sense of total abandonment at God's hand that drives Job to lament.

Job's lament stemmed from recognising that his reality stood in direct contradiction with his theology, and the only logical conclusion was that God intentionally brought suffering upon him, consequently God cannot be the

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<sup>61</sup> Janzen, *Job*, 58.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew R. Angel, *Playing with Dragons: Living with Suffering and God*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 55.

<sup>63</sup> Patricia Huff Byrne, "'Give Sorrow Words': Lament – Contemporary Need for Job's Old Time Religion", *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling* 56:3 (2002), 255.

<sup>64</sup> Andersen, *Job*, 147.

faithful benevolent God in whom he once believed.<sup>65</sup> As Boulton suggests, the heart of lament lies in the accusation that "...God's trustworthiness to deliver, and thus God's praiseworthiness – has been discredited".<sup>66</sup> However, this accusatory tone should not be confused with blasphemy; rather it serves as an attempt to provoke God into a response by basically stating, "God, this is what I believe, it's up to you to prove me wrong!" As Siedlecki affirms, "Job is, in effect, taking God to court."<sup>67</sup> For many Christians, speaking to God in this manner is troublesome, and they chose to adopt Elihu's theology whereby the omnipotent God has the authority to act freely, and believers should accept this without question (34:17-30).<sup>68</sup> But, is a blind affirmation of faith really the response God expects from his people? His commendation of Job's response in 42:7, would suggest otherwise.

Job directly accuses God on numerous occasions throughout the story, however chapter 16 is a particularly vicious indictment of God's cruelty.<sup>69</sup> Here Job not only provides a graphic image of God's wrath (vv. 9-12), but also suggests his actions were callous and deliberate (vv. 12-14).<sup>70</sup> Job's lament is permeated with a sense of hopelessness in relation to the suffering and isolation he has experienced at God's hand, stating that he is "worn out... shattered... crushed... weeping... [and] broken" (16:7-17:1). This is further developed in chapter 19, as he states he feels humiliated, "...wronged... alienated... loathsome" and ridiculed. In short, Job does not hold anything back; he is brutally honest with God in relation to his true feelings – he feels angry, betrayed, bitter and defeated. As Brueggemann points out, lament is far removed from the "...denial, cover-up, and pretence, which sanctions social control".<sup>71</sup>

However, whilst his language may convey hopelessness, in terms of isolation, the very fact that his lament is addressed to God keeps Job connected to him, even in divine silence. Consequently, out of the darkness of his isolation, hope arises. As Byrne affirms,

[l]ament is a prayer of paradox, a cry to a silent or seemingly absent God, an attempt to connect with the disenfranchising community, an effort to define one's experience in a world where all structures have collapsed... It is the haunting howl of alienation and despair spoken from a place where hope paradoxically emerges.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Hester, *Job*, 35.

<sup>66</sup> Matthew Boulton, "Forsaking God: a theological argument for Christian lamentation", *SJT* 55:1 (2002), 63.

<sup>67</sup> Armin Siedlecki, "In the Face of Innocent Suffering: Learning to Allow Rage", *Word & World* 31:4 (2011), 424.

<sup>68</sup> Jamie A. Grant, "Psalm 44 and a Christian Spirituality of Lament", (Tyndale OT Lecture, July 2007), 12; Waters, "Elihu's Theology"; 144.

<sup>69</sup> Hulme, *Christian Caregiving*, 50.

<sup>70</sup> David L. McKenna, *Job: The Preacher's Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 123.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament", *JSOT* 36 (1986), 60.

<sup>72</sup> Byrne, "Give Sorrow Words", 255.

In his lament Job accuses God, but at the same time he lives in hope that either God himself will answer, or another being in the heavenly court will advocate on his behalf (16:18-22). He remains steadfast in his integrity throughout the lament; in his eyes he is blameless and it is this, combined with his brutal honesty, that “finally provokes an appearance from the Almighty” (38:1).<sup>73</sup> The honesty of his lament reveals Job’s growing isolation, as it stands in such sharp contrast to the behaviour of the friends – that is to say, when out of respect for the God of their theology, they concluded that Job had to be guilty of sin. Rather than supporting him, they were in essence attempting to transform Job’s suffering into something they knew how to deal with, namely guilt. As Brueggemann contends, “there is a terrible temptation to change pain into guilt... In deference to the God who is perfect, we have assumed that if something is wrong, it must be our fault.”<sup>74</sup> By tackling the issues in this manner, all they had to do was convince Job to repent and everything should return to normal. Their inability to be honest and admit to God that they did not understand Job’s plight and seek his guidance, ironically left them in a position where they, too, were isolated from God.<sup>75</sup> As Phillips points out,

... speaking correctly meant speaking *to* him... Job did so; the friends did not, suggesting that, in addition to their limited view of the situation, they completely lacked the relationship [with God] that infused Job’s every utterance.<sup>76</sup>

However, despite Job’s honesty, God does not explicitly answer any of his questions, nor does he reprimanded Job for his accusatory comments. Rather, the divine reproach focuses on the fact he “spoke words without knowledge” (38:2), deeming Job ignorant.<sup>77</sup> This raises an exegetical issue, as Job’s ignorance in 38:2 seems incompatible with his correctness in 42:7. However, ignorant speech is not necessarily wrong, as Andersen affirms, “[t]he Bible does not consider ignorance to be either sin, or the root of sin”.<sup>78</sup> This concept is given further warrant when we consider the two statements together, which seem to imply that God was judging Job’s response to isolation, not so much on the theological “correctness” of what he said, but on the reason why he said it. Job’s lament was not simply a means of accusing God; it was a method of expressing confusion in relation to his theology. As Ngwa states, by concentrating “on the direct address to God

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<sup>73</sup> Angel, *Playing with Dragons*, 55.

<sup>74</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Friday Voice of Faith”, *CTJ* 36 (2001), 19. It should be noted that there are numerous occasions when we are guilty of wrongdoing, and in these instances the correct course of action is to confess to God and repent.

<sup>75</sup> Phillips, “Speaking Truthfully”, 40.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>78</sup> Andersen, *Job*, 294.

alone is to miss an important aspect of the book, namely, the human struggle to articulate a theology in the midst of one's own suffering".<sup>79</sup> In other words, lament freed Job to embrace a new understanding of God's sovereignty (42:3) that went far beyond the doctrine of retribution held by his friends.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, whilst his lament accused God of being unjust it also served a useful purpose and consequently, God is able to judge Job as being both "ignorant and correct".<sup>81</sup>

### *How Christians should respond*

In terms of isolation, what Job's response imparts to today's Christian is the recognition that doubt is a perfectly acceptable reaction to suffering. However, it is clear that Job never questions his belief in God; rather his concern lies in the legitimacy of his actions.<sup>82</sup> As Job dealt with his doubt by asking the most difficult "why" questions in life and venting his frustrations with brutal honesty, Christians can respond in a like manner in the knowledge that their actions are biblical.<sup>83</sup>

When involved in pastoral care this insight is particularly useful as it helps to establish empathy with the sufferer. In Job we see an inner conflict between the man who vehemently declared that accepting both good and bad from God was simply part of life (2:10), and the one who fervently argued that God was unjust. As Hulme states,

Spiritual counsellors are wise to assume a Jobian protest within the hearts of the sufferers to whom they minister. Even though the sufferer's lips sound like Job in the prologue, they may have their shadow sides of doubt, resentment, and despair, like Job in the poetic section.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, what we see in Job's honest response to isolation is the freedom to breakdown old theological beliefs that limited his understanding of God and construct new frameworks with respect to his sovereignty. This is further enhanced when we consider that Job did not challenge God when he failed to answer his questions, instead he chose to accept that divine knowledge and wisdom are beyond human comprehension (42:2).<sup>85</sup> This freedom enables the Christian to appreciate that a sufferer's perception of God may differ to theirs as a result of their circumstances. As Cataldo suggests, "God... can be experienced as the perpetrator of suffering on the innocent victim, as the passive, non-responsive bystander, or as the benevolent, just

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<sup>79</sup> Ngwa, *The Hermeneutics of the "Happy" Ending*, 104.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>81</sup> Phillips, "Speaking Truthfully", 40.

<sup>82</sup> Hulme, *Christian Caregiving*, 22.

<sup>83</sup> Brueggemann, "The Friday Voice of Faith", 19.

<sup>84</sup> Hulme, *Christian Caregiving*, 23.

<sup>85</sup> Janzen, *Job*, 251.

other”.<sup>86</sup> An awareness of these differing perceptions may help establish trust and empathy with the sufferer, despite theological differences.<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, honest communication and an acceptance of God’s sovereignty also guards against the “temptation to change pain into guilt”, because we are aware that he has the autonomy to govern his creation as he sees fit.<sup>88</sup> In other words, we need to stop looking for the reason behind suffering, and look to God. As Angel states, “Job asks us to look deep inside ourselves and ask whether we worship because God is God, or because God is good”.<sup>89</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Job’s sense of isolation along the horizontal axis increased when the theological perspectives held by his loved ones and wider society differed from his own. This resulted in a stalemate whereby the friends held resolutely to their doctrine of retribution, whilst Job persistently declared his innocence. In short, Job found no receptive human source of comfort and was completely alone. On the vertical axis, Job felt abandoned by God when he began to doubt his “reap what you sow” theology because it did not correlate with his present reality. His response involved a lament to God that was accusatory and at times vicious. However, throughout the story Job held onto two things – his integrity and his faith in God. As a result, he developed a deeper level of faith and understanding of God’s character.

Job’s lament demonstrates that in times of isolation ongoing communication with God is vital. However, whilst holding firmly to one’s theology may, in some cases be commendable, the epilogue demonstrates that this is of lesser importance to God than truthful and honest communication. In effect, God has given us the freedom and permission to vent our sincere anger directly to (or at) him. This latitude gives the Christian the opportunity to breakdown old theological frameworks and come to a new understanding of God’s sovereignty.

This paper takes a small step towards understanding isolation caused by suffering, and how Christians should respond to this problem. Whilst it cannot claim to have presented all the answers, it demonstrates that reading Job, as a theology of isolation can help Christians understand how to communicate with God, respond to their own thoughts and emotions, and support others in times of suffering.

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<sup>86</sup> Lisa M. Cataldo, “I Know That my Redeemer Lives: Relational Perspectives on Trauma, Dissociation, and Faith”, *Pastoral Psychology* 62 (2013), 801.

<sup>87</sup> Donna M. Orange, *The Suffering Stranger: Hermeneutics for Everyday Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 38.

<sup>88</sup> Brueggemann, “The Friday Voice of Faith”, 19.

<sup>89</sup> Angel, *Playing with Dragons*, 74.

# CULTURE, CLASS AND ETHNICITY: A THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

*Jon Putt\**

Christian discussion of culture, class and ethnicity are as important as they are heated. Often they fail to properly define terms or reflect deeply within theological categories. This paper is a theological exploration of the ways in which the concepts of class, culture and ethnicity are understood in biblical terms and subsequently interrelated. It is part of an attempt to uncover and confront our own cultural blind spots and biases, and in turn value the other more highly than ourselves.

## *Introduction*

Joe nudged the swing doors open and looked around. He was early; the hall was only a third full. He sat near the back, unsure what to do next. Ten minutes later, with the hall almost three-quarters full, someone stood up and started speaking. Joe surveyed his fellow attendees. They were like an alien race: more women than men, singing together, largely silent and undemonstrative otherwise. After bobbing up and down, singing various celtic-rock-tinged songs (which the musicians seemed to enjoy more than the crowd), a man spoke for almost thirty minutes, occasionally drawing a chuckle for observations concerning lives with which Joe was not familiar, or issues that apparently meant much to others but not to him.

Joe grabbed a rich tea biscuit after the service, but felt like a foreigner as he watched people. There was a preponderance of chinos, shirts and jumpers, many of them branded “Fat Face” or “White Stuff”. What sort of “Crew” did these people belong to anyway? There was a preponderance of people using words like preponderance. It was all unusually quiet and no-one had popped out for a fag. Conversation circled around wine orders, independent film festivals, and sports (not football). And why was no-one talking to him?

This story is born out of experience; it is my experience, but I am not Joe. I am one of the “Fat Face” wearing, non-smoking, polite, measured, part-privately-Oxbridge-educated, professional members of a local evangelical

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church that Joe may have seen that day he visited church – perhaps not an alien race, but certainly a foreign class. Those that fail to recognise in my description the middle classes illustrate a useful point to which we will return below: class is not an easily-definable category. It is inherently perspectival and therefore disputable. I have been a member of various churches and visited more, and although they have been partly diverse, ethnically and socio-economically, the *dominant* culture has been middle class.<sup>1</sup> Some of those churches, despite their best efforts, did not reflect the diversity of their local contexts. If local churches are to be beacons of light to which all are attracted, this is at least regrettable.

If evangelical churches are to be more fruitful in attracting and including those from a non-middle-class background then we might start with understanding our world a little better, and perhaps develop a more theological understanding of what we call “class”. As we do so, we may also become more aware of our stubbornness, pride and prejudices that lie ensconced in the comforter of our own class complacency. This might move us to new understanding and repentance, and we may then be better placed to contextualise the manner in which we meet, our mission and our call. We might uncover attitudes and practices that place an unnecessary barrier to people from a non-middle class entering into any given local church.<sup>2</sup> It is a question, therefore, of culture first, evangelistic method second. The focus here will be less on how we communicate the timeless truth of the gospel (that is maybe for another paper) but the time-bound, culturally-specific ways we seek to meet together to listen to God’s Word, offer praise, encourage each other and so forth. So, let us go forth, thinking of ourselves with sober judgment, confident in the grace of God to humble us, challenge us, change us, and equip us with passion and understanding, empathy and zeal as we seek to become more fruitful churches and leaders.

It is my sincere hope not to appear, or worse, to be, patronising in this paper. As Hanley writes of sociological and popular commentators: “In many ways, what defines the state of being working class is veering between sentimentality and bitterness like a drunk trying to walk down the aisle of a

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<sup>1</sup> I am not alone in my experience either. Historically, evangelical churches have struggled to incorporate people from non-middle-class backgrounds; D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989; repr., Oxford: Routledge, 2002), 107-111. Indeed, Wickham argues that generally, the lower down the social strata, the lower the proportion of those people have been included in churches; E. R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London: Lutterworth, 1957), 158.

<sup>2</sup> Some may alternatively say a less privileged background but I want to highlight even at this stage something we shall see below: the middle and upper classes have a habit of seeing the working class as “less privileged”. Often however this is a (patronising) judgment made on a material basis, rather than a social or relational basis. The term itself carries a judgment on what people value and esteem.



moving bus.”<sup>3</sup> I will attempt as little veering as possible as I discuss issues relating to people from a culture I know less well than my own and certainly do not regard as either inferior or perfect.

To work towards a theological understanding of class, we will begin with the issue of culture: what it is, where it comes from and how to “read” it. This is because we are in part concerned with *cultural* reasons people from non-middle-class backgrounds may have for staying away from majority-middle class-churches. Having examined the issue of culture, we will then turn to the issue of class and investigate how that term is generally perceived and used; specifically, we will argue for a particular biblical understanding of “class”. Within that discussion, we will develop our understanding of how the ideas of class and culture relate, and therefore how a culture within any given church develops. At that point it will also be appropriate to sketch an outline of what the church should (and should not) look like with regard to class and culture.

## 1. Culture

Understanding what cultural factors of any given church may prove off-putting requires first a working understanding of culture.<sup>4</sup> Vanhoozer argues that culture is made up of “works and worlds of meaning”.<sup>5</sup> He goes on to argue,<sup>6</sup> that culture is therefore the dimension of social life that carries meaning and encompasses the outworking of human endeavour; each action and construction communicates something of the author’s values, concerns and self-understanding. This means that culture is powerful and dynamic – it communicates values, orientates those who consume it by giving them a framework with which to view the world, reproduces its own values and cultivates the human spirit.

Take, for example, a film like *Finding Nemo*. The film communicates the authors’ values, including perhaps (amongst others) the value of family life, and the importance of forgiveness and trust. These values are carried by the film to those watching it and, depending in part on the skill of the film makers, begin to influence and shape those watching the film. They then carry those values into the wider world, using them as a lens by which to interpret their worlds and interact with those around them.

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<sup>3</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta, 2007), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Chester follows a similar approach to culture in his book; Tim Chester, *Unreached: Growing Churches in Working-Class and Deprived Areas* (Leicester: IVP, 2013), 28-32.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture”, in *Everyday Theology – How To Read Cultural Texts And Interpret Trends* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J Sleasman; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Vanhoozer, “What is Everyday Theology”, 24, 26, 28-31.

For those not yet belonging to Jesus, or within his church, Wells argues that their cultural outpourings are reflections of values and beliefs that have been produced by looking for the sacred within (otherwise known as idolatry).<sup>7</sup> As Powlinson says: "Idols counterfeit aspects of God's identity and character...: judge, saviour, source of blessing, sin-bearer, object of trust, author of a will which must be obeyed, and so forth. Each idol that clusters in the system makes false promises and gives false warnings."<sup>8</sup>

As such, all the things that God provides in terms of transformation, intuition, connectedness and consciousness are sought by people within themselves; any aspect of non-Christian culture is a consequence of that search and the construction of norms that flow from answers found or constructed within. This search for such transcendent norms is ultimately futile and unsatisfactory:

...postmoderns... have ways of offsetting this inner corrosion. Luxury and plenty, entertainment and recreation, sex and drugs, become the ways of creating surrogate meaning or momentary distraction, or at least numbness. It is surrogate meaning and distraction to conceal the inner blackness, the depletion of self, so that its aches can be forgotten.<sup>9</sup>

Alternatively put, what goes on internally is expressed externally.<sup>10</sup> Ecclesiastes summarises this search and the resultant cultural production: "wisdom" fails to make sense of life (Ecc 1:17), nor does revelry (Ecc 2:1-2) or activity, work and wealth (Ecc 2:4-11; 4:7-12).<sup>11</sup>

Non-Christian culture is not as bad as it might be, however; far from it. Turnau argues that the search described above is the reaction of God's creatures to God's natural revelation and the insistent and repetitive claims of such revelation.<sup>12</sup> Human culture is therefore in constant dialogue with natural revelation as it suppresses that revelation and attempts to provide non-sacred answers to questions regarding sin, salvation and relationships. Common grace and such idolatry is intertwined, as non-Christian culture is built on God's grace.<sup>13</sup> If churches are to be places that are as inclusive as

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<sup>7</sup> David. Wells, "The Supremacy of Christ", in *The Supremacy of Christ in a Post-Modern World* (ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), 27.

<sup>8</sup> David Powlinson, "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair'", *JBC* 13/2 (Winter 1995), 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> Wells, "The Supremacy of Christ", 42.

<sup>10</sup> Powlinson, "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair'", 36.

<sup>11</sup> Wells, "The Supremacy of Christ", 43.

<sup>12</sup> This is based on his understanding of Rom 1:18-23; Theodore A. Turnau III, "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace and General Revelation", n.p. [cited 25 November 2009]. Online:

[https://issuu.com/ransomfellowship/docs/rf\\_ebook\\_reflectingtheologically](https://issuu.com/ransomfellowship/docs/rf_ebook_reflectingtheologically)

<sup>13</sup> Theodore A. Turnau III, "Equipping Students to Engage Popular Culture", in *The Word of God for the Academy in Contemporary Culture(s)* (ed. J. B. Hulst and P. Balla; 2003; repr., Budapest: Karoli Gaspar Reformed University Press, 2008), 22. Elsewhere, Turnau describes this as doing culture with "borrowed capital"; Turnau, "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful", n.p.

possible it is important to effectively “read” the culture and underlying worldview of people in order to make sure the mode and shape church takes is accessible and relevant to people from differing backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> This involves asking questions that seek to identify “God’s footprints”: Where is beauty or justice found in the culture? Where is truth appropriated but twisted? Where does salvation lie and what does damnation look like?<sup>15</sup>

What we have said about non-Christian culture applies also to the culture of each church family. Every church has a culture constituted of the corporate values and perspectives of the members and leadership of that church.<sup>16</sup> There is no such thing as neutral culture,<sup>17</sup> nor can we know, this side of the new creation, “objective” or paradigmatic church or gospel culture. As people are converted from their idolatrous worldviews with their attendant cultures, there is a tension between the old man and the new creation (2 Cor 5:17) renewed by the Spirit (2 Cor 4:16).<sup>18</sup> Yet as people from each culture enter a church family, they bring with them to the church community some aspect of their culture which, in God’s common grace, has something to commend it. Equally, they bring with them aspects of their culture of which they need to repent. Every church community is therefore a mosaic of redeemed sinners with incompletely redeemed cultures, cultures that do not necessarily share the same levels of common grace or redemption in the same areas. So, for example, imagine a hypothetical church comprised largely of two cultures. In common grace, culture A put a very high premium on hospitality whereas culture B put a very high premium on generosity. Now people from both cultures have been converted and belong to the same community and both need to prize and grow in the relative strengths of the other culture.

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<sup>14</sup> There are two points to note here: One – I am assuming a non-homogenous basis for church about which I will speak below. Two – I do not advocate complete flexibility when it comes to church and believe that some elements are necessary and inflexible but the mode in which those elements are delivered can be flexible. My thinking on this is probably most influenced by writers such as Frame and Dever. See remarks regarding the regulative principle and church in John M. Frame, “Some Questions About the Regulative Principle”, *WTJ* 54 (1992) and Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (1997; repr., Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Turnau, “Equipping Students to Engage Popular Culture”, 20-21.

<sup>16</sup> There is a constant feedback loop between the leaders, who are also members, and the members of the church, with the values and interests of one group influencing and affecting the other.

<sup>17</sup> This point is found in numerous places but developed here from Frame’s insight that there is no neutrality. Frame applies this first and foremost to the division between Christians and non-Christians; either people submit to Jesus as Lord or they do not. But the point regarding neutrality can be transferred to a broader understanding of culture where both sides of the divide are marked by a spectrum of values and interests; John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P&R, 1994), 4-6.

<sup>18</sup> Turnau, “Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful”, n.p.

## 2. Class

Having spent some time examining culture, we now turn to consider class – what it is and how it works. “Most British thinking about class is not only obsessional, but also vague, confused, contradictory, ignorant and lacking any adequate historical perspective.”<sup>19</sup> Not to be intimidated, what follows is an exploration into the concept of class, combining a Christian perspective with a sociological one.

### 2.1. A Christian Understanding of “Class”

My contention, is that class can be treated in much the same way as ethnicity. Both are ways of speaking of the characteristics of a particular type of community or people group, and the parameters of analysis used when discussing class and ethnicity are strikingly similar.<sup>20</sup> This section will therefore explore some of the literature regarding a biblical theology of ethnicity, which we shall link to class as we proceed.

Ethnicity denotes a specific group, or ethnic solidarity (ESOL),<sup>21</sup> which may be differentiated from other ESOLs; likewise, this sort of differentiation can be something perceived by those in various class brackets. Distinct ESOLs require boundary markers (as does class) including common ancestry,<sup>22</sup> language/dialect,<sup>23</sup> spiritual forces, cultural/historical traditions, geographic area (or tradition of such an area)<sup>24</sup> and a common name.<sup>25</sup> Ethnicity is at least therefore a social perception,<sup>26</sup> and an ESOL may not demonstrate *all* these shared characteristics but will have a number of them, with common ancestry being central.<sup>27</sup> With regard to class, common ancestry is a more subtle factor, although it is still present; Britain has for example, its first “middle class princess”,<sup>28</sup> in Kate Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge, thanks in part to her ancestry.

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<sup>19</sup> David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (1998; repr., London: Penguin, 2000), ix.

<sup>20</sup> Dewi Hughes, *Castrating Culture* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 8. Although class perhaps has less potency being more fluid.

<sup>21</sup> This term is found in Kreitzer’s work, e.g. Kreitzer, *Good News for All Peoples*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Which may be real or fictive (Deut 1:13; 7:4-4; 17:15; Jos 23:12-13). Mark Kreitzer, *Good News for All Peoples*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Genesis 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> Kreitzer, *Good News for All Peoples*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Hughes, *Castrating Culture*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox, 1979), 39.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Marc Berthoud, “The Bible and the Nations: pts 1 & 2”, n.p. [cited 31 August 2005]. <http://www.creationism.org/csshs/v15n2p22.htm> & <http://www.creationism.org/csshs/v15n3p13.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> James Langton, “Kate Middleton: Britain’s middle class princess”, n.p. [cited 10 April 2013]. <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/europe/kate-middleton-britains-middle-class-princess>.

The Bible recognises the reality of ESOLs with reference to nations/peoples,<sup>29</sup> without in any way undermining or denying humanity's universality;<sup>30</sup> the table of nations defines ESOLs within the unity of humanity. "[They] are good and ordained by the Creator."<sup>31</sup> If class can be considered part of the ESOL picture, then it, too, is part of the intentional diversity and unity of humanity.

Numerous texts suggest ethnicity is created by God (e.g. Acts 17:26),<sup>32</sup> and the trinitarian nature of God indicates that God enjoys diversity.<sup>33</sup> Ethnic diversity therefore, including class diversity, are therefore to God's glory: "God glorifies himself in the differences themselves and is being glorified in the reconciliation of the nations through Jesus Christ, his son."<sup>34</sup> God creates associations of interconnected people (Ps 22:27), and these interrelated networks of people are necessary to fulfil Gen 1:26-28, given humans are finite and social.<sup>35</sup> This, combined with Gen 9:1-17, makes ethnicity implicitly creational,<sup>36</sup> making ethno-linguistic (and class) diversity a result of blessing and the command to multiply and disperse.<sup>37</sup> Thus in Genesis 11, the forced dispersal of the nations after Babel is part judgment, part blessing. It is judgment of humanity's hubris and false faith, and of their refusal to go forth and multiply. It is blessing in that it ensures they conform to God's plan for humanity in fulfilling the creation mandate.<sup>38</sup>

Whilst ethnicity is created by God, Costas goes on to argue that "Man is a historical being, not an abstraction".<sup>39</sup> As humanity is receptive, ESOLs develop through interaction with their environments.<sup>40</sup> This does not mean that ESOLs are not "real"; "on the contrary, the ethnic bond is profoundly

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<sup>29</sup> Deut 4; Isa 43:9; Matt 28:19-20; Acts 10; Rom 15:8-12; 16:25-26; Gal 3:8. Berthoud, "The Bible and the Nations", n.p.

<sup>30</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, "Western Images of Others and Otherness", in *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith* (ed. Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves; Oxford: OUP, 2007), 106.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Kreitzer, "The Table of Nations, The Tower of Babel, and Ethnic Solidarity", *Global Missiology* 4/1 (2004), 7.

<sup>32</sup> See also Gen 10:5, 20, 31-32; Deut 32:8; Ps 2:8; 82:8; 86:9; Jer 10:7; 27:5-7.

<sup>33</sup> Kreitzer, *Good News for All Peoples*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Thabiti Anyabwile, "The Glory and Supremacy of Jesus Christ in Ethnic Distinctions and Over Ethnic Identities", in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honour of John Piper* (ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), 299.

<sup>35</sup> Berthoud, "The Bible and the Nations", n.p.

<sup>36</sup> Keith Ferdinando, "The Ethnic Enemy – No Greek or Jew... Barbarian, Scythian: The Gospel and Ethnic Difference", *Themelios* 33/2 (September 2008): 57.

<sup>37</sup> Kreitzer, *Good News for All Peoples*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> See Strange's treatment of Kreitzer's work: Daniel Strange, *Their Rock is not as Our Rock: An evangelical theology of religions* (Apollos, Nottingham, 2014), 121-145.

<sup>39</sup> Orlando E. Costas, *The Church and its Mission: A Shattering Critique From the Third World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1974), 3, 4.

<sup>40</sup> "Ethnic identity has a fluid quality and is subject to transformation and renegotiation." Ferdinando, "The Ethnic Enemy", 49.

affective: it is in this sense primordial rather than instrumental.”<sup>41</sup> Scripture affirms that ESOLs are created but not static, being environmentally formed and influenced.<sup>42</sup> This description fits well with class, something experienced as real yet subject to modification,<sup>43</sup> both in terms of the descriptions of class categories and by the terms with which someone may self-identify their class. For example, the Beckhams were the subject of a study charting their class transition.<sup>44</sup>

All ESOLs are corrupted, as mankind is. J. H. Bavinck notes that mankind, as a bearer and creator of culture, construes ESOL in a way to escape God: “Something of a protective shell [ESOL] has grown around his deepest essence, e.g., his name, position, honour, uniform, or title.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Ferdinando observes, “Ethnic identity can become the idolatrous centre of human devotion.”<sup>46</sup> The Bible therefore requires critical evaluation of *every* ESOL, looking for aspects of rebellion;<sup>47</sup> we can therefore say that no class is without flaw or systematic weakness.

Yet Berthoud argues that ESOLs, and therefore classes, can be redeemed and restored (cf. Gal 3:27-29): “In Christ, nations, sexes and social classes are restored to their creational goodness and thus know a healthy (a holy) unity and a healthy (a holy) diversity.”<sup>48</sup> He goes on to show that in Revelation, the elect, in their ESOLs, are in the new creation (Rev 21:1-2, 24, 26; 22:1-2), being healed and adopted (Rev 5:9-10; 7:9-10), and their riches and God-honouring cultural output is retrieved. Harvey Conn suggests that, “in the redemptive work of the second Adam, the task of the first Adam will be fulfilled”.<sup>49</sup> Conn goes on to argue that this includes mankind’s cultural output, and ethnic diversity and scattering.

In Christ, ethnicity and class are restored but members of distinct ESOLs are also caught up in a new people: “The coming of the kingdom of God relativises the sociocultural absolutes of the cultures of this world. Our

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<sup>41</sup> Being real to those within them and real in the sense that they are based in tangible realities including all the marks of ESOLs listed above. Ferdinando, “The Ethnic Enemy”, 49.

<sup>42</sup> Kreitzer, *Good News for All Peoples*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Giddens’ comments regarding social mobility: Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (6th ed.; Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 463-468.

<sup>44</sup> BBC, “David and Victoria Beckham ‘getting posher’, study finds”, n.p. [cited 19 April 2013]: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-22179969>.

<sup>45</sup> J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (trans. David H. Freeman; 1954; repr., Phillipsburg, N. J.: P&R, 1960), 122-123.

<sup>46</sup> Ferdinando, “The Ethnic Enemy”, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Jindra, “Culture Matters: Diversity in the United States and Its Implications”, in *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith* (ed. Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves; Oxford: OUP, 2007), 73.

<sup>48</sup> Berthoud, “The Bible and the Nations”, n.p.

<sup>49</sup> Harvie M. Conn, “God’s Plan for Church Growth: An Overview”, in *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth* (ed. Harvie M. Conn; Phillipsburg, N. J.: P&R, 1976), 2.

heavenly citizenship causes us to sit lightly to cultural loyalties.”<sup>50</sup> We might term this a “meta-ESOL” – a new people group where the members carry some of their historic ethnic distinctiveness with them, allowing it to mingle with the ethnic distinctives of others. The church, therefore, is not classless but an ESOL of its own (cf. 1 Peter 2:9-10), which begins to eliminate those aspects of distinct ESOLs that belong to the “old man” and cause division.<sup>51</sup> The use in 1 Peter of “people words”,<sup>52</sup> gives the church historical roots,<sup>53</sup> a key component of ESOLs. Members of the church retain their original ESOL, but “through the redeeming grace of Christ, she enriches their respective cultures, gives greater depth to their talents and abilities, and restores them to fuller humanity”.<sup>54</sup> Christians are therefore distanced (but not removed) from aspects of their ethnicity and class,<sup>55</sup> as they are drawn into one people under one king.<sup>56</sup> Like all ESOLs, time is central to this “meta-ESOL” as salvation is cross-generational, pulling together all into one body, as Walls describes, “Christian faith, therefore, is necessarily ancestor-conscious, aware of the previous generations of faith”.<sup>57</sup>

## 2.2. Sociological Understandings of “Class”

Having explored how a Christian might understand class biblically, we now turn to explore class sociologically. Traditionally, “class” is seen as a fluid and dynamic category, often with wealth and economic capacity as the most substantial determinant.<sup>58</sup> This is overly simplistic, however. Cannadine argues that class should be characterised in three ways *simultaneously*:<sup>59</sup> as an integrated procession in order of social rank; as discrete classes divided by wealth and pastime (upper, middle and lower); and as an adversarial order (between patricians and plebeians, for example).

This denies a more simplistic Marxist-inspired approach to class which habitually splits class into two (workers and owners) and treats economic factors as the chief class determinants. This fails to do justice to the fine

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<sup>50</sup> Harvie M. Conn, “Looking for a Method: Backgrounds and Suggestions”, in *Exploring Church Growth* (ed. Wilbert R. Shenk; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 91. See also Milne for a summary of the desirability and necessity of diverse congregations. Bruce Milne, *Dynamic Diversity: The New Humanity for Today and Tomorrow* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006), 16-17.

<sup>51</sup> Whilst not eliminating distinct ESOLs themselves (Berthoud, “The Bible and the Nations”, n.p.).

<sup>52</sup> *eqnos, genos, laos*.

<sup>53</sup> Costas, *The Church and its Mission*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Ferdinando, “The Ethnic Enemy”, 61.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Matt 4:17-25; Jn 17:22-23 (Hiebert, “Western Images of Others and Otherness”, 107).

<sup>57</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (New York, N. Y.: Orbis, 2002), 75.

<sup>58</sup> Giddens, *Sociology*, 437.

<sup>59</sup> Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, 19.

gradients within the “worker” class and the plurality of influences feeding class identity.<sup>60</sup>

In 1688, Gregory King, a proto-anthropologist, discerned twenty-six clear gradations in British society,<sup>61</sup> and recently the BBC announced that there are currently seven classes in Britain.<sup>62</sup> Despite the slight preeminence of the hierarchical model in Britain,<sup>63</sup> there still exists clear class consciousness and conflict:<sup>64</sup> “As soon as a person speaks, Brits tend to assign them a social class and treat them accordingly.”<sup>65</sup> The third, adversarial category, can be seen in Zadie Smith’s description of the difference between living in Caldwell and Hampstead: “*They* had a guard up the hill, in Hampstead, for *them*. Nothing for *us* [my italics].”<sup>66</sup> Smith is naturally not the first to perceive this sort of class divide. In 1958 Hoggart described the experience of the “have nots” as follows: “A feeling that the world outside is strange and often unhelpful, that it has most of the counters stacked on its side, that to meet it on its own terms is difficult... this [is]... the world of ‘Them’.”<sup>67</sup> This category can be constructed from different perspectives: for example, the virtuous few versus the rest and vice-versa.<sup>68</sup>

### 3. Culture, Class and Church

So, putting these things together, we say that all churches have a culture and, if dominated by people from the middle classes, it will be partly formed and produced by the gospel, but also partly formed of middle-class values, perspectives and interests. Many of these may be unseen and unspoken but nevertheless present, some more helpful than others.

One possible response to the reality of class identities with their respective cultural trappings is the homogenous unit principle (HUP) of

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<sup>60</sup> Giddens, *Sociology*, 440. Furthermore, Hoggart argues that even on its own terms, Marxism does not do justice to the working classes, either lionising or lamenting over them, falling between patronising and pitying them: Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin, 1958), 16.

<sup>61</sup> Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, 28. Weber too, by combining economic factors, status (some sort of social capital or prestige), and party saw almost infinite positions on the class spectrum: Giddens, *Sociology*, 441.

<sup>62</sup> BBC, “Huge survey reveals seven social classes in UK”, n.p. [cited 17 April 2013]. Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22007058>.

<sup>63</sup> Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, 22. On page 23 he argues, “Britons are always thinking about who they are, what kind of society they belong to and where they themselves belong in it.”

<sup>64</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 22.

<sup>65</sup> Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, 129-130.

<sup>66</sup> Zadie Smith, *N-W* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), 151.

<sup>67</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 72.

<sup>68</sup> Other possible constructions include: the middle class versus the corrupt élite; decent society versus the idle poor; the disadvantaged masses versus the privileged classes, and so on: Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, 166.



church growth. The HUP is based on the following flow of argumentation: given that nations are mosaics of ESOLs, and people like to become Christians without leaving their ESOL, churches should be established within ESOLs to minimise the non-theological barriers to becoming Christian.<sup>69</sup>

Regarding class therefore, this would mean deliberately establishing working-class or upper-class churches in order to make it easier for people from those backgrounds to join. I am currently unpersuaded by this ecclesiology, but rather than rebut the theory here, I will instead attempt to make the case positively for churches that are diverse and reflect the areas in which they exist. Before I do so, it is important to clarify that I am not arguing against the possibility of churches that are marked more by one class than another; this is entirely possible given that churches may exist in areas dominated by one sort of socio-economic group. It is also not an argument against various forms of contextualised evangelism (cf. 1 Cor 9:19-23). However, it is an argument against deliberately formulating local churches in such a way that it targets for inclusion people from certain backgrounds whilst deliberately making it more difficult for other people to join in.

"In the pursuit of holiness, in the proclamation of the gospel, in the service of the poor and friendless, the church of Christ builds a spiritual culture, a foretaste of the kingdom to come."<sup>70</sup> Churches should seek to include diverse ESOLs in building a "meta-ESOL" where ESOLs are not lost but redeemed in serving the whole.<sup>71</sup> "The church must be diverse because humanity is diverse; it must be one because Christ is one."<sup>72</sup> As any church meets, therefore, it should be looking to the members from different classes represented for ways they can build the church with their distinctive gifts, experiences and perspectives, as the united body of Christ.<sup>73</sup> Contextualised repentance must be preached, and modelled, tying conversion to the goal of unity *amongst* diversity. To ignore ethnic, and therefore class, unity is to misunderstand conversion, thinking it superficial, whereas conversion reaches out and affects every area of a person's life and identity, including the assumptions and culture of their class.<sup>74</sup>

Church members should display unity in the quality of their common life,<sup>75</sup> through their friendships and service to each other regardless of class. Hughes argues, for example, in a context where there is a diversity of

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<sup>69</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (ed. C. Peter Wagner; 3d ed.; 1970; repr., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 45-47, 155.

<sup>70</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (CCT; Leicester: IVP, 1995), 176.

<sup>71</sup> Clowney, *The Church*, 171.

<sup>72</sup> Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 77.

<sup>73</sup> This is drawn from Walls' work on Eph 2:19-22; 4:13-16. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 77.

<sup>74</sup> Anyabwile, "The Glory and Supremacy of Jesus Christ in Ethnic Distinctions and Over Ethnic Identities", 305-306.

<sup>75</sup> Ferdinando, "The Ethnic Enemy", 60.

languages, it may be appropriate to accommodate them with different languages in one service, possibly with translation. "The bilingual church was a powerful witness to the gospel in a bilingual and multi-ethnic situation."<sup>76</sup> Although difficult to realise practically, there are further examples of churches attempting to integrate contrasting cultural norms. In some cases a song is chosen in an alternative language (with translation provided), in others, one service in the month is led by the minority Chinese membership, in Chinese, again with translation. This can work on a micro-scale too, with those providing translation or sign language sitting with those who require it. Hughes goes on to say, "On one hand the church declared that people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds are one in Christ; on the other hand it also declared that it is right and proper to respect cultural and ethnic difference."<sup>77</sup> The demonstration of this unity is especially seen at meal times and communion.<sup>78</sup>

ESOLs provide richness and variety and ignoring their distinctions risks devaluing something God has created.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, a church brings *together*, in other-person-serving community, *everyone*, whatever their background, under the lordship of Jesus: "[The church] is a community gathered from every tribe, tongue, and nation. It is a people called out of darkness into God's marvellous light through the Holy Spirit, as a result of God's revealed and redeeming grace in Jesus Christ, to be God's own people."<sup>80</sup> The church may therefore resemble its glorious eschatological reality.<sup>81</sup> The church benefits from the complementary creativity that diverse redeemed ESOLs provide in building a new, Christ-like, "meta-ESOL",<sup>82</sup> provided the unity of humanity is never undermined.

#### 4. Praxis

Let us conclude with some modest, possible practical applications of this discussion. There is a vast amount more to be learnt from those working in working-class communities, including many involved in the Reaching the Unreached Conferences, but here are some initial reflections:

1 – *Be humble*. We need to be honest about own failings, prejudices and blind spots. This is something Duncan Forbes, a pastor in Roehampton, has spoken about helpfully, including the need to more fully realise the deep and

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<sup>76</sup> Hughes, *Castrating Culture*, 53.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>78</sup> Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 77.

<sup>79</sup> Berthoud, "The Bible and the Nations", n.p.

<sup>80</sup> Costas, *The Church and its Mission*, 35.

<sup>81</sup> Ferdinando, "The Ethnic Enemy", 62.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 58. See also Chester's comments regarding the mutual correction offered by working- and middle-class cultures within a church context: Chester, *Unreached*, 33-34.

liberating truths of justification.<sup>83</sup> We need to confront the possibility that underlying middle-class respectability lies a moralistic pride which fails to take account of the effect the physical environment can have on people. Hanley argues that those who live on estates are the victims of “psychogeography”, living in small spaces miles from jobs, shops or bus routes and surrounded by corners of “perpetual night”,<sup>84</sup> Whilst Hanley’s mistake may be to excuse people of their sinful behaviour, a Christian would be mistaken in assuming they would act any differently in similar circumstances, save for God’s grace.

2 – *Be engaged*. We need to work harder at knowing the people in our areas more deeply so we can love them more wisely and communicate more effectively. Just with regard to class, we have seen that the British working class is not a homogenous entity but may be differentiated by geography, ancestry, accent, education, fashion, manners, leisure, housing,<sup>85</sup> and thus exists as a hierarchy in itself as well as a discrete grouping: “To isolate the working classes in this rough way is not to forget the great number of differences, the subtle shades, the class distinctions, within the working classes themselves.”<sup>86</sup>

3 – *Be welcoming*. We need to work at making our church gatherings less alien experience for visitors to experience. Our lead pastor at Grace Community Church in Bedford, Ray Evans, talks of the “as if” principle. In others words try and organise everything “as if” you had people present from all kinds of ethnic/class/cultural/religious backgrounds. One pastor from a working-class background that I spoke to who asked not be named explained that experiencing a Christian community as a foreign culture, with no points of contact, can reinforce the message that Christianity itself is a foreign religion, not suitable for those from other communities:

In terms of our worldview there would be a sense that middle-class people don’t understand us, they don’t know us, they have a different life to us. So whatever they’ve found that works for them won’t work for us because we would view us as having a very different life.

4 – *Be relevant*. Different people face different pressures. A failure from the pulpit to address topics that regularly touch the lives of people from different classes is profoundly off-putting. Brown argues that historically the church’s failure to address issues of nuclear disarmament, race and

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<sup>83</sup> Here, for example: <http://duncanf.blogspot.co.uk/2017/09/how-do-i-deal-with-my-own-bias.html>, and here: <http://duncanf.blogspot.co.uk/2017/08/isnt-classism-just-as-much-lower-class.html> [both accessed 6 March 2018].

<sup>84</sup> Hanley, *Estates*, 124-125. Such a moralistic attitude is displayed by this reply to the concern that the new estates would in time become slums: “Whether the blocks become slums or not will depend on the people who live in them”, 110.

<sup>85</sup> Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, 18, 22.

<sup>86</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 21.

environmental issues meant that a generation grew up alienated from church – it was simply not relevant to their issues.<sup>87</sup>

5 – *Don't be judgmental*. Here is another story a pastor told me about someone's experience of going to church: "One brother I know was told please don't bring your food to the potluck, to the bring and share, because it's too pungent, it smells too strong. That's a real incident." Remember, most non-Christians are probably expecting to be told off when they come to church, and this is probably more true of those that are not from middle-class backgrounds, given the history of the church.<sup>88</sup> The church needs to be startlingly counter-cultural in a society where, "For today's middle class, contamination is the fear that dare not speak its name."<sup>89</sup>

6 – *Value and promote diversity*. Churches need to be active in identifying and promoting the gifts of *all* their members from *all* backgrounds for *any* and *all* church responsibilities and not they just look for the next graduate to train. What values are we searching for in potential elders? Are they the values that are really valued by and in entrepreneurial business leaders, or more fundamental aspects of character?

In writing this at the current time, just after the MLK50 and latest iteration of the Together for the Gospel conferences, a biblical appreciation of God's design for ethnic diversity seems particularly appropriate. Let us note a number of points: Russell Moore, Ligon Duncan and David Platt<sup>90</sup> all spoke of the need for racial reconciliation and the implications for justice that flow from the gospel.<sup>91</sup> Secondly, ten years ago Thabiti Anyabwile spoke about the biblical concepts of ethnicity and race;<sup>92</sup> he argued strongly for a biblical foundation for ethnicity (and ethnic diversity) of which race could be a constituent, but flexible, part. This was part of the inspiration behind this paper in connecting class to the concept of ethnicity. Thirdly, it was noted that this attention on racial reconciliation missed an additional historic injustice – that of injustice between the classes.

What might we say, therefore, in reflection? In reference to point one above, one of the chief temptations for humanity is pride, to the extent that pride can almost function as a synonym for sin. And one of the most

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<sup>87</sup> Instead, the church often focused on sobriety and respectability: Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), 190.

<sup>88</sup> The working classes were often seen and described as immoral by evangelicals in the nineteenth century: Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 21.

<sup>89</sup> Hanley, *Estates*, 14.

<sup>90</sup> These talks can be accessed here: <https://www.russellmoore.com/2018/04/10/king-and-kingdom-racial-justice-and-the-uneasy-conscience-of-american-christianity/>, <http://t4g.org/media/2018/04/the-whole-in-our-holiness/>, <http://t4g.org/media/2018/04/let-justice-roll-like-waters-racism-need-repentance/>, [all accessed 16 April 2018].

<sup>91</sup> See also: <https://www.paultripp.com/articles> [accessed 16 April 2018].

<sup>92</sup> <http://t4g.org/media/2010/04/bearing-the-image-identity-the-work-of-christ-and-the-church-session-ii/> [accessed 16 April 2018].

prominent manifestations of pride might be said to be the devaluing of those not like us as, it allows us to indirectly puff ourselves up. The thought process might run something like this: “This person is valuable and useful and – surprise, surprise – they bear a striking similarity to me, therefore I too must be valuable and useful.” So pride graduates to narcissism, and injustice abounds.

There are two advantages of realising that ethnicity is the parent category as Anyabwile highlights (see point two above), and as we have argued throughout this paper: it opens our eyes to *all* ethnic injustice (not just where race is a constituent element – see point three above),<sup>93</sup> and it paves the way to reconciliation and integration without over-simplifying the task in hand. (In his way, Doug Wilson reveals some of the caveats and nuances at play in the current reconciliation conversations.)<sup>94</sup> We can move towards more fully realising local churches that reflect God’s triune character and ontology. God is one and God is three, Father, Son and Spirit. Our churches are one, united by faith in Jesus with no distinctions (cf. Galatians 3:28), and our churches are many, consisting of individuals with different gifts, backgrounds etc. (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-31).

### *Conclusion*

Throughout this paper we have been working on the assumption that, “All congregations, everywhere, are called to be... bridging-places, centres of reconciliation, where all the major diversities which separate human beings are overcome through the super-natural presence of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>95</sup> In God’s sovereignty, other people from different ESOLs refine our understanding of the gospel story and our place in it.<sup>96</sup>

But churches will only include the “other” if they have the right attitude. No amount of cultural awareness can make up for a deficiency in what Edwards called “internal worship”.<sup>97</sup> Only this sort of love, founded in love

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<sup>93</sup> It allows us to see, for example, that there may need to be reconciliation between black African upper classes, and white African working classes, between men and women with middles classes of various skin tones etc.

<sup>94</sup> <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/dear-thabiti.html> & <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/but-thabiti.html> [both accessed 16 April 2018]. These are referenced without critique, although undoubtedly some might be desirable. The references merely show that if we take skin colour as the primary category, our attempts at reconciliation and inclusion may not be wholly satisfactory.

<sup>95</sup> Milne, *Dynamic Diversity*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1988), 151.

<sup>97</sup> The Bible emphasises the internal attitude of the Christian in relation to others, cf. Isa 1:12-18; Amos 5:21, Mic 6:7-8; Isa 58:5, 6, 7; Zech 7:1-10, Jer 2:1-7; Matt 15:3. “We cannot express our love to God by doing anything that is profitable to him; God would therefore have us do it in those things that are profitable to our neighbours, whom he has constituted as our receivers.”: Jonathan Edwards, “Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England”, 365-430,

for Christ, can overcome the class insecurity with which the middle classes are plagued.<sup>98</sup> Freed from insecurity by their passion for Jesus, middle-class Christians can really “see people” from non-middle-class backgrounds,<sup>99</sup> allowing them to hear their questions, and have their practices remoulded accordingly.<sup>100</sup> Without the transforming power of the gospel, majority middle-class churches are likely to conclude with Massingham: “All our efforts to bring about a reconciliation between the classes are useless and a waste of time.”<sup>101</sup>

However, a gospel heart and vision must be combined with wisdom and an understanding of those who are different. Specifically, majority-middle class-churches need to realise, “It takes reserves of strength – reserves that many people don’t know they have until they are forced into life-or-death circumstances – to stand out, to climb over the wall in the head, which is precisely why huge groups of young people wear the same things without really knowing why.”<sup>102</sup>

Whilst this paper has been at pains to emphasise the centrality of Jesus and the gospel in any attempt by evangelical churches to reach non-middle-class people, it has covered more cultural and practical ground than biblical. This emphasises the need to contextualise, not just the gospel presentation, but also the culture of our churches:

Abstract, disembodied and history-less sinners do not exist; only very concrete sinners exist, whose sinful life is determined and characterised by all sorts of cultural and historical factors; by poverty, hunger, superstition, traditions, chronic illness, tribal morality, and thousands of other things. I must bring the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ to the whole man, in his concrete existence, in his everyday environment.<sup>103</sup>

Or as one of the pastors I spoke to put it:

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in vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Edited by Edward Hickman, 2 vols. 1834 (Repr., Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:428.

<sup>98</sup> Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (London: Hodder, 2004), 133.

<sup>99</sup> Taking into account all that they do and say to build a picture of them, rather than relying on presuppositions and assumptions; Cf. Zack Eswine, *Sensing Jesus: Life and Ministry as a Human Being* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2013), 208.

<sup>100</sup> Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2012), 101.

<sup>101</sup> He went on to say: “I dare say the only way to get to know them is to give up everything and be subject to the same necessities and fears as they are. Well I haven’t got the pluck to do that, and I don’t mean to try.” Massingham was writing in the 1930s. Cited by Michael Collins, *The Likes of Us: A Biography of the White Working Class* (2004; repr., London: Granta, 2005), 116.

<sup>102</sup> Hanley, *Estates*, 179.

<sup>103</sup> Bavinck, *Introduction*, 81.

But whatever your take on it is and whatever your methodology is, there are a number of pastors that are just unwilling to contextualise at all for council estate people... And this idea of well, the Holy Spirit is going to work through it, not realising that what they're doing is not done in a vacuum where only the Holy Spirit operates. There's a lot of their own culture in there.

Accordingly, this is an attempt to put theological meat on cultural bones, to illuminate the task at hand with some biblical insight and demonstrate the desirability of including people from non-middle-class backgrounds, and to offer some modest suggestions by which it may be achieved. Church must be done *cross-culturally* as "there is no universal [gospel] presentation. We *cannot* avoid contextualization",<sup>104</sup> so it should be done deliberately, to God's glory and the joy of many.

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<sup>104</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 95.

# OVERCOMING LISTLESSNESS: LEARNING FROM EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS

*Fiona R. Gibson*<sup>\*</sup>

Early and medieval Christian writers cautioned believers against the Seven Deadly Sins. Even today most Christians could probably name most of them. However, the one that was considered one of the most deadly and complex – acedia – is now virtually unknown and little understood. This paper will briefly examine the nature of acedia by engaging with the writings of Evagrius of Pontus, who was one of the first theologians to deal extensively with what acedia is, and how to overcome it. Some of his remedies may be surprising, and have unexpected contemporary applications.

## *Introduction*

To those in the Eastern Orthodox church, Evagrius of Pontus is a well-known name, a famous desert Father whose works of spirituality and practical advice for ascetics place him at the beginning of a tradition central to that church's teaching. Amongst Western Christians, especially perhaps those in the Protestant churches, Evagrius is largely unknown.

Yet this monk, who lived and wrote in the fourth century AD, was one of the first to compile a list of eight deadly temptations that would eventually, after various revisions, become the Seven Deadly Sins against which Christians would be exhorted for centuries to battle.<sup>1</sup> He would also be one of the first to write an extensive list of scriptural verses which could be used in prayer when battling these demonic temptations. Arguably, then, Evagrius and his works need to be better known in the Western Church.

One of the eight vices about which Evagrius wrote was acedia. The term has undergone some nuanced changes in meaning over the centuries. Acedia = sloth = laziness. And laziness is not really seen as much of a problem in the twenty-first century. It might be a minor character flaw, but is it any more serious than that? Can acedia really be called a sin?

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<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse how and when those patterns of thought and behaviour that were once called Deadly Sins came to be regarded as more minor sins and finally, in some cases, if not described as virtues, at least seen as relatively harmless character defects.



The Church Fathers certainly thought so. Not only did they think it was a sin, but it was included in one of the earliest lists of the deadly, or capital, sins and vices – those from which all others flowed – yet in contemporary writing it is seldom mentioned. However, whilst the word itself has largely disappeared from regular usage, a look at its various translations (listlessness, despondency, boredom, dejection, inertia or slackening) suggests that the phenomenon may have a modern resonance.

Acedia was first written about in a monastic context, as we shall explore below, and seems to carry at its heart a withdrawal from or rejection of the demands of the spiritual life. Seen in those terms, it cannot be consigned to history. We will therefore examine the idea of acedia in theological terms by looking at the writings of one the first to teach extensively about the vice, Evagrius of Pontus, placing acedia in a framework that helps to explain how it runs contrary to the Christian ethic of love of God and neighbour.

For Evagrius, in his treatise to Eulogios on the vices opposed to the virtues, “Acedia is an ethereal friendship, one who leads our steps astray...”<sup>2</sup> Listed as one of the eight “thoughts” against which an ascetic must battle, acedia seems to be a mysterious combination of sadness, listlessness, withdrawal and over-activity. More than that, in Evagrian terms, acedia, with its angry and restless rejection of the highest good – knowledge of God – in favour of something else, is an expression of disordered love against which monks must battle.

Before we can examine that proposition, we shall briefly note some biographical details about Evagrius, as this shows how his theology was informed by those who taught and influenced him.

### *Biography*

It is generally accepted that Evagrius was born in or around 345 in Iborra, Pontus, to an aristocratic family.<sup>3</sup> His father was a rural bishop, and Evagrius would have received the education that went with his family’s means and his father’s vocation.<sup>4</sup> During the 370s Evagrius was admitted to the office of reader by Basil the Great,<sup>5</sup> before moving in 379 to Cappadocia. There, Evagrius, now a deacon, assisted Gregory of Nazianzus in the disputes with the Arians, culminating in the First Council of Constantinople in 381.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Evagrius, *On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues* 6, in Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003), 64.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Gabriel Bunge, *Despondency: The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Pontus on Acedia* (trans. Anthony P. Gythiel; New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., A. M. Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, The Early Church Fathers (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Bunge, *Despondency*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Interpretations of the reason for Evagrius' departure from Cappadocia vary, but scholars are agreed that it involved a scandalous relationship with a prominent lady.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the truth of the situation, Evagrius left Constantinople in 382 and travelled to Jerusalem. It seems that he suffered some form of physical and mental breakdown, and withdrew from office for around six months.<sup>8</sup>

During this time Evagrius was helped by Melania and Rufinus, with whom he was staying in Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> On his recovery, and probably at Melania's instigation, Evagrius took the monastic habit in 383 and travelled to the Egyptian desert, where he would largely remain until his death sixteen years later.<sup>10</sup>

The theological influences on Evagrius were, primarily, the Cappadocian Fathers and, through them, Origen, and it is that link that means evangelical Christians will want to approach his works with caution, or at least be alert to the concerns they raise.

### *Issues with Evagrius' teaching*

In common with many theologians of his day, Evagrius seems to have been influenced by Platonic thought. Given the links between Origen, the Cappadocians and Evagrius, it is unsurprising that elements of Origenistic thought also occur in his writings. Jerome was the first to add Evagrius (posthumously) to the controversy around Origen,<sup>11</sup> whose allegorical interpretations of the Bible and apparent teaching that, "...bodily existence resulted from a fall into sin, but for which creation would have been non-material",<sup>12</sup> were rightly being questioned. Evagrius was not accused of similar heresies at that stage; that would come over a century later, but he was being drawn into the controversy by association.

By the sixth century, scholars were questioning whether or not it was spiritually dangerous to read *any* of Evagrius' work.<sup>13</sup>

However, to counteract the labelling of him as a heretic, we need to remember that Evagrius was active in support of Gregory at the First Council of Constantinople, where he contended against the Arians. One writer suggests that we can deduce from this that "...the bedrock... of his whole literary production is this confession [at Constantinople] of doctrinal

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<sup>7</sup> For the various interpretations see, e.g., Bunge, *Despondency*, 13-14 and Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Bunge, *Despondency*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

orthodoxy",<sup>14</sup> and further, that, "Evagrius... maintained an outspoken apologetic for Nicene orthodoxy".<sup>15</sup>

The cultural context in which they were writing was complex. As Kevin Corrigan puts it:

...Evagrius is a child of his own times... As part of the logic of thought and practice, therefore, he had to have a cogent *Christian* picture of such structures. Evagrius' [theological teaching] is accordingly restrained, even appropriate when put beside many less restrained details in Gnostic versions.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the best approach for an evangelical Christian to take is to follow that recommended in the sixth century, where the theological writings were to be avoided, but the practical advice could be adopted.

### *Defining terms*

The first frustration for anybody seeking to lay down a framework in which to understand Evagrius' teaching on sin in general, and acedia in particular, is that his insights are scattered across several treatises, and his use of some terms can be interchangeable. For example, as we shall see, Evagrius will sometimes talk of "thoughts", sometimes of "temptations", and sometimes of "demons" when describing negative desires which attempt to draw the one seeking God away from him. The diagnosis and the prescribed cure remain the same, but the cause of the affliction can be variously described.

Jeremy Driscoll suggests that the Evagrian understanding was that, "thoughts are the means which demons use to tempt a monk".<sup>17</sup> This is the assumption we shall adopt throughout this section.

The importance for Evagrius of cutting off the sin at the point of the thoughts, before they can give birth to sinful acts, is seen in his letter to Melania, one of his mentors, where he writes, "Everyone who wishes to travel on the way of virtue should keep diligently from sin, not only by abstaining from the act, but from the very thought in his mind."<sup>18</sup>

The idea that thoughts themselves can be sinful brings in the question of culpability, and so Evagrius teaches the monk not to allow thoughts to linger. He writes in *Praktikos* 6, "Whether or not all these thoughts trouble the soul is not within our power; but it is for us to decide if they are to linger within

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<sup>14</sup> Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory: Mind, Soul and Body in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century* (Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity; Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Driscoll, "Listlessness in *The Mirror for Monks* of Evagrius Ponticus", *Cistercian Studies* 24 (1989), 208 n7.

<sup>18</sup> Evagrius *Letter 8 (To Melania)*, 3, in Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 61.

us or not and whether or not they stir up the passions.”<sup>19</sup> Driscoll suggests that, for Evagrius, part of a monk’s training is learning the art of constant vigilance against the thoughts – a vigilance that will be the remedy against demonic attack.<sup>20</sup>

We shall now turn to an examination of acedia itself.

### *The nature of acedia*

The first thing to recognise is that acedia is a complex vice, and therefore difficult to define concisely. We shall give a broad overview of it in Evagrian terms, before attempting to analyse his teaching on it in detail.

#### *Overview of acedia from Evagrius’ works*

Gabriel Bunge writes that Evagrius sees acedia as a vice which, like all others, “...has its secret, invisible roots in self-love, that all-hating passion, which manifests itself in a thousand ways as a state of being stuck in oneself that renders one incapable of love... Because it is unnatural, this wayward desire cannot, in its essence, find fulfilment.”<sup>21</sup>

Acedia is an insidious vice, one that poisons the heart and mind with discontent and restlessness. It is not the same as a *temporary* distraction or feeling of inertia; acedia is, again quoting Bunge, “...a simultaneous, long-lasting movement of anger and desire, whereby the former is angry with what is at hand, while the latter yearns for what is not present.”<sup>22</sup> It is that interpretative framework of anger and desire that we shall adopt later when, after describing acedia in Evagrian terms, we move to analyse it.

According to Evagrius acedia is unique in that it has its origins in both the physical and the intellectual parts of a human being. We noted earlier that Evagrius describes acedia as “an ethereal friendship, one who leads our steps astray...”<sup>23</sup> In that same section of teaching, Evagrius spells out the symptoms of acedia. It is worth listing them all, for they will form the basis of the discussion that follows:

[Acedia is] hatred of industriousness, a battle against stillness, stormy weather for psalmody, laziness in prayer, a slackening of asceticism, untimely drowsiness, revolving sleep, the oppressiveness of solitude, hatred of one’s cell, an adversary of ascetic works, an opponent of perseverance, muzzling of meditation, ignorance of the scriptures, a partaker in sorrow, a clock for hunger.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 6, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 98-9.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremy Driscoll, *Evagrius Ponticus Ad Monachos: Translation and Commentary*, Ancient Christian Writers 59 (New York: Newman Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Bunge, *Despondency*, 133.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Evagrius, *On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues* 6, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 64.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

Acedia appears both to increase and sap desire, increasing desire for things that will draw the human being away from God, and sapping the desire for beneficial practices (prayer, psalmody, *askesis* - from the Gk 'skein', exercise).

Evagrius describes acedia in one place as the commander of the army opposing the ascetic, bearing down on [ascetic labours] and seeking to destroy them,<sup>25</sup> setting "laziness as an antagonist against the soul",<sup>26</sup> and in another as "the most oppressive of all the demons".<sup>27</sup>

Acedia leads the monk to rebel against his place and assigned task in the monastery; for example when he is supposed to be reading, Evagrius suggests that:

The eye of the person afflicted with acedia stares at the doors continuously, and his intellect imagines people coming to visit. The door creaks and he jumps up; he hears a sound, and he leans out the window and does not leave it until he gets stiff from sitting there.<sup>28</sup>

When he reads, the one afflicted with acedia yawns a lot and drifts off into sleep; he rubs his eyes and stretches his arms; turning his eyes away from the book, he stares at the wall and again goes back to reading for a while; leafing through the pages, he looks curiously for the end of texts, he counts the folios and calculates the number of gatherings. Later, he closes the book and puts it under his head and falls asleep...<sup>29</sup>

The picture is one of a person who is unable to focus on the task in hand, who will find even physical discomfort preferable to persevering in the work.

One of the clearest descriptions of acedia in Evagrius' works comes in *Praktikos*, advice from Evagrius to those embarking on the monastic life. The contradictory nature of acedia becomes clear in the passage as he shows how, despite the manifold thoughts, the unifying temptation is to abandon the monastery and the struggle for holiness. It is in this passage that the reason for the "demon of acedia" being described as "the noonday demon" is explained, for it "attacks the monk about the fourth hour and besieges his soul until the eighth hour".<sup>30</sup>

The passage, though lengthy, is worth noting in full because it concentrates in one place the central concepts of Evagrius' understanding of acedia, and is thus foundational to our examination of it:

The demon of acedia, also called the noonday demon, is the most oppressive of all the demons. He attacks the monk about the fourth hour and besieges his soul until the eighth hour. First of all, he makes it appear that the sun moves slowly or not at all, and that the day seems to be fifty hours long. Then he compels the monk to look constantly towards the windows, to jump out of the cell, to watch the sun to see how far it is from the ninth hour, to look this way and that lest one of the brothers ... [*sic*.] And further, he instils in him a dislike for the place and for his state

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<sup>25</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 8, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Evagrius, *Eulogios* 9, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 12, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 99.

<sup>28</sup> Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts*, 6.14, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 84.

<sup>29</sup> Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts*, 6.15, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 84.

<sup>30</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 12, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 99.

of life itself, for manual labour, and also the idea that love has disappeared from among the brothers and there is no one to console him. And should there be someone during those days who has offended the monk, this too the demon uses to add further to his dislike (of the place). He leads him on to a desire for other places where he can easily find the wherewithal to meet his needs and pursue a trade that is easier and more productive; he adds that pleasing the Lord is not a question of being in a particular place: for scripture says that the divinity can be worshipped everywhere (cf. John 4:21-4). He joins to these suggestions the memory of his close relations and of his former life; he depicts for him the long course of his lifetime, while bringing the burdens of asceticism before his eyes; and, as the saying has it, he deploys every device in order to have the monk leave his cell and flee the stadium. No other demon follows immediately after this one: a state of peace and ineffable joy ensues in the soul after this struggle.<sup>31</sup>

Evagrius teaches that acedia attacks every part of the person, body, mind and soul:

Whereas the other demons are like the sun which rises and sets, touching only one part of the soul, the noonday demon [acedia] is accustomed to enveloping the entire soul and strangling the mind.<sup>32</sup>

Kevin Corrigan, writing on the similarities between the teaching of Evagrius and that of Gregory of Nyssa, gives an evocative description of acedia as, “a sort of material-less, object-less smog of inert boredom...”<sup>33</sup> Contained in that description is the idea of hopelessness and despair that characterises acedia, that can manifest itself either in laziness or distraction, as we shall discuss later.

One problem with acedia is that it weakens the monk spiritually and leaves him unable to combat other temptations. Acedia also leads to self-delusion, suggesting that each new possibility to escape the work set before a person is, in fact, the way to virtue. So, for example, the one suffering from acedia may offer to visit those in distress, but in so doing, they are serving their own ends by avoiding the harder calling of fulfilling their duty of prayer.<sup>34</sup> There are repeated vivid metaphors in Evagrius’ writing, showing how acedia leads to rootlessness, dryness and fruitlessness in the ascetic life.<sup>35</sup> For example, a restless monk who can only remain still for a short time is compared to a “dry twig in the desert”.<sup>36</sup> Acedia also, crucially, leads the monk to see the work of prayer, his brethren and his calling as negative and burdensome. Combating acedia, therefore is not a simple or quick matter.

Having described an overview of Evagrius’ understanding of the nature of acedia, we may now move towards analysing it in some detail.

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<sup>31</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 12 in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 99.

<sup>32</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 36, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 104.

<sup>33</sup> Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts*, 6.6, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 84.

<sup>35</sup> Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts*, 6.8, 6.9, 6.10, 6.11, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 84.

<sup>36</sup> Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts*, 6.10, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 84.

## Analysis

### (i) The twin roots of acedia: anger and desire

Unlike the other seven vices, Evagrius teaches that acedia comes from both the concupiscible (to do with desire) and the irascible (to do with anger) parts of the soul. This combination gives rise to the unique sense of hopelessness and despair that characterises acedia, that can manifest itself either in laziness or distraction. We see this in the *Scholia on Psalms*, where Evagrius says,

Through the thoughts the demons are drawn up in battle against us, sometimes moving in the concupiscible part, sometimes moving anger, and at other times moving the irascible part and the concupiscible part in the same moment, from which is born what is called a complex thought. But this only happens in the hour of listlessness [acedia].<sup>37</sup>

The interpretative framework that we shall adopt in this section takes its cue from that dual source: anger and desire. Evagrius explicitly makes the point that acedia is a complex struggle between anger and desire in a fragment of a letter quoted by Driscoll:

... [acedia] alone of all the thoughts is an entangled struggle of hate and desire. For the listless one hates whatever is in front of him and desires what is not. And the more desire drags the monk down, the more hate chases him out of his cell. He looks like an irrational beast, dragged by desire, and beat from behind by hate.<sup>38</sup>

Driscoll's own commentary on that letter draws the conclusion that, "there is something about listlessness [acedia] that involves the monk in a war of proper vs. improper desires, of love vs. hate".<sup>39</sup>

Evagrius himself is clear that both inertia and diversion, coming from the dual root of acedia in the anger and desire, are different manifestations of the same vice.

Whilst it may initially be hard to see the link between inertia and diversion, viewing them as opposites, once the common cause in acedia is unearthed the connection is clear: both are ways of avoiding the demands of the ascetic life. One prevents any activity, the other promotes restless over-activity; both stultify spiritual growth, leaving the soul unable to make progress towards God. Suffocation or restlessness achieve the same end:

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<sup>37</sup> Evagrius, *Scholia on Psalms*, in PG12, 1664B, quoted in Driscoll, "Listlessness in *The Mirror for Monks*", 213. In modern English Protestant translations this verse is Psalm 140:4.

<sup>38</sup> Evagrius, *Letter 27*, 6. Translated from a Greek fragment found in C. Guillaumont, *Fragments grecs inédits d'Évagre le Pontique in Texte und Textkritik, eine Aufsatzsammlung*, Berlin, 1987, 220-1. The reference is in Driscoll, "Listlessness in *The Mirror for Monks*", 211, n23.

<sup>39</sup> Jeremy Driscoll, "Listlessness in *The Mirror for Monks* of Evagrius Ponticus", 211.

spiritual death. A table may be helpful in seeing how anger and desire work together in acedia:

Anger (irascible part of soul)	Desire (concupiscible part of soul)
Inertia	Diversion
Suffocation	Restlessness
No activity	Over-activity

This arrangement may initially seem counter-intuitive as *anger* might more naturally seem to cause restlessness, but in Evagrius' worldview it makes sense to say that restlessness is a fruit of disordered desire because that negative desire can never be satiated. So there is a constant desire for a new situation, which leads to over-activity, which Evagrius illustrates by comparing a restless monk with a sick person whose appetite needs to be stimulated by several different foods,<sup>40</sup> or a man who requires more than one wife to satisfy his desire for pleasure.<sup>41</sup>

In the same way, for Evagrius, anger leads to inertia because anger generates an overwhelming sense of dissatisfaction with the present situation. The hatred of his manual labour, of his state of life and of brothers whom he feels have offended him all contribute to a monk's anger, which in turn generates "laziness in prayer, a slackness of asceticism, ignorance of the scriptures... [and] muzzling of meditation".<sup>42</sup> In acedia, anger turns in on its human subject, suffocating any positive aspect of desire for progress in the practical life of asceticism.<sup>43</sup>

## (ii) Acedia as "container" of other vices

So we have seen that acedia, far from being a "simple" matter of laziness, is for Evagrius the most complex of all vices, with its dual root. But there is a further dimension to its complexity: Jeremy Driscoll notes this in referring to Evagrius' commentary on Psalm 139:3, "Keep me safe, LORD, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from the violent, who devise ways to trip my feet".<sup>44</sup> Evagrius states that, "On that day [when listlessness attacks] no other

<sup>40</sup> Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts*, 6.12, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 84.

<sup>41</sup> Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts*, 6.13, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> Evagrius, *On the Vices Opposed to the Virtues* 6, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 64.

<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that, whilst some modern writers suggest depression is a form of anger turned in on itself, true clinical depression appears to have more in common with Evagrius' sadness than with acedia. Space does not permit consideration of that question in this article.

<sup>44</sup> Driscoll, "Listlessness in *The Mirror for Monks*", 213. In modern Protestant English Bibles this verse is Psalm 140:4. Remember that in Evagrius' writings "thoughts" parallel temptations and vices.



thought follows the thought of listlessness, first because it lingers and second *because it contains almost all the other thoughts in itself*.<sup>45</sup>

This thought – that acedia contains almost all other temptations within itself – is extremely suggestive for our study, as it helps us to differentiate between the common understanding that acedia = sloth = laziness and the idea that acedia is in fact a much deeper sin, with connotations of rebellion, restlessness and rejection of progress towards love and knowledge.

Having spent time understanding what Evagrius means by acedia, and seen how serious it is in impeding the monk's progress in the ascetic life, we are now in a position to examine Evagrius' suggested remedies against acedia.

### *Remedies against acedia*

#### *Perseverance*

Evagrius, when listing the negative "movements" of a human being, including sloth (acedia),<sup>46</sup> assigns to each a positive, corresponding, opposite, "movement". That for acedia is perseverance.<sup>47</sup>

Perseverance builds up the mind to defeat acedia and resist the other sins it contains. In a passage in his treatise to Eulogios on the vices opposed to the virtues, Evagrius describes how perseverance destroys acedia:

Perseverance is the severing of acedia, the cutting down of thoughts, concern for death, meditation on the cross, fear firmly affixed, beaten gold, legislation for affections, a book of thanksgiving, a breastplate of stillness, an armour of ascetic works, a fervent work of excellence, an example of the virtues.<sup>48</sup>

The passage contains several key Evagrian ideas: First, the idea that being concerned for one's death will lead to perseverance, and thus overcome acedia. In *To Monks*, this link is made explicit when he writes, "Remember always your departure from life and forget not the eternal judgment, and there will be no fault in your soul."<sup>49</sup> It is by focusing on eternity, and not

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<sup>45</sup> Evagrius, *Scholia on Psalm 139:3* in PG12, 1664B. quoted in Driscoll, "Listlessness in *The Mirror for Monks*", 213, my italics. It is important to note that the *Scholia on Psalms* in PG 12 was originally attributed to Origen. However, following Casiday, Driscoll and others, who rely on Hans Urs von Balthasar's article on the *Hiera* of Evagrius in *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie*, 63 (1939), I have adopted the modern consensus that Evagrius was the author. Investigating the truth of the attribution is beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>46</sup> Evagrius, *Great Letter*, 41, in Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 72.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Evagrius, *Vices*, 6.4, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 64.

<sup>49</sup> Evagrius, *To Monks in Monasteries and Communities*, 54, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 125.

listening to the challenges posed by acedia, that the monk will find the motivation to continue the ascetic life.

Evagrius counsels the monk to remain in his cell or at his task, battling the demon of acedia when it strikes, not to run away: "If the spirit of acedia comes over you, do not leave your dwelling or avoid a worthwhile contest at an opportune moment, for in the same way that one might polish silver, so will your heart be made to shine."<sup>50</sup>

So, acedia is opposed to, and defeated by, perseverance in an act of the will that controls negative desire and harnesses the power of the irascible part of the soul to fight the temptations.

### *Scripture*

In Book Six of *The Antirrhetikos*, Evagrius systematically lists fifty-seven possible temptations that could beset a monk, all of which he sees as demonic deceptions stemming from acedia. Meditation on Scripture is, according to Evagrius, one of the most effective remedies against acedia, so his first recommendation to anyone suffering temptation is that they learn and recite Scripture to quote against the demons.

Bearing in mind the dual root of acedia, Evagrius also teaches that the use of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs will "...[cool] our boiling irascibility and [extinguish] our desires".<sup>51</sup>

Other remedies against acedia, as well as perseverance and the application of Scripture, advocated by Evagrius are short, intense prayers, physical work, breaking tasks into more manageable goals, and patience.<sup>52</sup> There is another remedy which Evagrius recommends to the monk battling acedia which, when combined with perseverance, will be particularly effective: "Perseverance along with *tears* represses acedia..."<sup>53</sup> It is to that unexpected weapon that we now turn.

### *Tears*

Evagrius views tears as a vital part of the Christian's fight against acedia. For example, in *Exhortation to a Virgin* he writes, "Sadness is burdensome and acedia is irresistible, but tears shed before God are stronger than both."<sup>54</sup> He devotes one entire section of the *Chapters on Prayer* to the importance of tears, suggesting that the monk should pray for tears as a sign of repentance,

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<sup>50</sup> Evagrius, *To Monks in Monasteries and Communities*, 55, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 125.

<sup>51</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 71, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 109.

<sup>52</sup> Bunge, *Despondency*, 109.

<sup>53</sup> Evagrius, *Exhortation to Monks*, 1.5, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 218, my italics.

<sup>54</sup> Evagrius, *Exhortation to a Virgin* 39, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 134.

and “Make use of tears to obtain the fulfilment of your every request, for the Lord rejoices greatly over you when he receives prayer accompanied by tears.”<sup>55</sup>

That tears have a remedial effect on acedia is suggested when Evagrius writes that, “The spirit of acedia drives away tears...” The callusing of the heart that acedia brings needs to be countered by tears. We see this when he prescribes Psalm 6:6 in *Antirrhetikos* 6.7:

[Pray Psalm 6:6] against the hardened soul that does not want to shed tears at night because of thoughts of listlessness [acedia] – for the shedding of tears is a great remedy for nocturnal visions that are born from listlessness.

In *Praktikos*, Evagrius suggests the use of tears as a way of dividing the soul, along with preaching the psalms to one’s own soul, as did David in Psalm 42:

When we come up against the demon of acedia, then with tears let us divide the soul and have one part offer consolation and the other receive consolation.

This again suggests that tears play a part in “unblocking” the soul troubled by acedia. In short, for Evagrius, “...tears wipe the soul clean of sins...”<sup>56</sup>

### *Physical labour*

Though the least frequently-mentioned of the remedies against acedia, physical work is mentioned in *Antirrhetikos* as a helpful device, when the monk is told to battle “...the demon of listlessness that hates the manual labour of the skill that it knows...”<sup>57</sup>

### *How the remedies combat acedia*

The four remedies which Evagrius prescribes – perseverance, Scripture, tears and physical labour – each play a different part in overcoming acedia. Scripture is recommended because it follows the pattern Christ set during his own temptation. That remedy is generic to all the thoughts. Specific to the fight against acedia, tears undo the hardened heart and prompt repentance; physical labour calms the thoughts and tires the body; and perseverance brings success and builds strength. In general, Evagrius teaches that actions of both body and soul are needed to combat the passions, and that love plays a part in destroying those that assault the soul: “Abstinence cuts away the passions of the body; spiritual love cuts away those of the soul.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer*, 6, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 193.

<sup>56</sup> Evagrius, *Exhortation*, 1.5, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 218.

<sup>57</sup> Evagrius, *Antirrhetikos*, 6.1, in Brakke, *Talking Back*, 133.

<sup>58</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 35, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 104.

In one summary section in *Eight Thoughts*, Evagrius suggests a simple rule that the monk who has recognised that he is in danger of falling prey to acedia should follow:

Set a measure for yourself in every work and do not let up until you have completed it. Pray with understanding and intensity, and the spirit of acedia will flee from you.<sup>59</sup>

### *Is this salvation by works?*

At first glance, yes. Evagrius seems to be advocating a system whereby, undertaking certain spiritual practices, the monk can (automatically?) grow in holiness and grow towards God. This approach is something that an evangelical Christian would want to reject, given that our salvation is by faith alone through grace alone. Evagrius has a place for grace, but it is for grace working with a human being's effort.<sup>60</sup>

However, the disciplines which Evagrius recommends to the monk battling acedia are helpful in and of themselves, and some could even be described as means of grace given by God to help Christians grow in holiness – not towards union with Christ, that is accomplished by the Trinitarian grace of God alone – but in godliness of character.

The practice of memorising and reciting Scripture is known to be a helpful way of the Christian “preaching” to him- or herself. Jesus himself quoted Scripture when tempted. Perseverance is something commended by the writers of the Epistles both as a fruit of suffering and also as something to be cultivated. Tears are a sign of anguish and humility before God, which he sees.

The evangelical Christian will need to guard against seeing these means of grace as ways of gaining favour with God, without rejecting them entirely.

### *Conclusion*

As we have seen, acedia starts with thoughts of restlessness, or demonic temptation towards listlessness, which leads one to discontent with present circumstances. One manifestation of acedia might be withdrawal, but another might be, quoting Bunge, “busy, untiring activism [masquerading as] the Christian virtue of brotherly love.”<sup>61</sup> for acedia “...not only talks us into lukewarm minimalism, but also drives us, on occasion, to a destructive maximalism”.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts*, 6.18, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 85.

<sup>60</sup> Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostica*, 1.79.

<sup>61</sup> Bunge, *Despondency*, 74.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

Acedia thus resists the demands made by the ascetic life yet, according to Evagrian teaching, that ascetic life is the only way to true knowledge of God. So, in Evagrian terms, acedia is an expression of disordered love against which monks must battle.<sup>63</sup>

It appears then that acedia, far from being a simple matter of indolence, somehow seeks not only to deny God's goodness by making temporary pleasures seem more rewarding than pursuing spiritual growth, but also impedes the soul's pursuit of God. If one simple phrase were to be coined to describe the restless, self-centred, self-deluding and self-defeating heart of acedia's sinfulness, its culpability and its nature, perhaps "stubborn indifference" might be that phrase.

The question could still remain: what have this ancient vice and ancient Eastern Orthodox writer to do with twenty-first-century evangelical thinking and ministry? One possible answer is that although Evagrius was writing in the fourth century, his analysis and his remedies are instantly recognisable and applicable to our times where, perhaps more than ever, restlessness is seen in every area of human relationships and society. Now, as then, listlessness seeks refuge in escape, disengagement and over-stimulation. The results are destructive in terms of relationships between humans and God, humans and humans, and humans and their work, just as they were seventeen centuries ago.

For example, the Christian leader who is tempted to procrastinate when facing writing a sermon may need to recognise that sloth is at work, and resist the urge to run away from the task God has given them by being distracted by administration. The believer who finds the other members of their church irritating, or some of the teaching not to their taste, may be tempted to leave and find another fellowship, but that may be a form of acedia – seeking to escape and disengage from the congregation where God has placed them – not just to grow themselves, but to be a blessing and encouragement to others. These examples, and many others, may serve to show us that the sin of acedia needs to be unmasked and battled against now, just as it did in the past.

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<sup>63</sup> Evagrius, *Reflections*, 53, in Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 215.

## REVIEW ARTICLE: *THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT, PRODUCED AT TYNDALE HOUSE, CAMBRIDGE*

Crossway, 2017, 540 pp, £28.56 hardback (Amazon). Also published by Cambridge University Press in various bindings.

*Daniel Stevens*<sup>\*</sup>

A gratis copy of the Tyndale House Greek New Testament (THGNT) was received at its launch at Tyndale House, Cambridge, for which I am grateful.

### *Introduction*

It is not every day that an entirely new edition of the Greek New Testament appears on the scene, and the THGNT represents a significant contribution to this somewhat monopolised field. The editor, Dirk Jongkind, associate editor Peter Williams, and the assistant editors Peter Head and Patrick James have made a meticulous, interesting and appealing contribution to the study of the text of the New Testament through this new edition. While the THGNT does not present any world-changing differences in the text of the New Testament, it does succeed in raising questions about the goals and priorities of New Testament textual criticism and extends its editorial concern to the form of the text itself, rather than stopping at what words are present in what order. Since the THGNT is not a composition but rather a critical edition of the text of the New Testament in Greek, this review will focus more on the philosophy, textual content and format of the THGNT than on the conceptual content of the New Testament itself. That is an exercise humbly left to the reader.

### *Overview*

The THGNT began as an update of Samuel Tregelles' (1813-1875) edition of the Greek New Testament with the addition of manuscripts, and particularly papyri, which have been discovered and catalogued since Tregelles' time. His edition was chosen as a basis because of a shared methodological frame-

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work, namely “Tregelles’ strong reliance on the testimony of documents and on the principle of proven antiquity” (505-6). However, the work continued to grow and, as it stands, represents an entirely new edition of the New Testament, not just an update of Tregelles’ work.

The editors had three goals that are expressed both in the text and the format of the THGNT:

- 1) Readability;
- 2) A documentary focus in which choices must be justified by manuscript evidence, in which at least two manuscripts agree, one of which must be from the fifth century or earlier (with the exception of variants in Revelation);
- 3) An attempt to present “the best approximation of the words written by the New Testament authors” (505).

Their editing is particularly informed by an extensive study of scribal habits, both generally and of individual manuscripts. This has allowed the editors to exercise a level of letter-by-letter detail that is not usually exhibited in editions of the New Testament, and causes them to be more concerned with aspects of spelling and accentuation than is typical. The aspect of this method that sets the THGNT most apart is the documentary emphasis, which goes on to inform every decision within the text. The THGNT takes this documentary approach rather strongly, refusing evidence from patristic sources as well as from later minuscules and early translational versions, other than for accentuation choices. While the editors acknowledge that a later text can witness an older reading, they do so only in theory, at no point admitting such a reading.

Upon opening the text, readers familiar with other edited Greek New Testaments (or indeed, any modern language translation) will be in somewhat unfamiliar territory. After a table of contents and a two-page preface, the text of Matthew begins and the New Testament continues through to Revelation. Introductory matters are left until the end of the book in an attempt to not interrupt the reading experience. The page itself is uncluttered, with no symbols in the text and minimal textual apparatus at the bottom of the page (more on that later). Further, quotations are not marked within the text at all, causing them to blend seamlessly into the main text.

Paragraphs are more frequent than in all other editions, based on manuscript witnesses more than modern convention, and are marked by *ekthesis*, projecting the first line into the margin, instead of indentation. This difference in paragraphing has a subtle effect on the reader, both by moving one along a bit more quickly because of the frequent paragraph breaks and by providing a different interpretation of what constitutes units of thought within the text. For example, Rom 6:1-10 is presented as a single paragraph, while Rom 6:18 is a paragraph unto itself. While the paragraphing of the THGNT does not represent the unmediated and universal interpretive traditions of early Christian scribes (as if there were such a thing), the

editors have chosen places of agreement between at least two manuscripts for their divisions. Hopefully, in their forthcoming textual commentary the editors will provide some of the evidence leading to these paragraphing distinctions.

Another obvious difference that will meet the reader is the order of New Testament books. Here also the editors were informed by the order found in many manuscripts, and so they arrange the New Testament in the order of Gospels, Acts, Catholic Epistles, the Pauline corpus (including Hebrews at the end) and Revelation. The Pauline corpus follows the familiar order.

### *Differences in the text and apparatus*

So far all this has been how the THGNT differs in format, but what differences are found in the text and apparatus? That is, in what ways does the THGNT differ from other critical editions in terms of the words on the page?

#### *The Apparatus*

The textual apparatus is noticeably smaller than that in other editions, and represents only a minority of the choices made and the evidence supporting those choices. Because of the editors' desire to have a clean and easily readable page, the evidence in the apparatus has been reduced to three categories: First are those variants which the editors believed were close contenders with the reading provided in the text. These are marked in the apparatus by a black diamond. Second are variants with "high exegetical importance" (515), that is, those that the editors feel comfortable deciding against, but would have a significant enough impact on the meaning of the passage if correct. Third, and finally, are variants which illustrate scribal habits, a particular emphasis in the editors' method.

While reduced, the apparatus of the THGNT stands out as particularly helpful on two counts: First, its comments are almost entirely in English, not Latin. (The main exception is <sup>vid</sup>, for *ut videtur*, "apparently".) Second, for most <sup>vid</sup> readings, that is for readings of manuscripts in which some or all of the letters of a given variant are missing due to damage, the apparatus provides a best reconstruction of the reading in round brackets. In such reconstructions, letters which are incomplete in the manuscript and must be partially reconstructed are represented with a dot beneath them, and those which are completely absent and must be entirely reconstructed are presented in square brackets. This is a great step forward in making <sup>vid</sup> readings more transparent, and puts the relevant evidence in the hands of the reader.



*The Text*

As for the text itself, the greatest overall differences are in the area of orthography. Spelling decisions were made on the basis of manuscript evidence, with emphasis on spellings testified in manuscripts of the fifth century and earlier. Accentuation decisions had to depend on later manuscripts or scribal hands, however, since the earlier uncial manuscripts did not initially have accentuation. The editors admit that these spellings and conventions may not reflect the actual spellings of the first century in general or the New Testament authors in particular, but do represent the most common spellings of the earliest evidence we have. While much of the text approximates the presentation of the text in the manuscripts, some ancient conventions were not followed: Lower-case letters are used throughout with minimal capitalization; spaces between words and punctuation are added, though the editors attempted to be sparing in their use of punctuation; *nomina sacra*, abbreviations of the names of holy persons or things, are not used, though they may be in later editions after a more full study of their use in manuscripts.

*Christos* is not capitalised at all, even when used like a title. *Iota* subscripts are omitted when not necessary for identifying the form, which means that outside of the dative singular for nouns and adjectives and the active subjunctive of verbs, they tend to be absent, even when etymologically correct. In compounds involving *syn*, the *nu* is occasionally not assimilated to the following letter, which may prove an inconvenience for readers attempting to look up the terms in a lexicon if unaware. Within this tendency, *syng* only appears once (1 Cor 7:6), *synl* is usually not preferred to *syll*, whereas *synm* is slightly preferred to *symp* as is *synch* to *sygch*, and *synk* is heavily preferred to *sygk*.

The representation of Semitic names follows the majority of manuscripts, which yields some irregularities, such as a rough breathing at the beginning of Abraham's name, resulting in *Habraam*, and not placing the accent on the penult as other editions do. In a somewhat more controversial move (at least among the subset of people who care deeply about Greek accentuation), the editors followed the evidence of later accentuation that sometimes placed an accent on indefinite *tis*. In addition to patterns of emphasis, the editors have appealed to stress patterns across Indo-European languages regarding the interrogative and indefinite pronouns etymologically related to *tis* (those beginning with \*k<sup>w</sup>-) to justify this move. Again, however, the editors emphasise that accentuation choices reflect a period centuries removed from the writing of the New Testament, and cannot necessarily always be projected backwards. This is certain to spark further debate on how Greek accentuation is understood and represented in edited texts.

The most widespread and obvious orthographic variant is the inconsistent use of the two letters *epsilon* and *iota* for long ī. This, again, is an attempt to represent the manuscript tradition in which *epsilon iota* was substituted for long *iota*. I call this usage inconsistent because the manuscript evidence is itself inconsistent, with some scribes preferring *epsilon iota* for ī (such as the scribes of *Vaticanus*), some not, and some switching between the two. Because the editors wished to follow this tendency in general (they made their attestation rule stricter by requiring it to be present in two manuscripts, one of which from the fifth century or earlier, and to appear in other instances of spelling that particular word), the THGNT sometimes features this variant, and sometimes does not. For example, *geinomai* is provided for *ginomai* “become” in Mark, Luke, two verses in John (!), and Romans-Colossians, but not elsewhere. Similarly, *geinōskō* is put for *ginōskō* “know” in Mark, Luke, John 10:14-14:17, and 1 Corinthians-Philippians. Here is a key point where the editors’ twin goals of documentary evidence and presenting the words written by the authors of the New Testament may come into conflict. Luke and Acts have different tendencies on the usage of *epsilon iota*, for example, leading one to think that this evidence is more relevant to the study of scribal habits in the New Testament manuscripts than the spellings of the authors themselves. The editors themselves acknowledge this possibility, and throughout their introduction these two goals exist in an unresolved tension.

All these orthographic changes may seem relatively minor to most readers, but they are worth thinking about for at least two reasons. First, the editors of the THGNT present them as a significant move toward the documentary evidence, and as such they represent an explicit part of what the editors set out to do. Second, they reveal a fundamental tension in the method of the THGNT between a desire to represent the documentary evidence of NT manuscripts and to provide the closest text possible to the original composition. While the editors’ study of scribal habits is extensive and no doubt accurate, they admittedly run the risk of presenting later convention as the oldest text form.

As far as concerns textual decisions, it would be impossible for this review to include every variant passage, but I will provide a few particularly salient textual decisions. There is a textual break after Mark 16:8, followed by an explanatory note from minuscule 1 in Greek, with an English translation in the apparatus, “In some of the copies, the evangelist finishes here, up to which (point) also Eusebius of Pamphilus made canon sections. But in many the following is also contained.” Mark 16:9-20 then follows. The Freer Logion of codex W after Mark 16:14 is not mentioned in the apparatus. The *Pericope Adulterae* in John 7:53-8:11 is entirely relegated to the apparatus, with the text continuing from 7:52 directly to 8:12. The apparatus records that 1 Cor 14:34-35 occur after 14:40 in codex D. In the catholic

epistles there will be more pronounced difference from the NA28, because of diverging editorial methods.

### *Aesthetics*

Since so much of the THGNT's difference is in issues of formatting, it is worth noting that the overall effect of this is a rather pleasant one. The clean pages without intrusive symbols or references are far more approachable, and facilitate an easy reading experience. The use of *ekthesis* for paragraphing is no less pleasing than normal indentation, and I find that it helps one scan through sections of the text more quickly. The font is Adobe Text, a visually appealing serif font. In all, it is a pleasure to read, and the editors do reach their goal of readability.

### *Overall thoughts*

The THGNT represents a significant contribution to the editing of the text of the Greek New Testament. It brings readers into closer contact with the evidence of the early manuscript traditions than any edition prior, and even takes a step closer to approximating the reading experience of those manuscripts. The level of detail provided by the editors is to be commended, and the evidence of spelling and accentuation convention is a worthy addition to the scholarly analysis of the Greek of the New Testament. The THGNT's greatest strength, however, may also be its weakness, in that it is bound to the early documentary evidence of Greek New Testament manuscripts, and thus is closed to the testimony of later manuscripts, versional evidence, or patristic citations of the New Testament. At times, then, there is the possibility that the information provided from the scribal habits of the first few centuries is ultimately just that, information about scribal habits rather than about the spelling and pronunciation of first century authors. That being said, however, this does not overshadow the benefits of the approach, and the Tyndale House Greek New Testament is well worth the work and the reading. It is a useful tool in the study of the New Testament, and works well in conjunction and comparison with other editions. Even at times when its evidence may speak more about the manuscript tradition, it is indirect evidence to the earliest text, and provides fascinating linguistic data about how Greek could have been pronounced and how it was transmitted, especially in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Jongkind, Williams, Head and James have produced an edition of the Greek New Testament that will benefit students of the New Testament, and I look forward to further editions and their textual commentary, both of which are sure to spark further conversation, study and interest.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Some Pastors and Teachers*

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Banner of Truth, 2017, 802pp, £25.18 (Amazon)

Well-known for his teaching, writing and editorial work, as well as for his contributions to reformed theological colleges and conferences, Dr Ferguson has latterly become Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, USA, commuting from Scotland, where he assists in ministry at St Peter's Free Church of Scotland, Dundee. It has been my privilege to have been given this, his latest book, *Some Pastors and Teachers*, to review.

The book's title stems from Paul's words in Ephesians 4:11, which, in context, echo Psalm 68:18. Paul says how the ascended Christ gave certain gifts so that the church might be built up in unity and love. In the New Testament church these gifts involve various ministries of the word of God, including the foundational work of the apostles, prophets (and evangelists?) and the ongoing provision for ministry of the "pastors *and* teachers". It is the ministry of these "pastor-teachers" that forms the theme, in one way or another, of this 800-page book.

The book reads superbly, gliding along with ease, interest and clarity. Its 40 or so chapters subdivide into five sections of unequal length, the first consisting of three excellent short biographies of famous reformed pastor-teachers. The author readily acknowledges the debt he owes to each of the three Johns (Calvin, Owen and Murray), who have exercised a considerable influence upon him. Each was not only a consummate theologian, but also demonstrated enduring commitment to bringing the word of God appropriately to the various audiences and congregations to which they ministered, the point being that those who minister God's word are the more helpful the more consistent they are in their theology (which requires constant study) and the more they know their people and *their* needs.

The second section consists of six fine essays on John Calvin, as an example of a pastor-teacher. I found "John Calvin: Commentator for preachers" particularly helpful in preparing this year's Good Friday and Easter sermons, and the essay on Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper shed helpful light on what is often found a perplexing subject! Whilst the long third section deals with "Puritans as Pastors and Teachers" the bulk of it concentrates on major theological themes in the writings of John Owen, including, to name but five, his doctrines of the Person of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Glory of Christ, the Priesthood of Christ and Christian Piety – and a thoughtfully-incorporated essay designed to help us read the Works of John Owen!

The fourth and fifth sections vary more in content, the fourth emphasising the Pastor in relation to “Teaching”; the fifth in relation to “Preaching”. Whilst each of the essays in the fifth section has to do pretty much overtly with preaching, those in the fourth section seem, at least superficially, more arbitrary, covering ground like Scripture, the Holy Spirit in relation to the Bible, Biblical Theology (in the Geerhardus Vos mould), the Holiness of God the Father, the meaning of Christ’s death, “by Faith Alone”, Assurance, Reformed Theology and Lifestyle, and several others. I enjoyed Dr Ferguson’s ten-point contribution to the “what is necessary for God-honouring preaching?” debate. His concluding Epilogue fittingly emphasises the doxological tendency of properly-construed Calvinism and his Introduction is a masterpiece of warm, candid and honest brevity. The honesty is important.

*Some Pastors and Teachers* is essentially an agglomeration of essays written by Dr Ferguson at different times and in a variety of contexts – although one never feels some of the essays to be especially deep and demanding or others to be shallow and superficial. But as Dr Ferguson says,

Many of these chapters were first published in relatively obscure places. But... [more recently] these essays seemed to self-select and rearrange themselves in my mind into a coherent whole (xi).

This means that some readers will already have come across some of these essays. And despite writing a number of them during times of busy ministry, and therefore aware that they may not be as polished as some might wish, he nevertheless hopes that “these pages will encourage other ministers to allow themselves to be stretched a little beyond their normal pulpit or lectern preparation” (xii). He urges strongly, where possible, that ministers should study beyond preparation for only their next sermon, and in so doing commends minister-readers to follow his own example: when given opportunity, to submit themselves to writing and to being stretched in the process – “Yes, you may find yourself under a little pressure; but pressure can produce diamonds!” (xii). And his hopes are modest:

These [essays] are some of the gifts that the Lord has given me for others who have an interest in and a concern for the ministry of the gospel. I know the parcels are small; but I hope there will be something inside them that will be a blessing and an encouragement to you.

They certainly are! The book is fit to grace the shelves of any church minister, to be read and reread at leisure, with pleasure, for encouragement, stimulation and guidance. At a good price this book is highly recommended.

That each chapter, or essay, is somewhat “stand-alone” means that it can be read as “complete” without reference having to be made to other chapters. This advantage carries with it the disadvantage, however, that there is a fair degree of repetition (I read of the hymn attributed to Calvin at least three times in as many chapters – although its contents perhaps stick better on the third reading; if I remember Lloyd-Jones’ preaching on 2 Peter

1:12 correctly, his statement “the art of [good] teaching is repetition” may be apposite here.)

Recognising that one has to draw the line somewhere in an 800-page volume and not answer everything [!], I was a little disappointed to find some of my lingering “pastor-teacher” questions remaining largely unanswered. One has to wade/swim potentially through 685 pages (or to make it more palatable, perhaps, 34 chapters) before getting to anything like an accurate exegesis of Ephesians 4:11. I had anticipated reading about “pastor-teachers” in relation to “elders”, or at least a discussion involving, say, John Murray’s fine essay on “Office in the Church” (*Collected Writings*, Vol. 2, esp., 360-361). But...! Might the principles in *Some Pastors and Teachers* not apply to *all* elders? Similarly, how is the office of the “minister” justified from the New Testament? Matters such as these seem rather to have been assumed. Though a super book, these unanswered questions left me wondering sometimes if the title was the best.

I was heartened to read that Dr Ferguson questioned the practice (685) of dividing between the pastor-preacher and the teacher-theologian, so as to create two ministries. However much we may think a preacher better fitted for teaching in a Bible college because he is so abstract, and however much we think a theologian better equipped for the pulpit because his concepts are simple, there ought to be no such dichotomy; John Owen preached his massively theological sermons on Hebrews to congregations of modest souls with limited academic ability; coherent, appropriately applied Calvinistic theology and helpful preaching amount to the same; they go together. As ministers (elders?), we do well to model ourselves and our ministries on those pastor-teachers who are also exemplary theologians.

*Gareth E Williams*

*Pastor, Bala Evangelical Church & Lecturer in Systematic and Historical Theology, Union School of Theology*

*Preaching in the New Testament: An exegetical and biblical-theological study*  
Jonathan I. Griffiths, IVP, 2017, 153pp, £15.32 (Amazon)

Jonathan Griffiths taught on the Cornhill Training Course and is now Lead Pastor of the Metropolitan Bible Church, Ottawa, Canada. He holds a PhD from Cambridge University. This book is in the excellent New Studies in Biblical Theology series from IVP. While there are countless how-to books on the subject of preaching, there is very little available that addresses what

preaching actually is with any biblical rigour. Consequently, this is an important book.

The purpose of this book is to answer two questions: First, “is there actually such a thing as ‘preaching’ that can be differentiated in any way from other forms of word ministry?” Second, if preaching is “mandated in the post-apostolic context... how is it characterised and defined?” (2-3). It is so important that our theology be based on the teaching of Scripture, and that should include our theology of preaching.

Over the years I have been surprised how many people are ready to see preaching as a feature of church tradition and church culture, but not necessarily a biblically-mandated ministry. Even those who have a high view of Scripture are sometimes uncertain of whether preaching is a distinctive and required ministry in changing times. In the face of trends and trajectories that threaten the centrality, or even existence, of preaching, this book fills a critical gap on the preacher’s bookshelf.

*Preaching in the New Testament* is not a long book, with the body consisting of just 134 pages. It is divided into three parts. Part one surveys the biblical theology of “the word of God”, three “semi-technical” terms for preaching in the New Testament (εὐαγγελίζομαι, καταγγέλλω, and κηρύσσω – a very accessible study if you don’t read Greek), and finally a survey of other word-based ministries of the church such as counselling and leading a Bible study. This foundation is built on in part two with exegetical studies of 2 Timothy 3-4; Romans 10; 1 Corinthians 1-2, 9 & 15; 2 Corinthians 2-6; 1 Thessalonians 1-2; and of course, Hebrews (which you would expect from Griffiths – this chapter is a highlight in the section). The third part is a chapter that summarises the findings of the study.

The heart of the study is Griffiths’ analysis of the three key terms for preaching (*euangelizomai*, *katangellō*, and *kēryssō*). The usage of these terms is presented clearly in table form on pages 20-24. These three verbs are not synonyms. They have unique characteristics, but also share important commonalities. Griffiths writes that in the New Testament, “the verbs typically refer to the act of making a public proclamation; the agent is generally a person of recognised authority; and the substance of the proclamation is normally some aspect of Christ’s person and work, the implications of the gospel, or some other truth from God’s word” (33). Griffiths argues compellingly that preaching is thus a distinct activity that is well-defined in the New Testament.

The conclusions of the study are carefully stated, but very important. Preaching is a proclamation of the word of God (122). The preaching of the church stands in a line of continuity with the Old Testament prophetic tradition, which finds its ultimate fulfilment in Christ the great Prophet and then extends out from him to the church – “to the apostles, their agents and successors whose work is to preach God’s word” (123-6, see also 61-66).

Griffiths rightly states that there are differences between the preaching of the church and that of the Old Testament prophets, but it would have been helpful to have some clarification on the distinctive ministry of prophets and prophecy in the New Testament.

The study underlines that the ministry of preaching is distinct from other word ministries in the local church, but rather than disenfranchising them, it drives and fuels them (133). Since preaching is distinct, this underlines the need for preachers to be commissioned to preach as leaders of the church (129 – a point that is derived from the exegetical study, but not developed much within the book).

Griffiths shows that preaching reflects the nature of the gospel (129) and is a divine and human activity that constitutes an encounter with God (130). Preaching has a natural context and particular significance within the Christian assembly (131). A significant proportion of the New Testament material either describes or recalls evangelistic outreach, so it is to be expected that the preaching in the New Testament includes a significant amount of focus on evangelistic ministry. Nevertheless, Griffiths demonstrates that the New Testament does present a ministry of preaching to believers in the local church.

Through a solid combination of studying the key terms and the key passages where those words occur, Griffiths has done us a great service in providing an accessible presentation of the biblical foundation and mandate for preaching in the ministry of the post-apostolic church. With this book on our shelves we should not feel swayed by pragmatic critiques or contemporary trends that might undermine our confidence in the ministry of preaching. Indeed, every believer has a calling to word-based ministry of some sort, but there is a unique role for preaching in the church.

Of course, we must seek to be good stewards of the preaching ministry, always striving to be biblical, clear, engaging and relevant, seeking to present the life-transforming grace of God in Christ as best we can. Nevertheless, our diligent efforts to develop our preaching ministry is built not on the pragmatic needs of the church or the shifting preferences of our culture, but on the biblical mandate to preach the word that Griffiths has presented so well in this book.

I believe every preacher should have a copy of this book on their shelves for reference, but let us be sure to read it first. Allow the plain evidence of the New Testament to establish a biblical conviction regarding the critical ministry of preaching in the church. Those engaged in other word ministries in the church would also benefit from this book as it is important to understand how those ministries interface with preaching.

Along with this short study, I would also highly recommend *Paul's Theology of Preaching: The Apostle's Challenge to the Art of Persuasion in Ancient Corinth*, by Duane Litfin (IVP Academic, 2015). Litfin's longer work is



referenced by Griffiths multiple times and is a fascinating study of what Paul meant by “preaching Christ” in 1 Corinthians 1-4. With Griffiths’ *Preaching in the New Testament*, and perhaps Litfin’s book alongside it, we will be better equipped to know what preaching is and why we should give so much energy to this vital ministry.

*Peter Mead*

*Pastoral team, Trinity Church, Chippenham, & founder and mentor, Cor Deo*

*Creation and Change:*

*Genesis 1:1-2:4 in the Light of Changing Scientific Paradigms*

Douglas F. Kelly, Christian Focus, 2017, 376pp, £19.99

This new publication is a very substantially revised and updated version of a work produced by the same author in 1997. Douglas F. Kelly is Professor of Theology Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina, and is a prolific writer on theological subjects as well as a worldwide conference speaker.

Books on the subject of creation and evolution are legion, and how to navigate them is a considerable challenge. One very helpful introduction to the whole subject is *Darwin on Trial* by Philip E. Johnson<sup>1</sup>, a soberly-written critique of many important aspects of evolutionary theory written with the discerning mind of a lawyer, and perhaps a good book to give to people who are tackling the subject for the first time. But Kelly’s work, by contrast, is grounded in the text of Genesis 1:1-2:4, which means that for people who entertain a high view of Scripture, this is the obvious “go to” book for them.

The imposing front cover – an attractive plan of the inner solar system – beckons the reader in to browse the Contents page which is a feast in itself. If only one reason were to be identified why this book should become the standard text on the doctrine of creation, it would be the comprehensive coverage of material, which includes the following: the Gap Theory (Chapter 5), the Flood and Fossils (Chapter 6), the Age of the World and the Speed of Light (Chapter 8), the Human Genome (Chapter 13), the Historicity of Adam and Eve (Chapter 14), and the Sabbath Day (Chapter 15).

These fascinating and important subjects, which are not only mouth-wateringly interesting and historically controversial, are in one sense supplementary to the main thesis of the book, which is to study the creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:4 in a linear fashion, focusing on the six days of

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<sup>1</sup> Philip E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (IVP, 2011).

creation and the seventh day of Sabbath rest; the treatment of each of these days forms the backbone of Kelly's treatment. The subtitle of the work, which refers to "Changing Scientific Paradigms", demonstrates that although Kelly is first and foremost a biblical theologian, he has also applied his considerable intellectual powers to areas of knowledge that are commonly regarded as "scientific". This is to be seen, especially, in the "Technical and Biographical Notes" with which most of the chapters conclude, which are sometimes as long as the body of the chapter in which they are contained.

Kelly is an erudite scholar of the very highest rank, but there is a deep humility in his approach. This book conveys less of a "Fundamentalist" atmosphere than others to which it might reasonably be compared. When Kelly deals with topics in which contentions have arisen, you sense that he has given very thorough, painstaking and respectful thought to these controversial areas before stating his conclusion. For example, in dealing with the problems posed by Australopithecine fossils, Kelly cites a considerable variety of sources, uses the language of "might", "possibility" and "probably" a good deal, and closes the chapter (6) with a paragraph which provides a characteristic insight into his method and attitude:

Here, as in many other places that deal with facts *that admit differing interpretations*, it is inevitable that such facts will be understood in a larger paradigm *that is thought to make the best sense of them*. In this case, evolutionary theory, creationism, or *perhaps* theistic evolution will be preferred. This volume seeks to give *the reasons why I find creationism the most satisfying* (148, emphasis mine in each instance).

Here we detect Kelly's motive and also his manner: convinced as he is of the authority of Scripture in all matters historical, geographical and geological, as well as theological – moreover, convinced as he is of a young earth, several thousands of years old – there is a gracious winsomeness about his approach which should mean that those who disagree with him will nevertheless read this book with appreciation and approval.

Kelly is committed to an understanding of the Six Days of Creation as literal days, and this conviction is grounded in his understanding that Genesis 1-11 are written, not as poetry – and he provides copious and compelling reasons why these chapters should not be viewed as such – but as historical narrative. Characteristically, he cites a number of internationally-recognised scholars. He comments in this regard:

One can disagree with the New Testament's literal, historical usage of Genesis 1-11, but one cannot honestly find in its pages anything less than a straightforward reading of these chapters as literal, relevant facts (58).

That is, Kelly demonstrates that it is more honest to say "I can see that Genesis 1 teaches that God created the earth, from nothing, and created man in his own image, *but I don't believe it*" than it is to say "we can make Genesis

1 teach that a process of evolution by natural selection happened gradually, and that God was somehow guiding that process, including human descent from apes". One is led to the conclusion that the reader of Genesis 1 should either say that he believes the natural meaning of this text, or else he doesn't. What he has no right to do is to do violence to the clear meaning of the text and twist it into whatever trend happens to be current in contemporary science.

In a similar vein, Kelly believes that the Framework Hypothesis, popularised largely through the work of Meredith Kline,

evades the chronological sequence of six twenty-four-hour days (and one day of rest) by a novel method: introducing a disjunction between "literal" chronological order and "literary" framework within the text of Scripture (155).

Kelly's critique of what he calls "hermeneutical dualism"(158) is indeed compelling, not least because following a parallel approach – creating a literary-historical dichotomy – to other texts of Scripture, both Old and New Testament, would do great violence to their meaning as understood by the church throughout the ages. Kelly's references to the largely neglected Jean-Marc Berthoud, in this regard, are extremely helpful:

Berthoud rightly suggests that this axiomatic disjunction between literary form and literal meaning is a philosophical position, that does not come from the Bible itself (159).

Chapter 14, on the subject of "The Historicity of Adam and Eve", is the only chapter that has not been written by Kelly; the author is Richard P. Belcher, Old Testament Professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte and Atlanta. In some ways this is the most alarming chapter of all; it was included in this new edition because of the recognition of,

a surprising trend among many Reformed biblical theologians and preachers; one that has gone "mainstream" since the 1997 edition of this book, and that is the denial of the historicity of Adam, in the interests of accommodating evolutionary theory (311).

Belcher, devoting most of his space to a careful exegesis of Genesis 2:7, approaches his conclusion with a serious warning to all readers of this book, written in a spirit which is representative of the entire volume:

The impact of evolution on the church's teaching is significant enough that the church needs to be vigilant in preserving the truth. Churches are dependent on their pastors to instruct them and guide them in areas where the truth is under assault... A candidate today [for the Christian ministry] might affirm both the historicity of Adam and evolutionary teachings. Merely to affirm the historicity of Adam is not enough (327).

This is an extremely weighty consideration. It has far-reaching repercussions when it comes to exegeting Romans 5:12-21, especially, and also 1 Corinthians 15:21-22. What kind of "Adam" are we talking about? Various types of

exegetical and doctrinal contortions need to take place – and are attempted, as Belcher shows – when “Adam” is shoehorned into an evolutionary hypothesis that does not allow Genesis 2:7 to be taken in its most obvious and natural sense. If the actions of the “one man” Adam are cast into doubt and confusion, what then for the actions of the “one man” Jesus Christ?

It is quite possible for advocates of the Framework Hypothesis, and others who believe in an old earth, to remain safely within the doctrinal bounds of churches and denominations which require historic confessional subscription; but this becomes a far greater challenge when the historicity of Adam and Eve are denied; or perhaps more specifically, when the denial concerns the special creation of Adam and Eve and their non-descent from any human or hominid ancestors.

Seldom mentioned in the book, but clearly subconsciously present in the minds of Kelly and Belcher, is BioLogos, the foundation whose stated mission is to “[invite] the church and the world to see the harmony between science and biblical faith as we present an evolutionary understanding of God’s creation.”<sup>2</sup> That there is a harmony between science and biblical faith, ultimately, cannot be doubted – there is one Creator God whose ordering of the entire Creation is necessarily in consistent harmony. But Kelly’s work, in conjunction with Belcher’s – again, to my mind, more compellingly and comprehensively than any other I have read – is a most devastating critique of the philosophical assumptions underlying “an evolutionary understanding”.

Belcher’s final comments in Chapter 14 are worth quoting in full:

We believe these things [he mentions the Bible’s teaching on homosexuality] because we believe Scripture clearly teaches them. But if the views that we hold on these important issues are viewed by our culture as uneducated, narrow, intolerant and hateful, why should we be surprised when our view of the historicity of Adam is also seen as uneducated and out-of-touch with mainstream culture? The real question is whether we are willing to endure the shame that comes when we stand for the truth of God’s word (328).

In several places Kelly wonders whether a longed-for “paradigm shift” is taking place regarding “both philosophical, theological presuppositions and empirical evidences... concerning how the world was brought into being, how old it is and how it functions”. (190) Kelly appears somewhat hopeful that this shift is indeed underway across various philosophical and scientific disciplines. It will be of great interest to see whether this point of view is confirmed in the years that lie ahead.

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<sup>2</sup> From the BioLogos website, <https://biologos.org/about-us/>

*God and the Transgender Debate*

Andrew T. Walker, The Good Book Company, 2017, 174pp, £8.00

Do we need to bother with the transgender debate? A recent BBC “Question Time” programme, featuring the lesbian novelist Val McDermid and Christian MP Tim Farron, raised the issue of supporting children and teens claiming gender dysphoria. There was no dissenting voice, leading the chairman, David Dimbleby, to express surprise at such unanimity. Ironically, it was Ms McDermid who added the qualification that surgical or chemical change should be resisted for that age group. I came away from that discussion looking for something that would enable me to engage in a more informed way, as well as more biblically, in this debate. Andrew Walker has done us such a service in his book, “God and the transgender debate”. The subtitle indicates its purpose: “What does the bible actually say about gender identity?”

The importance of the subject is indicated in the foreword by Al Mohler (President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary). He regards the transgender issue to be on a level with past Christological controversies and the Reformation. In his view, transgenderism is at odds with “thousands of years of consensus regarding gender and human identity” (10).

The author is modest in his aims; the book is “a start not a finish”. Nevertheless, if all you have previously read is Vaughan Roberts’ excellent little book you will find this is a comprehensive, brilliant and more detailed contribution. There are thirteen chapters covering 171 pages. It is a great example of clear, flowing writing. Whilst not claiming to be a technical book there are helpful footnotes to sources of statistical information along with further reading for those wanting to dig deeper.

The content and direction of the book are helpfully laid out in the opening chapter. Chapters two to four explain both how society has arrived at a general acceptance of transgenderism and helpfully defines the vocabulary used. What is it to be transgender? It is to be born biologically of one sex but feel you belong to the opposite. Tensions therefore arise, including a feeling of being trapped in your own body. For the first time in history there is both a cultural acceptance of making the physical changes necessary and the medical wherewithal to bring this about. Chapters five to seven are devoted to a biblical view of the subject, reminding us of God’s design of male and female, the beauty of which was marred by sin. Chapters eight to ten deal with the practical realities of loving, both as individuals and churches, those struggling with transgender issues. They are not freaks. Chapters eleven and twelve are outstandingly helpful in counselling parents whose children raise questions on this issue, as well as parents whose children feel they are transgender. The penultimate chapter covers

important questions and answers. There is a closing appendix comprising a useful dictionary of terms.

The book begins with a helpful explanation of the secular thinking that has opened the door to a widespread acceptance of transgenderism. The reader will then find a faithful exposition of the Bible: The teaching of Genesis 2 is unpacked and applied – God is our Creator and as such has the right to dictate the pattern of our sexuality. It is a pattern perfectly designed for the good of society. Heterosexuality is, therefore, not the result of a cultural consensus but the decision of an all-wise, creator God. To reject this truth is to also reject the teaching of Jesus Christ (i.e. Mt 19:4-6).

Strong emphasis is placed on displaying Christian compassion for those struggling with gender issues. For them this is not a mere academic subject but intensely practical and goes to the core of their mental health and well-being. The author describes an occasion when he debated with those of the LGBT community and the lessons he learnt. He calls on Christians to repent if they have been harsh, fearful or negative towards this segment of society. He does so via a brief application of James 2:1-10.

The author is both sensitive and biblically faithful; we are to speak the truth in love. “If we accept the authority of the Bible, we must understand that affirming people in a path that is contrary to what the scripture teaches is never loving. If I affirm transgenderism, I am actually doing an unloving thing” (99).

The author reveals some of the flaws in the transgender arguments. For example, if you make yourself the final authority in decision making, you face the dilemma that a decision made at 18 (maybe to undergo hormone treatment or surgical intervention), may well be one that you regret at age 30.

There is also reference to eminent practitioners in this field who, in the past, have assisted those requesting physical change, but now after long observation and reflection, disassociate themselves from their former practise and mainstream thinking. One such individual is Dr Paul R. McHugh, a now retired but highly esteemed American professor of psychiatry from Johns Hopkins (University) Medical School. A practising Catholic, he states,

In fact gender dysphoria – the official psychiatric term for feeling oneself to be the opposite sex – belongs in the family of similarly-disordered assumptions about the body, such as Anorexia Nervosa... Its treatment should not be directed at the body as with surgery and hormones any more than one treats obesity-fearing anorexic patients with liposuction. The treatment should strive to correct the false, problematic nature of the assumption and to resolve the psychosocial conflicts provoking it (75).

In counselling young children, the same writer is helpfully quoted:

Even if a pre-pubescent child really does feel they are the opposite gender, statistically the vast majority of individuals outgrow these feelings. This is why the phenomena of children being given medical intervention that blocks hormones during puberty is so troubling (139).

The footnotes helpfully direct the reader to further research.

Finally, the book is worth its price for chapters 11 & 12 alone: “Speaking to children” and “Tough questions”. It is not a matter of *if* my children or grandchildren ask me how to deal with a biological girl, whom the school now accepts can use the boys toilets, but *when* such questions will come. This, then, is not a book just for pastors but for all Christians, especially those with young children. The author does not want us to be caught on the back foot on these issues. Armed with this material Christians can enter the lion’s den of debate with secular liberal humanism and stand their ground. The book succeeds in its aim to equip all thoughtful Christians to engage more biblically, intelligently, pastorally and compassionately with those struggling with the transgender agenda.

*Steve Carter*

*Retired pastor, now living happily in the South Wales valleys*

### *Death and the afterlife*

Paul R. Williamson, Apollos, 2017, 244pp, £9.71 (Amazon)

This is volume 44 of the New Studies in Biblical Theology series, edited by D. A. Carson, and the second in the series by Paul Williamson (Vol. 23 “Sealed with an Oath”) who is Lecturer in Old Testament, Hebrew and Aramaic at Moore College, Sydney.

Carson in his preface writes, “The first step towards regaining an eternal perspective is to rediscover what the Bible actually says about life, death, judgment, resurrection and hell. And this is what Paul Williamson has undertaken.” Williamson had six months of leave to prepare the material which was originally delivered as the 2016 Annual Moore College Lectures.

In his introduction he recalls reading, as a young Christian, “The Bible on the Life Hereafter” by William Hendriksen:

However, while the main topics of “individual eschatology” remain unchanged, some of the controversial matters are significantly different today... today the challenges often arise from within the evangelical camp (1).

The opening chapter lays out the basic plan and methodology of the book: five doctrines are analysed using three methods. What are the three tools of assessment? First, the ancient cultural context. He gives a sketchy overview of death and the afterlife in the ANE and in the Graeco-Roman world. In subsequent chapters the main focus is intertestamental Judaism.

Second is the Biblical context:

God's revelation concerning personal eschatology was revealed progressively over time. Thus the Old Testament perspective is not necessarily the same as what we are more familiar with from the New (22).

Third, is the contemporary evangelical context: "During recent decades this traditional understanding has been seriously challenged... by those with impeccable evangelical credentials" (22):

### *1. Death*

The controversy here is whether we have a soul. Is death the separation of the body from the soul, and is there an intermediate state after death?

The two questions are inter-related – if we have no soul, then we do not need an intermediate state; on the other hand, if there is an intermediate state, then presumably we must have a soul or some such non-material entity to inhabit such (33).

Perhaps the clearest single Scripture put forward is Matthew 10:28: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

He concludes: "Physical death may indeed be understood, therefore, in terms of the ultimate separation – the dissolution of the psychosomatic unity that is intrinsic to *living* human beings." (62) There will also be a "post-mortem existence outside the body" (61) for believer and unbelievers, but it is to be emphasised that this is a provisional and impermanent condition, awaiting the general resurrection.

### *2. Resurrection*

Some have been using 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 to teach that "believers have resurrected bodies from the moment they die". Williamson shows that not only is this an inadequate reading of the text, but also that it would contradict the plain teaching of verses such as, 1 Cor 15:52: "For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised, and we will be changed." He states, "Clearly there is no place for an immediate resurrection at the point of death" (88).

He surveys both Testaments, suggesting the minimal direct teaching on personal resurrection in the Old Testament does not prove it to be a doctrine drawn from the surrounding culture, such as the teaching of Zoroastrianism, but that it is implicit in the doctrine of God (Deut 32:39).

### *3. Judgment*

Here the question under consideration is, "How can we, in the present time, be justified by faith, yet on the last day be judged according to works?" (96)

The survey of both Testaments affirms that God judges us: In the Old Testament God's promised judgments come within the flow of history, whereas the New Testament warns of a judgment that will end the history of



this world. Williamson then focuses on three passages to examine the theme of “judgment according to works”: Firstly, Matthew 25:31-46. The key to the text is the much-debated phrase “one of the least of these my brothers... referring to his followers; that is all who are genuine disciples” (113). Our faith expressed in love within the church “will distinguish the sheep from the goats” (114).

Romans 2:7-10 “refers, not to a hypothetical ‘empty set’, but to those who are regenerate, who, albeit imperfectly, do what is good by the help of God’s Spirit” (116).

Finally, in Revelation 20:11-15, “the issue is not salvation by works, but judgment based on unimpeachable evidence – evidence that reveals the nature of a person’s relationship with God” (121).

#### *4. Hell*

The author states,

Currently evangelicals espouse three main views. First, hell as “eternal conscious torment”, second, hell as “temporary conscious torment”, third hell as “annihilation” (129). Our primary concern is with the first two views (130).

Regarding the Old Testament, “we note that... [its] portrayal of Sheol hardly resembles the New Testament presentation of hell” (134). In the New Testament, we are urged not to link “Gehenna” with Jerusalem’s rubbish dump (an idea invented in Europe during the Middle Ages) but with the OT associations of “burning” and “rotting” (148). Williamson identifies Revelation 14:9-11 as “unmistakeable” (159) evidence that hell is eternal conscious torment: “he will be tormented... the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever, and they have no rest” (158).

#### *5. Heaven*

The controversy here is twofold: how we conceive of the final destiny of the saved and whether everyone will eventually share this same destiny. “The main eschatological focus in the Old Testament was not enjoying God’s presence in heaven, rather God’s presence here on earth” (168). Whilst affirming the importance of the heavenly transcendent dwelling of God, the New Testament hope is summarised in the final two chapters of Revelation, where three concepts merge: The new cosmos, the new Jerusalem and the new Eden.

He describes the final destiny of the saved “in terms of transformation and renewal rather than destruction and replacement” (181). And in regard to those who think the Scripture guarantees eternal life to everyone, via a post-mortem repentance, Williamson states: “...there is no suggestion in Revelation 21 that anyone in the lake of fire repents or relocates to the holy city” (188).

In his conclusion, the author writes, "This book has provided exegetical support for the traditional evangelical understanding of death and the afterlife" (193). I agree, and appreciated the clarity of thought and faithfulness to Scripture. This is a really helpful summary of biblical personal eschatology.

My one quibble is the legitimacy of referring, in chapter 6, to "Evangelical universalists" (184). To be an evangelical requires more than affirming the authority of Scripture to resolve all disputes; it also requires submission to the basic content of the gospel revealed in Scripture, which includes the truth that not all people are saved. One can either be an evangelical or a universalist, but not both.

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*God's Divorce*

Colin Hamer, Faithbuilders, 2017, 156pp, £10.99

Although hardly commented on by most, one feature of the recent royal wedding between the couple we now know as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex was the fact that one of the parties was divorced. As far as Archbishop Justin Welby is concerned, it was "not a problem". Since 2002 the Church of England has been willing to marry divorced persons in certain circumstances. For others, divorce and remarriage is almost always wrong.

Readers of this journal may recall our review of the original PhD by Dr Colin Hamer (*Marital Imagery in the Bible*, Foundations 71, Autumn 2016). This popularised edition with reader-friendly cover seeks to simplify things even further and to add some practical applications. These are very helpful and some may want to begin here, although it is only fair to follow the careful exegesis.

What has been published already has proved controversial in some quarters, but Dr Hamer's arguments remain worth considering. The carefully thought out theology found here is not seeking easy answers but biblical ones and for that reason alone can be commended. Do check out this or the fuller work and give the arguments a fair trial.

*Gary Brady*

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