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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

"Jesus said to them, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they marvelled at him" (Mark 12:17, ESV).

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic continue to reverberate in society and the church. While, as I write, it seems that cases are declining and the vaccination programme is going well, the impact of the pandemic will be felt for years to come. The effects will last not just in general society, but in the church as well. Clearly there will be a heightened need for pastoral care as we face the financial and mental health challenges that will follow Covid (both for pastors and congregations). There is also need for relatively immediate practical reflection: for example, how has the nature of gathered worship been affected by online lockdown experiences; how has outreach/evangelism changed in a post-Covid world? But there are also specific theological areas that need careful thought.

One obvious point is the complex relationship between church and state, and in particular the role of the state relative to gathered public worship. It is fair to say that the pressures and challenges of the past year have exposed a number of fault lines in our theological understanding of government power, particularly in relation to church activity in unusual times. In a sense, this is nothing new. The protestant church has always had a variety of views over how church and state relate – from Erastianism, to varying degrees of "two kingdom" articulations of the freedom of the church from state interference. But Covid has brought differences which had been largely theoretical, at least outside of the established churches, quickly and sharply into the realm of church practice. For example, we have had to face questions such as the following: Does the state in times of health emergencies have a right to impose restrictions on gathered worship, and even "ban" it? Can the state dictate what level of fellowship (social distancing etc.) can happen in church? Can the state control the "elements" of worship, i.e., that we must not sing?

For myself, when facing into these questions I find it important to recognise that we do not become disembodied spirits when we meet for worship. Whilst we are engaged in the activity of a kingdom that is "not of this world" (John 18:36), we remain citizens of an earthly realm, and the practical consequences of our meeting is not affected by the fact that it is for worship as opposed to hearing a lecture on the philosophy of David Hume. In one sense we are simply a group of people coming together, which is surely a "circumstance concerning the worship of God" which is "common to human actions and societies" (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 1:6) and so is not *a priori* exempt from government laws tasked with curbing infectious disease.

This makes answering the questions posed by government responses to Covid fraught with difficulty. However, for me at least, the compliance of churches with the requirements of the civil authorities over the past twelve months has been absolutely right (Rom. 13:1), and an important witness to the world. It is, after all, by being “subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution” that we “by doing good... put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” (1 Peter 2:13-15).¹ The article by Mark Lawson “The Christian and the Civil Magistrate” makes a case along these lines, and I think is a helpful window into the theological discussions we need to continue to have on church and state relations post-Covid.

However, I recognise there will be differing responses to our current position, and that there are many shades of grey. Indeed, differences are almost inevitable (though tragic when they lead to division as they have in some churches). I say inevitable, because it has ever been this way. One of the things I have enjoyed through the past year is working through the wonderful new edition of Richard Baxter’s *Reliquiæ Baxterianæ*. In his autobiography Baxter outlined various responses to the “Great Ejection” of 1662 where 2,000 or so ministers were forced to leave the Church of England. Baxter comments as follows:

And the [ejected] ministers themselves were thus also divided, who before seemed all one; for some would go to Church, to Common Prayer, to Sacraments, and others would not: Some of them thought it was their duty to preach publicly, in the streets or fields while the people desired it, and not to cease their work through fear of men, till they lay in jails, or were all banished: Others thought that a continued endeavour to benefit their people privately, would be more serviceable to the church, than one or two sermons and jail... Some thought... bound to separate from Common Prayer, and Prelates, and Parish Communion... others... thought... bound... to this communion and worship in case they could get no better: and that to teach from house to house in private... was the most righteous and edifying way.²

And so, as we work through the implications of Covid on church life, different responses are going to emerge (just as they did in the seventeenth and other centuries). Therefore, my main plea is for us to be “eager to maintain the unity

¹ This does not mean if we judge government actions disproportionate that we should not use whatever lawful avenues there are to press the importance of gathering for worship, even taking action to the courts (where there has been a recent good and helpful outcome in Scotland). Again, it does not mean we should not make the case for the vital nature of public worship for the spiritual health of our congregations, and indeed for the nation.

² Richard Baxter, *Reliquiæ Baxterianæ: Or, Mr. Richard Baxter's Narrative of the Most Memorable Passages of his Life and Times* (5 vols.; eds. N. H. Keeble et al.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2:187-8.

of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Recognising how deeply we all love and care about gathered worship, what is needed is a calm working through of the theological issues with a true spirit of love, even where we end up differing from one another. I would very much welcome further articles in this spirit, on how we, as churches, should reflect on church and state, either supporting the article by Mark Lawson, or offering alternative views.

Another area raised by the pandemic is the apologetic approach the church should take in response to the questions that our current crisis raises. What can we say when confronted with the questions raised by the deaths, economic hardship, mental health deterioration and so on that have been caused or exacerbated by the experience of the past twelve months? The second article on Covid touches on this, reviewing a number of books which have outlined potential Christian responses to these questions. I am grateful to Stephen Lloyd for his thoughtful approach to this, but again, would welcome further reflections on this area.

Away from Covid, this issue opens with an article by Sharon James which speaks to the culture of the days in which we live, “‘It’s All About Me!’ Ministry In A Therapeutic Culture”. This is such an important topic, and Sharon very helpfully outlines the context in which Christian evangelism and ministry occurs today. It is undoubtedly true that we are now in a cultural moment where we have seen a loss of transcendence, absolute truth and the collapse of a shared culture. How has this impacted the church? What challenges and opportunities does this place before us? Read and find out!

Another article on reaching out into our culture today comes from Ivor MacDonald. This article considers the specific context of rural culture and what that means for mission. Ivor helpfully outlines that the “rural context remains quite different from the urban context for mission, despite many cultural changes”. As someone whose roots are in the Highlands of Scotland, I am passionate that the church does not neglect rural ministry.

The final article is from Alasdair Macleod and reflects on the sad history of mainstream Presbyterianism in Scotland in the twentieth century. There are many lessons from the broader societal trends in the twentieth century, how these impacted the church, and how the mainline church ultimately failed to see these trends, and its own theological liberalism, would lead to a catastrophic collapse in church attendance and influence. While I wish it was otherwise, it is hard to disagree with Alasdair that “The future of mainline Presbyterianism is difficult to foresee”.

I hope the variety of these articles, and the book reviews in this issue, give much food for thought.

Dr Donald John MacLean.

April 2021

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“IT’S ALL ABOUT ME!” MINISTRY IN A THERAPEUTIC CULTURE

Sharon James*

If ever, by some unlucky chance, anything unpleasant should ever happen, why, there’s always soma to give you a holiday from the facts. And there’s always soma to calm your anger, to reconcile you to your enemies, to make you patient and long-suffering. In the past you could only accomplish such things by making a great effort and after years of hard moral training. Now, you swallow two or three half-gramme tablets, and there you are. Anyone can be virtuous now. You can carry at least half your morality round in a bottle. Christianity without the tears – that’s what soma is.¹

Ninety years ago, Huxley depicted a *Brave New World*, where citizens were kept peaceful, happy (and under state control) by means of a constant supply of medication.

Today, ever larger numbers of people (including children) are offered therapy or medication to address mental, emotional and spiritual pain.² Others resort to self-medication with addictive substances or behaviours.³ Many point to a collapse in Christian belief and practice.⁴ And increasing numbers of commentators have warned of the dangers of an increasingly therapeutic culture, where “happiness itself is a right owed to all”.⁵

In this article we will note some of the factors which have contributed to this cultural moment, and then consider how the therapeutic culture has impacted the church (including evangelicalism).⁶

* Sharon James is the author of several books, most recently *How Christianity Transformed the World* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2020). Some of the material in this article is taken from her forthcoming book, *The Lies we are Told: The Truth we must Hold*, to be published by CFP in 2022.

¹ Aldous Huxley, *A Brave New World* (written 1931, published 1932) (Repr., London: Grafton Books, 1985), 190.

² P. R. Breggin, *Medication Madness: A Psychiatrist Exposes the Dangers of Mood-Altering Medications* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008).

³ Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

⁴ Douglas Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2017).

⁵ Darel E. Paul, “Under the Rainbow Banner”, *First Things*, June 2020, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2020/06/under-the-rainbow-banner> (accessed 4 February, 2021).

⁶ There is a legitimate place for both therapy and medication; this article is addressing broad cultural trends rather than offering any comment on specific treatments for particular illnesses.

I. The Culture

When I trained as a teacher, we were often told that self-actualisation was the goal for every child. That thinking fuels the idea that life is “all about me”. During the mid-twentieth century, two sociologists described a sea-change taking place in Western society. In 1966, American sociologist Philip Rieff (1922-2016) published *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. He observed that until the twentieth century, it had been generally accepted in the West that wisdom is mediated to the young through parents, teachers and church leaders. Youngsters were taught that it was a good thing to control their desires; self-control, restraint and respect for authority were held out as virtues; duty and service to others were central to character formation. With the advent of the therapeutic society, the overthrow of traditional authorities was viewed as progressive. Individual liberation was seen as the key to fulfilment. Desires were to be indulged. But what would society look like when everyone lived like this? When everyone was seeking self-fulfilment? When communal and family bonds were fractured?

Then, in 1979, American historian and social critic, Christopher Lasch (1932-1994), published *The Culture of Narcissism*. Western culture had formerly emphasised character building, and respect for the family and authority. But now, family was seen as repressive, individual freedom was held out as the goal, long-term commitments were feared, and the interests of men and women were pitted against each other.

Rieff and Lasch weren't Christians. But they sensed that once we all assume that our supreme end is self-fulfilment, we enter uncharted territory. What will society be like when *everyone* puts self-fulfilment ahead of service to others? Insisting that as free individuals, we are not accountable to any transcendent authority, and placing our own choices ahead of any obligation to others, both diminishes us as humans, and damages social cohesion. When a society loses belief that we are designed to live in community, with mutual obligations, that society cannot last.

Today, the overreach of liberalism and “uber-individualism” has become even more apparent.⁷ Insistence on self-determination has escalated into the expectation that we all have the right to construct our own identity, as well as our own morality. Almost overnight we find ourselves faced with the assumption that we must not question anyone's individual claims, however bizarre; the idea that “safe spaces” should protect the vulnerable from uncomfortable ideas; and the claim that “criticism is violence”. To question an individual's feelings may be deemed hateful. How did we get here?

A good overview of a Christian perspective on mental illness is Alan Thomas's book, *Tackling Mental Illness Together: a biblical and practical approach* (London: IVP, 2017).

⁷ Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2018).

1. *No God: Loss of Transcendence*

In 2017, author Douglas Murray⁸ identified two major factors contributing to the loss of Christian faith in Europe. Darwin’s account of the origins of life without a Creator made atheism intellectually credible, and Christianity was hollowed out from within by liberal theology.⁹ Our culture is now infused with a naturalistic worldview (this world is all there is), rather than the theistic worldview (this world is created by God). Many grow up in a “world without windows”.¹⁰ We are expected to exclude belief in anything beyond the things we can see, touch, taste, hear and feel. There is no access to transcendence, eternal values, mystery or God. But without a transcendent authority, who, or what, is left to judge between competing claims to truth?

In 2013 a family in England were told that their four-bedroom home would have to be demolished. A deadly weed had spread from wasteland nearby, and penetrated the walls of their home. The only way to remove it would be to knock the house down, kill the plant, and rebuild.¹¹ Today, like that poisonous knotweed, the lie – that there is no ultimate truth – has penetrated every institution in the West. The pioneers of critical theory wanted to bring about a society where all inequalities in outcome were removed.¹² To achieve that, the power (hegemony) of established institutions had to be undermined. How? Use radical doubt (*aka* critical theory) to question *all objective truth*, including scientific truth (and much that had previously assumed as “common sense”).

For decades now, many students have been taught that both claims to absolute truth, and universal explanations (“meta-narratives”), are disguised grabs for power. They are exploited by oppressors to protect their privilege. Reason, logic and science are seen, then, as tools of oppression which should be replaced with the *lived experience* of people in oppressed groups. Authentic knowledge is achieved *within* different communities. People *outside* those

⁸ Douglas Murray does not profess to be a Christian believer, but laments the social costs of a collective loss of faith.

⁹ Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe*, 211.

¹⁰ Peter Berger *et al.*, eds., *Against the World, For the World: The Hartford Appeal and the Future of American Religion* (New York: Seabury, 1976). Sociologist Peter Berger coined the phrase “world without windows” to describe a worldview which rejects the supernatural and believes that matter is all there is. He also described this as the “prison of modernity”.

¹¹ “Japanese knotweed: the plant that could cost you your home”, *Love Money*, 26 June, 2013, <https://www.lovemoney.com/news/21501/japanese-knotweed-the-plant-that-could-cost-you-your-home> (accessed 31 July 2020).

¹² Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity: And Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020).

groups do not have access to that knowledge.¹³ So critical theory denies the existence of objective universal truth, and challenges the use of “oppressive” tools of reason and logic. It removes any possibility of reasoned debate. On what shared basis can civilisation continue? Such a society is vulnerable to tyranny: the subjective judgments of the loudest voices win.

2. *No Judgment: Loss of Absolutes*

If there is no Creator, we are not answerable to a Creator. There won't be a final Judgment. If we won't have to give account to our Creator God, then who has the right to tell me what to do? Philip Rieff (mentioned above) maintained that the distinguishing mark of modernity was the assumption that we are not accountable to anyone other than ourselves. During the twentieth century the idea gained ground that the exercise of *all* authority is toxic. But society cannot function without the exercise of authority – so what will happen once it is assumed that the exercise of authority is *necessarily* oppressive?

Professor Frank Furedi points out that during the 1940s and 1950s, many began to use the terms *authority* and *authoritarian* interchangeably. Then, in the 1950s the word *obedience* began, increasingly, to be used alongside the term *unquestioned*. The implication was that obedience was something for unthinking people! The idea of *moral judgment* morphed into the derogatory term *judgmentalism*, and now *morality* is associated with a negative *moralism*.¹⁴ Within the cultural framework of extreme individualism, everyone must do what is right in their own eyes.

For many decades, education systems in many countries have incorporated “values clarification”. Each child is expected to work out *for themselves* what is right and wrong. Values clarification is not a neutral teaching tool. It challenges confidence in absolute morality and promotes moral relativism.¹⁵

In 1993, British sociologist Richard Hoggart observed that when elderly people in the deprived area of Leeds where he had grown up spoke of youth delinquency, they qualified any statement with, “but it's only my opinion of course”. In a world where God and absolute moral standards are denied, we all have to be non-judgmental. On that same housing estate, Hoggart found

¹³ This concept is often called “standpoint theory”. For example, if one particular cultural group uses “traditional medicine” (including witchcraft or magic), and someone outside that group wants to test that medicine scientifically, that could be viewed as cultural oppression.

¹⁴ Frank Furedi, “The Diseasing of Judgment”, *First Things*, January 2021, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/01/the-diseasing-of-judgment> (accessed 30 December, 2020). Furedi is a Professor of Sociology, an atheist and humanist.

¹⁵ E. S. Williams, *Lessons in Depravity: Sexual Education and the Sexual Revolution* (Sutton: Belmont House, 2003), 14-16.

that there was little confidence in the role of parents. Children were growing up in what was, effectively, a “violent, jungle world”.¹⁶

In 2011 a study of attitudes among young adults in America was published which found:

Six out of ten (60 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed expressed a highly individualistic approach to morality. They said that morality is a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision. Moral rights and wrongs are essentially matters of individual opinion, in their view... In this world of moral individualism, then, anyone can hold their own convictions about morality, but they also must keep those views private. Giving voice to one’s own moral views is itself nearly immoral...¹⁷

Refusal to affirm whatever moral choice someone makes is regarded as failure to respect them, and even as hate. By 2020, it was common to hear the slogan “criticism is violence” on university campuses.¹⁸

3. “It’s all about Me!”: Collapse of a Shared Culture

If there is no God, we can create our own identity, choose our own destiny and construct our own morality. We only have this one life on earth, so we should fulfil ourselves while we can.

(i) The challenge to biblical sexual morality

By the end of the nineteenth century, a number of intellectuals had launched an attack on conventional morality, and during the early twentieth century, others continued the campaign.¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1908) reversed everything usually assumed about morality. He defined chastity as immorality, and purity as impurity:

¹⁶ Quoted in Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society* (London: IEA, 1995), 241.

¹⁷ Christian Smith, et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21, 24, emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Frank Furedi, “The Diseasing of Judgment”, *First Things*, January 2021, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/01/the-diseasing-of-judgment> (accessed 30 December, 2020).

¹⁹ They included Robert Owen (1771-1858), the father of English socialism; Francis Place (1771-1854) a political radical and advocate of birth control; Richard Carlisle (1790-1843) who promoted the idea that sex was primarily about pleasure, and therefore a “right” to be enjoyed by all and George Drysdale (1825-1904) who argued that sexual satisfaction was a basic human need like food. Also, Edward Carpenter (1844-1929), Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) and H. G. Wells (1866-1946). Williams, *Lessons in Depravity*, 51-54.

*The preaching of chastity is a public incitement to anti-nature. Every expression of contempt for the sexual life, every befouling of it through the concept "impure", is the crime against life – is the intrinsic sin against the holy spirit of life.*²⁰

These ideas would be promoted by the advocates of "free love". Around the beginning of the twentieth century this group was limited to members of the intellectual elite (such as the "Bloomsbury" circle in London).²¹ Later, the same ideas would be propagated through the whole of Western society.

The idea that sexuality is a core element of personal identity is the legacy of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). He believed that to be human is to be sexual,²² insisting that from early infancy humans are capable of sexual expression and enjoyment, hence his hatred of Christian morality and the traditional family as they forbade early sexual activity.²³ Freud regarded humans as highly developed animals, and he understood sexual desire in purely physical terms. Sex is "de-sacralised"; there is no place for mystery, and no place of innocence. This depersonalising of sexual behaviour opened the way to the grossness of modern pornography and the cheapening of casual sexual encounters.²⁴

Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) argued in *The Sexual Revolution* (1936) that sexual suppression in childhood led to unhappiness throughout life. He believed that human fulfilment demanded sexual satisfaction. Children could be liberated from oppressive moral codes by means of permissive sex education. Fascism arose, he suggested, as a result of sexual repression,²⁵ and suffering and cruelty in society were due to the enforcement of Christian morality: "...suppression of the love life of children and adolescents is the central mechanism for producing enslaved subordinates and economic serfs".²⁶

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Why I am so Wise* (1889; trans. R. J. Hollingdale; London: Penguin Books, Great Ideas, 2004), 57, emphasis his.

²¹ Gertrude Himmelfarb, "From Clapham to Bloomsbury", February 1985, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/gertrude-himmelfarb/from-clapham-to-bloomsbury-a-genealogy-of-morals/> (accessed 6 January, 2021).

²² Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), chapter 6.

²³ Today we see an exact fulfilment of Freud's ambition: schools generally do promote permissive sex education and do not promote biblical Christianity. The idea of sexual abuse has been reversed. Properly, any sexual activity with children should be regarded as child abuse (and that would include explicit sharing of sexual information, such as that often given out in sex education). The innocence of children should be protected without exception. But now, it is regarded as abusive not to allow underage youngsters to express themselves sexually.

²⁴ Roger Scruton, "An Unhappy Birthday to Sigmund the Fraud", *The Spectator*, 29 April 2006, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/an-unhappy-birthday-to-sigmund-the-fraud> (accessed 31 December, 2020).

²⁵ Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (*Die Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*), 1933.

²⁶ Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution*, 1936, p. xvi, <https://wilhelmreichmuseum.org/product/the-sexual-revolution/> (accessed 11 May 2021).

Reich believed that his “gospel” of sexual liberation would bring life and happiness to all. The way to get this good news out to the masses was by means of compulsory sex education from the earliest age. Traditionalists, religious fundamentalists and social conservatives had to be silenced; there could be no happy coexistence between the old and new morality.

Margaret Sanger (1879-1966), pioneer of contraceptive provision and founder of Planned Parenthood, also viewed sexual freedom as salvation. In *The Pivot of Civilisation* (1922), she argued that the magic bullet to tip humanity towards a better future was contraception (and the sexual freedom that this would facilitate).²⁷ Sex had to be liberated from the restraint of lifelong faithful monogamy (Christian morality). Her philosophy can be summed up:

- What is the cause of human misery? Christian Morality
- What will solve human suffering? Sexual Liberation

The legacy of such thinkers is the new morality prevailing in Western culture:

- Sexual freedom used to be regarded as sinful; it is now seen as healthy
- Modesty, chastity and sexual restraint used to be considered virtues; they are now viewed as pathological
- The “natural” family of a married father and mother was accepted as the fundamental building block of society; it is now often thought to be a seedbed of abuse and an outdated relic of heteronormativity.

The old morality based on a Christian worldview was replaced with the new morality of individual freedom. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (b. 1948) has described this as the “democracy of the emotions”. The “pure relationship” is based on “confluent” love. Partners must be free to leave at any time.²⁸ It is the authentic experience of each individual that matters, unfettered by external rules.

(ii) “Don’t question my experience!”

The existential movement denied the reality of God and made individual experience supreme.²⁹ Emotion becomes the overriding principle of deciding

²⁷ Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilisation* (1922; Repr.; New York: Pergamon Press, 1950), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1689/1689-h/1689-h.htm> (accessed 2 July 2020).

²⁸ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 62.

²⁹ A theme explored in Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Subsequent editions have been published in 1984 and 2007.

moral questions. We do not want our feelings to be challenged by others (or even by ourselves!). This begins at an early age:

*Therapists are even showing up at our day-care centres – and they’re talking to primary school children so frequently that by the time the kids turn nine, they sound as if they’ve been studying Freud. “I’m stressed out.” “I’m so depressed.” “I need to chill out.” We have socialized a generation with self-victimization, and the kids have internalized its terms.*³⁰

Instead of teaching youngsters virtues such as character and resilience, many think it is important to validate whatever they are feeling. This creates individuals who are in continual need of therapy and support, inhibits enterprise and ambition, and creates dependency and entitlement.

Jonathan Haidt insists that it is damaging when youngsters are told to trust their feelings at all times (he calls this the untruth of emotional reasoning). Many now assume that emotional well-being has to be protected from any psychological harm which may be inflicted by words or ideas that make them feel uncomfortable. This increases the likelihood of becoming “fragile, anxious and easily hurt”!³¹ It is a vicious circle.

(iii) Identity politics and Queer Theory

Some experiences *are* given more credence than others: the experiences of those without “privilege”. Increasingly, propositions are assessed, not on their rational merit, but on the status (privileged or not) of the person making the claim. In this context, a new class of victims have been created by the claims of queer theory. Systemic heteronormativity is said to be the idea that there are embedded structures in a society that privilege heterosexuals. These structures (especially the man-woman married family) need to be overthrown, in order to achieve equality of dignity for anyone who falls under the LGBTQ+ umbrella.

Three decades ago, in 1989, a handbook for gay activists entitled *After the Ball* was published. The authors, Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, deliberately constructed the concepts of “born gay” and “gay orientation”, in order to shift attention from behaviour and choice to “fixed identity” (over which a “victim” had no control).³² This brilliant move afforded minority status to gay people, and simultaneously shifted any questioning of

³⁰ Heather Macdonald and Frank Furedi, “The Campus Victim Cult”, *City Journal*, 13 March, 2018, <https://www.city-journal.org/html/campus-victim-cult-15644.html> (accessed 7 October, 2020).

³¹ Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are setting up a Generation for Failure*, (London: Penguin 2018), 9.

³² Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, *After the Ball: How America will Conquer its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 90s*, (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 184.

homosexuality into the realm of *persecuting a minority*. Anyone who suggested that man-woman marriage was natural or that homosexual activity was wrong, could be labelled as homophobic. If they attempted to refute that accusation, they were accused of internally repressing their own homosexuality, or, alternatively, of internalising homophobia.

Equality of dignity means that we are obliged to positively affirm LGBTQ+ identities. Douglas Murray, himself a gay man, believes that we have moved beyond acceptance of homosexuality to a situation of moral blackmail where failure to celebrate queer culture is condemned. To suggest that “two men cannot make a baby” is now regarded as bigoted.³³ And yet, to insist that “two men *can* make a baby” denies objective reality and insults women, without whom babies cannot be made! So this overreach of individual autonomy actually demeans half the human race.

II. The Church

Even that brief survey indicates that many non-Christians are ready to acknowledge the dangers (both to individuals and society) of unlimited elevation of individual freedom and fulfilment. It should be plain that there is a direct conflict between the therapeutic worldview and the biblical worldview:

Therapeutic Worldview	Biblical Worldview
SELF: the source of authority for me	GOD: the source of authority for all
My desires and feelings are the authority for me	The transcendent God defines identity, meaning, truth, morality: there is an external point of reference
We each define our own identity and values	God’s moral law has been placed on the conscience of every human being made in God’s image
We do not need to submit to an external authority	God has revealed his truth in his Word, the Bible

We might have hoped that the Christian church would unite to resist these various challenges to biblical truth. Sadly, many clergy and theologians have cheered them on.

³³ Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), 42.

In 2019, Southwark Cathedral hosted a launch event for *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*, written by Nadia Bolz-Weber, an ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. A key moment in *Shameless* is when one of Bolz-Weber's parishioners tore out and burned the Bible pages referring to God's condemnation of homosexuality, and then burned all the other pages of the Bible, except the four Gospel accounts of Jesus.³⁴ She then felt joy and freedom, an experience regarded by Bolz-Weber as true Christian liberty. This exemplifies a "no guilt, no shame", therapeutic version of the Gospel. We are expected to celebrate the release experienced by a troubled woman when she threw sections of the Bible onto a bonfire.

Let us note some of the steps along the road to this re-writing of biblical truth:

1. Loss of Confidence in Divine Revelation

Christian theology all too often adjusts in order to fall into step with the surrounding culture. Nineteenth-century theological liberalism mirrored the naturalistic worldview that posed such a challenge to the Christian faith at that time. The methods of higher criticism set human reason over the authority of Scripture: doctrines concerning the miracles, the resurrection, and the Virgin Birth seemed incredible within a naturalistic worldview. Many nineteenth century theologians believed that the way to rescue Christianity and make it plausible in the scientific age was to liberate it from "primitive" and supernatural elements. A number of German theologians led the charge: rooted in the early-nineteenth-century German Enlightenment (especially the writings of Immanuel Kant) they elevated human reason to assess the various parts of Scripture. The Bible was analysed using the same critical methods as would be used for any other ancient text.

In parallel with the move towards a naturalistic worldview, liberal theologians separated religion from the realm of historical facts. Religion was viewed as a matter of experience; it became less important to insist that Jesus physically rose from the tomb – instead, the "spiritual reality" of new life was said to motivate the early disciples. Accounts such as the Virgin Birth, the historicity of the miracles, the literal return of Christ and the resurrection of the body were all called into question. Christ's authentic teaching was said to have been overlaid by later theological interpretation (especially by Paul). There was an ongoing attempt to get back to the "real" Jesus.

The Bible was increasingly viewed as just a collection of human documents, not the Word of God. Jean Réville (1854-1908), a self-identified Protestant Liberal, argued that liberalism was essentially non-doctrinal –

³⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2019), 71-2.

belief in the Trinity was no longer needed, and the Bible was a source document, but not to be regarded as authoritative.³⁵ During the nineteenth century, many protestant churches abandoned belief in the Trinity, and became Unitarian. There was then a further slide into an abandonment of any belief in a transcendent Deity: by the twentieth century many Unitarians were committed humanists.³⁶ Belief in the afterlife was generally replaced with the idea that social justice should be achieved here on earth.³⁷

Many churches in Europe, America and beyond, lost confidence in the Bible as the Word of God. As missionaries were sent out all over the world, they took unbelief with them. Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) resigned from the Baptist Union in protest at the refusal of denominational leaders to discipline those who denied fundamental truths.³⁸ He stood almost alone, but warned:

*Assuredly the New Theology can do no good at all... If it were preached for a thousand years by the most earnest men... it would never renew a soul, or overcome pride in a single human heart.*³⁹

American theologian J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937), wrote *Christianity and Liberalism* in 1923. He argued that Liberalism is not to be regarded as one branch of Christianity – it is a false religion. But at the time of his death, in 1937, theological liberalism was still dominant in universities and seminaries around the world.

In reaction against the sterility of liberal theology, Karl Barth (1886-1968), Emil Brunner (1889-1966), and others re-emphasised the transcendence of God and the sinfulness of humankind. Neo-orthodoxy was a necessary corrective to liberal theology. But it did not return to the conviction that all Scripture is inspired, and therefore without mistake. The new emphasis on the transcendent led Barth, for example, to teach that Scripture *becomes inspired* when the Holy Spirit applies it to the believer. That move – placing authority at least partly in the *experience* of the individual – played perfectly into the culture of the mid-twentieth century, for by this time the collapse of confidence in universal truth had contributed to the idea that the only thing any individual could do is seek their own *authentic experience*. There was no point in looking for external, objective reality.

³⁵ Jean Réville, *Le Protestantisme libéral, ses origines, sa nature, sa mission*, (Fischbacher, 1903).

³⁶ More than half of the signatories of the first *Humanist Manifesto* (1933) were religious leaders, mainly Unitarian ministers. <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto1/> (accessed 11 January 2021).

³⁷ The Social Gospel, as preached by Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), took centre stage.

³⁸ Iain H. Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 144-150.

³⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The “Down Grade” Controversy* (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 2009), 2.

Theological liberals in the past placed *human reason* above Scripture; their descendants now place *human experience* above Scripture. A bridge between the older liberal project and the new therapeutic liberalism was provided by John A. T. Robinson (1919-1983), Divinity Lecturer at Cambridge University and Bishop of Woolwich. *Honest to God* (1963) argued that God is not “out there”, rather we experience the “God within”; we decide our own morality (“situational ethics”); moral absolutes are a shackle. The now-retired American Episcopal bishop, John Shelby Spong (b. 1931) recalls his excitement at reading *Honest to God* in 1963:

*...when I read it – I couldn't stop. I read it three times! My theology was never the same. I had to wrestle with how I could take the literalism I had picked up in Sunday school and put it into these new categories.*⁴⁰

Spong became a leading voice in the Progressive Christian movement (see below), which champions a diversity and inclusivity that effectively means celebration of any and every lifestyle.⁴¹

2. Expressive Individualism

Once you deny that there is a God whose character and decrees define what is right, then you deny universally-valid moral laws. The remaining moral absolute is to be faithful to yourself, to find your own authentic identity. This expressive individualism has seeped into many sections of the church. If the Bible contradicts “what I sincerely and deeply feel”, all too often feelings win. The Ten Commandments seem dangerously authoritarian in an age influenced by the new discipline of psychotherapy.

The Revd Dr Gavin Ashenden recalls his ministerial training, where he was taught the two core elements of Rogerian counselling technique: unconditional positive regard and self-actualisation. He describes the new world of uncritical affirmation in which “love” has taken on a new meaning: “the insistence on accepting someone ‘as they are’, with no preconditions and no criticism”. “Hate” now means “any criticism of the fragile self”.⁴²

If, in the name of an external morality, a Christian voice were to challenge the demands the therapised ego insisted made it happy or actualised, this

⁴⁰ Interview with John Shelby Spong, *Read the Spirit*, June 23, 2013, <https://readthespirit.com/explore/the-retired-bishop-john-shelby-spong-interview-on-one-of-the-worlds-most-loved-and-feared-books-the-bibles-gospel-of-john/> (accessed 20 August, 2020).

⁴¹ <https://progressivechristianity.org/the-8-points/> (accessed 20 August, 2020).

⁴² Gavin Ashenden, “Redefining hate: from diabolical anti-love to any criticism of the fragile self”, Archbishop Cranmer website, 14 July 2017, <http://archbishopcranmer.com/redefining-hate-diabolical-anti-love-criticism-self/>.

*Christian or the Bible whose words the Christian was calling upon, would become “hate speech”... The culture of Limitless Self-Regard... identifies any refusal to accept its demands for self-realisation or self-satisfaction on its own terms as hate. The struggle in the Church is not one of compassion versus hate: it is one of revelation versus narcissism.*⁴³

Questioning someone’s identity or orientation is now viewed as hateful, even violent. Affirmations of absolute moral truth are viewed as intolerant; calls to repentance and a holy life are seen as abusive; evangelism is softened. In some parts of the professing church, preaching hell and judgment is almost unknown. The gospel becomes a message of finding fulfilment, achieving freedom from anxiety, or discovering the authentic meaning of life. The significance of God is that he can bring meaning and hope to me – self, not God, takes centre stage.

3. The Shift in Evangelicalism: “It’s all about me and Jesus”

The Great Awakening of the eighteenth century wonderfully demonstrated the power and importance of individual conversion. Sadly, during the subsequent two centuries, sometimes the focus on individual salvation meant a neglect of God’s glorious purposes for the whole cosmos and unconcern for the doctrines of creation and common grace.

In *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*⁴⁴ David Bebbington traced various ways in which evangelicalism has developed in response to the culture around it. He noted the impact of the Romantic movement in the nineteenth century (leading to greater sentimentality among many evangelicals), and relativism in the twentieth century (leading to an emphasis on each person deriving “truth” from personal experience).

Professor David Wells has written a succession of books which analyse the ways in which evangelicals have often been shaped by the surrounding culture.⁴⁵ He characterises much current Christianity as “filling out *my* story, being propelled on *my* journey”.⁴⁶ Faith becomes a private, personal, individual matter, which would help explain why some worship services consist *solely* of songs about how Jesus loves *me*: “Our experience in the

⁴³ Ashenden, “Redefining hate”, Archbishop Cranmer website, 14 July 2017, 5-7.

⁴⁴ D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989; repr.; London: Routledge 1993).

⁴⁵ *No Place for Truth* (1993), *God in the Wasteland* (1994), *Losing our Virtue* (1998), *Above all Earthly Pow’rs* (2005), *The Courage to be Protestant* (2008). All explore the effects of post-modernism, materialism and relativism on Christianity.

⁴⁶ David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), 87.

modern world inclines us to think of God solely as the 'inside' God and to lose sight of him as the 'outside' God."⁴⁷

We are encouraged to think of God mainly as relating to me and providing for my needs, but downplay the biblical truths concerning his holiness, transcendence, justice and sovereignty. Sin is presented not so much in relation to God – how we have offended our Creator – rather we focus on our own experience of anxiety or pain or failure. Wells argues this leads to a spirituality that is, "...deeply subjective, non-moral in its understanding, highly individualistic, completely relativistic, and insistently therapeutic".⁴⁸

This helps to explain the shift within evangelicalism regarding attitudes to a range of ethical issues, including an increased acceptance of divorce, artificial reproductive technologies (even when they involve destruction of the early embryo), and homosexual practice. At a popular level, each time you hear someone say: "My God would never condemn people to an eternal hell!" or "My God would never discriminate against women/gay people!" that is an example of placing personal experience in judgment over Scripture. The teaching of the Bible is interpreted in such a way as to justify our own lifestyle.

The historic evangelical position is that Scripture stands as the final authority by which all human experience is judged. But many evangelicals have shifted towards a therapeutic model of pastoral care, listening to the *experience* of those they help, and using that experience to mould their doctrine and theology. Hence experience sits alongside Scripture as authoritative.

The last book written by Francis Schaeffer was *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (1983). He argued that the greatest threat to evangelical faithfulness was accommodation to the spirit of the age. We tend to be seduced by the enjoyment of personal peace and affluence, and are therefore unwilling to pay the price of costly discipleship. If taking a biblical stand on current cultural flash points means losing our job, then it is just easier to keep our heads down. We should remember that the most popular books read by previous generations of Christians included *The Book of Martyrs* by John Foxe, and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Holy War*. These taught that true Christians will suffer for their faith. By contrast, today many Christian self-help books imply that God wants to make our lives as comfortable as possible.

4. Emerging Church – Progressive Church

By the end of the twentieth century, a new strand of protest had arisen within evangelicalism, reacting against what was viewed as traditional orthodoxy with its linear thought and rigid creeds and statements of faith, as well as

⁴⁷ Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant*, 120.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

against authority structures, megachurches, denominations and power bases of church life. One section of the movement, broad in its convictions and without clear structures or boundaries, became known as emerging (or emergent) church.⁴⁹ Embracing diversity, a common factor in these churches was a rejection of dogmatism; formal statements of faith and authoritative preaching were replaced with assurances of inclusivity. This was, effectively, a religious expression of postmodernism. Emerging Church leader Brian McLaren (b. 1956) rejects any theology which he views as based on modernist thought which presents orthodoxy as “nailed down, freeze-dried, and shrink-wrapped forever”.⁵⁰

Just as the liberal theologians of the nineteenth century were motivated by a sincere desire to rescue Christianity to make it more acceptable to a scientific age, those involved in the emerging church (which has morphed into progressive church), have tried to engage with contemporary culture. They recognise that people today long for authenticity so they try to present Christ in a personal (rather than a highly structured and traditional) setting. Some of their specific criticisms of modern evangelicalism (for example, disillusionment with aspects of the megachurch movement or evangelical celebrity culture) are well-founded. But whenever we place human experience in judgment over Scripture, it is a denial of authentic biblical Christianity. As Dan Doriani comments:

[Today many] believe in an experience of Jesus “not intrinsically tied to any specific doctrinal formulation.” They believe “doctrine and morality are finally unimportant as long as believers experience warm feelings about Jesus and engage in ministry to the world.” But if experience is the key, then revelation is found outside Scripture...⁵¹

Alisa Childers was a committed, Bible-believing evangelical and a successful Christian singer. She joined a progressive church, attracted by the way it seemed to offer authenticity and relevance to real life. The studies she attended there “challenged my beliefs, rocked my faith and shook me to the core.”⁵² As she studied both the claims of the progressives and the claims of Scripture, she came to believe that “the gospel can only be fully known if the

⁴⁹ “An Emerging Church Primer”, 9 Marks, <https://www.9marks.org/article/emerging-church-primer/> (accessed 20 August, 2020).

⁵⁰ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 286.

⁵¹ Dan Doriani, “Friendly Liberalism: A Threat in every Age”, *The Gospel Coalition*, 7 July, 2017, <http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/friendly-theological-liberalism-a-threat-in-every-age> (accessed 20 August, 2020), emphasis mine.

⁵² Alisa Childers, *Another Gospel? A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), xi.

Bible *actually* is the inerrant and inspired Word of God”.⁵³ She now believes that:

*...progressive Christianity offers me nothing of value. It gives me no hope for the afterlife and no joy in this one. It offers a hundred denials with nothing concrete to affirm.*⁵⁴

III. The Challenge: Legislating against Repentance?

In the context of a therapeutic culture, the Christian teaching about God’s moral law and the need for repentance is, increasingly, viewed as psychological and emotional abuse, an assault on *individual* freedom. It is not surprising, then, that even within evangelicalism, there has been an airbrushing away of fundamental biblical truths, including eternal punishment⁵⁵ and the universality and perpetuity of God’s moral law.⁵⁶

In this context, we need to be alert to current serious challenges to religious and individual liberty.⁵⁷ We will consider just one: In July 2020 Boris Johnson announced that he is committed to introducing legislation to outlaw “conversion therapy”.⁵⁸ While some quack medical practitioners or charlatan preachers have engaged in abusive practices, such crimes are, rightly, already punishable in law. Rightful revulsion at such instances is being exploited. Some, including professed evangelicals, demand that:

*Any form of counselling or persuading someone to change their sexual orientation or behaviour so as to conform with a heteronormative lifestyle, or their gender identity should be illegal, no matter the reason, religious or otherwise – whatever the person’s age.*⁵⁹

⁵³ Childers, *Another Gospel?*, 233.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁵⁵ Albert Mohler, “Air Conditioning Hell: How Liberalism Happens”, *9Marks*, 1 March, 2010, <https://www.9marks.org/article/air-conditioning-hell-how-liberalism-happens/> (accessed 3 February, 2021).

⁵⁶ Jonathan Bayes, *The Threefold Division of the Law*, The Christian Institute, <https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/the-threefold-division-of-the-law.pdf>; Ernest Kevan, *The Grace of Law* (Repr.; Morgan, PA.: Soli Deo Gloria, 2003); John L. MacKay, *The Moral Law*, The Christian Institute, <https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/the-moral-law.pdf>; Philip Ross, *From The Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Base for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2010).

⁵⁷ The Christian Institute, <https://www.christian.org.uk/> provides regular updates on such issues.

⁵⁸ BBC News online, 20 July 2020, see: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-53477323> as at 20 November 2020

⁵⁹ <https://www.banconversiontherapy.com/the-letter> as at 22 January, 2021. Jayne Ozanne, one of the signatories, is an “evangelical gay” Christian, <https://jayneozanne.com/biography/> (accessed 21 January, 2021); Bishop Paul Bayes, another signatory, is also regarded as

To introduce such sweeping and loosely defined legislation would have a devastating impact on gospel freedom.⁶⁰ The law would be used to decide a theological question: “Does the Bible teach that homosexual practice is wrong?” To say “Yes” (whether in sermons, small groups, individual conversations, prayer times, or even as parents speak to their children) could be outlawed. Steve Chalke believes that sermons *and* informal prayer that don’t affirm LGBT identities are “safeguarding issues” which require government intervention. He anticipates that such legislation would lead to high-profile prosecutions against churches.⁶¹

“Conversion” is a biblical term (e.g., Acts 15:3), which includes *both* putting our faith in Christ, *and* repentance from sin. A blanket ban on “conversion therapy” could be used to coerce churches to accept the idea that becoming a Christian does *not* involve repentance with regard to sexual sin (*contra* 1 Corinthians 6:11). It would threaten religious liberties, and deny individuals the freedom to voluntarily seek biblical counsel.

IV. The Opportunity: Holding out Grace, Community and Hope

In the face of such challenges, some may be tempted to stay quiet. In a therapeutic culture it is so tempting to assume that this life is mainly about us, our security, and our comfort. It is easier to lie low, keep our faith private and bunker down in our Christian communities than to risk the accusations of hateful intolerance that may result from openly proclaiming the gospel of repentance. In the West we are not (yet) being forced to deny Christ by brute force. “Soft totalitarianism” is when we are intimidated by the threat of losing social status, employment or academic credibility.⁶² If we think that life is all about security in the here and now, we will fall at the first hurdle. We should remember that the joy of knowing God’s smile is greater joy than anything else.

Our chief end in life is not self-fulfilment! It is to worship, enjoy and obey our God; and he calls us then to love and serve others. Jesus taught his followers to pray: “Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9-10). If we pray for God’s will to

evangelical, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/16/senior-bishop-change-church-of-england-attitudes-gay-people> (accessed 4 February 2021).

⁶⁰ “Banning conversion therapy or banning the Gospel?”, The Christian Institute, <https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BanningconversiontherapyorbanningtheGospel.pdf>

⁶¹ “The 5 damaging practices that churches inflict on LGBT people”, Steve Chalke, Open Church Network, see <https://www.openchurch.network/blog/the-5-damaging-practices-that-churches-inflict-on-lgbt-people> (accessed 19 November 2020); <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/steve-chalke-says-churches-are-skating-on-thin-ice-by-doing-conversion-therapy> (accessed 22 January 2021).

⁶² Rod Dreher, *Live not By Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissenters* (New York: Sentinel, 2020), xiii and passim.

be done on earth, we are to work for that as well, by doing good, serving our neighbours, and sharing the good news of salvation. We may feel weak, but we have the truth of God's Word and the power of his Spirit. In union with Christ and his people we are to proclaim the gospel of forgiveness from sin which, alone, can liberate those who are trapped by the devil in a prison of deceit.

The current therapeutic culture has manifestly failed to deliver real satisfaction, as even many non-Christians have been forced to acknowledge. We should regard this cultural moment as an opportunity, not a threat.

In a world where the "windows have been shut" there is a yearning for transcendence. Living life as if "it's all about me" can never deliver satisfaction. We have all been created in the image of the Triune God to love and enjoy him, and to love and serve others. And, created in the image of God, we all have a conscience. On the one hand, our therapeutic culture tries to erase guilt and shame but, perversely, our culture is also fiercely unforgiving.⁶³ Christianity offers forgiveness, a new start, and the power to live a new life.

In a world where unlimited autonomy has been exalted, and freedom has been sought from the restrictions and limitations of binding commitments, there is an ocean of insecurity and pain. Nearly a quarter of a century ago, psychologist Oliver James observed that the epidemic of broken relationships caused by the sexual revolution and family breakdown was creating a collective "wail of anguish, which crescendos to the furthest reaches of our society".⁶⁴ The number of broken bonds is far greater now than then and many long for fidelity and security. We have a faithful God who keeps his promises; he has created us in his image, and his moral law works *for* human flourishing, not *against* it. And the powerful bonds of genuine Christian community offer acceptance, commitment and grace.

In a world which lives for the now, death is the end, and there is no real hope for the future. If the main purpose of life is to fulfil ourselves, when life does not deliver our desires, what is the point of going on? Earlier this year, author Rod Dreher shared a heart-breaking letter written by a young man in Canada, who had been searching for spiritual reality. The evangelical churches he visited offered "all flash and no substance", but he continues to seek a solid foundation of biblical truth. He wrote:

Churches are crumbling; unable to offer a vision and path for those seeking holiness. There are plenty of us, young people, who are disillusioned with the way that society is going. I truly believe it's why so many people my age are suffering from anxiety, depression and other mental health problems. Drug usage, alcohol abuse and a hookup culture are blankets of comfort for people who have no meaning or purpose in life anymore... It's extremely difficult

⁶³ Murray, *The Madness of Crowds*, 174-183.

⁶⁴ Oliver James, *Britain on the Couch* (London: Century, 1997), 128.

being a young person nowadays. People don’t believe it or understand why I say this. They immediately point to the fantastic technological advancements and wealth in our society. While those things have undoubtedly made life better, there is a tremendous lack of meaning and purpose with most young people. I can confidently say that many of us feel hopeless and aimless in life. We are living in a society that promotes people to do whatever makes them happy, even if the consequences are dire...⁶⁵

All around us there are countless people who are “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). But we have a certain hope to hold out, and the free offer of the gospel to share. Christ has defeated all evil; ultimately all the effects of the fall will be rolled back; God has good purposes for this world; we have the hope of resurrection from the dead, and eternal life in the new heavens and earth – a cosmos restored and renewed. Throughout the world, there *are* Christian churches that confidently proclaim these truths, and which are growing despite fierce persecution.⁶⁶ Jesus Christ is reigning as King of kings, and he will be exalted over all enemies (1 Corinthians 15:25). It is our privilege and our joy to represent our King, as we speak and stand for him, whatever the cost.

⁶⁵ Rod Dreher, “Letter from a Struggling Young Man”, *The American Conservative*, January 5, 2021. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/benedict-option-letter-from-struggling-young-man-houellebecq/> (accessed 4 February, 2021).

⁶⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE CIVIL MAGISTRATE

*Mark J. Larson**

The Covid pandemic has demonstrated weaknesses in thinking of many pastors in the evangelical and Reformed community regarding classical Reformed teaching on church-state relations. This article examines the biblical doctrine of church and state along with key insights from the church fathers, Luther and dominant Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We are reminded that church and state have a different jurisdiction and purpose and that God intends that they work together in mutual appreciation and submission to one another. Submission to civil government is not absolute, but we must also recognise that there are limits to our religious liberty. Our church activities must not endanger the public safety. The position that is largely forgotten in the present Covid crisis is that Reformed theology has always maintained that although the civil magistrate does not have a “right in sacred things” (ius in sacra), he does have a “right around sacred things” (ius circa sacra) and may therefore temporarily forbid church assemblies in a time of pestilence in the interest of saving human life.

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). Jesus here mandates that we must give to Caesar what is his due, our obedience and even the taxes that are owed to him. We must also give to the Lord our God what belongs to him: our ultimate love and obedience. The apostle Peter reiterates the same position – we are to “fear God” and “honour the king” (1 Pet 2:17).

I. Ecclesiastical and Civil Government

Our Lord’s command reminds us that God has placed every believer under two kinds of government, ecclesiastical and political. John Calvin put it this way: “There is a two-fold government in man: one is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained.” Church government focuses upon “the life of the

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soul”, while civil government has to do with “the concerns of the present life”.¹ Martin Luther spoke in a similar way:

*God has ordained the two governments, the spiritual government which fashions true Christians and just persons through the Holy Spirit under Christ, and the secular government which holds the Unchristian and wicked in check and forces them to keep the peace outwardly and be still, like it or not.*²

Philip Melanchthon likewise distinguished between ecclesiastical and civil magistrates in the first edition of his *Loci Communes*. Ecclesiastical magistrates have one fundamental responsibility, being “enjoined only to preach the Word of God”. The civil magistrate, conversely, “is one who bears the sword and watches over civil peace”.³

The same fundamental ideas are reflected in the ancient church and in the time after the Reformation. The church father John Chrysostom affirmed, “The king” is “entrusted with the care of our bodies, the priest with our souls”. “The king”, he said, “may remit our financial debts, the priest remits our moral debts”. Furthermore, “the one uses coercion, the other persuasion. The one bears weapons that may be seen and felt, the other bears weapons of the spirit”.⁴ James Thornwell, the nineteenth-century Reformed theologian from South Carolina, likewise stated, “The State aims at social order; the Church at spiritual holiness. The State looks to the visible and outward; the Church is concerned for the invisible and inward.” Thornwell in this connection distinguished between the respective symbols of church and state. “The badge of the State’s authority”, he said,

*is the sword, by which it becomes a terror to evil doers, and a praise to them that do well. The badge of the Church’s authority is the keys, by which it opens and shuts the kingdom of Heaven, according as men are believing or impenitent.*⁵

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster: 1960), 847.

² Martin Luther, “On Secular Authority”, in *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, ed. Harro Höpfl (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1991), 10-11.

³ Philip Melanchthon, “Loci Communes”, in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, ed. and trans. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 148-149.

⁴ John Chrysostom, “Fourth Homily” on Isaiah 6:1, in *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, ed. Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 98.

⁵ James Henley Thornwell, “Address to All Churches of Christ”, in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 449.

Although church and state have a different jurisdiction and purpose, God intends that they work together in mutual appreciation and submission to one another. There ought to be a spirit of constructive collaboration between them. This was the point made by Gelasius, the bishop of Rome, as he addressed Anastasius, the Byzantine emperor. He reminded the emperor of his responsibility: "You submit devoutly to those who are preeminent in God's work... learning... to be subordinate in religious matters." "You know", he wrote, "that you should depend upon their judgment in such questions." Submission, though, between church and state was not a one-sided thing. Gelasius acknowledged that the pastors of the church must likewise assume a posture of humility in their relationship to the state. "Even the masters of religion", he affirmed,

*conscious that divine providence has conferred the empire upon you, obey your laws as public discipline requires, lest they should seem to obstruct the judgment you pronounce even in trivialities.*⁶

II. Fundamental Biblical Perspectives on the State

Our thinking about civil government must be grounded in the teaching of Holy Scripture. The apostles provide significant instruction, much of it rooted in the Old Testament, that must guide our thinking on the topic of government. We are taught in the first place that the authorities that come into political power do not do so by accident. Paul declares, "There is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God" (Rom 13:1). Daniel 4:17 states, "The Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever he will, and sets over it the lowest of men." Augustine recognised that there are times when God is pleased to place Christians in political power. He contended that such occurrences cause much happiness in the Christian community:

*As for those who are endowed with true piety and who lead a godly life, if they are skilled in the art of government, then there is no happier situation for mankind than that they, by God's mercy, should wield power.*⁷

Augustine, though, realised that ultimate happiness is not to be found here in this world. He argued that justice is not to be found at any level in the City of Man, for there are problems in the home, in the city and in the world. "True justice", he maintained, "is found only in that commonwealth whose founder and ruler is Christ."⁸

⁶ Gelasius, "Letter to Anastasius", in *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 179.

⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 213-214.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

Luther, likewise, was realistic in what we can expect from the political arena. "You should know," he said, "that a prudent prince has been a rare bird in the world since the beginning of time, and a just prince an even rarer one." He insisted further, "As a rule, princes are the greatest fools or the worst criminals on earth." However, Luther acknowledged that this was not always the case: "If a prince should happen to be prudent, just or a Christian, then that is one of the greatest miracles and a most precious sign of divine favour on the land."⁹ Our political authorities may be wise and good, or they may be fools and evil. In either case, God has allowed them to rise to power. The prophet Daniel addressed the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar with these words:

You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory; and wherever the children of men dwell, or the beasts of the field and the birds of heaven, he has given them into your hand, and has made you ruler over them all (Dan. 2:37-38).

The fundamental purpose of government is likewise addressed in apostolic doctrine. Paul states, "He is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practises evil" (Rom 13:4). Peter takes the same position regarding the administration of justice against evil men, but he adds another feature as he writes about the Roman emperor and the provincial governors who are appointed by him. The governors, he maintains, are sent by him "for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good" (1 Pet 2:13-14). Political authority is also to honour people who have been model citizens; praise should be given to those who do good.

There is the recognition among the church fathers in continuity with apostolic doctrine that the civil magistrate bears the sword for the purpose of exercising capital punishment and for the purpose of waging war. Clement of Alexandria referred to people who are "running to extremes of wickedness and to all appearances" seem "beyond cure". What is to be the response of government to this? He answered, "In its care that others should not be corrupted, it takes the course most conducive to health and puts him to death, like an amputation performed upon the body politic."¹⁰ Origen maintained that war *per se* is not necessarily wrong. He wrote, "While others fight, Christians should be fighting as priests and worshippers of God, keeping their hands pure and by their prayers to God striving for those who fight in a righteous cause."¹¹

⁹ Luther, "On Secular Authority", 30.

¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria, "Stromateis, Book 1", in *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 36.

¹¹ Origen, "Against Celsus, Book 8", in *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 44.

Augustine, in particular, moved the thinking of the church in a biblical direction on the subject of war. He argued that “the natural order which seeks the peace of mankind, ordains that the monarch should have the power of undertaking wars if he thinks it advisable”.¹² Luther reflected the Augustinian view and drew attention to the necessity of a just war. He wrote,

When I think of a soldier fulfilling his office by punishing the wicked, killing the wicked, and creating so much misery, it seems an un-Christian work completely contrary to Christian love.

From another perspective, though, it is a work of righteousness. Luther reflected upon how this is the case:

*When I think of how it protects the good and keeps and preserves wife and child, house and farm, property, and honour and peace, then I see how precious and godly the work is; and I observe that it amputates a leg or hand, so that the whole body may not perish.*¹³

The fundamental obligation of the Christian citizen toward civil government is set forth in Romans 13:1. Paul begins his discussion of political authority with this declaration: “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities.” This is a remarkable statement in view of the fact that the political authorities at the time were generally not friendly to the church. Nevertheless, the mandate is repeated in Romans 13:5: “You must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake.” Luther made the point that there is a reason for these directives: “Even though rulers are wicked and unbelieving, yet is their governmental power good (*in itself*) and of God.”¹⁴

Our submission to the governing authorities impacts our finances: “You also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers” (Rom 13:6). The term *leitourgos*, “minister”, has a religious implication – even referring at times to priests. Christ himself as our high priest is a *leitourgos* in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 8:2). Perhaps this is one reason for Calvin’s statement that “civil authority is, in the sight of God, not only sacred and lawful, but the most sacred, and by far the most honourable, of all stations in mortal life”.¹⁵

¹² Augustine, “Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon”, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1*, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 301.

¹³ Martin Luther, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved”, in *The Reformers on War, Peace, and Justice*, ed. Timothy J. Demy, Mark J. Larson, and J. Daryl Charles (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 14-15.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976), 179.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, 1490.

God demands the submission of the Christian to the authority of the civil magistrate, but there is more to it than our outwards actions. Peter lays down an obligation that reaches into our thoughts: "Honour all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king" (1 Pet 2:17). What is the "first duty" of subjects toward their magistrates? It is, Calvin affirmed, "to think most honourably of their office". "I am not discussing the men themselves", he noted, "as if a mask of dignity covered foolishness, or sloth, or cruelty as well as wicked morals full of infamous deeds". "But I say that the order itself is worthy of such honour and reverence."¹⁶

Honour is one aspect of what God wants from the believer, but there is also our responsibility to pray. Paul states,

I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence (1 Tim 2:1-2).

Tertullian set forth a biblical position at this point:

Looking up to heaven the Christians – with hands outspread, because innocent, with head bare because we do not blush, yes! and without one to give the form of words, for we pray from the heart – we are ever making intercession for all the emperors.

He continued,

We pray for them long life, a secure rule, a safe home, brave armies, a faithful senate, an honest people, a quiet world – and everything for which a man and a Caesar can pray.¹⁷

Origen stated the same thing about prayers being offered for the emperors, but he also added that our prayers are "sent up as from priests on behalf of the people in our country".¹⁸

Our prayers are directly related to the indispensable nature of civil government. Luther commented,

If there were [no law and government], then seeing that all the world is evil and that scarcely one human being in a thousand is a true Christian, people would devour each other and no one would be able to support his wife and children, feed himself and serve God.¹⁹

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, 1509-1510.

¹⁷ Tertullian, "Apology", in *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 26.

¹⁸ Origen, "Against Celsus, Book 8", in *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 45.

¹⁹ Luther, "On Secular Authority", 10.

Chrysostom had spoken similarly a millennium earlier:

Innumerable benefits accrue to cities from their governments, and if you removed them everything would disappear: neither city nor region nor houses nor market nor anything else would remain in place, but everything would be topsy-turvy while the strong swallowed up the weak.

He went on in the same discourse to specify some of the benefits of government. We see this, he maintained, in their “providing defences, keeping enemies at bay, suppressing disruptive forces in political communities,” and in “affording a final resolution of all disputes”.²⁰

III. Political Principles That We Need to Remember

The biblical command to submit ourselves to the authority of civil government does not mean that our political obedience is absolute, allowing of no exceptions. Scripture sets forth two exceptions with respect to our compliance with civil authority:

First. We must not obey if the government commands us to do that which is forbidden by God. The Egyptian pharaoh directed the midwives to kill the male infants born to the Hebrew women. We read that they refused to do so: “But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive.” Their civil disobedience brought the blessing of God upon them (Exod 1:15-17, 20-21).

Second. We must not obey if the government forbids us to do what God commands us to do. The Lord commanded the disciples that they were to bear witness to him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and in all the earth (Acts 1:8). Their preaching was soon forbidden by the Jewish authorities: “They commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:18). The response of the apostles is instructive. They announced that they were going to listen to God and not the contrary human directive: “We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Our compliance with political authority is not absolute, but we need to remember that there are limits to our religious liberty. This is true even under the United States Constitution which has granted not merely religious toleration, but full religious liberty to all Americans. Philip Schaff, the renowned church historian of the nineteenth century, drew attention to the fact that religious liberty is not absolute:

²⁰ John Chrysostom, “Twenty-Fourth Homily on Romans”, in *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 94-95.

The relationship of church and state in the United States secures full liberty of religious thought, speech, and action, within the limits of the public peace and order.

He added,

*The state has nothing to do with the church except to protect her in her property and liberty; and the state must be equally just to all forms of belief and unbelief which do not endanger the public safety.*²¹

Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, the famous eighteenth-century professor of jurisprudence at the University of Geneva, had made the same point in his book *The Principles of Politic Law*, published in 1751, three years after he died. Burlamaqui drew attention to the bizarre and dangerous activities that have arisen in religious communities throughout history:

The ideas which mankind imbibed of the Deity, have often misled them to the most preposterous forms of worship, and prompted them to sacrifice human victims.

He added, “They have even, from those false ideas, drawn arguments in justification of vice, cruelty, and licentiousness.” He then raised the question, “Since religion therefore has so much influence over the happiness or misery of society, who can doubt but it is subject to the direction of the sovereign?”²²

Burlamaqui’s question leads us to consider the third principle that is deeply and widely imbedded in Reformed teaching regarding the authority of the civil magistrate regarding sacred things. Classical Reformed thought insists that the magistrate does not have a “right in sacred things” (*ius in sacris*), even while he has a “right around sacred things” (*ius circa sacra*).

We begin by reflecting upon the fact that the political authorities do not have a “right in sacred things”. The magistrate, for instance, does not have a right to interfere in the content of what pastors preach. King Charles I, for example, did not have the right to prohibit the teaching of predestination in the Church of England (Article 17 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* affirms predestinarian doctrine). In fact, his meddling in sacred things eventually led to the English Civil War. Another example along these lines is provided by Chrysostom in his “Fourth Homily” on Isaiah 6:1. Chrysostom drew attention to the example of Uzziah, the ancient king of Judah, who overreached the civil

²¹ Philip Schaff, “Church and State in the United States”, in *Church and State in American History*, ed. John F. Wilson and Donald L. Drakeman (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2003), 147. Emphasis added.

²² Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, *The Principles of Natural and Political Law*, trans. Thomas Nugent (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), 409.

jurisdiction given to him by God. His attempt to take on the some of the functions of the priesthood resulted in God striking him with leprosy. Uzziah would thus “bear the trophy of his punishment like an inscription on a monument”. The act of divine judgment “was not for his own sake, but for those who would follow him”.²³ This was a warning according to Chrysostom to all politicians who would similarly intrude themselves into the affairs of the church.

Mainstream Reformed doctrine, on the other hand, has always insisted that the magistrate does have a “right around sacred things”. Francis Turretin, professor of theology at the University of Geneva in the seventeenth century, provided an elaborate defence of this position in his treatment concerning “The Political Government of the Church”. He began his consideration of this issue with this assertion concerning the civil magistrate:

They sin in defect who remove him from all care of ecclesiastical things so that he... allows free power to anyone of doing... whatever he wishes in the cause of religion.

He then set forth the orthodox Reformed position that the magistrate does have “authority over sacred things”, although it is not an “unlimited authority”. The authority is “extrinsic” and is designed “that all things be done decently and in order in the house of God”.

It is concerned with sacred and spiritual things... with respect to the external adjunct, either of place or time or persons or other circumstances (which by themselves are the object of political power).²⁴

Burlamaqui, the renowned jurist, stood in continuity with what the Reformed Orthodox had taught on the “right” of the magistrate “around sacred things”. Burlamaqui declared, “The prince has a right to regulate every thing, which interests the happiness of society, and by its nature is susceptible of human direction.” He acknowledged that his authority is not absolute: “No human authority can”, he said, “forbid the preaching of the gospel, or the use of the sacraments, nor establish a new article of faith, nor introduce new worship.” In addition,

the sovereign cannot lawfully assume to himself an empire over consciences, as if it were in his power to impose the necessity of believing such or such an article in matters of religion.

²³ Chrysostom, “Fourth Homily”, in *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 99.

²⁴ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 316-21.

He insisted, however, that the civil magistrate does have the “prerogative of regulating” the “circumstances of external worship, that the whole may be performed with greater decency”.²⁵

Burlamaqui did not deny that “scripture and ancient history ascribe the government of the church to pastors”, but he maintained that this did not “diminish the authority of the sovereign” as he carefully delineated in what that authority consisted. “The government, belonging to pastors”, he contended,

*is that of counsel, instruction, and persuasion, whose entire force and authority consists in the word of God, which they ought to teach the people; and by no means in a personal authority.*²⁶

Ecclesiastical authority “in sacred things” does not nullify civil authority “around sacred things”.

A specific example of how Reformed doctrine on this issue relates to a national crisis brought about by a plague is seen in the work of the English Reformed theologian Richard Baxter as presented in his *Christian Directory*. In Question CIX under the topic of Christian Ecclesiastics, Baxter asked, “*May we omit church-assemblies on the Lord’s day, if the magistrate forbid them?*” Baxter maintained that we need to be discriminating in our thinking regarding this inquiry: “It is one thing to forbid them for a time, upon some special cause, (as infection by pestilence, fire, war, &c.) and another to forbid them statedly or profanely.” On the one hand, Baxter affirmed,

If the magistrate for a greater good, (as the common safety), forbid church-assemblies in a time of pestilence, assault of enemies, or fire, or the like necessity, it is a duty to obey him.

On the other hand, he continued,

*If princes profanely forbid holy assemblies and public worship, either statedly, or as a renunciation of Christ and our religion; it is not lawful formally to obey them.*²⁷

A final point needs to be made which lends a note of solemnity to this entire discussion. Paul issues a warning to the individual who resists civil government: “Whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment to themselves” (Rom 13:2). There are

²⁵ Burlamaqui, *The Principles of Natural and Political Law*, 410-412.

²⁶ *The Principles of Natural and Political Law*, 414-415.

²⁷ Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, vol. 4 (London: Richard Edwards, 1825), 465.

always going to be individuals who range themselves in battle against (*antitasso*) legitimate government which is properly acting as an instrument of common grace in society. The apostle declares that such people will be punished. The word *krima*, translated “judgment”, can even refer in some contexts to the ultimate penalty (Jude 4). The *King James Version* provided this translation: “Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.” Whether or not it should be rendered “damnation” in Romans 13:2 may be debated, but it seems quite clear that this is more than a reference to punishment coming from civil government. Calvin wrote as follows:

*And by judgment, I understand not only punishment which is inflicted by the magistrate, as though he had only said, that they would be justly punished who resisted authority; but also the vengeance of God, however it may at length be executed: for he teaches us in general what end awaits those who contend with God.*²⁸

IV. Concluding Exhortation

We are living in days of civil unrest and widespread insubordination to the governing authorities. What is the will of God for believers at such a time as this? Peter explicitly states that submission on the part of the individual is the will of God, even when we may not necessarily agree with the political authorities in their public policy determinations.

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men (1 Pet 2:13-15).

This text insists that our submission, apart from the exceptions previously noted, must be universal. We must be compliant with “every ordinance of man” – every *ktisis*, every political arrangement produced by human beings. If the public policy determination does not explicitly violate the moral law of God and does not direct us to sin, we must be compliant with the civil magistrate. We must manifest a spirit of cooperation. We must go out of our way to follow the directives given by our political authorities, even if we happen to think that there is a better way to do things. This is the will of God, and this is what it means to do good. If we live in such a way as this, we will silence those who slander us, for they will have nothing evil to say about us.

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 479.

COVID-19 AND CREATION: MEGAPHONES, MYSTERY AND LAMENT

*Stephen Lloyd**

This article surveys four Christian responses to the coronavirus crisis of 2020. The main focus is on the different ways the authors attempt to reconcile God's goodness with the suffering caused by this pandemic. The implications for our understanding of origins that result from the authors' various responses are also considered. Three recurring themes (judgment, mystery and lament) are examined in more detail before discussing Noah's flood as a helpful model to frame a biblical response to the crisis. The article highlights the difficult choices we have to make in apologetics: to attribute natural evil to human sin requires the timescale of evolutionary history to be rejected.

I. Introduction

As the immensity of the virus crisis became apparent in early 2020, books responding to it multiplied like the virus cases. In this article I review a selection of these publications from well-known, influential Christian authors. My focus will be on the apologetic issue of how we reconcile the existence of a good, sovereign, creator God alongside a pandemic caused by a deadly virus. In particular, how does our understanding of origins relate to the various responses that are given?

Most of the publications I examine have a wider remit than this, and rightly so. In the midst of suffering people are not necessarily asking "Why?" – they want help in coping with the impact of the virus on their lives. Mair and Cawley's book in particular contains much helpful material on all sorts of practical issues for individuals and churches arising from the virus crisis.

My concern is that in the midst of seeking to provide comfort and support, a mistaken approach to origins¹ is assumed (and therefore normalised and

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¹ I am assuming a "creationist" worldview in which Adam is the physical ancestor of all humanity, agony and death post-date Adam's sin, and Noah's flood was a global catastrophe. Each of these doctrinal positions require the long timescale of evolutionary history to be challenged. For an explanation and defence of this view see Stephen Lloyd, "Chronological Creationism", *Foundations* 72 (May 2017), 76-99. (Available from: <http://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations->

legitimised) in a way that undermines the true comfort and hope found in the gospel. Long term, the contradiction and confusion hidden in such responses is as dangerous as the virus itself.

II. Overview of Four Responses

1. John Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020)

As might be expected from books produced at such speed there is little new or surprising if you are familiar with the author's previous writings. Piper begins with his own experience of cancer and the impact it had on his life and ministry. This is followed by a series of chapters setting out the doctrine of God that must shape our response to the coronavirus pandemic. Significantly, he begins with God's revelation in Scripture: it is only through what God has revealed that we can know what God thinks. As those familiar with Piper's ministry would expect, he also emphasises God's sovereignty. The virus is a "bitter providence" (22, 37) but it is *God's* providence: "everything happens because God wills it to happen" (39). And this is where we find hope: "The same sovereignty that could stop the coronavirus, yet doesn't, is the very sovereignty that sustains the soul in it" (38).

In the second half of the book he gives six answers from Scripture to what God is doing through the coronavirus (whilst acknowledging that God "is always doing a billion things we do not know" [57]). His first two answers are the most significant for this review, beginning in chapter 6 with,

God is giving the world in the coronavirus outbreak, as in all other calamities, a physical picture of the moral horror and spiritual ugliness of God-belittling sin.

He is explicit that human sin (specifically Adam and Eve's sin, 65) is the "origin of global devastation and misery" (61) and thus that the fall is God's *judgment* because of sin. The physical horrors around us reveal how horrible sin is and get our attention. Echoing C. S. Lewis, he says, "Physical pain is God's trumpet blast to tell us that something is dreadfully wrong in the world" (66). His second answer in the following chapter is even more pointed: "Some people will be infected with the coronavirus as a specific judgment from God because of their sinful attitudes and actions" (69). Piper gives various biblical examples to back up this answer and is clear that self-examination is required

[issues/issue-72](#)) and Stephen Lloyd, "Christian Theology and Neo-Darwinism are Incompatible: An Argument from the Resurrection", in G. Finlay, S. Lloyd, S. Pattemore and D. Swift, *Debating Darwin. Two Debates: Is Darwinism True & Does it Matter?* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 1-29.

because, “while not all suffering is a specific judgment for specific sins, some is” (71). I will discuss this argument further below.

Overall this is a book that is aimed at Christians, helping them pastorally to respond to the crisis much as Piper has responded to his own cancer. It assumes a biblical worldview in which suffering and death have resulted from Adam’s sin, but Piper does not highlight, or indeed exploit, how different that worldview is to evolutionary history. Nor (in common with many others who take a similar position)² does he acknowledge that his answer requires a radical revision to the dates assigned to fossils in mainstream contemporary geology as I explain further, below.

2. John C. Lennox, *Where is God in a Coronavirus world?* (London: The Good Book Company, 2020)

In contrast to Piper, John Lennox writes with non-Christians in view as an apologist, but not abstractly. He wisely recognises that he is speaking to people trying to make sense of suffering who are themselves in the midst of suffering. So his approach is to replicate talking with you personally in a coffee shop (which at the time of writing he couldn’t!). He wants to “convey some comfort, support and hope” (5). A holistic approach is needed: “We each need to make sense of coronavirus in three different ways: intellectually, emotionally and spiritually” (17). As the book title makes clear he is providing a response to the problem of *natural evil* specifically (13), with coronavirus being the case-study. “Coronavirus confronts us all with the problem of pain and suffering. This, for most of us, is one of life’s hardest problems” (13) – although not a new problem, as he reminds us of pandemics down history (10).

As he considers different worldviews, he rejects the idea that natural evil can be understood as the judgment of God on specific sins, and says such a view is like karma in pantheism (22-23) and not what we find in the Bible. Considering atheism, he exposes its inadequacy in providing any answer to the problem of evil since it, in effect, explains away the problem by denying the reality of evil in any transcendent sense. Lennox addresses the central dilemma of a Christian worldview in chapter 4: “Can the coronavirus be reconciled with the existence of a loving God?” (31). He begins by arguing that viruses are essential to life, with only a small proportion being harmful to, for example, humans. In a similar way, he cites earthquakes as a (presumably

² Tim Keller would be another example. He says, “when human beings turned from God the entire warp and woof of the world unravelled. Disease, genetic disorders, famine, natural disasters, ageing and death itself are as much the result of sin as are oppression, war, crime and violence.” *The Reason for God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008), 170. Yet he doesn’t appear to recognise that such a statement is irreconcilable with evolutionary history and rules out the long ages that he wants to leave as an option in the same book when dealing with the challenge of science (94, n18).

small?) downside to the overall good that plate tectonics achieves. Then, anticipating the objection of why could not God have made the world without the negative “side effects”, Lennox switches back to the issue of moral evil. Human free will means we can choose evil, and he explicitly cites “the first humans, Adam and Eve” (37) as the originators of human disobedience. Physical death was the result, along with wider consequences for creation (including epidemics, 40) as now (citing Romans 8:20) creation “has not achieved the goal for which it was designed” (39). He then returns to our human culpability suggesting that a more realistic formulation of the problem of moral evil is: “I think and do evil. If, then, there is a God, why does he tolerate me?” (42).

Concluding the chapter, his argument then takes a strange, even contradictory, turn. Having given what sounds like an explanation for natural evil resulting from human sin, Lennox retreats to mystery in his concluding paragraphs. He emphasises the reality “that there are deep flaws both in human nature and in physical nature” (42), but we cannot know the reason(s) God has allowed the world to be like this. Instead, in a world that combines both beauty and ugliness, we should be asking if there is evidence for a God we can trust “with our lives and futures?” (43). Lennox answers this question in chapter 5, by pointing to the person of Jesus and his death and resurrection. He stresses that Jesus is the Judge of humanity, thus ensuring ultimate justice. This is clearly an essential element of the answer to *moral* evil, but strangely, what would be more relevant to the problem of *natural* evil, the new creation, is left until a brief mention on page 61. There is a passing reference to “a world where suffering will be no more” (47), and similar references to “that other world” (58) but this could be (mis-?) understood as referring to a non-physical heavenly existence.

Lennox quotes C. S. Lewis’ famous words about suffering being God’s “megaphone” (49), urging his readers to look to God, and then, in chapter 6, gives helpful advice on how Christians should respond to the pandemic, including the importance of loving our neighbour.

The book ends with mystery, in a postscript which begins: “Do I think I have answered all the questions that this crisis has raised? No, I don’t. Far from it” (62). Ironically, the question that I am left with is less about the crisis, and more about his book that is trying to answer those questions: *Why does he retreat to mystery?* I am not suggesting that we fully understand God’s purposes in this crisis (see later), but rather that we are given a clear, direct answer in Scripture for the existence of physical death and the disease and dangers that lead to it. It is the answer that Lennox himself appears to provide, for example on page 49: “In a fractured world, damaged through the consequences of human sin, pain and suffering are inevitable.” If so, why does Lennox never state that the original, pre-sin, “very good” creation (Gen 1:31)

did not therefore contain deadly viruses?³ That is a question only he can answer, but to state such a view explicitly would of course bring him into conflict with evolutionary history in which death and all that leads to it has been present long before human beings existed. In addition, it would undermine his initial argument (34) that viruses, including deadly ones, are essential to life. Not only *could* God have made “viruses that were always beneficial” (35), he *did so* in the beginning, and will make a plague-free new creation in the future, undoing the damage of sin.

In short, Lennox exudes pastoral warmth and elucidates various important biblical truths but, oddly for a Maths professor, he does not show his working, to make the logical connection between these truths and their consequences explicit. Adding an element of mystery comes across as evasion as it has the effect of shielding awkward questions concerning the compatibility of his view with the evolutionary timescale.

3. Tom Wright, *God and the Pandemic* (London: SPCK, 2020)

Tom Wright, as ever, writes with verve and originality to produce a book that contrasts with both Piper and Lennox. It appears to be aimed primarily at Christians. His focus is to correct what he sees as a faulty understanding of the storyline of Scripture that leads to ill-considered “knee-jerk” reactions (4-6) that echo approaches found in the ancient world (2-3). Although he says we should refuse “to use the crisis as a loudspeaker for what we’d been wanting to say in any case” (53, and similar on page 7), the book reads as exactly that for Wright as he presses well-worn themes that will be familiar to those who know his work well! His argument is not helped by the rather haughty tone pervading the book as he seeks to correct those who are less enlightened.

A specific focus of his criticism is a particular view of God’s sovereignty (“an iron grip, relentlessly ‘controlling’ everything”, 56) coupled with the idea that the virus crisis is a sign of judgment from God. “When bad things happen, it must be God that’s done it (because he’s responsible for everything), so that must mean that he is angry with us for some reason” (6).

He recognises Old Testament teaching that interprets disaster as punishment for sin (not least the Exile, 8), but sets this alongside numerous examples of innocent or unexplained suffering, most famously in the book of

³ Lennox is not alone in what comes across as equivocation. Chris Wright, in an article for the newspaper *Evangelicals Now* (May 2020), says, “...why do viruses exist at all in God’s good creation? Not to mention all the other little nasties that do us such harm? And I cannot give a clear biblical answer to that. Of course, we know that we live in a world that is not as God intended it to be, as a result of our sin and God’s curse. Creation itself suffers and is subject to frustration, and we suffer within it, not immune to all the ways that death invades and threatens life, as God told us it would.” If the impact on creation he refers to in the second half of the quote includes viruses then he *can* “give a clear biblical answer”. If not, then why is he mentioning this impact on creation? I am left confused.

Job (12-13). Wright's argument is crystallised in chapter 3 where he focuses on Jesus and the gospels and it is reiterated in the rest of the book: "Jesus himself is the ultimate 'sign'" (17). Hence to view the virus crisis (or any other natural evil) as some sort of message from God is to undermine the climactic nature of Jesus' mission: "...you don't need extra signs. More is less, as so often. You need Jesus... Every attempt to add new 'signs' to this narrative diminishes it." (52-53).

This framework provides the grid with which he interprets Jesus' teaching. When Jesus points to disasters to warn his hearers of the need to repent he is speaking like an Old Testament prophet – for example John 5:14.

Yet at other times he seems to have been looking, not backward to sins which might bring about judgement, but forward to the new thing that was happening: the kingdom of God (16),

citing the contrasting account of John 9:1-3 as an example. The "signs" of judgment that Jesus speaks of, point to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 (15). So, for us today, "the summons to repentance... come[s] not through wars, earthquakes, famines or plagues... They come through Jesus." (23) Jesus himself is the final warning "sign".

Nevertheless, Wright caveats his stark conclusion by noting that God can do whatever he wants. "If he wants to draw things to people's attention in a special way, that is up to him" (22, and similarly 29, 41). So, it seems he does not want to totally silence C. S. Lewis' "megaphone", but is reluctant to identify its voice through specific events such as the coronavirus crisis.

He develops the argument further from the rest of the New Testament in chapter 4. Disasters such as the famine prophesied in Acts 11:28 are not signs calling for repentance, but an opportunity to provide practical help to those in need. The call to repentance in Acts 17:30-31 is grounded in Jesus' resurrection, not examples of recent natural disasters.

If we are not to preach repentance in the light of the virus crisis, what should our response be? Wright offers two main answers: practical action, coupled with lament. The former is introduced as early as page 3, asking the question, "What can we do?" and Wright expands on this later in the book, pointing to past examples of Christians pioneering care for the sick and those in need (61ff). As for lament, Wright takes his cue from Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus (27, 44), and he draws a similar lesson in his treatment of the crucial verses, Romans 8:19-21:

When the world is going through great convulsions, the followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain (42, emphasis his).

He contrasts this activity of prayer with “commenting from the sidelines: it’s because you’re all sinners!” (43). In fact, not using words (Rom 8:26) is seen as a virtue. We do

not have any words to say, any great pronouncements on “what this all means” to trumpet out to the world... but we, the followers of Jesus, find ourselves caught up in the groaning of creation... That is our vocation: to be in prayer, perhaps wordless prayer, at the point where the world is in pain (45, emphasis his).

He even suggests, tentatively, that God himself “has no appropriate words to say to the misery when creation is out of joint” (46).

Wright himself is strangely wordless in relating this whole topic to his understanding of creation in the sense of what God made in the beginning. Original human sin gets a mention (55), but there is no hint that this is the reason for the groaning of creation. He prefers mystery to explanation (a theme I will return to later). Given Wright’s commendable passion for the doctrine of new creation I was surprised this did not feature more strongly in his argument. His focus is more on what the church can do now, than on God’s final answer to the problem of natural evil. But then to be explicit about the hope of a future creation without deadly viruses begs the question of why God would make the original creation with these in place.

Wright can speak with penetrating insight: he characterises the central dilemma in our response to the crisis as a clash between the god of healing and the god of money, with the weak going “to the wall” (72-73). So much of what he affirms is right: Jesus *is* the ultimate sign calling us to repentance. Our understanding of, and response to, this crisis, and every crisis, must indeed be “Jesus-shaped” (23). The problem, as is so often the case, is with what Wright denies. In a different way to Lennox, there is a flawed logic at work. Understanding the virus as a demonstration of God’s judgment on sin (see further below) is not an alternative, nor in opposition to, providing the practical help he rightly advocates. Nor does it undermine the climactic nature of the revelation of God in Jesus – rather it gives it traction. His is a “Wright-shaped” theology that, deliberately or not, remoulds the gospel to be more palatable to a modern, western liberal mindset. Consider the language he deploys as he describes the message of modern “prophets” giving their views on the crisis: “...strikingly detached moralizers (it’s all because the world needs to repent of sexual sin) to valid but separate concerns (it’s reminding us about the ecological crisis)” (7). Notice how he characterises speaking against sexual sin as “moralising” whereas environmental concerns are entirely “valid”.

4. Paul Copan, "Viruses and God's good creation: How do they fit?" in Kristi Mair & Luke Cawley (eds.), *Healthy Faith and the Coronavirus Crisis* (London: IVP, 2020)

Finally, we turn to Paul Copan's chapter. This is a different entity in that it is a narrowly focused chapter in a wide-ranging, multi-author book. The title is precise, seeking to address the objection that viruses are inconsistent with a "good creation".

Copan begins with examples of Christian medics being at the forefront of fighting disease, sometimes at great personal cost. His point, as he makes explicit in his summary at the end of the chapter, is that "trust in God is not opposed to science" (52). This is a crucial first step in his argument, a premise that determines the outcome. By "science", he is not merely referring to the enterprise or the discipline of science, but the conclusions of mainstream science in areas that extend far beyond medicine. Hence, he asserts as a fact that animal predation and animal death were part of the created order *before* humans appeared on the basis of what "the fossil record indicates" (44). That assumption shapes his reading of Genesis: "...prior to the fall, things were perhaps 'rougher' than we've been led to think" (43). He then points to various other parts of Scripture to support his conclusion that predation and human mortality have always been part of creation.

Then turning specifically to the existence of viruses he argues that they, like hurricanes and earthquakes, are example of "trade-offs" necessary for life:

...they play an important God-given role in providing for the overall good or well-being of earthly creatures. However, these can also present potential threats under certain conditions (46).

Copan concludes this section saying, "God the Creator established a very good, well-ordered world for the benefit of his creatures" (48). But he then goes on to explain why we experience a "broken world". It is due to "our first ancestors" (he does not identify these as Adam and Eve), rebelling against God and becoming "vulnerable to a host of potential threats" – including "harmful microbes" (48-49). He then states without further elaboration or explanation, "While humans enjoyed fellowship with God, they were protected from these potentially destructive forces" (49). Strikingly, for such a crucial step in his argument, he provides no textual support for this statement. Nor, is it clear how this sits alongside the conclusion of the previous section: if the world including viruses is "for the benefit of his creatures", what do the first humans need to be *protected* from? Furthermore, why did God make such a world with these deadly dangers existing long before human sin? Copan's answer hardly provides a robust defence of God's goodness. His approach leaves him with

the dilemma of having to argue that either deadly viruses are not bad, or God is not good.

The inconsistency continues as Copan on the one hand eschews describing virus outbreaks and the like as God's judgment, yet also sees them as "indications of our brokenness and alienation from him" (49) and therefore they act as a "spiritual wake-up call" (50). Finally, he points to the hope found in the resurrected Jesus in the face of the inevitability of death. But his critique of atheism at this point – "if there is no God, there is no cosmic justice, no guarantee that virtue and happiness will be united, no guarantee that good will triumph" (50) – rings hollow. If God is the one who made suffering and death in the beginning, how can we be confident in his promise to remove it in the end?

Having surveyed these four contributions individually, I now want to explore in more detail some recurring themes and how they relate to the origins debate.

III. Recurring Themes

1. Is Coronavirus a Judgment from God?

All the authors, except Piper, answer, "No".⁴ To suggest otherwise is, Lennox says, "a very crude response that causes a lot of unnecessary hurt" (22). As we have seen, the case of the man born blind in John 9 is frequently cited, along with the suffering of Job to justify this negative answer. What is less often cited is the case of the paralysed man in John 5, whose condition Jesus explicitly links to his sin (14). To his credit, Wright does set this example alongside John 9 (16-17), and, he also recognises physical disasters are sometimes interpreted as judgments on sin in the Old Testament. Yet he can also make the astonishing statement that, "Passover was never about forgiveness" (30) even though striking down the firstborn is explicitly described as a judgment (Ex 12:12), and the Israelites were, as the event's name suggests, literally "passed over" in this judgment on the basis of the sacrifice of a lamb.

Clearly, a proper answer to this question has to go beyond quoting selected texts and examples and take into account the whole sweep of biblical theology. Pastoral wisdom is also needed in how we express the answer, as it is easy, especially in the age of social media, to be misunderstood and cause the "unnecessary hurt" that Lennox is worried about. Many of his concerns can

⁴ R.T. Kendall is another prominent author who is ready to consider the possibility that the coronavirus is a judgment of God, although he also commends John Lennox's caution on this point. See "What if Covid-19 really is God's judgement?" *Premier Christianity*, (November 2020). Available from: <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2020/November-2020/What-if-Covid-19-really-is-God-s-judgement>

be alleviated if we are clear that statements like, “event P, affecting the group of people Q, is a judgment on sin R”, are both arbitrary and ignorant. First, it is arbitrary because reality is less neat. Typically, natural disasters have a range of effects, from mild to deadly – does that mean those affected worse, are worse sinners? (Note that Jesus provides the answer to a similar question in Luke 13:2-5). People are guilty of many sins, so why should sin R be the one that is selected as the cause of a particular judgment? Further, group Q includes a whole variety of people, some of whom may not be characterised by sin R at all, and there are others outside group Q who may be immersed in sin R yet escape unscathed.⁵ Even where God does link the disaster enveloping a community with its sin, it is clear these complexities remain. For example, before the exile Israel’s disobedience extended back many centuries, yet only the generation alive at the exile faced that specific consequence. Similarly, many of those exiled were faithful Israelites (e.g., Daniel) and some who remained in the land continued in disobedience and unbelief.

Secondly, our assessments are based on ignorance because most of the time God does not give us a running commentary on how he is working out the justice of the universe. We are not God, and attempting to second guess his purpose will never end well pastorally.

In short, we cannot answer the question, “Is coronavirus *the* judgment of God *on...*?” but that is not the question I am asking. The question, “Is coronavirus *a* judgment from God?” *can* be answered on the basis of what God has revealed. If death is the wages of human sin (Rom 6:23), then coronavirus and other death-inducing features of the physical world must be part of the consequences of sin, and therefore become part of the natural order sometime after the first sin (the fall) of Adam. As a result, the natural world now operates differently (Gen 3:14-19, Rom 8:20-23) to the original “very good” creation (Gen 1:31).⁶ With this history of the world in place we can provide the biblically-grounded explanation of natural evil: *all suffering is due to sin, but not necessarily the sin of the person suffering*.

In this framework, “innocent suffering” (i.e., suffering not directly related to the sin of the person suffering) is the result of our interconnectedness, both with other people and the physical world: my thoughts and actions have consequences for others and the world. Humanity as a whole, down history,

⁵ Some of Piper’s examples (70-71) of the direct judgment of God involve individuals e.g. Herod in Acts 12:23. The death of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10) would be another example. In these cases the level of complexity is reduced because they concern specific individuals with the judgment occurring as a near instant response to a specific sin. However, even here, without the explicit witness of Scripture, we could not make a definitive connection between the particular sin and the particular judgment.

⁶ This all fits with what is pictured as a *good* land (Deut 8:7-10). A land under God’s blessing is a place without fear, famine or violent animals (Lev 26:3-6), whereas disease is linked to sin and God’s judgment (Deut 28:21-22, 58-6; 1 Kgs 8:35-37).

suffers a complex mixture of physical consequences from Adam's sin, everyone else's sin, as well as our own individual sin. And it is those physical consequences that alert us to something being profoundly wrong spiritually. As Piper puts it, "*physical evil is a parable, a drama, a signpost pointing to the moral outrage of rebellion against God*" (66, italics his).

As we have seen, others like Lennox and Copan who do not share Piper's approach, still want to preserve the apologetically helpful idea that suffering is, in C. S. Lewis' words, "God's megaphone". However, if the link between sin and natural evil is broken, the megaphone produces a muted and distorted message. It is muted because if natural evil is part of how the world was made and how it has always been, then it is much harder to argue this is *not how it is meant to be* – i.e., that there is something *wrong* with how creation functions now. Apologetically, this is an own goal, since one of the few things just about everyone does intuitively sense is that there *is* something wrong with the world! That sense of "paradise lost" is explained by Adam's fall, corrupting an originally "very good" creation. The "shock value" of natural disasters is also muted, because these events have always happened such that they are a regular, normal (albeit unpredictable) part of life on this planet. In the words of 2 Peter 3:4, "everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation".

Secondly, breaking the link between sin and natural evil and thus avoiding the language of judgment, distorts the message that suffering conveys. It tells us that we are victims, needing therapy, rather than guilty people deserving judgment. Put in those terms the attraction of going down this route in today's culture is obvious, but it is a distortion of the gospel and does not point people to Christ. If we interpret suffering as a badge of our victimhood, it merely leads us to seek comfort and whatever relief from suffering that we can find from any source, not necessarily Christ. Our focus becomes relief from suffering, treating the symptoms not the cause. It also distorts how the cross of Christ is understood such that it becomes about God sharing in our pain – as Wright puts it, "his hands, in fact, are nailed to the cross in order to share our pain".⁷ However, if suffering is ultimately due to sin, it confronts us with our *guilt* before our creator. The *only* answer to that guilt is found in Christ, in particular his wrath-bearing atonement on the cross.

A message that natural evil is evidence of God's judgment against sin and a warning of the greater wrath to come will not make us popular. But it will make us relevant, giving traction to our message that eternal judgment is something to be taken seriously – just as a patient experiencing pain or other negative symptoms is more likely to act on a doctor's warnings of early death due to their unhealthy lifestyle. As Piper rightly notes (65-67), the physical is tangible evidence of the spiritual reality. Jesus cites physical judgments from

⁷ Tom Wright, "God with us: A paradigm for life during the pandemic", in Kristi Mair & Luke Cawley (eds.), *Healthy Faith and the Coronavirus Crisis*. (London: IVP, 2020), 289.

the past (Luke 17:26-32), as well as contemporary events (Luke 13:1-5) as warnings to be ready for the judgment to come.

While such warnings do need to be spoken boldly (not apologising for God's righteous judgment), they must never be spoken coldly – Jesus wept as he prophesied Jerusalem's destruction (Luke 19:41-44). Nor should providing this theological rationale for our suffering be seen as opposed, or as an alternative, to practical help. Rather, understanding natural evil as a result of sin, and its removal as part of the redemption Christ has purchased provides the motivation to do all we can to alleviate suffering in the present.⁸ In doing so (and in this I concur with Wright, 60-61), we are following Christ in bringing glimpses of the new creation into the present.

2. *Mystery*

Answering "No" to the question of the previous heading naturally leads to the heading of this section. Deadly viruses like coronavirus exist, and if they are not to be explained as God's judgment on sin, then (if we are theists) there is little choice but to retreat into mystery. Wright seems to regard this as a positive virtue as if seeking explanations in the face of evil is almost impolite: "That way danger lies: to give an account of God's good creation in which there is a 'natural' slot for 'evil' to be found" (57). Such a response is not without wisdom: God and his purposes are much bigger and greater than we can conceive. And just as Job was not given an explanation for his suffering (as Wright notes, 13), we can rarely fathom the *specifics* of suffering: why *this* suffering, for *this* person, at *this* time? We are called to trust and worship, recognising we are not owed answers to these questions. The words of Spurgeon that Lennox cites (62) are apt: "God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart."

However, just as it is arrogant to claim we know what God has not revealed, it is not a mark of humility to keep silent about what God has made clear. It is theological cowardice and bad medicine. Suffering on its own does not lead people to God. Without the biblical explanation given above the megaphone of suffering is only making an unpleasant noise. In a similar way a doctor who provides an accurate but unwelcome diagnosis may not be liked, but they are a better doctor than one who empathises but who does not really understand the problem. It is the accurate diagnosis, revealed to us by our Creator, which gives us relevance, if not popularity. None of this is theoretical:

⁸ The wider point that I cannot explore fully here is that it is precisely because creation is fallen (i.e., not functioning as it is meant to) that we believe it is worth restoring, just as we would a defaced masterpiece. Also see Kurt P. Wise, *Faith, Form and Time* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 168 for a biblical justification for medicine that requires a young-age creationist perspective.

People are hurting. But Wright's words: "...we, the followers of Jesus, [do] not have any words to say, any great pronouncements on 'what this all means' to trumpet out to the world" (45) hardly bring reassurance in the midst of the urgency and distress of this coronavirus crisis.

3. *Lament*

With mystery goes lament. (See how Wright brings these two together, 14). If we cannot offer an explanation, at least we can bring solidarity in the suffering: weeping with those who weep, like Jesus (John 11:35). In Wright's words, "this is a time for lament. For admitting we don't have easy answers... For weeping at the tomb of our friends. For the inarticulate groaning of the Spirit" (53). Again, there is plenty of wisdom here for how we should engage with one another in suffering. Who could object to these sentiments? But that is precisely the problem: there is the danger that we cease to speak with a prophetic edge and our message is reduced to, "I (or maybe God) feel(s) your pain."⁹

Speaking of lament has become fashionable in recent years as Christians have come to a welcome new appreciation of this biblical genre.¹⁰ Biblical lament is multifaceted, and it does include an element of mystery – just think of the number of lament Psalms that ask, "Why?" as they wrestle with how suffering has afflicted them personally in their specific circumstances. But it is wrong to pit lament in *opposition* to providing answers. Lament is ordered grief in which our emotional response is shaped by what God *has* revealed. Fundamentally, lament is the cry to God, "It's not meant to be like this." That cry presupposes not mystery, but the sure knowledge of God's purpose based on what he has revealed. Biblical lament is an evidence of faith because it stems from taking God at his word as it expresses the gap between our present experience and what God has promised.

In short, biblical lament is only coherent within a biblical worldview, with the right history of the world in which something *has* gone wrong, for which we are responsible. If deadly viruses have always been present in creation, if they are part of God's original good purpose for creation, then to lament over their presence now is incoherent, even presumptuous. We might moan and cry over their unwelcome impact on us, but that is not biblical lament. We are

⁹ Even secular commentators recognise that this is not always a helpful response. See David Edmonds, "Sorry, I don't feel your pain", *Prospect*, (March 2017), 68-71.

¹⁰ Writing in the context of the coronavirus crisis, Paul S. Williams suggests, "Lament in the presence of Jesus is the powerful gift of lockdown" in his article, "God is mobilising the church for a new wave of mission." (12 June, 2020) <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/God-is-mobilising-the-Church-for-a-new-wave-of-mission>. On a different, but contemporary topic Mark Vroegop highlights lament as necessary for racial reconciliation. See, "Racial reconciliation needs to hurt. Why tears of lament are an essential part of the path to unity." *Christianity Today*, (October 2020), 72-73.

not helpless victims, rather we lament as the undeserving. Thus, lament is humble – not through hiding in mystery – but through a recognition of our guilt. It includes a sense of regret for the part we have played, collectively as sinners, in bringing about the tragic events we lament (e.g., Dan 9:1-19). Even where we lament as those who are innocent in the sense of facing unjust suffering, the lament is *not* that we *deserve* better. In lament we cast ourselves on God, as his children, because our hope is in *him* (Lam 3:22-24).

4. *Summary*

The error I have discussed under the above three headings is the same: it is starting with something that is true and extrapolating from that to make it the whole story in a way that conflicts with the complete narrative that God has revealed. So, it is true that we cannot interpret the virus pandemic as specific judgment on individual sins, but that does not mean it is not a judgment on sinners in any sense. It is true that there is mystery in suffering (and indeed all that happens), because God has not revealed all the details of his purposes to us. But that does not allow us to reject or be silent about the explanation of natural evil that he has provided. It is right that we “weep with those who weep”, but that does not exhaust our response to those in suffering, and nor does it reflect the theological richness of biblical lament.

These errors flow from the difficulty of communicating, with pastoral sensitivity, a message of judgment *and* grace to people in the midst of suffering. In the final section I want to suggest an alternative response to the coronavirus crisis that is based on the biggest natural disaster in history: Noah’s flood. It could be described as the natural disaster to, if not end, then limit, all natural disasters. A theology that can handle the wiping out of all air-breathing animals and people, except those on the ark, is one that is big enough for our current pandemic.

IV. The Flood: Judgment and Grace

The flood is the most dramatic and devastating example of human sin leading to physical judgment, with the physical consequences extending beyond humanity. It is God’s physical exposition of the curse he first announced in Gen 3:14-19 (and warned of in 2:17). Sin has physical, deadly consequences because it is turning from the God who is the giver of all life; the world, designed to support abundant life, is now a place of danger and death; creation is reversed. Were it not for the ark, the flood would have marked the end of all air-breathing life, of all humanity: “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark” (Gen 8:1). God had a plan of rescue, of grace (Gen 6:8) that would not only include Noah and his family, but the animals with him and the earth itself (Gen 9:12-16). In short,

in the flood we see not only that the consequences of human sin extend to the rest of creation, but also that the salvation of humanity includes the rescue of creation. There is a re-creation in the flood that anticipates the new creation when Jesus returns (2 Pet 3:5-7).¹¹

Modern apologists understand the power of stories. In the flood we have a true story that tangibly communicates the reason we live in a world of coronavirus and every other natural evil – tangible, because we are surrounded by evidence of the flood: from the rocks we walk on and the coal we burn, to the fossils we hunt. It is a story that communicates warning of the need to repent and be ready for the future judgment (Luke 17:26-27; 2 Pet 3:3-10), but equally, for those who do repent, the hope of a future new heaven and new earth, “the home of righteousness” (2 Pet 3:13). Judgment and grace are woven together in the flood story, and also in the post-flood creation that we live in now.

In the post-flood world grace dominates. The great message of the rainbow, given to Noah’s descendants, the living creatures and the earth, is that despite ongoing sin life will be preserved. In the post-flood world, judgment is still present (it is still a fallen world), but limited. The rainbow is like a shield of grace protecting the world from the full extent of what is deserved. We live in an era of “common grace” preserving life. God promises the regularity of the seasons so food can be grown (Gen 8:22; Acts 14:17). We have bodies that are normally well equipped to fight off infection. He gives people medical skills, the ability to design ventilators and produce vaccines.¹² We benefit from many acts of kindness and generosity. In short, the world is nothing like as bad or dangerous as it could be: most viruses are not deadly but serve useful functions as Lennox and Copan rightly point out.¹³ In the fallen creation there is a sensitive balance between enough danger and suffering to communicate that something is wrong (so we might repent and find grace), but not too much to make life unsustainable. What would be seen as bad in the original “very good” creation such as predatory behaviour and

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of the theological significance of Noah’s flood see, Stephen Lloyd, “*Flood Theology: Why does Noah’s Flood Matter?*” available for download from <http://biblicalcreationtrust.org/resources-origins-archive.html>.

¹² Some creationists can be suspicious of scientists who accept the evolutionary paradigm, yet these same scientists are often involved in developing many of the medical treatments we all benefit from!

¹³ The role of viruses is also a subject of creationist research. Joe Francis proposes that microbes and viruses were created “as a link between macro-organisms and a chemically rich but inert physical environment, to provide a substrate upon which multicellular creatures can thrive and persist in intricately designed ecosystems” and “suggests that microbe and viral pathogenesis is a relatively recent and rare deviation from original created function”. See J. W. Francis, “The organosubstrate of life: a creationist perspective of microbes and viruses”, *Proc. Int. Conf. Creationism*, vol. 5, (2003), 433-444, available from: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1193&context=icc_proceedings.

thorns are, in a fallen creation (where disease and death are present), necessary to preserve life overall.¹⁴

In a fallen world we have to hold two truths together: Life is precious (Gen 9:5-6) and yet death is inevitable (Gen 9:28-29).¹⁵ Every death is a tragedy (death is a terrible evil, 1 Cor 15:26), yet life can only be preserved for so long, and at a cost. In many ways, the difficulties and dilemmas we are facing as a society in responding to the coronavirus crisis stem from holding these two (biblical) truths together.¹⁶ These tensions inherent in negotiating a fallen world highlight our limitations, our vulnerability and our utter dependence on God. The coronavirus, like other natural evils, confronts us with reality.

Neither natural disasters nor human acts of wickedness increase the death toll of humanity. Death is inevitable, as Copan reminds us at the end of his chapter (51), quoting C. S. Lewis. In a different quote, Lewis noted (speaking about the Second World War):

*I think it important to try to see the present calamity in a true perspective. The war creates no absolutely new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice.*¹⁷

Before the coronavirus outbreak, nearly 1500 people per day on average died in England and Wales. Those figures never made the news. It is the extra, unusual, hastened loss of life due to the pandemic that catches our attention. These significant, but limited, judgments are God's megaphone, warning us of our danger without him. Even here we see grace in judgment, in that God is holding back the final judgment, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9).

V. Conclusion: We Cannot Avoid Hard Choices in Apologetics

Many Christians are nervous about the apologetic difficulties of questioning the long ages required by the evolutionary chronology. But adopting the evolutionary timescale comes at a cost: it means death and all the disease and other natural evils leading to it (including deadly viruses), long predate a

¹⁴ Kurt P. Wise & Sheila A. Richardson, *Something from Nothing* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 111-112.

¹⁵ D. A. Carson makes a similar point from Psalm 90 in, *How Long, O Lord?* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 118.

¹⁶ Encouragingly (but ironically) our society seems happier to affirm the value of human life despite this belief relying on a Christian worldview, whereas society is more reluctant to concede the inevitability of death despite this being inherent to the evolutionary worldview.

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time" in, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 44.

biblically historical Adam falling into sin.¹⁸ This means it is an act of apologetic “mis-selling” to allude to, or to imply that human sin is an explanation for natural evil if long ages are assumed.¹⁹ Instead, it should be made explicit that God made a coronavirus world and he called that world “very good”. This is the route many Christians do go down and they recognise (and attempt to alleviate) the difficulties for God’s character that result.²⁰

There is an alternative that provides a more satisfying and robust defence of God’s character, but it comes with its own hard choice. Natural evil *can* be explained as the consequence of human sin if we are ready to challenge the evolutionary chronology so that the fossil evidence of disaster, disease and death is dated to a time *after* Adam’s sin. The scientific work involved to understand the evidence within this alternative history is considerable, but immensely worthwhile. It is only within this framework that the doctrinal coherence of the gospel can be maintained (for example, Jesus needed to physically die on the cross, because physical death is part of the punishment for sin). Furthermore, it is a framework with far greater apologetic power to address topics beyond merely natural evil.²¹

Rather than be on the defensive over the “problem” of natural evil, we need to be confident in presenting an enormously attractive and radically counter-cultural history of the world in the face of the alternatives. Atheism is a hard choice: It is bleak – stuff just happens. There is nothing wrong with the world and there is no solution, no hope. In contrast, God’s word provides an explanation *and* a solution: There *is* something wrong with the world, that is *our* fault – a hard, yet necessary truth. But God in his grace has provided the answer to save us from our sin and to redeem the whole of creation. It is an explanation and solution that addresses both the spiritual *and* the physical. The coronavirus crisis has exposed our human vulnerability and the impotence of the modern idols in which we trust because of its physical impact. It is a dose of reality, and therefore highlights the relevance of the gospel. With the right history of the world, including its origins, we can make the most of this opportunity to present our society with a message of hope.

¹⁸ This is true even if it is argued that only *human* physical death is a consequence of Adam’s sin. See Lloyd, “Chronological Creationism”.

¹⁹ It is possible to maintain the link between human sin and natural evil yet keep the evolutionary timescale if the punishment for sin is in place *before* the act of sin as argued by William Dembski in, *The End of Christianity* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing, 2009). However, such a proposal has its own apologetic difficulties (as Dembski recognises and attempts to address). My point is the importance of being explicit about the choices we are making in our apologetic arguments.

²⁰ For example, on the coronavirus crisis explicitly see Paul Ewart, “Good news in the pandemic?” (31 August, 2020) <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/good-news-in-the-pandemic>. On natural evil more generally see Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

²¹ See Lloyd, “Chronological Creationism”.

DISTINCTIVES OF THE RURAL CONTEXT FOR CHRISTIAN MISSION

*Ivor MacDonald**

The article examines the distinctive context of the countryside for Christian mission. Firstly, some of the challenges raised by remote or rural settings are examined. There is then a consideration of some of the advantages inherent in such a context and finally some concluding thoughts on the unique opportunities for mission in rural areas.

I. A Distinct Rural Context?

The first task in addressing the issue of a rural context for mission is to consider whether there is a distinct rural context at all. Not all are convinced that this is the case in the twenty-first century. The “McDonaldisation” of the world has led to a flattening out of cultural distinctives, especially amongst young people. Timothy Keller, for one, argues that technology has led to the urbanising of even the most remote rural areas:

People, especially young people want to live in cities. The rise of new forms of technology has not weakened this desire. Instead, it has dramatically expanded the reach of urban culture. This urbanizing influence now extends far beyond the city limits, affecting even the most rural areas of remote countries.¹

Following this line of thought, some maintain that effective mission in rural Britain requires little by way of contextualisation that is specifically rural, as urbanism has carried all before it.

However, even allowing for the significant homogenisation of popular culture, society remains diverse and an awareness of the distinctiveness of different geographical and social contexts is vital for fruitful mission. Even the term “urban” encompasses contexts which differ significantly because of unique histories and differing attitudes to authority and community, economic realities and social challenges. One Anglican vicar, Gary Jenkins, describes his move from a London housing estate to a wealthy suburb in terms

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¹ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 154.

of coming to terms with a radically different society: “In 2001, I took a journey of 12 miles and entered another world”²

Jenkins found that in his first urban charge the members were working class, orientated towards family and community, resource poor and weak in leadership; business meetings tended to be less focussed but more spontaneous and fun. His suburban people were middle-class, goal-orientated, resource rich and highly individualistic. Whereas the people in the “estate” were open and willing to talk about their experiences, the suburban folk were less free in expressing their feelings and more driven by “right answers”. Recognising the differences in context was crucial to ministering well.

In a similar way, even though Instagram and Netflix mean that city and country have a shared discourse, the difference in history, landscape, relationships to place and community, remoteness and resources mean that the countryside, changing as it is, still presents a very different context from urban and suburban ministry. There is a commonality of distinction that justifies the concept of “rural context”. In what follows I want to map out some of the issues that make rural ministry challenging, then consider the strengths inherent in the context and finally the distinct opportunities provided in rural areas.

II. Challenges Within a Rural Setting

1. Undervalued

Rural communities have long suffered from a sense of being undervalued by the church. This plays out in several ways: Rural charges are often regarded as suitable territory for the beginning or the end of a ministry. They are seen as a good place for a young minister to cut his teeth, make his mistakes and then move on to a place with more potential. Similarly, it is expected that ministers drawing near to retirement will “ease down” by moving to a rural charge where there will be less demands made of them. This attitude is not peculiar to Britain. Wendell Berry laments a similar situation in the United States and accuses the church of being complicit in a more widespread drain of resources away from country to city:

No church official, apparently, sees any logical, much less any spiritual problem in sending young people to minister to country churches before they have, according to their institutional superiors, become eligible to be ministers. These student ministers invariably leave the rural congregations that have sponsored or endured their educations as soon as possible once

² Gary Jenkins, *Ministry Today* (www.ministrytoday.co.uk/magazine/issues/66/504/) accessed 5 January 2021.

they have their diploma in hand. The denominational hierarchies, then, evidently regard country places in exactly the same way as “the economy” does: as sources of economic power to be exploited for the advantage of “better” places.³

Allied to the stereotype of rural places as sleepy villages where nothing much happens is the emphasis in much modern mission thinking on the strategic priority of the city. This urban mission emphasis is based firstly on an understanding of the biblical data that sees the rapid growth of the early church as arising from the strategic insight of Paul and his associate evangelists in making urban centres of influence such as Ephesus and Corinth the focus of their missionary activity. There is often a biblical theology articulated which seeks to demonstrate that the city – and not a restored Eden – is God’s future purpose for the earth.⁴ Cities are regarded as the centres of influence for politics, the arts and science; the city is where we find the cultural elites and the upwardly mobile young people who will shape tomorrow. Thus, urban mission is articulated in terms of a “trickle down” strategy. Influence the city and the rest of the nation will follow, it is argued.⁵

So powerful is the conviction that urban areas are strategic and cutting edge that the implication is sometimes given that to minister anywhere else is to avoid the challenge of mission altogether. Take for example the words of one urban mission advocate from over thirty years ago:

Cities are simply huge clusters of people, and Jesus goes where the people are. In His earthly ministry Jesus wept with compassion for the crowds of Jerusalem and moved among them in ministry.

Over half of the world’s population lives in urban centres. In developed nations like the United States, the percentage of urban dwellers is much higher. In California, for example, 91 percent of the population lives in cities.

My city, Los Angeles, is crowded, expensive, violent, and polluted. I would rather raise my children in rural isolation or suburban convenience, but Jesus has called me here. Jesus has always been attracted to the dark places... By the year 2010, three out of every four people on earth will live in cities.⁶

The above quotation also illustrates the tendency to overstate the shift to urban settings. The United Nations estimates that currently 55 percent of the

³ Wendell Berry, “God and Country” in *What are people for?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 97.

⁴ See, for example Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2001).

⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 148.

⁶ John Dawson, *Taking Our Cities for God* (Altamonte Springs FL: Creation House, 1989), 34.

world's population live in urban areas. The 45 percent of rural dwellers represents 3.4 billion souls.⁷

What is seldom acknowledged by the urban strategists is the delight that God takes in confounding the wisdom of the world (1 Cor 1:18-31). It is this delight in acting against the grain of the "strategic" for his own glory that resulted in his choice of Israel (Deut 7:7-8) and the removal of Phillip from a revival in Samaria to speak to one individual in the middle of nowhere (Acts 8:26-40).

Not only was Jesus born in a rural setting, but he grew up in a community which was regarded as a rural backwater unlikely to lead to any significant developments: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. 'Come and see', said Philip." (John 1:46)

According to archaeological research, Nazareth in Jesus' day had a population of only 120 to 150 people.⁸ This was a farming-based village, situated high on a hill and away from the main trade routes. Nathanael's instinctive scorn would have reflected the general view of such a tiny community.

The bulk of Jesus' ministry was conducted in rural Galilee. If Jesus had adopted the "trickle down" strategies of many modern mission thinkers, he would have gone to Jerusalem and sought to win the religious and political elite. Instead, whilst Jesus was burdened for the people of Jerusalem and devoted time to preach and teach there, he also chose to devote significant attention to the villages of the land. As New Testament scholar N. T. Wright comments,

*We should not be surprised that Jesus in announcing [the gospel] kept on the move, going from village to village and, so far as we can tell, keeping away from Sepphoris and Tiberias, the two largest cities in Galilee. He was not so much like a wandering preacher preaching sermons, or a wandering philosopher offering maxims, as like a politician gathering support for a new and highly risky movement.*⁹

In fact, deprecating rural mission may turn out to be a poor move. Recent history has shown how movements once thought to be irreversible may in fact be reversed unexpectedly. The rise of political populism in the twenty-first century has seen a move away from open frontiers and the free movement of labour. The Covid-19 global pandemic influenced social trends in many surprising ways, some of which may be enduring. Who is to say that

⁷ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects/> (accessed 8 January 2021).

⁸ Erin Zimmerman <https://www1.cbn.com/BibleArcheology/archive/2010/12/19/five-things-you-didnt-know-about-nazareth> (accessed 23 January 2021).

⁹ Quoted in Donnie Griggs, *Small Town Jesus* (Damascus MD: EverTruth, 2016), 49.

globalisation and urbanisation are as unstoppable as we have been told so confidently and for so long?

Even if one were to accept all the assumptions made by those who advocate prioritising the city it would still, within these terms, make sense to recognise the huge potential of the often-overlooked rural mission field. In his autobiography, the founder of Walmart (until recently the owners of Asda), Sam Walton writes of how his business strategy was to focus on small country towns of under 10,000 people which were being overlooked by the competition:

Now that we were out of debt, we could really do something with our key strategy which was to put good-sized discount stores into little one-horse towns which everybody else was ignoring. In those days Kmart wasn't going to towns below 50,000, and even Gibson's wouldn't go to towns much smaller than 10,000 or 12,000. We knew our formula was working even in towns smaller than 5000 people and there were plenty of those towns out there for us to expand into. When people want to simplify the Wal-Mart story, that's usually how they sum up the secret of our success: "Oh they went into small towns when nobody else would." And a long time ago, when we were first being noticed, a lot of folks in the industry wrote us off as a bunch of country hicks who had stumbled onto this idea by a big accident.¹⁰

It would be tragic if, in a laudable attempt to flag up the importance of reaching cities of the world, it was suggested that mission to the countryside is "less strategic". Encouraging our best men to give their best years to rural mission may turn out to be highly strategic. My own denomination (the Free Church of Scotland) has several good stories to tell of rural churches that have been revitalised resulting in a significant impact on the community and the morale of the wider church.

2. Socially Suffocating

Rural social dynamics are perceived as negative in two respects. There are, first, the factors which encroach on social goods such as privacy which are taken for granted in the city. People often speak of the "goldfish bowl" of rural life: Everyone knows your business. It is hard to keep much private and people feel free to comment on your affairs. Some people find this difficult to adjust to. Others enjoy the sense of belonging which comes from living in a place where everyone knows your name and waves when you pass in the car.

The sense of being under scrutiny is greater when a minister or church planter moves to an area where he has strong ties. In Lowland Scotland, the

¹⁰ Sam Walton, *Sam Walton: Made in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 139-140.

phrase, “We kent yer faither” (“We knew your father”) usually indicates that the speakers are unwilling for the person in question to rise “above his station”.

But this was, of course, the same comment that was thrown out against Jesus: “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us?” (Matt 13:55-56)

Jesus, in other words, knew the reality of small-town hostility but it did not prevent him preaching in Nazareth and other parts of Galilee. He had nothing to hide from the people, whether or not they rejected him. And if someone is willing to embrace the close context of rural living then the power of incarnating the gospel is strong. Likewise, the spiritual fruit of gospel ministry will make a proportionately greater impact in a close-knit community. It is much harder to deny the reality of spiritual conversion in a small town or village.

The city is often identified with the possibility of living authentically and realising one’s potential away from the glare of small-town gossip. “In New York you can be a new man”, sings the chorus in the musical *Hamilton*. But it can also be seen as the place where vice thrives unseen in the darkness, unchecked by the homespun morality of the village.

Secondly, the social conservatism of rural areas is seen as slowing down the progress of the gospel. Rural people are regarded as inward-looking, conservative and slow to change. In the city, by contrast, people are more diverse and mobile and hence more open to change. Once again, these things may be true socially, but they are not of themselves barriers to the working of the Holy Spirit as the histories of spiritual revivals rooted in deeply traditional rural areas will testify.

3. *Under-Resourced*

One negative feature of rural ministry and mission which is acknowledged by all is that the rural church is under-resourced in terms of buildings, personnel and finance.

John Clarke, director of the Arthur Rank Centre, an organisation based in Warwickshire, England that seeks to resource the rural church, paints the contrast between urban and rural churches in terms of building resources as follows:

This [the city church] is the church which besides meeting for worship on a Sunday has an active programme of events during the week. Extensive use is made of the church buildings which will usually include a hall, smaller meeting rooms, toilets, and kitchen. This building is the primary locus and focus of the church’s mission.

Compare that with a village church or chapel. The Parish Church will probably be several centuries old, with no toilet or kitchen and will be heavily 'pewed'. There may be a small room constructed in the bell tower. The chapel may have an extra room, with a sink at one end, and perhaps a toilet, but many are simply a rectangular shell.¹¹

The smaller population of rural areas may mean that there are fewer people available to share the work of outreach and pastoral care. Small numbers also affect the dynamics of church life: Arlin Rothauge of Seabury Western Theological Seminary in the USA has made an analysis of the social impact of church size which has been very influential.¹² He categorises congregation size as follows:

- The family church. These are congregations of up to 50 members. They may have been without a paid leader for some time and are used to functioning informally.
- The pastoral church of 50 to 150 members. At this point the numbers are too large for one or two "parental figures" to dominate and the seminary-trained minister is central. Members expect their spiritual needs to be met through their direct relationship with the minister. Church size is small enough for everyone to know each other.
- The programme church of 150 to 350 members. The church is at a size where personal care and leadership must be supplemented by lay-led cells of activity such as pastoral care groups, programmes for recovering from divorce, abuse, addiction etc.
- The corporate church with more than 350 members. Here a relatively high-profile senior minister and well-resourced Sunday services provide unity whilst a significant number of paid staff deliver multiple ministries.

Rural churches are usually in either the first or second category, with the great majority being family churches. These churches may be part of a grouping of similar-sized fellowships under the oversight of a paid minister. However, the real decision-maker in the family church may be the patriarch/matriarch of the family group. This person may see his/her role as preventing the minister

¹¹ John Clarke, *Rural Ministry* (<https://www.ministrytoday.org.uk/magazine/issues/13/61>) (accessed 8 January 2021).

¹² Arlin Rothauge, *Sizing up a congregation for new member ministry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982). See also Paul Beasley-Murray, (https://www.paulbeasleymurray.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/What_Type_of_Church_is_Yours_Autumn_2008) accessed 8 January 2021, and Roy M. Oswald, (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54c7d7ede4b03a45e09cd270/t/5aa00b43652dea8c73c46299/1520438089615/HowToMinisterEffectivelyInFamilyPastoralProgramandCorporate-SizedChurches.pdf>) accessed 11 May 2021.

from leading the church off in a radically new direction. The minister's role is seen as chaplain to this church "family". Clearly there is potential for conflict if the vision of the minister is not shared from the start. By contrast, in church plant situations the small size of the group becomes an advantage because the core group is selected on the basis of a shared vision and so the unity of vision becomes a powerful driver from the outset.

4. Tensions

One of the features of the British countryside for many years has been the movement of urbanites into the country looking for a better quality of life. This movement, whilst bringing in new blood has often been at the expense of young local families who are unable to compete for local housing. In the Highlands of Scotland, the term "white settler" was coined to describe a new breed of incomer who arrived with patronising attitudes towards "natives" and sought to modify the community to fit more closely the city dynamics they had, ironically, left behind for a better life!

At the same time, much of the growth of rural churches may come from these newcomers. For some of them, the move to the country may be indicative of some wider soul-searching or a hankering for authentic community. The division in the community between old and new residents may then be reflected by tension within the church if the suggestions for changes in practice are, for example, welcomed more enthusiastically by the newcomers than by the indigenous folks.

However, although these new tensions are undoubtedly a challenge within the rural situation, they also represent a stimulating new dynamic which is often fruitful.

III. The Strengths of the Rural Context

1. Rootedness

When Cain sinned, his punishment was to become rootless, a wanderer in the land east of Eden (Gen 4:12). In contrast, when the idealised Israel is portrayed in Scripture it is characteristically presented in terms of being a life in which the Israelite is rooted in the land and at peace with God and his neighbour (e.g., Micah 4:4)

The countryside provides an alternative to the hypermobility of the city. Rural churches tend not to suffer from the emotional fatigue that arises from welcoming newcomers to church who have little intention of staying long. In contrast to what is generally the case in the urban setting, they offer the opportunity to make long-term commitments to people and place. When

relationships break down it is much more difficult to simply move on and avoid the issues.

Land/landscape is important in anchoring people to place. As theologian Walter Brueggemann points out, to connect with the land is to find your place in a bigger whole. "Land is never simply physical dirt but is always physical dirt freighted with social meanings derived from historical experience."¹³ As a result, there is a kind of anchoring of people in a rural setting which does not happen so easily in the city with its man-made and transient surroundings. "People do form bonds with place, and territory is vitally important to people and may serve as an integral component of self-identity."¹⁴

Although the mobility of urban people is often represented as a positive aspect for mission (people are less stuck in their thinking, more open to change, etc.),¹⁵ it can also be seen as a manifestation of consumerism. People move to find an even better neighbourhood, a higher-paying job, a safer part of the city etc. Experience shows that consumerist attitudes are often carried over into the church: it is all too easy in the city to hop from one church to another in pursuit of greater affirmation, more people who share your interests, or more engaging preaching. In the rural church there is the possibility of working with people who see themselves as heavily invested in the locality and hence in the prospering of this church.

2. *A Sense of Community Ownership of the Church.*

In urban and suburban contexts, church planters and those involved in church revitalisation will seek to position the church as a community church. They will want to communicate the church's desire to serve the people, identify with them in their struggles and communicate in ways that are accessible. This identification with the community is highly desirable in order to communicate the gospel in an incarnational manner rather than aloofly from a distance.

In a rural area that community connection is already there to a much larger extent than in the city. This is how John Clark of the Arthur Rank Centre contrasts rural and urban churches in terms of their relationship with the community:

Membership in a village church is by identification rather than by participation. One becomes a member of an urban congregation by attending worship and becoming involved in the life of that church. In the village, one may attend rarely (Harvest Festivals, Remembrance Sunday,

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 2.

¹⁴ David Storey, *Territory: The Claiming of Space* (Harlow, Essex: Prentice Hall, 2001), 17.

¹⁵ Keller, *Center Church*, 148.

*Christmas) or not at all, but still regard oneself as a member. In the city people belong to a church; in the village, the church belongs to the people.*¹⁶

As Clarke goes on to acknowledge, this sense of community ownership is a double-edged sword. On the negative side it can be harder to evangelise nominal Christians who think that they are already “in” by virtue of living in the village and turning up for the occasional church fundraiser.

But positively it represents significantly less alienation from the church than is found in highly-secularised urban situations. There are multiplied connections of which to take advantage to share the gospel: The minister will be expected to take an active part in the local school; often the connection will extend beyond formal chaplaincy roles to involvement on school boards, sports coaching, travelling with young people on school excursions etc. In the city, these are opportunities of which Christian leaders can only dream – in the country they constitute the normal expectations of the community. The minister or church worker is seen both as a local leader and a representative of a community organisation. In urban settings it requires steady work over years to overcome suspicion and develop a successful children’s work. In a rural parish the entire population of the village school is likely to turn out for a summer children’s mission.

Because the church is the community’s church, a large proportion of the community are likely to turn out for key life events such as a funeral, a wedding or for Remembrance Sunday. Christmas and Easter represent significant opportunities for connecting and because a proportion of the community may have some connection with agriculture, there is the potential to sensitively engage with key points of the farming year. An example would be extending a community-wide invitation to a harvest thanksgiving service.

3. *Organic Evangelism*

Rural churches are rarely able to operate the kind of programmes typical of congregation sizes 150 to 350 in Rothauge’s size classification. Churches this large are common in urban and suburban settings and use a suite of modern rooms and the skills of ministry assistants to provide a menu of events to assimilate newcomers.

What rural churches can do, however, is to provide Christian influence and witness via members who are naturally involved in the community. In my last (rural) charge we had very little in the way of hall space to provide a programmed approach to mission. However, members of the congregation taught in the local school, were active in local business, were founding members of the local community trust, and involved in activities to promote

¹⁶ Clarke, *Rural Ministry*.

the local Gaelic culture.¹⁷ Such connectivity, where Christians relate to their non-Christian neighbours in informal, non-religious contexts, is a great opportunity for church leaders to equip the saints for being salt within the community.

Notwithstanding all that was said in 2 above, rural areas are not immune from the impact of secularism, the growing divide between church and community and the portrayal of the Christian message as regressive. As we move into times more reminiscent of the first two centuries of the church it will be relational, organic witness that will prove to be more effective than event-based evangelism and programmes. Features of the rural church context which appear as weaknesses may turn out to be strengths with growing secularisation.

4. *A Context for Dialogue on Contemporary Issues*

Some of the most pressing questions of our day relate to the rural context. Issues such as wildlife conservation, pollution, animal welfare, re-wilding, veganism, genetic engineering and cloning, country sports, and the health of the food chain are discussed in the wine bars of the city, but it is in the countryside where they are an everyday reality. In the past, topical issues such as new town planning, industrial relations, the nuclear threat etc. seemed remote from the countryside. Today, however, there is a sense in which the rural context is more relevant than ever. All these topics call for sustained theological reflection by the church.

Agrarianism is a philosophical outlook that goes back to at least the eighth century BC¹⁸ and is often associated with American founding father, Thomas Jefferson. In its modern form, agrarianism stresses the importance to society of family farms, valuing the local and committing to community, prizing work for what it contributes to human flourishing rather than profit, and respecting creation. Especially in North America, a new Christian agrarianism has developed as a result of the work of Christian thinkers such as Wendell Berry¹⁹, Wes Jackson²⁰ and Frederick L Kirschenmann.²¹ Their thinking has been implemented by Christian practitioners such as Virginia farmer Joel Salatin of Polyface Farms who is an articulate advocate of regenerative

¹⁷ My previous congregation was Kilmuir and Stenscholl Church of Scotland, Isle of Skye.

¹⁸ F. Eugene Heath, "Agrarianism" article in Encyclopaedia Britannica (<http://www.britannica.com/topic/agrarianism>) accessed 11 January 2021.

¹⁹ See his *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, (New York: Avon, 1977).

²⁰ See, for example, Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to this Place* (Berkeley CA: Counterpoint, 1996).

²¹ Frederick L. Kirschenmann, *Developing an Ecological Conscience: Essays from a Farmer Philosopher* (Berkeley CA: Counterpoint, 2010).

farming. These developments are a significant resource to equip the rural church to speak prophetically to the issues of our day.

IV. Opportunities for Mission in the Rural Context

1. Championing the Rural Community

We began by exploring the question as to whether or not the rural context is a reality and affirmed that it is indeed a distinct context with strengths as well as weaknesses. It is vital to recognise this and to avoid the temptation of trying to build a city church in the countryside. It is important to play to the strengths of the rural context. One of these, we noticed, was the strong residual connection between church and community.

There are many opportunities for church leaders to strengthen this by championing the local community in different ways. It may be that the minister is able to provide strong local leadership by speaking out for the community in the face of threats to the wellbeing of the area. Chairing a local forum or writing on behalf of the community need not distract from gospel ministry and may enhance the perception of the church being for the people.

It is often possible to celebrate local events in the community's history. Perhaps a memorial service for some tragedy or a celebration of the life of a notable person who came from the area. During the Year of Homecoming in Scotland many churches (including my own) celebrated their local communities through photographic exhibitions, historic trails, open-air services, or specially-written leaflets commemorating the area and especially people with links to the church from the community.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of church leaders loving the area in which they minister, whether that be a city location or a rural location. If a church leader speaks critically of a place – decrying it for being boring or sleepy – or appears to be condescending in any way, then the credibility of his ministry is seriously undermined. But if they speak well of the community, show genuine affection for the history, traditions and activities of the community, and stand up for it when necessary, then the community remembers and turns to them at key moments knowing that here is “someone who is for us”.

One of the challenges that a new minister or church planter has in a rural area is to ask questions of the context. What is important to people in this community? What leisure activities are popular? Where do people go to eat? What is perceived negatively by the community? Rural communities are rooted and take a pride in belonging. By shopping locally, patronising the local restaurant, taking up sports that they may not have considered before,

newcomers to the village sensitively overcome the barrier of being perceived as an outsider and instead become a good local.²²

When young able ministers and church planters go to rural areas and refuse to be allured to “bigger and better” charges in the city, they are seen to identify with the community and their ministry gains credibility with each passing year. Rural areas have been conditioned to believe that they are places with no future – that their usefulness, such as it is, is to provide a flow of resources to the city. Championing the countryside and committing to stay delivers a powerful message to the contrary.

2. Training the People of God in Friendship Evangelism

The typical rural congregation will have multiple contacts within the community. This is as much an outcome of necessity as anything else. Small populations, the need for people to perform several different functions within the community and inter-relatedness mean that one individual may be meaningfully connected to more people than someone who lives in the suburbs and “plugs in” to a workplace in the city. This is a huge opportunity for mission. How thrilled urban evangelists would be to know that their co-workers knew every parent in the school!

However, these connections do not necessarily translate into missionary contacts. Often rural Christians may be blind to these opportunities because they do not look on their community as a mission field. Sometimes the fear of upsetting relationships in a small community makes people reticent to use the opportunities that lie before them.

There is a need to challenge people to be open about their faith and to be bold in sharing the gospel in a natural way. Contextualised evangelism in rural situations will be highly relational, small-scale and all-embracing. Blanket mailshots may not be a good idea, but word of mouth invitations will usually be the best way forward.

Courses like Christianity Explored can be very suitable for rural areas because they are intentionally relational, are best carried out in conjunction with a meal, and are effective with small numbers. Where it is possible to co-operate with other evangelical churches, this greatly enhances the effectiveness of mission as the division between churches is often perceived (correctly) as contributing to fragmentation within the village.

Christians need to be trained in personal evangelism so that they are confident in sharing the gospel message and alerted to the many opportunities that exist all around them.

²² Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 143.

3. *Developing Leadership Through Every-Member Ministry*

One of the challenges facing rural mission is the lack of resources to provide paid leadership. In fact, this limitation can be turned on its head and seen as an opportunity for mobilising lay people in mission. The New Testament makes clear that the function of spiritual leaders in the church is not to do all the work but to equip and enable the whole body of Christ to build the church. The classic statement of this principle of “every member ministry” is found in Ephesians 4:11-12:

So, Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

These works of service involve the “one-anothering” activities to which the readership is exhorted at the close of many of Paul’s letters. To list just a few of these, we have: “encourage one another” (2 Cor 13:11); “speaking to one another in psalms hymns and songs from the Spirit (Eph 5:19); “spur one another on to love and good deeds” (Heb 10:24); “Carry each other’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). But the equipping of the body of Christ also includes training for building up the church through evangelism: “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet 3:15).

Whilst nearly all Christian leaders agree with the idea that they are not to do all the work but to equip others to be co-workers, in practice it is often a neglected principle. Training others for mission requires intentionality and perseverance and so it is often not carried out.

Where there are financial resources available, the temptation is to fund full or part-time workers to do evangelism. Even where these resources are not there, the temptation is to look for non-stipendiary leaders who will do the work of ministry and mission.²³ It is much more fruitful to recognise the situation as an opportunity for mobilising all the people of God.

Because of rural geography, one congregation is likely to be spread over several villages with gatherings in each one operating semi-autonomously. Such gatherings are under the direct oversight of elders, perhaps with a full-time teaching elder providing vision and spiritual leadership and preaching in rotation in each centre. The use of online communication, which has had such a big impact in 2020/21, is likely to continue to be influential in mission to rural communities, enabling the minister to connect the place where he happens to preach in one instance with the other centres. However, new technology must not perpetuate reliance on the one leader but rather be used

²³ Clarke, *Rural Ministry*.

to enable training and the multiplying of leaders as well as creating a sense of unity.

One of the primary tasks of the minister/church-planter/salaried church leader will be to envision the eldership with the importance of training the membership in evangelism. Not all the elders will necessarily make good trainers, but the aim should be to have them all committed to the project. The elder begins with a group of people who are enthusiastic to be trained in one-to-one Bible reading, online evangelistic Bible study, sharing testimony, gospel outlines etc. People are trained by being told the principles, then they are shown how these principles are put into practice. There is no greater stimulus to equipping than the leaders who lead by example. Then, finally, the individuals in the group need to become active themselves whilst being supported. As they build up their confidence, they then go on to train others.²⁴

In a rural context training up others may be seen as the only solution to a desperate shortage of manpower. The good news is that this is the route that all churches should be pursuing any way! The need is simply more focussed in the countryside. There may, of course, be resistance to moving from a traditional pattern. However, the fragility of the situation in new and long-established churches means that there should be a greater willingness to move in this direction.

4. *Building Partnership with City Churches*

Highlighting the city as a mission field was undoubtedly necessary but, as so often happens, the pendulum has swung too far in that direction. We need not seek balance by decrying urban mission; both urban and rural mission are clearly needed, and urbanisation is an undisputed phenomenon. What we need is a proper recognition that what we perceive as being small and unimportant places may be seen very differently from a heavenly perspective. A fruitful corrective can be the willingness of city churches to partner in mission.

There is a general dynamic whereby urban centres concentrate resources by channelling people and commodities from the hinterland to enrich the centre. City churches often grow in like manner: Country churches put in the hard graft of evangelising young people, discipling them and bringing them into church membership, only for them to leave for large, gathered city congregations just when they have most to offer. Gospel partnership between city and rural churches addresses this imbalance.

²⁴ These are not new insights of course but are recognised as essential paths to equipping the whole people of God. See, for example, Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The ministry mind-shift that changes everything* (Sydney: Matthias Media 2009); Harry Reeder and David Swavelly, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church* (Phillipsburg NJ.: P&R Publishing, 2008).

If partnerships with city churches are to be fruitful, then it must be a partnership of equals. There is no place for the city team coming with a superior attitude, assuming that they have all the answers for the country folk; imperialism kills partnership. Nor should the country church look to its city partner as though it was a rich uncle ready with handouts of money, people and skills. Rural Christians must recognise that they come to the table with a contribution to make; city teams must come willing to listen to the locals before acting. They must be ready to learn from their time in the country context and expect that there will be aspects of rural spirituality which are needed as correctives for city life.

Such church partnerships mirror the symbiosis between country and town that is seen in Old Testament Israel where the people of the land were custodians of a rich heritage and were in constant spiritual interaction with Jerusalem. City churches can supply the larger numbers of young people needed to mount effective youth missions, train in mercy ministry and counselling and help to fund trainees for gospel ministry. Rural churches can model long-term commitment to the local church and community, the importance of relational witness and intergenerational fellowship.

5. *Holistic Mission*

Finally, the rural context presents the opportunity/challenge of developing a truly holistic theology. At heart, such a theology is quite simple. I have written elsewhere²⁵ of the triangle of relationships which is presented in Scripture as fundamental to our human situation. These are our relation to God, to one another, and to the earth. These relationships were distorted by the Fall and are substantially healed by the gospel; they will be restored completely when Christ comes again.

It is an important part of the church's task to show how the gospel addresses each of these three relationships. It is true that the primary relationship is that of people to their Creator – until this is addressed then interpersonal relationships and the issue of the groaning creation cannot be addressed. For that reason, the minister/church planter must recognise that he is called to “preach Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). The evangelical church has been rightly anxious not to allow social justice issues to displace the primary task of alerting men and women to their fractured relationship with their Maker and the need to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

However, reconciled men and women live in the real world and face a hundred new questions each day regarding how they work and save and play

²⁵ Ivor MacDonald, *Land of the Living: Christian Reflections on the Countryside* (College Station TX: Virtualbookworm.com, 2005).

and shop and eat and relate to new technology and global trends. There is a need in every church to teach Christians how to develop a Christian world view. In the rural context that must include issues of creation care, sustainable food production, the importance of place and community. Our message must take note of our context if it is to be authentic.

When it shrinks back from addressing all aspects of that triangle of relationships fractured by the Fall and healed by the gospel, the church can be guilty of a functional dualism that divides life into the spiritual and the secular. Wendell Berry spoke with compelling insight about this tendency in a lecture given to the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky:

If we are to maintain any sense of coherence or meaning in our lives, we cannot tolerate the present utter disconnection between religion and economy. By "economy" I do not mean "economics" which is the study of money-making, but rather the ways of human housekeeping, the ways by which the human household is situated and maintained within the household of nature. To be uninterested in economy is to be uninterested in the practice of religion; it is to be uninterested in culture and character. Probably the most urgent question now faced by people who would adhere to the Bible is this: What sort of economy would be responsible to the holiness of life? What, for Christians, would be the economy, the practices and restraints of "right livelihood"? I do not believe that organized Christianity now has any idea. I think its idea of Christian economy is no more or less than the industrial economy – which is an economy firmly founded on the seven deadly sins and the breaking of all ten of the Ten Commandments. Obviously if Christianity is going to survive as more than a respecter and comforter of profitable iniquities, then Christians, regardless of their organizations, are going to have to interest themselves in economy – which is to say, in nature and in work. They are going to have to give workable answers to those who say we cannot live without this economy that is destroying us and our world, who see the murder of Creation as the only way of life.²⁶

Here then is one of the greatest challenges to the rural church. Its context provides a workshop for these issues of "economy" to be worked out Christianly. There is a developing literature of Christian thought on the rural situation, but it must impact the congregation. The church planter or church revitalizer must equip the people of God to think through the issues that relate to their context. They must organise adult Christian education classes and seminars, distribute literature and initiate discussion groups on the subject.

²⁶ Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation" in *The Art of the Commonplace: The agrarian essays of Wendell Berry* (ed. Norman Wirzba; Emeryville CA: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2002), 309.

The people of God are then equipped to put Christian principles into practice in their work or to discuss the issues meaningfully with non-Christian friends. We do this because it is the right thing to do as people born again of the Holy Spirit. We honour God by yielding to his sovereignty over all of life. But additionally, in this way we build bridges with those who are not yet Christians. In this way we command a hearing from our sceptical neighbours who have long considered Christianity an irrelevance to their lives.

V. Conclusion

The rural context remains quite different from the urban context for mission despite many cultural changes. It is a great mistake to try to make a city church of a rural church. The rural church should not seek to be a scaled-down version of the city church; it is quite different. It is a different mission field with different opportunities and souls that are as valuable as they are anywhere else.

Acknowledging this is an important beginning, but it is only a beginning. The strengths and challenges of the rural context mentioned above are common to most situations but there is always a great deal of work to be done in thinking through the particular features of each individual community.

There is, in truth, no one size that fits all and it is important to acknowledge the challenges and play to the strengths of a rural setting to the glory of God.

THE UNION OF 1929 AND WHAT CAME AFTER: DEVELOPMENTS IN MAINLINE SCOTTISH PRESBYTERIANISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

*Rev Dr Alasdair J. Macleod**

The union of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church in 1929 was perceived as a significant and promising development in Scottish church history. However, challenging trends marked Scottish society in the twentieth century, negatively impacting the church: secularism, mass entertainment, diversity and pragmatism. Furthermore, union was achieved by dismantling the former confessional commitments of the Church of Scotland, and by obtaining full liberty for future change without external accountability. The Church of Scotland since has been marked by an eroded doctrine of conversion, liberalism, and preaching losing its primacy, all before the current statistical decline. Two major attempts at renewal are considered: those of George MacLeod and the Iona Community and of William Still and the Crieff Fellowship, neither of which reversed the decline. The union of 1929 consequently looks like mere institutional realignment, with the trends already in place that would undermine mainline Presbyterianism in Scotland.

I. Introduction

For a mainline Scottish Presbyterian in the first half of the twentieth century, there could be no doubt what was the most important recent development in the history of Scottish Christianity. The union of the United Free Church and the old Established Church in 1929 to form the modern Church of Scotland brought together the two thick black lines of the “spaghetti junction” of sundered Scottish Presbyterianism into one single institutional church. By that union, the Church of Scotland became not only the recognised national church, but also the spiritual home of the vast majority of Scottish Protestants. For the historian J. R. Fleming, 1929 brought his magisterial *History of the Church in Scotland* to a triumphant conclusion, an “end of history”, the ecclesiastical equivalent of the fall of the Berlin Wall: antiquated divisions

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replaced by forward-looking unity. Furthermore, not only was the union highly successful in combining two large and disparate churches into one seamless body, merging local and regional lower courts, national General Assemblies, and even the historically-independent United Free Church Colleges with the University Faculties of Divinity, but the new Church exhibited considerable vigour. A national campaign of church planting in the 1930s under the leadership of John White (1867-1951) saw many new congregations established in the newly-built urban and suburban housing schemes of modern Scotland; scholars and preachers like the Baillie brothers, John (1886-1960) and Donald (1887-1954), were major national figures; Kirk membership, and at least occasional attendance, were a normal part of respectable Scottish life.

Yet less than a hundred years later, the picture looks very different. The union of 1929 looks like a mere institutional realignment, with all the key trends already in place that would lead to the present-day decline into near irrelevance of mainline Scottish Presbyterianism. This article will aim to put the union of 1929 within that broader historical context and to consider the subsequent development of mainline Scottish Presbyterianism in the twentieth century.

II. Trends in Scottish Society in the Early Twentieth Century

We can identify a number of trends in Scottish society that proved extremely damaging to the Church of Scotland, and to Scottish Christianity more generally.

1. Secularism

By the 1920s, Scotland was already culturally a much more secular country than ever before. Academic higher criticism of the biblical text had greatly undermined confidence in the unity and truth of Scripture as the inspired Word of God. General acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution, and of a geological long age for the Earth, had called into question the biblical account of origins and, by extension, the reality of the Fall of Man. The literary expressions of doubt found in Victorian works such as Matthew Arnold's famous poem *Dover Beach* (1867), and George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* (1871-2), had hardened into a literature founded on secular presuppositions. The sentimental Victorian and Edwardian Scottish writers like Ian Maclaren and J. M. Barrie were now rejected as the "kailyard" (cabbage patch) school of literature, and the new leading writers, such as the poet Hugh MacDiarmid,

and novelist Lewis Grassic Gibbon, were politically of the hard left and, by conviction, determined atheists hostile to all organised religion.¹

Furthermore, the horrendous death toll of the First World War had undermined confidence in the need for conversion in this world: how could it be conceivable that so many young men had been precipitated into eternity without evidence of spiritual preparation, or further opportunity for it, so far as one could see, to be lost without hope? The leading Church of Scotland preachers, such as John White, began teaching the possibility of posthumous salvation, in some form of Purgatory.² Yet such doctrinal change was, in the longer term, deeply undermining to the Church: it looked, as indeed it was, overly convenient. Where was the Scriptural, as opposed to emotional or cultural, basis for Purgatory? And, more to the point, it removed the necessity and urgency of seeking God in this world. As a consequence of all this, respectable Scots still continued to attend church in the early- and mid-twentieth century, but their lives were no longer dominated by the exercise of religious piety.

2. *Mass Entertainment*

This was reflected in changing recreation. Reading habits had changed dramatically from Victorian times: sermons were no longer the most popular form of literature, being overwhelmingly replaced by secular novels.³ Radio was introduced in the 1920s and rapidly became ubiquitous; despite the many worship services broadcast, it normalised the hearing of plays, undermined the observance of Sunday as the Lord's Day, and promoted an increasingly secular tone to conversation. Theatres were increasingly popular and socially acceptable, and the cinema as a new form of recreation grew with astonishing speed during the 1920s; professional football acquired mass popularity; crowds no longer flocked to attend evangelistic rallies or Communion seasons, but to watch films and sporting fixtures. Dedicated piety looked old-fashioned.

3. *Diversity*

The homogeneity of Victorian society rapidly broke down as the twentieth century progressed. Social pressure towards the respectability of church attendance decreased in the early part of the century as a wider range of

¹ Cf. William Ferguson, *Scotland: 1689 to the Present* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1968), 377-80.

² Augustus Muir, *John White* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), 444-5. Cf. J. L. MacLeod, "Greater Love Hath No Man Than This: Scotland's Conflicting Religious Responses to Death in the Great War" (70-96), *Scottish Historical Review*, lxxxi.1, 211 (April 2002).

³ As late as 1870, the largest genre of book published was religious, with works of fiction in fifth place. By 1886, fiction had reached the top, cf. Iain H. Murray, *The Undercover Revolution: How Fiction Changed Britain* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 5-6.

Sunday activity became available, and this tendency accelerated dramatically during the 1960s. As households became more affluent, they became more able to pursue their own choice of activities: "presbyterian doctrine and practice [have] withered considerably as prosperity pushed out puritanism".⁴ Furthermore, church would no longer be viewed as "one size fits all" Presbyterianism, but as a matter of personal preference. Consequently, even where individuals did experience conversion and hold strong Christian convictions, that did not necessarily translate into institutional loyalty to the Church of Scotland. Brethren assemblies, Baptist churches, independent mission halls, Pentecostal and charismatic fellowships proliferated.⁵

4. Pragmatism

Furthermore, society itself also became more hard-headed and cynical. The earnestness of Victorian statesmanship was entirely displaced by the practicality of twentieth-century politics. Political candidates could no longer expect to speak for any length of time on abstract principles, nor was there much patience with high-flown eloquence: voters expected transactional communication: specific policies to meet identifiable needs. This inevitably affected preaching: preachers felt the pressure to demonstrate the reality and relevance of their messages to ordinary life, and all too often the temptation was therefore to speak on political, social or moral issues, rather than on Christian experience that might only resonate with a minority, even had the preacher an acquaintance with it himself. The decline in experimental preaching was undoubtedly and inevitably accompanied by the decay of experimental Christian piety in Scottish society.

III. The union of 1929

The United Free Church arose from a union in 1900, between the two other large national Presbyterian Churches. This immediately prompted investigation of the prospects for a full union with the Established Church, but three major issues had to be addressed: constitutional, doctrinal and property issues.

1. Constitutional Issues

First, the Church of Scotland was historically committed to strict subscription to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* on the part of ministers and Professors

⁴ Callum G. Brown, *The Social History of Religion in Scotland Since 1730* (London: Routledge, 1987), 255.

⁵ Cf. Brown, *The Social History of Religion in Scotland Since 1730*, 252-6.

of Divinity. While this was a fairly dead letter, and broad liberty was taken for granted by Kirk ministers and Professors on doctrinal issues, this would, of course, require to be changed if a Church with a looser subscription was to be incorporated. Therefore, the Kirk obtained the inclusion of a key clause in the *Churches (Scotland) Act 1905*, legislation that was chiefly intended to address the property issues arising from the 1900 Free Church union, that the Church of Scotland itself had liberty to change its own formula of subscription. This subscription was then loosened in 1910 with the adoption of this form:

*I hereby subscribe to the Confession of Faith, declaring that I accept it as the Confession of this Church, and that I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith therein.*⁶

By leaving the “fundamental doctrines” undefined, subscription as a meaningful doctrinal safeguard was in fact all but destroyed in the modern Church of Scotland.

Many of the ministers and congregations that had come from the old United Presbyterian Church were firmly committed to voluntarism, the conviction that the church should be supported only by the voluntary donations of its adherents. However, the Kirk continued to receive various forms of state funding, including the “teinds”, a sort of local property tax, and the right to charge the local heritors (landowners) the cost of building or improving the parish church.

A Committee of the Kirk was established to meet these concerns, convened by John White, and proposed a Declaratory Act to the General Assembly to declare that the rights and powers claimed by the Church of Scotland as a Church were not granted by the state but were inherent in the Church. This was approved, but in the face of opposition.

2. Doctrinal Issues

The opponents saw the Act as sacrificing the Kirk’s established status, in return for only a general recognition by the State. The small group of Scoto-Catholics successfully demanded that a doctrinal statement be included as part of the Church’s Articles Declaratory. This was incorporated as Article I and thus is embedded in the constitution of the Church of Scotland as recognised and established by law, declaring that the Church “avows the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic faith founded” upon Scripture. However, Article V was a good deal more significant for the future of the Church of Scotland:

⁶ Quoted in John W. Keddle, *Preserving a Reformed Heritage: The Free Church of Scotland in the 20th Century* (Kirkhill: Scottish Reformed Heritage Publications, 2017), 151.

*V. This Church has the inherent right, free from interference by civil authority, but under the safeguards for deliberate action and legislation provided by the Church itself, to frame or adopt its subordinate standards, to declare the sense in which it understands its Confession of Faith, to modify the forms of expression therein, or to formulate other doctrinal statements, and to define the relation thereto of its office-bearers and members, but always in agreement with the Word of God and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the said Confession, of which agreement the Church shall be sole judge, and with due regard to liberty of opinion in points which do not enter into the substance of the Faith.*⁷

The Church of Scotland no longer had a permanent doctrinal standard. After extensive delays caused by the First World War, the Church of Scotland's presbyteries overwhelmingly approved the draft articles. In 1921, Parliament responded by passing the Enabling Act, recognising the Church of Scotland's right to adopt the articles as a statement of its constitution. The constitution, which had received Parliamentary recognition, asserted that the Church has received from Christ alone as King and Head of the Church the capacity, subject to no civil authority, to self-government in all matters of doctrine, worship, and discipline.⁸ In terms of its own governance, however, this effectively took the Church of Scotland outside the jurisdiction of the civil powers regarding its internal affairs. By profession, it was under the authority not of Parliament but of Christ. However, this removed any external accountability for consistency with the Confession or any other doctrinal standard.

3. *Property Issues*

The Church of Scotland had learned from the Free Church union of 1900 the necessity of assuring itself of ownership of its properties and funds once union had been accomplished. Furthermore, the obligations of the "teinds" could not be carried into the union, as this form of funding would be unacceptable to many of the former United Presbyterians. Therefore, in 1925, Parliament passed the *Church of Scotland Properties and Endowments Act*, which placed control of all the Church of Scotland's assets in the hands of the Church itself, including a fixed annual payment from landowners to the General Trustees of the Church in compensation for cancelling all land charges, burgh revenues, exchequer grants, and the obligation on local heritors to upkeep churches.⁹

⁷ "Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland", accessed 21 November 2020: <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/church-law/church-constitution>

⁸ *Ibid.*, Article 4.

⁹ J. R. Fleming, *A History of the Church in Scotland, 1875 – 1929* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1933), 107–11.

In 1926, the General Assembly ratified the Articles Declaratory 1921 as the official constitution of the Church of Scotland, which concluded the legislative preparation for the union.

4. *The Union of 1929*

In October of 1929, the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church at last accomplished the union, with John White becoming the first Moderator of the united Church. The scale of the union may be seen from the figures below.¹⁰

1928 Statistics (31 December)	Congregations	Ministers	Elders	Members	Pupils in Sunday School & Bible Class	Foreign Missionaries	Income
CofS	1714	1764	15,008	759,625	246,974	184	838,006
UFC	1441	1516	19,106	538,912	247,026	434	1,540,947

One significant aspect of the union was that it brought large and healthy congregations into the Church of Scotland again in parts of the Northern and Western Highlands and Islands where the presence of the Kirk had been little more than a skeleton service since the Disruption nearly 90 years before. One conservative minister of the Church of Scotland, Rev Roderick Macinnes of Uig, Lewis, declined to enter the union, and he and about half his congregation were admitted instead to the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Similarly, one conservative congregation of the United Free Church at Scalpay, Harris, declined to enter the union, and was admitted to the Free Church of Scotland.¹¹

5. *The United Free Church (Continuing)*

Only a small minority of very hardline voluntaries in the United Free Church were still dissatisfied with the extent of the national recognition of the new Church. They held out for an absolute separation from the state, and on that basis refused to enter the union. The leader of this movement was Rev. James

¹⁰ J. R. Fleming, *The Story of Church Union in Scotland* (London: James Clarke, 1929), 170.
¹¹ John MacLeod, *Banner in the West: A Spiritual History of Lewis and Harris* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2010), 237-9.

Barr (1862-1949), who was both Minister of Govan United Free Church and Labour MP for Motherwell, and who had therefore carried on the fight against the union both in church courts and in the House of Commons. Lessons had been learnt from the 1900 union, and it was agreed that congregations that remained outside the union by majority could retain their property, and the name “United Free Church”, provided the minority agree to use the additional term “(Continuing)” for the first five years.

Less than 14,000 members, in 106 congregations, stayed outside the union, forming the United Free Church as it continues to the present. It was initially one of the most liberal of Scottish denominations, called by Fleming an “advanced ‘left wing’ of Scottish Presbyterianism”.¹² It was the first Presbyterian Church to ordain a woman minister, Elizabeth Barr, daughter of James, in 1935, and the first to have a woman Moderator, Barr herself in 1960. However, it also had an evangelical strand, including one Highland congregation in Balintore, which had a history in the Anti-Burgher tradition going back to the eighteenth century. Today, interestingly, this strand seems to be more prominent than before. The present United Free Church has opposed same-sex marriage as “inconsistent with Christian teaching”,¹³ and so far has made no moves to accommodate open homosexuals in the ministry.

On this issue at least, it would appear therefore to take a more conservative line than the present Kirk.

6. *Conclusions on 1929*

What are we to make of the union of 1929? Consider two views: The historian J. R. Fleming, writing in 1929, described the union thus:

*The crown of much striving after a greatly desired goal – a united Church both national and free. Such a combination is no longer a dream but an achievement. [...] It hopes to assimilate and embrace the other religious elements within the nation which are needful for its ultimate completeness. [...] With steady perseverance and undaunted faith in God and the future, all will be well.*¹⁴

By contrast, John W. Keddie, has more recently described the union as follows:

The effective dismantling of the Reformed Faith in a meaningful sense, at least in relation to distinctive doctrine and constitution. Office bearers would

¹² Fleming, *History of the Church in Scotland, 1875-1929*, 142-3, 323.

¹³ “Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill, Submission from United Free Church of Scotland”.

¹⁴ Fleming, *Story of Church Union in Scotland*, 148-50.

*no longer sign up to the whole doctrine of the Confession, or for that matter to the specifics of any doctrinal statement as the confession of their personal faith.*¹⁵

The latter may well now appear the more reasonable conclusion.

IV. Trends in the Church of Scotland after 1929

The product of the union was a very large Church, which seemed full of promise, despite some ominous signs in wider society. However, we can identify a number of trends in the Kirk itself that proved extremely damaging to it and to Scottish Presbyterianism and Christianity in general.

1. Doctrine of Conversion Eroded

The necessity of a new birth was no longer preached with the urgency characteristic of Victorian evangelism. D. L. Moody (1837-1899), the American evangelist who had so impacted Victorian Scotland, had attracted criticism for the “easy believism” of his methods, but at least he had preached the need for conversion. By the 1920s, there seemed to be a tacit assumption that those who professed faith in Christ were genuinely converted. With little searching or experimental preaching, there was no distinction drawn between the genuinely converted and the merely nominal. This problem persists in the Church of Scotland to this day.

The Kirk had always had ministers of the Moderate school, not emphasising conversion, and sometimes giving little evidence of any experience of it themselves. But during the first half of the twentieth century the emphasis on the need for personal conversion all but died out in most of the Church of Scotland. One exception to this would be the Highland, and particularly Gaelic speaking, parishes where the emphasis on the new birth persisted.

2. Liberalism in Theology and Practice

The core of liberal theology was a rejection of the historical truth of many of the accounts of the Bible. Its positive message, which was general in mainline Scottish Presbyterianism by the 1920s, was the universal love of God, and the universal atonement of Christ for all men. These doctrines, preached without reference to the justice or righteousness of God, undermined any presentation of the danger of the soul entering eternity without a well-grounded hope in

¹⁵ Keddie, *Preserving a Reformed Heritage*, 154-5.

Christ. Ultimately, this theology undermined the necessity and even the value of church attendance: all were assumed to be saved, regardless.

Some Church of Scotland theologians, such as Thomas F. Torrance (1913-2007), proposed a return in a more orthodox direction that would make the person of Christ central to theology and worship, without fully embracing the authority of Scripture or doctrinal Calvinism. Torrance was the most famous and influential mainline Presbyterian Scottish theologian of the twentieth century. He had studied under Karl Barth at Basel and was deeply influenced by the neo-orthodox and Christological direction of Barth's theology. Torrance himself served as Professor of Christian Dogmatics at New College, Edinburgh, from 1952 to 1979.

He pioneered the translation of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* into English, founded the *Scottish Journal of Theology* and wrote significant works of his own. His influence on academic theologians and ministers was tremendous, but arguably did not greatly filter down to the pew.¹⁶

3. *Primacy of Preaching Lost*

While individual preachers of the Church of Scotland were still very popular, such as James S. Stewart (1896-1990), parish minister of North Morningside in Edinburgh from 1935 to 1946, able to attract and hold vast congregations by their eloquence, the importance of preaching itself had been fatally damaged by the undermined confidence in the Bible as the Word of God. How could preachers of more ordinary talents command the loyalty of congregations, when the subject matter of their sermons was no longer even considered necessarily true, let alone a vital priority of eternal significance?

Furthermore, the cycle was vicious. Where preachers consistently abbreviated and de-emphasised their sermons, so the membership became less used to, and appreciative of, good preaching. Fervent, urgent presentation of the gospel of atonement by the blood of Christ as a message that must be received and believed if individuals are to be saved, became more and more difficult in this context. By about 1950, I suspect that such preaching was unknown in most Church of Scotland parishes.¹⁷

4. *Thus Statistics are not the Whole Story*

The membership of the Church of Scotland peaked in the 1950s at more than 1.3 million,¹⁸ but the seeds of its decline had been sown long before. Bluntly,

¹⁶ Cf. "Thomas Forsyth Torrance" (823-4), in Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

¹⁷ Again, this generalisation would not hold of the Highlands and in particular the Gaelic parishes.

¹⁸ In 1958, Kirk membership was reported as 1,315,466; cf. John Highet, *The Scottish Churches* (London: Skeffington, 1960), 213.

church membership had ceased to mean a great deal by the time that statistical high was reached. When the secular pressures of wider society intensified in the 1960s, the weakness of commitment to active membership in the Church of Scotland was painfully evident.

A former Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Rev John Chalmers, has described one example of this:

Back in the 1960s nearly every congregation in the Church of Scotland had well-attended evening services; then from January to July 1967 the BBC screened The Forsyte Saga in 26 Sunday night episodes; 26 weeks was more than enough to change the Sunday evening habits of families across the nation.¹⁹

The decline extended over time to morning services as well. The number of pupils enrolled in Church of Scotland Sunday Schools almost halved between the mid-1950s and 1980, and the number of Kirk baptisms fell by a half between 1967 and 1982.²⁰ Today, the membership of the Kirk is a fraction of what it was, estimated at just over 325,000 in 2018, and overwhelmingly elderly, with the decline continuing unabated.²¹ But the true decline cannot be seen as a new development since the 1960s, but rather as a far longer-term development, over the course of the twentieth century.

V. Attempts at renewal

The Church of Scotland was not blind to these problems, and a number of attempts were made to revive the Kirk with a clearer vision and message for wider society. We will consider the two most important of these.

1. George MacLeod and the Iona Community

George F. MacLeod (1895-1991) was the minister of the industrial parish of Govan Old in Glasgow during the depression years of the 1930s. He was a charismatic and gifted minister from a famous clerical dynasty; his grandfather was Norman MacLeod of Glasgow's Barony Church, a chaplain to Queen Victoria and a key leader of the nineteenth century Kirk. George, although he had served in World War I, and won the Military Medal for

¹⁹ Quoted in Report, *The Times*, 26 August 2020, accessed 13 November 2020: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/scotland/alexas-next-task-will-be-helping-churchgoers-to-keep-the-faith-fkp7fg8f8>

²⁰ Brown, *Social History of Religion in Scotland*, 229.

²¹ Report of the Council of Assembly, 2019, accessed 13 November 2020: <https://ga.churchofscotland.org.uk/storage/uploads/council-of-assembly.pdf>

gallantry, had become a strong pacifist, and embraced radical socialist politics.²²

In Govan, MacLeod became convinced that the Church was failing to reach the working classes effectively, and devised an intriguing and radical scheme to supplement the training of young ministers, and to harness their energies in pursuit of a greater project. He proposed that a group of new licentiates and working-class craftsmen would live together as an all-male community for three months each summer on the remote but historic island of Iona, and work to rebuild the ancient abbey there. The licentiates would spend two summers on Iona and two winters working as assistants in urban parishes, before seeking their own pastorates. The scheme, which became known as the Iona Community, commenced in 1938, and the abbey was eventually finished in 1967.

The Iona Community was brought formally into the jurisdiction of the Church of Scotland in 1949, despite considerable controversy, and continues to report to the General Assembly each year, though remaining independent in its governance. It is now headquartered in Glasgow, with the rebuilt Iona Abbey as its principal residence. In 2019, it reported 278 full members and 1400 associate members.²³ Members include both ministers and laypeople, and from many denominations including the Roman Catholic Church. There are also “Columban houses”, further residences associated with the Community, on mainland Britain.²⁴

Members commit themselves to “the Rule”, which associate members to are invited to keep, and full members held accountable for keeping, as follows:

- Daily prayer, worship with others and regular engagement with the Bible and other material which nourishes us;
- Working for justice and peace, wholeness and reconciliation in our localities, society and the whole creation;
- Supporting one another in prayer and by meeting, communicating, and accounting with one another for the use of our gifts, money and time, our use of the earth’s resources and our keeping of all aspects of the Rule;
- Sharing in the corporate life and organisation of the Community.²⁵

²² Ronald Ferguson, *George MacLeod: Founder of the Iona Community* (London: Collins, n.d. [1990]).

²³ “Iona Community Annual Report, 2019”, accessed 21 November 2020:

<https://iona.org.uk/2020/06/29/iona-community-annual-report-2019/>

²⁴ “Iona Community” (433-4), in Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*.

²⁵ “The Rule”, Iona Community, accessed 16 November 2020: <https://iona.org.uk/movement/the-rule/>

The Iona Community began with a focus on reaching the working class, but has developed to have a concern for alienated and marginalised groups generally, whether because of politics, gender, sexuality, poverty or experience of the justice system. In practice, it serves as a vehicle for the promotion of left wing and liberal views of politics, theology and worship.

In terms of politics, George MacLeod campaigned over a long period of time for the General Assembly to adopt a policy of support for unilateral disarmament of nuclear weapons, in which he was at last successful in 1983. This policy continues to the present.²⁶ The Iona Community continues to campaign on issues of perceived social injustice.

In terms of theology, the Community has embraced and promoted a view of mission that is positive to modern culture:

Philosophically, for the Community, the Spirit of God works through nature, through people, and through communities even where there may be no overt profession of faith. Thus God is to be found wherever his Spirit is present: church or no church. Within this approach whatever is "natural" is very easily regarded as "godly" and "spiritual". Here the Community believes that it taps into ancient Celtic Christianity in which nature, faith, and culture were – in its view – closely tied together. This philosophy, plus its concerns for the marginalised has resulted in the Community, in the present debates concerning sexuality, to be of the view that whatever is natural is right – natural being understood as being "the way any person is formed". The approach of the Iona Community is similar to the principle of enculturation adopted by many modern missions, in which the divine already existing in a culture or a religion is looked on positively and seen not simply as a starting-point for someone coming to Christian faith, but also as the way God has chosen to meet that people in that particular culture.²⁷

In practice, this has also made the Iona Community a prominent voice in favour of full acceptance of the legitimacy of homosexual relationships at all levels in the Church of Scotland.

In terms of worship, MacLeod favoured a Scoto-Catholic, liturgical approach, that provoked the criticism that he and the Community were "half way towards Rome and half way towards Moscow".²⁸ He defended this approach to worship in his volume of the Cunningham lectures, published in 1956, *Only One Way Left*. The Community's publishing wing, Wild Goose

²⁶ "Pacifism, Peace Movement" (641) in Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*.

²⁷ Bruce Ritchie, unpublished class notes, BA course on "Scottish Church History" (2018), Unit 10.2, quoted by permission; cf. J. V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM Press, 2001).

²⁸ "George Fielden MacLeod" (530), in Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*.

Publications, continues this legacy by producing contemporary worship material in an ecumenical and progressive vein.

George MacLeod received considerable recognition, being appointed a Chaplain to the Queen, serving as Moderator of the General Assembly in 1957, and being awarded a life peerage as Lord MacLeod of Fuinary. He died in 1991 at the age of 96. His influence is pervasive in the modern Church of Scotland. However, it is very difficult to argue that MacLeod had much influence on wider Scottish society, and his work certainly did not produce any revival of the Church's influence amongst the working classes, nor prevent the massive nationwide decline of loyalty to the Kirk. But MacLeod's was not the only way of renewal attempted in the Church of Scotland.

2. *William Still and the Crieff Fellowship*

By the 1950s, active and dedicated evangelicals were few in the ministry of the Church of Scotland. One was D. P. Thomson (1896-1974), the energetic home missionary, who pioneered seaside mission and local campaigns of visitation in particular areas.²⁹ Another was Tom Allan (1916-1965), minister successively of the parishes of North Kelvinside and St George's Tron in Glasgow. He organised the Tell Scotland campaign from 1953 onwards, seeking to reach out with the gospel. This campaign reached its pinnacle with the visit of the American evangelist Billy Graham in 1955 for the All Scotland Crusade.³⁰

However, by far the most influential evangelical leader in the twentieth century Kirk was William Still (1911-1997), minister of Gilcomston South parish in Aberdeen for a remarkable 52 years, from 1945 to 1997. Early in his ministry, Still reached the conviction that the preaching of the Word, in a consecutive and expository manner, must take its place at the centre of congregational life. His discovery of the power of expository ministry was almost accidental, as he found himself preaching on consecutive portions of Romans week after week in his congregation, but he rapidly became convinced that this was the means, through careful exposition and rigorous application to the souls and consciences of his hearers, to let God himself speak, and thus to build strong believers.

Equally, it followed that prayer was the most vital and necessary accompaniment, to seek God's own blessing on the preached Word. Acting on this conviction, Still made the radical decision to halt most of the additional and extra meetings associated with the congregation, such as the Boys' Brigade, Girl Guides and Women's Guild; the only exception was a Sunday

²⁹ "David Patrick Thomson" (820-1) in Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*.

³⁰ "Tom Allan" (10-11) in Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*.

School for children under the age of seven. The traditional Saturday night evangelistic rally he replaced with a congregational prayer meeting in preparation for the Lord's Day. At first, attendances suffered, but as time went on a stable and committed congregation gathered around Still's ministry.

Still was already evangelical in his convictions, with a background in the Salvation Army, and committed to the authority of Scripture as true and valid, but as he preached the Word, he found his theology moving in a Reformed (Calvinistic) direction. He came to accept and teach the full doctrine of the Westminster Confession of Faith. He taught the vital necessity of personal conversion, and of the eternal salvation that Christ grants to the believer, in the sovereign will of God. He taught limited atonement and double predestination as defined in the Westminster Confession. Still's ministry coincided with the development of the Banner of Truth Trust publishing house from the late 1950s, which prioritised the republication of Puritan and historically Reformed theological and devotional works. This stimulated a significant recovery of Calvinistic doctrine and piety in the United Kingdom, which also influenced evangelicals in the Church of Scotland in a Reformed direction.

An immensely able and natural preacher, Still expounded the Word richly and persuasively. His ministry attracted large numbers of students, including many ministerial candidates, who were shaped and moulded by that preaching for the rest of their lives. His followers were known as the "Stillites". The best known of his colleagues were James Philip of Holyrood Abbey, Edinburgh, George Philip of Sandyford Henderson, Glasgow, and Eric Alexander of St George's Tron, Glasgow. These men adopted similar approaches in putting the expository preaching of the Word at the centre of the lives of their congregation, with great emphasis on gathered prayer.³¹

In 1970, Still founded the Crieff Fellowship (initially called the Crieff Fraternal). Initially, this was just a meeting of about twenty ministers, to hear a couple of Christian psychiatrists speak, and learn from them, but it continued to meet on a regular basis, growing to an attendance of over 400 ministers, and many elders. The Crieff Fellowship was never rigidly ordered or structured in the manner of the Iona Community, and certainly never reported formally within the structures of the Church of Scotland, but it had huge influence, effectively forming a large evangelical party within the Kirk.³²

Still's strategy as an evangelical leader was characterised as

*a policy of quiet infiltration – that is, for evangelicals to work and witness within congregations in such a way as to bring the denomination as a whole back to its biblical roots.*³³

³¹ "William Still", (797), in Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*.

³² "Crieff Fraternal" (223-4), in Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*.

³³ David J. Randall, *A Sad Departure* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2015), 41.

This applied to the Kirk: evangelical ministers would work within the existing structures of the Presbyterian Church. He urged that his followers should “trust to be enabled to tolerate the situation” of women entering the ministry for example, rather than contemplate separation.³⁴ But the principle also applied to society: evangelical Christians should be “salt and light” and change society from within. Critics have fairly pointed out that Still’s policy of quietism within the institutional Church left evangelicals fatally weakened, inexperienced and unprepared, when it was in church courts that the battle needed to be fought. For example, Carl Trueman writes:

There were many flaws in Still’s approach but the most obvious was that it failed to take account of the nature and significance of legislative and administrative power in Presbyterian denominations. Guarding one’s own pulpit and congregation is vital but it makes no difference to the Church at large, for denominational power in Presbyterianism is exerted by Presbyteries, Synods, and Assemblies, and to influence those one must sit on the relevant committees, turn up to meetings, make life difficult for all the right people. Boring work, thankless work, often unpleasant work – but ecclesiastically vital work nonetheless. It is thus the Stillite policy which must take considerable blame for the institutional weakness of the evangelicals as they engaged the liberals in the current battle. [...] William Still left a legacy of great preachers and men of prayer in the Kirk. But his pitiful ecclesiastical strategy gave them no foundation upon which to mount a successful rearguard action against liberalism.³⁵

Furthermore, despite the declared policy, the evangelical movement in the Kirk did, in any case, find it necessary to take more organised form with a couple of specific institutions. In 1981, Rutherford House was established as a centre of academic scholarship for the publication of literature and promotion of theological study of a Reformed and evangelical character. This was based in Edinburgh for 35 years, but has now become the Rutherford Centre for Reformed Theology in Dingwall. Andrew McGowan, former Principal of Highland Theological College, became the Director in 2019.³⁶ A second institution was Forward Together, which was founded in 1994, and was active as a pressure group within the Church of Scotland promoting biblical responses to social issues. In 2015, this merged into Covenant Fellowship Scotland, which was a specific organisation of protest over the

³⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson (ed.), *Letters of William Still* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984), 147.

³⁵ Carl Trueman, “Should they stay or should they go?”, accessed 23 November 2020: <https://www.reformation21.org/mos/postcards-from-palookaville/should-they-stay-or-should-they-go>

³⁶ “Rutherford Centre for Reformed Theology, Our History”, accessed 21 November 2020: <http://www.rcrt.scot/about-us/our-history/>

acceptance of homosexual ministers in the Kirk. Covenant Fellowship Scotland is now the principal organised network of evangelical ministers and laypeople in the Church of Scotland, “working for the Reformation of the Church of Scotland, according to the Bible”.³⁷

Still’s strategy was undeniably successful in terms of local congregational ministry, producing several large and dedicated evangelical congregations with a lasting influence in the Scottish cities, and through influencing ministerial candidates, seeding that influence in many parishes throughout the country. Yet committed evangelicals remained a small minority overall within the Church of Scotland, and the wider Kirk continued to move with the rest of society in a socially and theologically liberal direction, further and further from the authoritative declaration of the Bible as truth and the new birth as man’s great need. Dr Bruce Ritchie has written: “In recent years the traditionally large moderate ‘middle-ground’ of the Church of Scotland has all but disappeared”.³⁸

While it is outside our chosen timeframe of the twentieth century, the emergence of the case of Rev Scott Rennie in 2009, a minister of the Kirk living in a homosexual partnership, being called to an Aberdeen charge, made the weakness of the evangelical party evident, and led many to conclude that the policy of “quiet infiltration” had failed. Liberalism, both social and theological, was ascendant in the Church of Scotland, and had the upper hand throughout consideration of the case, and the subsequent debates over same-sex marriage. Consequently, several of the largest, traditionally Stillite, congregations separated from the Kirk, Gilcomston South included, along with a significant number of parish ministers. Some of these congregations are now independent, while others have joined the Free Church of Scotland, and others a looser federation called the International Presbyterian Church.³⁹

Critics of the Stillite strategy have pointed out that the roots of the Scott Rennie case ran much deeper than the emergence of the active homosexual lobby – and that such a case is a direct fruit of the doctrinal liberalism tolerated in the Kirk over many years. Carl Trueman has written challengingly on this:

Yet I still remain perplexed as to why the gay issue brought things to a head. The official teaching of a Presbyterian denomination is always a function of its confessional documents as they connect to the terms of ministerial

³⁷ “Covenant Fellowship Scotland Vision Statement”, accessed 21 November 2020: <https://covenantfellowshipscotland.com/about/our-vision/>

³⁸ Bruce Ritchie, unpublished class notes, BA course on “Scottish Church History” (2018), Unit 10.2, quoted by permission.

³⁹ A full account is found in Randall, *A Sad Departure*. Randall lists the names of forty ministers who left the Church of Scotland over the Rennie case between 2009 and 2015 in an Appendix, 183-4.

subscription. Those terms had been decisively loosened many generations before homosexuality became the major issue it is today. For example, I know first-hand that a former minister of the very Aberdeen congregation which called the gay minister denied fundamental tenets of the faith with impunity throughout his career. The problem with fighting on the gay issue is that this matter only became a problem because so much else that was so vital had already been made thoroughly negotiable. There is a lesson there. And there are also some grim optics: these men who left were not homophobes (whatever that means these days) but by making this the issue upon which to stand, they ran the risk of appearing as such. "So denial of the resurrection is acceptable but gay sex is not?"⁴⁰

Those who left interpreted this as the moment Kirk membership became unacceptable, yet the failure of the dozens of ministers involved to act together and to summon others to join their stand, has undermined the assertion that such a moment has come. It is not clear that those who have left the institutional Church of Scotland over this issue make any claim to be the valid continuation of the Church of 1929, nor is it clear that they consider their evangelical brethren as obligated to follow them. Indeed, how could they, when the very constitution of that union makes the doctrine and practice of the Church protean? The result is that the movement out of the Kirk has rather appeared as a series of individual protests and separations – and not even necessarily in the Presbyterian form of protest to the responsible church courts – rather than as the true Church standing apart from error, and reconstituting on a basis of constitutional fidelity.

Others, arguably more consistent with the strategy as originally taught by William Still, have remained in the Church of Scotland, believing, even now, that they can usefully continue the fight against liberalism from within.

VI. General Failure

By the end of the twentieth century, it was clear that both liberal and evangelical attempts at renewal had failed.

1. Catastrophic Numerical Decline

It is no exaggeration to say that the Church of Scotland is now in an existential crisis. The membership of the Kirk is in freefall: it has halved in the last twenty years.⁴¹ The Church runs a structural deficit each year, but this has been

⁴⁰ Trueman, "Should they stay or should they go?"

⁴¹ Report, *The Times*, 20 May 2020, accessed 17 November 2020: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/church-of-scotland-faces-job-losses-and-mission-cuts-pslqh0rhm>

greatly exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. The congregational income for 2020 is projected to fall from the previous year by £30 million.⁴² The present scale of Church operations is totally unsustainable, in terms both of finances and ministerial manpower. These problems are likely only to increase as time goes on.

2. *Broken Unity*

Yet the problem is deeper than one of finances, or even numbers: The Scott Rennie case exposed the depth of disunity within the Church of Scotland. It is no exaggeration to say that the case calls into question what it means to be a minister, what it means to be a Christian, and indeed what it means to be the Church of Christ. The question of the compatibility of active homosexuality with ordained ministry drove a wedge between those in the Kirk still chiefly guided on questions of morality by the Bible, and those chiefly guided by the changing preferences of wider society. As the question has apparently been resolved in favour of the latter, many ministers and some congregations have left the Church of Scotland. While there was no single moment of disruption, nor any great authoritative summons from the Word for evangelicals in the Kirk to stand up and be counted at last, an ongoing exodus over a number of years has drained much of the vitality from the Church's Evangelical wing, and has arguably undermined the Church of Scotland's moral authority. Even other mainline churches, such as the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, have found the Church of Scotland's acceptance of active homosexuality as compatible with ministry too much, and have accordingly severed ecumenical ties.⁴³

3. *Crisis of Identity*

Furthermore, the problem shows no sign of being resolved as the furore over the question of homosexuality has died down. The question of what the Church is, and what it is for, remains. The Church of Scotland as an institution seems unable to assert a necessity for its own message. If its own leaders cannot assert a responsibility and priority upon, for example, Church attendance,⁴⁴ then its very future may well be in doubt.

⁴² Report, *The Times*, 20 May 2020.

⁴³ Report, *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 June 2018, accessed 17 November 2020: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/ex-moderators-pain-as-presbyterians-cut-ties-with-church-of-scotland-its-enough-to-make-you-cry-36988490.html>

⁴⁴ Steve Aisthorpe, Church of Scotland Mission and Development worker, for example, "challenged many preconceptions linking declining church attendance with a decline in Christian faith" in his new book, according to the Church of Scotland website, accessed 17 November 2020, but no longer available online: <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/2016/invisible-church-author-optimistic-about-future-of-faith>.

VII. Conclusion

The union of 1929 does not seem to have fulfilled its perceived promise at all. It has neither heralded a wider structural unity of Christian churches, nor has it stimulated any return to greater Christian zeal or piety. In many ways, it was merely an institutional realignment. Indeed, if the union movement had significance, it surely lay in the loosening of the constitution achieved in the legislative preparation for union, which opened the way formally for the advancement of liberalism evident in the Kirk in the second half of the twentieth century.

Equally, attempts at renewal of the Kirk have not proven successful. From an evangelical perspective, the direction proposed by the Iona Community is wholly retrograde, leading directly away from the Christian convictions and piety that would form the basis for a solid revival of the national Church. By defending sexual lifestyles prohibited by Scripture, and promoting a political agenda focussed on the needs of the present world, the Iona Community has arguably lost all sight of the eternal existence of the soul, and urgent necessity of personal salvation. By contrast, the agenda promoted by William Still would seem, at least in its priorities, to offer the right direction for the Kirk, in a return to Reformed doctrine, biblical preaching, and the priority of evangelical conversion, and it is a matter of sadness that these concerns have been the priorities only of a minority in the modern Church of Scotland. Yet it is reasonable to ask whether the strategy of quiet infiltration has not been exposed as ill-conceived from the beginning. To imagine such a strategy succeeding at any point in the foreseeable future would seem a very fond hope.

The future of mainline Presbyterianism is difficult to foresee. The precipitate decline in numbers in mainline Presbyterianism shows no sign of slowing, and it is likely that churches will continue to close and congregations be amalgamated at a faster and faster rate. The Kirk may in the medium term be financed chiefly by the sale of unused properties, but this cannot ultimately be sustainable. In terms of specifically Evangelical witness, many of the most vibrant local churches now would seem to be those outside the Kirk. It is difficult to foresee the Church of Scotland returning to a significant place at the heart of national life in Scotland any time soon.

REVIEW ARTICLE: SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Robert Letham, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019) 1072pp,
£39.70 (Amazon)

*Stephen Clark**

An excellent review article by Dr Jonathan Bayes of this volume appeared in the Spring 2020, Issue 78 of this journal. The reason for a second review article results from the magisterial nature of the book under review and from the observation made by Dr Bayes that, given the scale of Professor Letham's work, his review had to be severely selective. This review article focuses on things which it was clearly impossible for Dr Bayes to address because of limitations of space.¹

I. Introductory Remarks

Professor Robert Letham – Bob, as he is affectionately known by his colleagues – has put the Christian world heavily in his debt with this, his *magnum opus*. Its publication was eagerly anticipated by those who had benefited from earlier theological works by him, notably on the Holy Trinity, on the work of Christ and on union with Christ. Expectations have not been disappointed. This is in every respect a superb treatment of systematic theology. I shall identify some of its outstanding features.

*Stephen Clark was, until his retirement at the end of August 2020, pastor of Freeschool Court Evangelical Church, Bridgend. He was Chair of the Affinity Theological Study Conference from its inception until retiring from this position in 2019. He lectured systematic theology at London Seminary until December 2020, when he retired from that position. He remains the Principal and Director of the Theological Training Course of the Evangelical Movement of Wales, on which he lectures systematic theology. He now resides in Cyprus.

¹ There is at least one very poignant element to this book and it is found in the Acknowledgments and on page 26. Professor Letham refers to the great help provided by Union's librarian ("Donald Mitchell, our brilliant librarian") in tracking down an obscure abbreviation. In December of last year Donald was tragically killed when he was knocked off his bike while cycling home from his work as librarian at Union, on the day the college broke for the Christmas holiday period. Donald was a close friend of this reviewer and a member of the church of which this reviewer had been pastor. Union's loss and the church's loss is indeed great.

II. Outstanding Features

First is its *clarity*. Professor Letham writes in such a way as not only to be understood but as not to be misunderstood. His prose is limpid. Don Carson once wrote a review of a book in which he stated that its author was incapable of writing a boring sentence. The same is true of Robert Letham.

Secondly, this is a book which is *conservationist* in its approach to theology, by which I mean that its author seeks to conserve the rich theological heritage of the Christian Church from all periods and places. As a theologian who is committed to a Reformed understanding of the Christian message, he is unafraid to acknowledge indebtedness to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox contributions to theological understanding and gladly pays tribute to those who, though not holding to Reformed theology, have valid insights into Christian teaching. This, of course, is as it should be: for if in Christ "all things are ours", including even death itself (that last enemy to be destroyed), then it is surely right to avail ourselves of anything which furthers our understanding and appreciation of God's truth, whoever might be the human agent whom God uses. If Paul could quote pagan poets, then Letham can surely quote Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians. Furthermore, the Reformed tradition has always done this.

In the third place, however, the book is *contemporary*, without being trendy. Christian psychiatrist Dr Gaius Davies once said rather mischievously (and, be it noted, somewhat unfairly and inaccurately) that a certain theological conference helped to prepare the twentieth-century pastor for anything which the seventeenth century might throw at him! Sadly, there are works of theology, like some sermons, which, while truly conservationist, fail to connect and relate to the contemporary world. One could not accuse this author of such a fault. Again and again throughout the book he seeks to relate truth to the contemporary church and to the cultural context in which the church is placed in the world.

Fourthly, Letham has produced a truly *comprehensive* work: all the main loci of theology are addressed. Inevitably some areas of truth receive greater attention than others. Again, this is as it should be. When Professor Letham told me that he was writing a systematic theology, I asked him why yet another such volume was needed. "After all", I said, "there have been quite a number of systematic theologies in recent years." His reply was to the effect that he wished to redress imbalance in much western evangelicalism, where undue emphasis has been placed upon the individual at the expense of the communal, corporate and churchly aspects of the Christian life. He has admirably succeeded in achieving his aim. It is a point to which I shall return a little later.

In the fifth place, however, this is a work which is *concise*. It may appear strange to apply such an epithet to a book which runs to 1072 pages. When one considers, however, the vast range of material which fills those pages,

without the resulting volume feeling in any way “crammed”, one begins to appreciate Professor Letham’s ability to say much with an admirable economy of words. Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology* comprises three very large volumes, quite apart from a posthumously published work on *The Church and Its Polity*. James Henley Thornwell’s works on theology and ethics fill four large volumes. And so one could go on. To have said so much in one volume is testimony not only to Professor Letham’s theological knowledge and understanding but also to his command of an elegant and graceful literary style.

Sixthly, there is a negative feature of this book which highly commends it: although concise, it is *not clinical*. A comparison may be made and a contrast drawn at this point with Louis Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology*. Although Letham’s book, with its 1072 pages, appears to be considerably longer than Berkhof’s, which in the Banner of Truth edition comprises 784 pages, the volumes may very well be of a similar length: Letham’s is octavo, whereas Berkhof’s, though of smaller page size, has smaller type face and closer line spacing than the more attractive layout Crossway has adopted for Professor Letham’s book. It may be just a personal opinion – others may well differ in their assessment – but I found Letham’s *Systematic Theology* to be considerably warmer than Berkhof’s and bathed in a spirit of worship and devotion.

Added to the foregoing is a seventh notable characteristic: *considered judgments*. There is a judicious way in which our author assesses different positions before giving his own verdict. What John Stott once said of one of the paradoxes of preaching is equally applicable to theology: one must be dogmatic on some things and tentative on others. Professor Letham admirably satisfies this *desideratum* of a true theologian. This helps the reader to be able to distinguish those things which are of greater importance than others and also to be able to recognise that some things are more clearly revealed than others.

The final notable feature of this book is its *categorisation*. The order in which the author addresses the various loci of theology differs somewhat from that of many other volumes on systematics. The author has clearly thought deeply about this matter and the result will commend itself to many readers.

And yet, even Homer nodded and so has my good brother and acquaintance Bob Letham. Given that my wife’s nephew is singled out in the acknowledgements for having read the entire manuscript and having made valuable suggestions, I am naturally more reluctant than would usually be the case in a review article to draw attention to what I would consider to be some surprising lapses! But since the words of all writers are to be measured by “the law and the testimony”, it will not be a work of supererogation to identify some matters which call for critical evaluation.

III. Some "Niggles"

1. Inadequate Treatment of "New Covenant Theology"

First, a handful of "niggles". Given the detail with which Professor Letham discusses some issues (for example, the nature of the imputation of Adam's sin, the Genesis account of creation, etc.), it is surprising that he simply dismisses what he refers to as "new covenant theology" with hardly any interaction with the works of its exponents. I accept his explanation that some matters will receive greater attention than others and that he wished to contain his work within one manageable volume. This, indeed, is one of the virtues of his book. But new covenant theology has had a considerable impact in the evangelical world; this being so, one would have expected some detailed treatment of it.

At the exegetical level there is not even a citation in the bibliography of Richard Longenecker's Commentary on Galatians; of Douglas Moo's commentaries on Romans, Galatians, Colossians, and James, and of his important article, "'Law,' 'Works of the Law,' and Legalism in Paul";² of Don Carson's Commentary on Matthew and other works where he expounds what has come to be termed new covenant theology;³ or of Brian Rosner's *Paul and the Law*. At the historical and theological level there is no interaction with the chapters by Richard Bauckham and Andrew Lincoln in the volume edited by Don Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*. The issue here is not whether these men are right (this reviewer seriously disagreeing with some things in the last-mentioned volume); rather, standing firmly within the evangelical tradition, with a high view of Scripture and with careful exegesis and impressive historical scholarship, they have presented a view of the Mosaic law which differs from that which Professor Letham advocates. Simply to dismiss it as being "contrary to the Christian tradition and its distillation of biblical exegesis through the ages, whether in Protestantism, Rome, or the Patristic era"⁴ is hardly adequate and will not do, especially in view of the fact that Bauckham cites many eminent authors from the patristic, medieval and post-Reformation period who emphatically did *not* understand matters as Professor Letham claims they did. There was a range of views. Given that both Professor Letham and Professor Moo gave widely differing papers at the Affinity Theological Study Conference, 2009, of which this reviewer was the overall chairperson, on the theme "The End of the Law?", it is, to say the least,

² Westminster Theological Journal 45 (1983), 73-100.

³ Although Letham quotes approvingly from Carson's Commentary on John's Gospel on p. 119, this is in connection with the procession of the Spirit. There is no interaction with those passages where Carson expounds verses in a way which expresses what has come to be termed "new covenant theology".

⁴ Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019), 466.

disappointing that the former dismisses new covenant theology in this way. (That Dr Bayes could commend our author for having done so in one sentence strengthens this reviewer's impression that Professor Letham will confirm those who already hold to the three-fold classification of the law and the third use of the law but will do little to persuade those of a different view to this position.)

2. *A Doctrinaire, Rather Than Exegetical, Treatment of Spiritual Gifts*

The second "niggle" relates to Professor Letham's treatment of spiritual gifts. The reviewer agrees with Letham that the case argued for by Wayne Grudem with respect to the kind of prophecy which, Grudem claims, may exist today is unsustainable and flawed. (It is, however, surprising that there is no citation of Grudem's published Cambridge University doctoral thesis, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* or of Dan G. McCartney's eirenic but devastatingly critical review of that volume.⁵) Letham's categorisation of prophecy as that which: either contradicts Scripture (in which case it must be rejected as false); or as that which repeats biblical teaching (in which case it is unnecessary and disqualifies it from being regarded as prophecy); or as that which adds to Scripture (in which case it must be dismissed as being inconsistent with the sufficiency of Scripture) is a doctrinaire approach which fails to take account of all the biblical data. History abounds with examples of the kind of thing envisaged in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 and this neither adds to Scripture, nor contradicts it, nor merely repeats what it says; furthermore, it lays no claim to bind the conscience of anyone with truth to be believed or duty to be performed. If this is not a kind of prophesying which may still exist (though prophets have ceased), what is it?⁶ Given that Professor Letham has extensive knowledge of the works of Calvin, it would have been helpful for him to have commented upon the latter's words when, having observed that of the offices of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, "only the last two

⁵ Westminster Theological Journal 45 (1983), 191-197

⁶ See, for example, the case of the young man who had stolen gloves from his employer: C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography. Volume 2: The Full Harvest 1860-1892. Revised Edition* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 60. The case of Mary Peckham, converted under the preaching of Duncan Campbell on the Isle of Lewis, is a striking example of the minute detail in which both this lady's secret actions and her thoughts were disclosed to her during the course of a sermon. The account is to be found on the recording by Ambassador, *The Lewis Revival 1949-1952*. For other "phenomena" which suggest either prophesying or a word of knowledge, see Alexander Smellie, *Men Of The Covenant. The Story of the Scottish Church in the Years of the Persecution* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), 407-408; John Kennedy, *The Days Of The Fathers In Ross-Shire* (Inverness: Christian Focus, 1979), 64. Spurgeon, Kennedy and Lachlan Mackenzie (the last mentioned of whom is the subject of part of Kennedy's book) were all "Reformed" men. See also the remarkable event recounted of Evan Roberts in Lynette G. Clark, *Far Above Rubies. The Life of Bethan Lloyd-Jones* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2015), 168.

have an ordinary office in the church" (Calvin distinguished the office of pastor and teacher), he goes on to say: "The Lord raised up the other three at the beginning of his kingdom, *and still occasionally raises them up when the necessity of the times requires.*"⁷ This is spoken in the context of an extraordinary call; not dissimilar sentiments may be found in the works of John Owen.⁸ Although both Calvin and Owen regard this as something exceptional and extraordinary, they certainly treat it as a possibility.⁹

3. *Word and Spirit in Preaching: the Eighteenth-Century Legacy*

Since Dr Bayes informed us in his review article that, having been involved in organising and leading prayer meetings for revival, he found himself forced by Professor Letham's work to reflect further on the relationship between word and Spirit in preaching (a process which, he says, will need to be ongoing), it may not be amiss if I make a few critical comments which might help to balance what Professor Letham says on this matter. He expresses concern that the eighteenth-century revivals have bequeathed an unhelpful legacy with respect to the relationship between word and Spirit in preaching. He claims that a doctrine of preaching similar to that of the Anabaptists has arisen. He writes: "This school of thought refers to 1 Thessalonians 1:5... to assert that the preaching of the Word may be unaccompanied by the Spirit."¹⁰ In an earlier issue of this journal I took issue with similar sentiments expressed in other published material by Professor Letham. Judging from his response in that same issue of this journal, he accepted that his strictures with respect to Lloyd-Jones's view on the relationship of word and Spirit in preaching were both unfounded and unfair.¹¹ So I shall not repeat what I wrote then but make three simple points: First, in preaching there is another element besides the word and the Spirit: there is the preacher himself. Simply to assert that the Spirit always accompanies the word is, while true at one level, an inadequate statement of the case. Verses such as 1 Timothy 4:15-16 clearly indicate that Timothy – and, for that matter, any other preacher – would not be the instrument of salvation, understanding salvation in its widest sense, unless he did certain things. Since, as Professor Letham himself acknowledges, the word without the Spirit is ineffective, it follows that for the word to be *effective in*

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion* (Beveridge translation), IV.III.4.

⁸ William H. Goold (Ed.), *The Works of John Owen. Volume XIII* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 28-38.

⁹ For a helpful discussion, see Hywel R. Jones, "The Call to the Ministry in Puritan Teaching" in *The Office and Work of the Minister* (Westminster Conference Papers, 1986), 14-28, especially 25-27.

¹⁰ Letham, *op. cit.* 631.

¹¹ See Stephen Clark, "Some Thoughts on the Relationship Between the Word of God and the Holy Spirit", *Foundations* No. 71, Autumn 2016, 52-87; and Robert Letham, "A Reply to Stephen Clark", *ibid.*, 88-92.

bringing salvation, the spiritual condition of the preacher is not unimportant. Indeed, Paul makes this very point in the last part of 1 Thessalonians 1:5: there was a link between what had happened to the Thessalonians and the way in which they knew that Paul, Silas and Timothy had behaved.

The second point is that when certain men have lamented the lack of spiritual power in preaching, they are *not necessarily* asserting that the Spirit has not been at work at all; rather, they are acknowledging the undeniable fact that sometimes the Spirit acts to regenerate and through the preaching of the word calls the new life he gives into expression, whereas at other times he does not; sometimes, what John Owen calls the Spirit's "sudden gusts and motions" and the "intense vigorous actings of grace on great occasions" mean that, under the preaching of the word, the Spirit accomplishes more in the lives of God's people in terms of promoting holiness than at other times. Indeed, in its answer to Question 182, as to how the Holy Spirit helps us to pray, the Westminster Larger Catechism states that the Spirit's work is "not in all persons, nor at all times, in the same measure". And since the preacher is not immune to the terrible danger of "grieving the Holy Spirit of God", it surely follows that, *as a general principle*, a prayer-less and careless preacher is unlikely to be used as powerfully by the Spirit in the preaching of the word as will someone who is walking in step with the Spirit and who is filled by the Holy Spirit. I stress, "as a general principle", rather than as an absolute rule for it is undoubtedly the case that, just as Paul could rejoice that some were preaching Christ, albeit not from pure motives and therefore not when they were in the best spiritual condition, so history abounds with examples of people being brought to faith and being spiritually helped through men who may have been fearfully compromised in their life.¹²

The third point is that this view of preaching was held *before* the eighteenth-century revivals by those within the Reformed constituency. One has only to read the comments of Matthew Henry and, less clearly, of Matthew Poole on 1 Thessalonians 1:5 to realise this. And if one consults Matthew Poole's exegesis of 1 Corinthians 2:4 (a verse which Poole links with 1 Thessalonians 1:5), it should become fairly clear that, in speaking of the inner persuasion of the truth which the Spirit alone can bring about, it is emphatically the case that before the eighteenth century there were mainline Puritans who believed that, sadly, the word might be preached *without* the demonstration of the Spirit's power.

But enough of my "niggles". I wish, now, to make some critical comments of a broader nature.

¹² Philippians 1:15-18.

IV. Substantial Concerns

1. The Place of "Private Judgment"

I referred earlier to Professor Letham's achievement in seeking to redress the imbalance in much contemporary evangelicalism of an emphasis upon the individual at the expense of the corporate, communal and churchly aspects of the Christian life. It is to be feared, however, that he may have pushed the pendulum too far in the opposite direction. A few examples will demonstrate that this fear is not unsupported by evidence. On page 233 our author baldly states: "It needs to be restated forcefully that the idea of 'the right of private interpretation' is *not* a Reformation principle."¹³ He continues on page 233 and on into page 234 as follows:

*This notion supposes that any individual has the right, privilege, and duty to interpret the Bible as he or she sees fit. A striking example is the case of the Particular Baptists in Nottinghamshire, who "followed the common Particular Baptist practice of constituting themselves into a church in a solemn ceremony in which participants covenanted with one another and with God to live in church fellowship according to the will of God as they saw it."*¹⁴

The two sentences before the "striking example" which Professor Letham cites are, on any reckoning, extraordinary. In his *The Theology of the English Reformers* Philip E. Hughes quotes the following words from Thomas Cranmer's Preface to the Great Bible:

*Here may all manner of persons... of what estate or condition soever they be... learn all things that they ought to believe, what they ought to do, and what they should not do... Briefly, to the reading of the Scripture none can be enemy, but that either be... sick... or else so ignorant...*¹⁵

Cranmer goes on to urge all to read the Bible "to the honour of God, increase of virtue, and edification *both of yourselves and of others*".¹⁶ Matters are expressed more clearly by William Whitaker in *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*: "Each individual should be his own judge, and stand by his own

¹³ Emphasis original.

¹⁴ The words which Letham quotes come from F. H. W. Harrison, "The Nottinghamshire Baptists: Polity," *BQ* 25 (1974): 212-31; see 217.

¹⁵ Philip E. Hughes, *The Theology of the English Reformers*, 1965 (Grand Rapids: Baker), 15-16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 16. Emphasis mine.

judgement, not indeed mere private judgement, but such as is inspired by God: and no one can bestow the Holy Spirit save God who infuses it in whom he will." Every word in this second quotation is all important. Whitaker makes it quite clear that each individual should be his own judge: in other words, he/she, not the church, is responsible for how he/she understands things. Secondly, however, this does not mean that the believer is being individualistic or merely subjective in his/her understanding: "not indeed *mere* private judgement" (my emphasis). In other words, it is private judgment but not *mere* private judgment. What, then, is to qualify this private judgment? Whitaker answers for us: "but such as is inspired by God". These words do not emanate from the "radical left wing" of the Reformation or from one of the "pneumatic" men, one of whom was characterised by Luther as having "swallowed the Holy Ghost, feathers and all"! Whitaker, Master of St John's, Cambridge, was a thorough-going Calvinistic, Church of England churchman. Significantly, he states, "no one can bestow the Holy Spirit save God who infuses it in whom he will". And what was Athanasius about when he was *contra mundum*, if not exercising private interpretation and judgment? Was not Luther also doing the same thing?

This, of course, is significantly different from what Professor Letham says on page 234, after he has cited the Nottinghamshire Particular Baptists as an example not to follow: "However, God gave the Bible not to private persons but to the church." (Does this mean that only "the church" may sanction Bible translation rather than leave it to a private person, such as William Tyndale?) This, of course, begs one of the key questions which tore society apart across much of Europe in the sixteenth century: *where is the church to be found?* And the moment men – and women – concluded that it was not the body which was in communion with the *soi disant* Bishop of Rome, they were, of course, exercising private judgment: their understanding of Scripture led them to the view that the Roman Catholic Church was not a true church but a synagogue of Satan. This did not lead the magisterial Reformers to the aberrant views of men such as the Zwicau prophets and Thomas Müntzer: they were at pains to stress that they were renovators, not innovators and they did take church tradition seriously, hence the readiness of Calvin and a host of others to quote from patristic sources. Nor did this emphasis upon private judgment lead them to a low view of the church. Quite the contrary! But since, as Professor Letham himself would accept – indeed, it is enshrined in the WCF – that "God alone is Lord of the conscience", it surely follows that one must exercise one's private judgment, under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, in determining what the Scripture teaches as to where the church is to be found. If Professor Letham finds fault with the Nottinghamshire Particular Baptists for forming themselves into church fellowships, how will he respond to the charge that he should be in the Anglican or Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox fold rather than belonging to a Presbyterian church? The answer, of course, is that he has

exercised *his* private judgment in believing that the Scriptures teach a Presbyterian view of the church, rather than the Episcopalian view of Anglicanism or the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox views of the church. He may well have benefited from the wisdom of other writers in reaching this view but, still, he has exercised *his* judgment in accepting *their* view of biblical teaching, rather than that of Anglican, Catholic or Orthodox writers.

2. *The Roots of Evangelical Individualism*

Lest it be thought that I am making some kind of cheap remark here, this surely leads on to and points up another surprising lapse in what is overall a truly great book. It concerns the roots and origin of the individualism which, Letham rightly asserts, is damaging to the church in the modern developed world. On page 37 our author sees individualism as having its roots in the Renaissance and then gaining ground during the Enlightenment. Again, on page 752 he writes: "under the impact of post-Enlightenment individualism, evangelicalism relegated the Supper" (that is, the Lord's Supper)

to an optional extra. The eighteenth-century revivals led to a Christian being understood as someone who could claim a personal experience of conversion, with the work of the Spirit on the individual paramount and church and sacraments often seen as divisive.

Again, on page 762 he writes: "The memorialist interpretation" (that is, of the Lord's Supper) "has been fostered by the rise of individualism in the West... The evangelical movement of the eighteenth century focused on individual salvation at the expense of the corporate." As if the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were not enough to account for the rampant individualism which, Professor Letham claims, disfigures not only our own day but that of eighteenth-century evangelicalism, he throws in for good measure the triumph of the nominalism of the late medieval period as that which accounts not only for individualism in society in general but for its ecclesiastical expression by independent churches.¹⁷ What shall we say to these things? Much in every way!

a) *Playing "leap frog"*

To begin with, Professor Letham is surely playing "leap frog" when he traces the origins and development of individualism: to jump from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment is surely to leap frog that most momentous change in thinking which occurred between these two epoch-making periods – the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation itself can hardly be divorced from

¹⁷ Letham, op. cit., 810-811.

the Renaissance: Calvin had been a Renaissance scholar; translations of the New Testament used the recently-published Greek text which had been prepared by Erasmus, himself a Renaissance scholar; and so on. Without the widespread demise of Rome's theological and intellectual hegemony, it may be doubted whether the Enlightenment project would ever have got under way. Forty-six to forty-seven years ago, the Anglo-Catholic John Saward (later, as a Roman Catholic systematic theologian and ethicist, Professor John Saward), who was my college chaplain, sought to convert me from Reformed evangelicalism to a brand of Catholicism. Echoing Keble, who, in his famous Assize Day Sermon of 1833 on National Apostasy, lamented the impact on "Church authority" of the politically-liberal ideas of his day, Saward sought to lay the blame for theological liberalism and secularism at the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg and what resulted from what Luther did there – the Reformation. It was, of course, the classic line taken by Newman.

And yet Keble and Newman in the nineteenth century and Saward in the twentieth century surely had a point. Once the theological and intellectual dominance of the Roman Church had been dismantled, what was to take its place? Well, according to Protestant Reformers like Whitaker and a whole host of others, Scripture is where God speaks and through which he exercises authority in the church. But who is to interpret Scripture? For all Professor Letham's proper emphasis upon the fact that the Reformers took seriously the need to listen to the early creeds and to the theologians of the past, the fact remains that the Reformation was, in one sense, a tremendously disruptive force, necessary though that disruption was. Thus, Luther – and especially later Lutheranism – would differ from other Reformers and the Reformed churches on numerous matters. Men such as "the judicious" Richard Hooker, Master of the Temple church, would take a very different view on numerous matters of ecclesiastical importance from that of the Reader of the same church, Walter Travers: if Hooker was the classic exponent of the Anglican *via media*, Travers was the neck of the Presbyterian party (Thomas Cartwright being the head).¹⁸ And, of course, in time possibly the greatest theologian of the English-speaking world, John Owen, would adopt a congregational understanding of church polity. It was the Reformation which led to this fissiparous state of affairs, something which Catholic apologists, polemicists and controversialists have never been slow to point out. And although the men to whom I have referred were not individualistic in their approach to Scripture or ecclesiology, they differed from each other in their interpretation of Scripture and in their understanding of what had been said by worthies of the past, precisely because they exercised *their* private judgment. *If* the Enlightenment is to be blamed for the individualism which characterises

¹⁸ See the following perceptive and penetrating paper: Hywel R. Jones, "Authority" in *Anglican and Puritan Thinking* (Warboys: Westminster Conference Papers, 1977), 5-14.

much contemporary evangelicalism, then the Reformation also has to bear part of the responsibility. Indeed, the Reformation re-asserted the importance of the individual, after centuries in which he/she had been lost or submerged under the weight of the ecclesiastical machinery of Rome. And thank God for that! Individualism is, no doubt, a poison in the church; but an emphasis upon the individual is not.

b) On the importance of the individual

At this point, there is a certain "lop-sidedness" to Professor Letham's proper insistence that in Scripture the individual always belongs to some tribe or group.¹⁹ No doubt, when an imbalance needs to be corrected there is the danger of overstatement in the opposite direction. I am suggesting that Professor Letham is guilty of such overstatement. It is, of course, true, as Letham observes, that when Achan sinned, all Israel sinned, and that it may be said that Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek because he was in the loins of Abraham when the latter did so.²⁰ But this must surely be balanced with the teaching found in a chapter such as Ezekiel 18, where it is the individual whom God holds accountable. Yet, apart from verses 30-32 of that chapter, where Professor Letham discusses God's will of desire and the nature of repentance, this chapter is neither referenced nor cited in the entire book.²¹ There is an important emphasis on the individual in Scripture. What is Jesus doing in Matthew 16:24, if not addressing people as individuals? What is he saying in Matthew 19:29, if not indicating that to become his true follower one may have to break all the familial and communal ties which one has? Of course, one thereby comes into God's family and this is communal; but the leaving of the one and the becoming a member of the other through union with Christ is, at one level, profoundly personal in an individual way at the existential level. Moreover, after one has become a member both of the universal and invisible church and a member of a local, visible expression of the church, Christ may still address one as an individual: it was to individuals within a lukewarm church, which Christ threatened to spit out of his mouth, that he said: "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."²² Although Christ is speaking to the churches, here is very much a reference to the individual and that in a context where the individual may well do what the rest of the church fails to do. I assume that Professor Letham would agree with this but he does not relate this emphasis to the corporate, which he is at pains to rehabilitate into our thinking and practice.

Moreover, if a right emphasis upon the individual can go to seed in individualism, a proper emphasis upon the communal can lead to the bitter

¹⁹ E.g., page 378.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ The former is found on page 171 and the latter on page 675.

²² Revelation 3:20.

fruit of corporatism. One sees this in the attitude of many Japanese people to the company for which they work. Moreover, is it not a good thing that families are no longer saddled with the shame which often was experienced in the past on account of but one black sheep in the family and which still obtains in some parts of the world? Has not an emphasis upon the communal sometimes created psychological problems in those who do not “tow the line”, and has it not created the phenomenon of the “outsider” and “misfit”? Referring to the fact that an emphasis upon an individual existing in union with others is an idea which “is foreign to Western individualism”, Professor Letham goes on to note that “it is commonplace to many cultures in Africa or Asia. You are who you are in relation to others. You are not an isolated island, all by yourself. If you were, it would be high time to see a clinical psychiatrist.”²³ But the sad fact is that I know of enough people from Asia who have experienced mental problems and who needed a clinical psychiatrist precisely because they could not meet the expectations of the group to which they belong. It was the very emphasis upon the group – in some cases, the family – which led to mental problems when, for example, a child feared that he would shame his family by failing to reach a certain academic standard.²⁴ In other words, anything good might be abused and lead to bad consequences. One can no more lay the blame for individualism at the door of a period which rightly emphasised the individual than one can lay the blame for corporatism and the creation of the outsider and misfit at the door of those periods where there has been a healthy emphasis upon one’s place in community.

It needs also to be borne in mind that sometimes communal pressures put more hurdles in the way of someone becoming a true follower of Jesus than exist in societies where people are encouraged to “do their own thing”. In other words, if individualism is unhealthy in some ways, it is no less the case that “communalism” can also be unhealthy in certain respects.

The simple fact is surely that the Bible emphasises both the individual and the communal and corporate. If Paul can write that God demonstrates his love for us in that while *we* were still sinners, Christ died for *us* (corporate), he can just as clearly write (in a letter to churches!), “the Son of God loved *me* and gave himself for *me*” (personal). It is to his personal experience he refers when he writes, “For *to me*, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” A church’s hymnody, like the book of Psalms, must surely express and reflect both the communal and the individual elements of the Christian life and hope.²⁵ It is, sadly,

²³ *Ibid.* 378.

²⁴ One Asian pastor who was living for some years in this country lamented to my wife the fact that his son had not done well in a maths exam at school. He had got only 98%! “Why”, the pastor asked, “could he not get 100%?” He was deadly serious. The child later experienced a mental breakdown.

²⁵ I accept, of course, as Professor Letham notes, that even psalms which are in the first-person singular may not be about the individual because David, as king, can be speaking for his

somewhat misleading when Professor Letham says, "Most hymns composed after 1700 have this" – that is, individualist – "slant: 'It is well with my soul...' 'Break thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me.'"²⁶ The former example is particularly badly chosen because the last verse, speaking of the great eschatological hope of resurrection, says: "But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming *we* wait; / The sky, not the grave, is *our* goal."²⁷ In other words, this hymn joins the individual and the corporate. I have not carried out a statistical analysis of all the hymns written before 1700 and thereafter (has anyone done so?!) to ascertain how many are written in the first person singular and how many are written in the first-person plural; but I suspect that Professor Letham is right in saying that most – that is, over 50% – written after 1700 have an individual slant. The misleading element of this statement, if it is, as I suspect, true resides in the fact that since this represents only just over 300 years, this is hardly unbalanced if the majority of hymns in the previous 1700 years had the corporatist slant. Surely, it was time to redress the imbalance on the corporate! Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that on the very day I am writing these words, my wife and I in our morning devotions together, singing our way through *Christian Hymns*, were this morning singing a hymn written by John Mason (1646-94), which is entirely in the first person singular.²⁸ Indeed, while picking up the hymn book for the footnote reference at the end of the previous sentence, the book serendipitously fell open to number 687, a hymn by Antoinette Bourignon (1616-1680) and translated by John Wesley. Again, it is entirely in the first person.²⁹ I shall not weary the reader with other examples, from Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard Baxter and Paul Gerhardt. Perhaps the really ironic thing is that the Apostles' Creed is in the first person singular, whereas Graham Kendrick put a modern-day version of it into the first person plural!

c) *On the genealogy of ideas*

The "genealogy of ideas" cannot always be as neatly traced as Professor Letham suggests. Although in many ways Descartes stands at the head of the "modern period", it does not follow, as Professor Letham appears to suggest, that Descartes' programme stands behind the individualism in much contemporary evangelicalism.³⁰ David Bebbington, also seeking to distinguish modern evangelicalism from Reformation and Puritan understandings of

people. But a psalm such as Psalm 42, addressed for the director of music and therefore intended to be sung, was *not* by David but was of the Sons of Korah.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 620.

²⁷ From the hymn by Horatio Gates Spafford (1828-1888), *When peace, like a river, attendeth my way*.

²⁸ *Christian Hymns* (Bridgend: Evangelical Movement of Wales, 1977). The hymn was 135: "I've found the pearl of greatest price".

²⁹ The hymn is, "Come, Saviour, Jesus, from above!".

³⁰ *Ibid.* 37, 762.

Christianity, saw John Locke's influence upon Jonathan Edwards as being the really decisive element of Enlightenment thinking and that which helped give rise to modern evangelicalism.³¹ Bebbington's argument, neatly summarised by Garry Williams in a superb critique of Bebbington's thesis, is that just as Locke reasoned that one could trust one's senses, so Edwards, hugely influenced by Locke's thinking, claimed that assurance of salvation could be reached much more easily than it had been by Puritans and Reformers by trusting one's *spiritual senses*.³² (Incidentally, Williams clearly proved the continuity between the Puritans and Edwards in the matter of assurance of salvation.) Although Locke put great emphasis on the individual, his approach was essentially different from that of Descartes, arguing for the importance of the "given" nature of the external world and the sense impressions which it creates in the individual. This empirical approach was, of course, radically different from Descartes' rationalism. These two very different tributaries both fed into the Enlightenment's stream of ideas. But claims that they can account for contemporary individualism *in evangelicalism* can hardly be supported by evidence, as I shall seek to demonstrate.

To begin with, Enlightenment thinking – and in England, especially that of Locke – gave rise to Deism, which was so prevalent in the eighteenth century. If there was one thing which the Evangelical Awakening in England and Wales stood against, it was precisely this poisonous fruit which grew on the tree of Enlightenment.³³ Secondly, it is a common place of studies of eighteenth-century Calvinistic Methodism within Wales and the revivals associated with the Calvinistic Methodists that the leaders of that movement – all men within the Church of England – were concerned that those who had been converted under their preaching remain in the Established Church, even though the officiating clergy were often hostile to the evangelicals.³⁴ Indeed, the greatest of their preachers, Daniel Rowland of Llangeitho, drank deeply not only from Puritan writings but also – as is clear from his *Dialogue between an Orthodox and an Erroneous Methodist* – from the early Church Fathers.³⁵ In his

³¹ D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 47-48.

³² Garry Williams, "Where Do Evangelicals Come From?" *Foundations* (Reading: Affinity), Issue 52, Autumn 2004, 5-13. See page 5.

³³ Consider, for example, the following: "Here then, God by his word steps in, and opens to his" (that is, man's) "view such a scene of divine love, and infinite goodness, in the holy scriptures, that none but men of such corrupt and reprobate minds as *our modern deists*, would shut their eyes against it": George Whitefield, "Sermon XXXVII: The Duty of Searching the Scriptures. *Search the Scriptures – John v. 39*" in George Whitefield, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (London: William Tegg & Co., 1854), 425. My emphasis.

³⁴ See, e.g., William Williams, *Welsh Calvinistic Methodism* (Bridgend: Bryntirion Press, 1998), 75-78.

³⁵ An extract from this is given in John Aaron's translation of John Morgan Jones and William Morgan, *Y Tadau Methodistiaidd Vol. 1* (1880): see John Morgan Jones and William Morgan (John

disagreement with Howell Harris, it is abundantly clear that he asserted the importance and value of tradition over against Harris's heterodox and individualistic judgment. Indeed, it was not only the desire to hear Rowland's amazingly powerful preaching that led many to walk miles to that isolated spot in rural Wales where he ministered (this, be it noted, constituting a powerful commitment to "the churchly" aspect of the Christian life); the celebration of the Lord's Supper, according to the Litany of the Church of England, was also hugely important and on at least one occasion led to the most powerful spiritual effects.³⁶ One might almost be forgiven for thinking that Rowland held to the Eastern Orthodox teaching of epiclesis!

Nor was this "churchly" emphasis upon the importance of this sacrament confined to the Calvinistic Methodists within Wales. J. C. Ryle, quoting from Hardy's *Life of Grimshaw*, records a conversation between the Archbishop of York and Grimshaw, when the former was effectively interrogating the latter as to his churchmanship. Grimshaw informed the archbishop that during his ministry in Haworth the number of communicants had increased from twelve to three to four hundred in winter and nearly twelve hundred in summer. The archiepiscopal response is worth noting: "We cannot find fault with Mr Grimshaw when he is instrumental in bringing so many persons to the Lord's Table."³⁷ Evidence such as that which has been adduced could be multiplied many times over and gives the lie to the claim that Enlightenment thinking had so permeated eighteenth-century evangelicalism that it led to an unbalanced emphasis upon the individual, an emphasis which marked a breach with Reformed and Puritan thinking and gave rise to the rampant individualism of our day. In brief, Professor Letham has made a serious charge but he has put the wrong people in the dock.

Before leaving the eighteenth century, it may not be inappropriate to point out that although, contrary to some misrepresentations of the matter, there was missionary concern during the Reformation and Puritan periods, it is indisputable that within Protestantism there was a huge upsurge in missionary concern and activity resulting from the eighteenth-century evangelical revivals.³⁸ Many parts of the world have cause to thank God for this. One fears that Professor Letham has a somewhat jaundiced view of the eighteenth century. I am suggesting that such a view is hardly justifiable.

Aaron, trans.), *The Calvinistic Methodist Fathers Of Wales, Volume One* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), 570-573.

³⁶ See Eifion Evans, *Daniel Rowland and the Great Evangelical Awakening in Wales* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 50-51.

³⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), 127.

³⁸ Calvin certainly had a great burden for his homeland of France while he was in Geneva, as well as looking further afield. During the Puritan era, the work of John Eliot amongst native Indians in America stands out as a wonderful example of cross-cultural missionary endeavour which was biblically informed.

3. *Professor Letham and the Sacraments*

I shall not duplicate what Dr Bayes had to say in response to Professor Letham's charge that Baptists hold a low view of the sacraments as a means of grace and view the Lord's Supper in an exclusively memorialist way. It will, however, be worth pointing out that Robert Hall Jr., a leading, early nineteenth-century Particular Baptist, in urging that "the symbol of unity" be not turned into the "apple of discord" (as had happened at the Marburg Colloquy), which would, Hall argued, be the case if Baptists excluded Paedobaptists from the Lord's Supper, based his case on the fact that the Lord's people would thereby be deprived of a precious means of grace. He speaks of the "real presence" in words which could have fallen straight from Calvin's lips.³⁹ Not only did Hall hold a view of the real presence but, as one committed to an independent ecclesiology, he did not belittle the oneness of the church.⁴⁰ On the other hand, it is hardly only twentieth-century, Zwinglian evangelicals who hold to a memorialist view of the Lord's Supper. Did not Hurrell Froude scorn Bishop Jewell for denying the Lord's Supper to be a means of grace as distinct from a pledge of remembrance?⁴¹

Professor Letham clearly believes that much contemporary evangelicalism places insufficient evidence upon the sacraments, and he is almost certainly right in his observation. It is undoubtedly the case that the New Testament refers to repentance and faith, baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit and admission to the visible church as being different elements of a whole. As with marriage, "what God has joined together, let not man put asunder". Sadly, many evangelical churches have an almost chaotic approach to the sacraments: one may take the Lord's Supper even though one has not been baptised or become a member of a local church. To this extent Professor Letham's work provides a necessary corrective to a deplorable state of affairs. But might it just be the case that he places too much emphasis upon the sacraments? I think so and shall seek to explain why.

³⁹ "To consider the Lord's Supper, however, as a mere commemoration of that event [Christ's death], is to entertain a very inadequate view of it... it is also a federal rite in which... we eat and drink in his presence: it is a feast upon a sacrifice, by which we become partakers at the altar, not less really, though in a manner more elevated and spiritual, than those who under the ancient economy presented their offerings in the temple. In this ordinance, the cup is a spiritual participation of the blood, the bread of the body of the crucified Saviour: and as our paedobaptist brethren are allowed to be in covenant with God, their title to every federal rite follows of course": Robert Hall, *On Terms of Communion* [1815]; *Works*, vol. 2, 63-64. Quoted in Robert W. Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1771 - 1892: From John Gill to C. H. Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006), 240.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 238.

⁴¹ Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies. Coleridge to Matthew Arnold* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 88.

On page 707 he writes: "in baptism the Spirit baptizes us into union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:1ff; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 2:12-13), giving us to share in the one βαπτισμα of Christ for sins upon the cross". Really? Although Professor Letham elsewhere clearly eschews baptismal regeneration (and, lest I be accused of making an unjust accusation, let me stress that Professor Letham does *not* believe in baptismal regeneration nor am I claiming that he does), the words just quoted clearly appear to say the opposite. To return for a moment to John Saward's attempts to convert me to Catholicism in the early to mid-70s, it was precisely the same language which Professor Letham uses which Professor Saward employed then to establish the "Catholic" view of baptism. I can still hear him saying that Romans 6:1ff. did not teach that baptism signifies or seals our union with Christ but that it effects it: no water baptism, no union with Christ; water baptism and the deed is done – one is thereby united to Christ in his death and resurrection. I agreed with Professor Saward at the time that baptism effects union with Christ and I still agree with him. I disagree, however, that it is *water* baptism which is being referenced in Romans 6:1ff. Nor is this a fanciful line of interpretation: for, as D. M. Lloyd-Jones points out in his sermons on Romans 6, there is a certain parallel with 1 Corinthians 12:13 and there it is *the Spirit* who baptises us into Christ.⁴² And Professor Letham's citing of Colossians 2:12-13 surely clinches this, precisely because the apparent reference in those verses to the Old Testament sign and seal of circumcision is just that: an *apparent* reference, for verse 11 makes it quite clear that Paul is referring to a circumcision *not* done by the hands of men. It is spiritual circumcision to which Paul refers (and that to Gentile Christians who had not been physically circumcised), to the reality which is signified and sealed by the sacrament done by the hands of men. This being so – and all the more so in the light of 1 Corinthians 12:13 and John the Baptist's words that whereas he baptised with water, Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit – it makes perfect sense that Paul is making the same kind of reference to baptism: it is the spiritual baptism, of which water baptism is the sign and seal.

Again, on page 709, Professor Letham states that in speaking of the Corinthians having been washed, "the baptismal reference is clear-cut". But Gordon Fee has argued forcefully and persuasively that though there may be an *allusion* to baptism, there are compelling reasons for believing that Paul is not speaking of baptism here.⁴³ Perhaps it is not so clear-cut after all. But agreeing with Anthony Cross, Professor Letham claims that Fee (and James D. G. Dunn, who has argued for a similar understanding of baptism to Fee's exposition) has fallen prey to a dualism between matter and spirit which has

⁴² D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans. An Exposition of Chapter 6: The New Man* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 29-41, and see especially 35.

⁴³ Gordon D. Fee, *NICNT: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 246-247.

more affinity with Gnosticism than with biblical Christianity. Well, if so, then is Anthony Thiselton also among the dualists, since he is clearly very sympathetic to Dunn's position?⁴⁴ Dunn, Fee, Lloyd-Jones, and now Thiselton are all tainted by dualism simply because they interpret certain verses as referring to a spiritual reality rather than to the sacramental sign and seal of that reality. Since in Romans 2:28-29; 4:9-11 and Colossians 2:11 Paul also emphasises the value of "spiritual circumcision" as over against the physical sign and seal, are we to say that Paul is also amongst the dualists? Is there not, at this point, the danger of an overly-academic approach which is divorced from the realities of pastoral life and practice? One is not falling victim to an unbiblical dualism and certainly not to a kind of Gnosticism if one acknowledges a fearful tendency of the human heart to rest in the performance of a rite or ceremony, even though that rite be biblically sanctioned. It was for precisely this reason that the leaders of the eighteenth-century evangelical awakening preached as forcefully as they did upon *spiritual* rebirth: so many of their hearers were placing reliance upon the sacrament of baptism, just as so many of Paul's contemporaries were placing confidence in circumcision. This no more denies the importance of baptism, than Paul denied the importance of circumcision.⁴⁵ It is, however, simply to acknowledge that in the real world (yes, the real physical and spiritual world), many need to be warned of the dangers of formalism.

Indeed, some of Paul's language in Romans makes it difficult to accept some of Professor Letham's statements about baptism. Although he is quite clear that union with Christ is effected by the Holy Spirit, who is sovereign, and that baptism does not automatically graft one into Christ; although he stresses that faith is essential to salvation, he can nevertheless make the following statement:

*Notwithstanding, the grace of union with Christ – signified, sealed, and exhibited in baptism – is conferred by the Holy Spirit. This is due to the Spirit alone, yet it occurs not independently of baptism but rather in and through it.*⁴⁶

What do these words *mean*? Surely Paul's whole argument in Romans 4:9-12 is that the righteousness which was credited to Abraham was credited independently of circumcision. Circumcision was a sign and seal of something rather than being that in and through which righteousness was credited to him. When, later, Professor Letham states that the connection between

⁴⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 453-454.

⁴⁵ Romans 3:1-2.

⁴⁶ Letham, op. cit. 714-715. My emphasis.

baptism and regeneration is not automatic, temporal or logical, but theological, what precisely does he *mean* by this? And how does this relate to the claim that union with Christ is effected by the Spirit in and through baptism? It seems decidedly different from what Paul writes in Romans 4 was the case with respect to Abraham and the sacramental sign and seal of circumcision.⁴⁷

It is all too easy to say that those who do not accept the sacramental interpretation of passages where Professor Letham sees a reference to water baptism are guilty of a dualism which smacks of Gnosticism. While some may well have overvalued the spirit over the body, one can hardly accuse all who disagree with Professor Letham of this fault. This is to indulge in a kind of theological name calling, of smearing people with "guilt by association". Indeed, it would not be too difficult to prove that men whom Professor Letham evidently admires had fallen prey to an unhealthy dualism in some areas and downplayed the importance of the physical. One thinks of Chrysostom's view that Adam and Eve could not have had sexual relations before the Fall; of Augustine's view that although procreation was legitimate, the sexual passions which accompanied the procreative act were always sinful (in other words, intercourse between a man and his wife is all right as long as they don't enjoy it!); and I shall not elaborate upon the views of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on this aspect of life, lest this review should become too farcical. But on any reckoning, this was dualism on a grand scale.

V. *Concluding Thoughts*

Much more might be said about Professor Letham's emphasis upon the sacraments and his failure to interact with views which differ from his but, as with the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, time would fail me to do so.⁴⁸ Instead, let me end on a positive note. I have said that Professor's Letham's *Systematic Theology* is a truly great work. Even when one disagrees with some of the good professor's views, one is glad to have been made to think and to think hard about the things which he says. He has written a *magnum opus* which rightly challenges much which passes for evangelicalism; and where I consider him to be mistaken on some things, it is nevertheless valuable to have the issues raised by him and to be forced to go back to meditate prayerfully on

⁴⁷ Although I believe in credo-baptism rather than in paedobaptism, I am not in any way taking issue with Professor Letham on this point. Although not accepting it, the argument for covenant children receiving the sign and seal of baptism is much stronger than some credo-baptists are prepared to admit. My concern is of an entirely different nature.

⁴⁸ For example, in arguing on pp. 663-664 against John Murray that the words "born of water and the Spirit" in John 3:5 include a reference to baptism, Letham argues his position but does not take account of the exegesis offered by Don Carson in his Commentary on John, an exegesis which tells decisively against that proposed by Letham.

passages of Scripture and to listen to what others have said of those passages in the long history of the church. His book deserves to have a place not only on the shelf of every pastor and theological student but also – and more importantly – to be frequently open on their desks. And not only on the desk: for though not light reading, it is truly a delight to read such an edifying volume and is one to be relished of an evening in a comfortable armchair. More than that – and this, surely, would fulfil Professor Letham’s desire to see greater emphasis upon the communal and corporate life of God’s people – it is a book which could be profitably studied and discussed in pastors’ fraternals and in church discussion groups. It is a friend to be cherished for life and it is likely to remain a standard volume of systematic theology for a very long time to come. We thank Professor Letham for his consecrated labours in producing such a work, and give glory to the God of all grace.

BOOK REVIEWS

A Concise Guide to the Qur'an: Answering Thirty Critical Questions

Ayman Ibrahim, Baker Academic, 2020, 145pp, £16.99

Daunted by the Qur'an?

For the Christian reader unfamiliar with the literary and theological world of the Islam's primary source of revelation, approaching the Qur'an can be pretty daunting. You may have heard the helpful maxim, "the Qur'an is to Muslims, what Jesus is to Christians", but what does this actually mean for us? Quite apart from the lack of any discernible thematic or chronological structure that we might associate with such an influential text or the fragmented and choppy feel of the narrative in our personal reading of the Qur'an, there is the key challenge of how we talk about and refer to such a venerated and hallowed book in our conversations with Muslim friends and colleagues.

Allow me to nail my colours the mast straight away and say that Ayman Ibrahim's 145-page concise guide is a fantastically helpful contribution to the field of accessible Christian scholarship of the Qur'an. Somewhere between robust and recommended, but less accessible, academic books like Keith Small's *Textual Criticism and Qur'an Manuscripts* (2011) and Mark Durie's *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Reflexes* (2018) and a more accessible but poorly researched and polemical work such as Don Richardson's *The Secret of the Koran* (2008), Ibrahim has written an approachable, even-handed and gently critical primer on some of the most important questions that arise when thinking through the authorship, historicity and thematic content of the Qur'an.

For whom does Ibrahim write and why?

Ibrahim is up front and clear about his target audience in this book. He is writing mainly for Christians with little or no awareness of Islamic theology or Qur'an studies. However, what makes his treatment of the critical questions most useful for any of us who want to take these matters into our conversations with Muslims is that he clearly has Muslims in mind as a secondary audience.

He is also explicit in his introduction about his three-fold evangelical goals in writing this book; firstly, to encourage Christians in their evangelism, dialogue and conversations with Muslims, secondly, to teach and train Christians to understand the diversity of Muslim interpretations of the Qur'an and thirdly to invite Muslims – probably via their Christian friends – to consider some of these critical questions (e.g., xiii and 93).

Whilst Ibrahim is transparent about his own background and perspective, his treatment is not a Christian "response" and less still a polemic against the

claims of or about the Qur'an. Rather, I would describe it as an honest and gently critical engagement with key critical questions that arise in the study of the Qur'an. This is well researched and clearly Ibrahim has done his homework.

What themes does he deal with?

Ibrahim's thirty questions are divided into two parts: Questions 1-15 in Part 1 deal with the history of the text, while questions 16-30 in Part 2 treat the content, features and themes of the Qur'an. The author addresses thorny questions, such as the Muslim claim of the incorruptibility of the Qur'an. He exposes the reader to the significant historical-textual critical issues that undermine the mainstream Muslim confidence in current versions of the Qur'an by rereferring to Islamic, secular, Jewish and Christian scholarship. He points out that the 1924 Cairo edition of the Qur'an that most modern Muslims read and believe to be the authorised version has only been agreed upon for less than 100 years (47-60).

Ibrahim also treats the Muslim claims about Christians and their views of central doctrines of God (the Trinity), (89-94) and the identity and ministry of Jesus (108-115) that arise from the Qur'anic text. What is particularly helpful is his nuanced way of presenting the Qur'ans' treatment of these doctrines, showing how the text both supports and condemns these Christian beliefs. With regard to the person and work of Jesus, he demonstrates both the continuity and radical discontinuity in the Qur'an. Rather than a simple binary table of points of continuity and discontinuity, what Ibrahim succeeds in doing is showing how the presentation of Jesus and other biblical prophets operate within the matrix of the Qur'ans' concerns.

Ibrahim's style and presentation

In treating these thirty critical questions the author follows a helpful four-fold pattern. First, he raises the issues behind the question being treated; second, he presents a balanced assessment of different Muslim perspectives on this issue; third, he gently raises critical questions addressing the issue and fourth, he concludes with a reminder of the mainstream Muslim consensus on the issue (e.g., 50). The effect of this is to give the reader a basic but sound understanding of both the textual-historical issues involved as well as the mainstream consensus Muslim interpretation of the issue, whilst also peeling back to reveal a less visible but nonetheless very real diversity in Muslim thinking (e.g., xiv).

His approach is enhanced by sporadic references dotted throughout the book of stories from his own life and experience of encounters and conversations with Muslims. They are related to his background as a Coptic Christian growing up in Egypt and then later from his life in the US where he now lives and teaches at The Center for the Christian Understanding of Islam

at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. (e.g., 109) These give texture and context to some of the issues he discusses.

The question-and-answer style allow the reader to dive in and engage with a specific theme without having to have read the whole of the book (e.g., xv). There are of course pros and cons with this approach. The obvious pro is that in a short time you can have a good summary of the issue, with some pointers to further material for more in-depth reading. No chapter in this book is more than nine pages long and most are between three and five. The con is that the style feels quite bitty and lacks the richness that a longer deeper narrative would achieve.

Although my review is positive, for the sake of balance, I will finish with three critical comments and then three reasons why I think Ibrahim's book is to be commended and why I have no hesitations in recommending it.

Criticisms

First, as I have indicated, I find Ibrahim's writing style, with short sentences and a tendency to list numerous questions, quite choppy. In parts it reads more like a list of bullets points strung together than a narrative exploring the themes. For me, his text lacks flow. (e.g., 34) Second, though he raises a whole host of really important critical questions in most of his chapters, he only addresses a small number of them. The result is that I found myself tantalised by the questions but left feeling frustrated that he does not treat most of them (e.g., 35). Finally, whilst he makes it clear that his book is not an exhaustive scholarly treatment and he justifies his choice not to litter his narrative with endless notes and citations, nonetheless I think it would have been enhanced by a few more of these references. For example, he often writes "some scholars" or "one account" but does not give any references to them. (e.g., 23) However, in fairness to him, on the most important source, he does make sure to give Qur'anic references for all the points he makes.

Praise

There are numerous reasons why I think Ibrahim's contribution is helpful. First, the accessibility of his book for those less familiar with the world of Qur'anic scholarship, which is probably most Christians in pastoral or parachurch ministry in the West. Although this is not a comparative study of the Qur'an and Bible, Ibrahim does on occasions make some helpful comparisons with textual criticism in Christian theology (e.g., 48, 90). When he does this, he does so fairly: he does not compare the best of Christianity with the worst of Islam. Second, his presentation and treatment of Muslim sources and debate about these is both accurate and broad. He opens up what to some – both Muslims and Christians – might seem like a "hidden world" of diverse Muslim perspectives. This is well supported by primary sources and occasionally – though not enough in my view – secondary sources. Finally, the most helpful

and winsome dimension of his approach is his gentle and balanced tone. One of the reasons most of us struggle to deal with questions that his book raises is our lack of confidence in the material on the one hand and even greater fear of offending Muslim friends and dialogue partners on the other. This is a book that I could read with most of my Muslim friends looking over my shoulder and not feel awkward about turning to them and asking, “So what do you think?”

In this way Ibrahim has succeeded in producing something that is neither polemical nor does it avoid addressing difficult but important questions about the Qur’an (e.g., 5, 33, 84).

Dr. Patrick (Pat) Brittenden

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Work and Worship: Reconnecting Our Labor and Liturgy

Matthew Kaemingk and Cory B. Willson, Baker Academic, 2020, 304pp, p/b, £15.59 (hive.co.uk)

As I was reading this book the refrain “Mind the Gap”, as a train arrives at the platform of British Railway Stations, came to mind – a warning not to fall between two safe places, The gap between the platform and the train. The gap examined in this book is between work and worship, between labour and liturgy.

There are several responses to the gap. The first is to deny it exists, or if it does, ignore it and leave it as it is. This approach is a dangerous one. The other is to attempt to bridge the gap; railway station managers often do this by using ramps. The other response is to remove the gap – in the case of train and station, this may prove difficult and would demand a whole new design. As regards the gap between work and worship Kaemingk and Willson – both with PhDs from Fuller Theological Seminary – take this last approach. Their desire and the focus of this book is to provide resources to see the gap removed. As with the railway station, this may need a redesign of what worship looks like.

They see value in the ramp approach but recognise it is not the answer. The ramp in the context of work and worship is to develop a theology of work – to provide a list of books for workers to read and pray through, in the hope that they will be able to see God in their work. As helpful and important as this may be, it is not the biblical answer, Kaemingk and Wilson argue. It needs more than an intellectual approach.

The authors write out of a sense of urgency for workers in the workplace,

worship leaders in the sanctuary, and scholars and students in the academy.

For many, the gap exists and is ignored. This is illustrated by their experience as children in attending gathered worship meetings. They observe:

We listened to pastors pray for Christian ministries all over the city and all around the world. But never once did we see our parents' labours in the fields of the Lord recognised or blessed during gathered worship. Never once did they mention our fathers' construction sites or auto shops. Never once did they mention our mothers' hospitals or restaurants... The silence of the sanctuary still rings in our ears. It informs and energises this book. (9)

Rather than use ramps to bridge the gap, they write out of a desire to see a transformation so that there is an integration between work and worship. They long to see gathered worship helping rather than hindering workers. To do this they draw valuable insights from the Scriptures. They believe that "Worship that is vocationally conversant will *both* glorify the work of God and (trans)form the work of the church." (23)

The largest contributing factor to the gap is, sadly, those who lead worship: "*they rarely consider what it means that worshippers are also workers*" (34, italics original). However, rather than playing the blame game, the authors provide insights into how church leaders can practice "vocational listening".

As the authors highlight, the workplace is filled with liturgies and rituals, but these are deforming rather than transforming. There is a need for "counter liturgies" that subvert those in the workplace that damage. The main bulk of the book, chapters 4-9, provide resources to do just that. They not only provide a diagnosis but also provide a remedy as they "explore the connection between Israel's gathered worship and its scattered work" (63). They provide some excellent examples of how Israel's gathered worship blessed and transformed "Israel's practices of work". As they point out, "Israel's worlds of worship and work were intentionally designed to intermingle" (63): "Shepherds were not asked to become 'spiritual' upon entering the worship service. They entered worship as shepherds carrying sheep" (77).

Part 3 (Chapters 10-12) explores "Practices". Here they examine how memory, participation and practice play a formative role for workers at the Lord's Table (Chapter 10). The final two chapters investigate worship that gathers (Chapter 11) and worship that sends (Chapter 12). Chapter 11 provides a brief case study of the design of two worship areas and provide some fascinating insights into how simple designs can function in a gathered worship service. The final chapter provides some excellent practical advice, for example how commissioning rituals could function in being able to "root workers in God's mission and reinforce their primary calling within God's kingdom economy" (246).

I suspect that this book will not be an easy read for pastors and church worship leaders as it will challenge the status quo – but it is an important book that is worth grappling with, particularly as discipleship needs to be seen as being broader than what happens on a Sunday morning. But also, because it shows that what does happen on a Sunday morning can shape and affect Monday to Saturday; then that gap between work and worship can be erased.

Steve Bishop

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The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology and Worship (Revised & Expanded)
Robert Letham, P&R Publishing, 2019, 696pp, £23.99 p/b (Amazon)

Do you pray to and worship the Triune God like a functional heretic? This is the pebble in my shoe left by Robert Letham's revised and expanded edition of his award-winning *The Holy Trinity*. Letham is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Union School of Theology in Wales and has published several respected works.

This over 600-page study inspects the Trinity from a biblical, historical and systematic theological perspective while engaging critical questions throughout. The book discusses the expected topics: major (and minor) heresies, necessity of extra-biblical language, eternal generation and eternal procession, the *filioque*, insufficiency of Trinitarian analogies and so on. This book, however, is unique: The final chapters ask how the Trinity frames our understanding of the incarnation, creation, Christian witness, human relationships and glorification. Evident throughout is that much of Christian behaviour flows from one's degree of love for and understanding of the Trinity.

The historical section alone is worth the purchase: The author distils years of inquiry into tight and sharp account; though the concepts are intricate and abstract, he regularly clarifies and streamlines. Students will happily see this section is thick with primary source references while engaging leading interlocutors. In addition, the book has helpful taxonomies such as the analysis of the *filioque* debate. Further, the consistent dispelling of historical myth provides needed correctives. And as one might expect from a theologian of the Trinity, Letham is skilled at nuancing seemingly parallel positions and sketching their theological trajectory.

The study engages widely: East and West, ancient and modern, respected and rejected, beloved and forgotten. Some heroes undergo brief jabs (Hodge, Warfield and Packer) while others are shielded (Van Til). The analysis of the

twentieth-century conversation is critically appreciative and reveals a deep-structure comprehension of those many will never read. For instance, very helpful is the description of Rahner's axiom and its ripple effects (leading to pantheism and panentheism only decades later). The author is charitable throughout and finds value in the questions and ideas of those outside his camp – even those we orthodox evangelicals cannot call mentors.

Possibly the most fundamental warning of the book is that God is equally one and three. Though Letham notes the reductionism of claiming the West tends towards modalism and the East slips towards tritheism, the overemphasis of God's oneness or threeness produces such outcomes. The end of the book traces how excesses of the one or the many play out in other religious or philosophical systems. For instance, Islam's exaltation of the oneness of Allah permeates the whole religion and is the root beneath much of its problems. Also, high modernity's pre-eminence of the many is in the end unliveable and unhuman.

This work exposes several less-discussed ideas, thinkers and questions: When was the last time you read about *anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia*? Also, most will encounter new names in the section on contemporary Eastern Trinitarian theology. Further, Letham asks interesting questions regarding how the Trinity and the *pactum salutis* (or covenant of redemption) cohere. The reader is also served by clear explication of slightly more common topics: *perichoresis*, *taxis* and the relation between the economic and immanent Trinity.

Regarding today's controversies and concerns, *The Holy Trinity* cautiously engages dangerous tendencies in evangelicalism. Most significant is the sober and respectful warning to those affirming some form of an eternal subordination of the Son – especially those who deny eternal generation and/or speak as if there were multiple wills in the Godhead.

The ideal reader is any Christian. The size may daunt the busy and distracted but make no mistake, it is not a crushing burden. For the average church member, this is a significant but dividend-paying undertaking; for the student, Letham's work discloses many new channels of study; for the church leader, it bids the reading of the Cappadocians (in addition to Augustine); for the pastor, it not only instructs and alarms but reminds of the necessity to worship God according to his being as Trinity. Who wants to unwittingly lead their church – by example – to worship like heretics?

I certainly recommend this book. It is not only worth purchasing and reading but for taking notes, reflection and discussion.

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The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God
 Vern S. Poythress, (Philipsburg: P&R, 2020) 728pp, £21.69 h/b (Amazon)

In this book Poythress offers what he considers to be an enhancement of classical Christian theism, by focusing on the doctrine of the Trinity. Many of his insights are valuable, but overall, in my view, the argument does not succeed.

The book has been welcomed as a crowning contribution to Poythress' broad-ranging theological works, an assessment stated in the endorsements from theologians like Sinclair B. Ferguson, Gerald Bray, Donald Macleod and D. A. Carson, and it is echoed in reviews. I take a more critical approach, although I agree that Poythress' work is a significant achievement and an excellent example of irenic and humble theological writing. The limits of space prevent an exhaustive review and I am forced to gloss over or even to miss many important aspects.

The book has eight parts. After setting the scene in part one, Poythress examines some of the classical attributes of God in part two, and then in part three moves to discuss the doctrine of the Trinity. Part four looks at the Trinitarian foundations of language. Then parts five to eight address the main argument which aims to enhance the Trinitarian doctrine of classical Christian theism by focusing on the Trinity.

Most of the chapters, particularly the earlier ones, present the argument and then discuss it in relation to the resurrection of Christ – a central theme of the book. Each chapter ends with application, a selection of key terms, some study questions, suggested further reading and a prayer. Throughout there is an abundance of explanatory diagrams. The style of the book is in this way like Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*. Like Grudem, Poythress makes it clear that he is writing mainly for ordinary Christians, not scholars, not theologians, just believers who are interested in knowing God more deeply.

The Basic Argument

Poythress writes with humility, love for the church, and awe at the majesty of the Triune God. The book consistently returns to the Scriptures and provides some very helpful exegesis of key passages relating to the overall emphasis. Poythress' comments on 1 Samuel 15 are particularly insightful in clarifying the uses of the notions of human and divine regret.

His central purpose in the book is to argue for an enhancement of classical Christian theism. The central purpose is supported by several elements of the suggested enhancement summarised at the end of the book. For convenience I divide them into three groups. First, Poythress asks his readers to "give up" the use of abstract logical argument in theology, and what he sees as over-

dependence on abstract terms. In doing so, he challenges the way the church addresses heresies:

To root out heresies takes precision. For some people, the easiest way is to fall back on the precision of Aristotelian metaphysics as our basis for technical discussion of God. To abandon that safety net in Aristotle is huge (595).

In summary, Poythress states that what we have left to fight heresy is “the sword of the Spirit” which is enough. In my view, at this point in the discussion, Poythress comes closest to biblicism.

The first element is symptomatic of the second. Poythress claims that Aristotelian metaphysics has been so absorbed by many historical and contemporary theologians that Aristotle’s categories are considered ontologically and epistemologically basic, whereas Poythress argues that the Trinity must be basic in these ways. Poythress suggests that jettisoning Aristotelian categories will produce a more fundamentally biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

To be clear before I offer further critique, Poythress is not advocating a return to pietism or biblicism. He does, however, appear to follow a line of theologians from Luther, Montaigne and Pascal, who argued that the deprecation of reason creates room for faith. Additionally, Poythress engages in rich theological argument and the work is in many ways an outworking of Poythress and John M. Frame’s multi-perspectivalism, particularly in his discussion of language and the Trinity.

In the third element Poythress argues that Augustine and Aquinas stopped short of what he thinks of as the biblical step of reinterpreting the attributes of God in light of the Trinity and understanding the Trinity in light of the divine attributes. The sections where Poythress constructs this argument contain discussions of Aquinas’ Trinitarian theology. Poythress is highly critical of Aquinas, although he clearly admires, and has benefited from reading, him.

The author’s intention to make his theological argument understandable to all Christians is certainly admirable, but in my view, it severely limits the depth of his theological engagement which at worst becomes simplistic because it is not sufficiently nuanced. The consequence of limiting theological depth for the sake of the target audience damages the valuable contributions that Poythress does make. If he had been willing to interact more with primary and secondary literature, he could have dealt more fully with the variety of issues and strengthened his argument.

In his examination of Aristotle’s categories Poythress concludes with the statement: “Unless we really know what we are doing, we are better off in most cases just staying away from Aristotle” (237). To ignore primary sources that have so clearly shaped Western civilisation is surely not helpful.

Encouraging Christians to ignore these sources may lead to a situation in which a theologian's knowledge of philosophy is entirely shaped by secondary literature written by Christians. If one learns the philosophical underpinnings of apologetics from those with whom one agrees theologically, one is not sufficiently equipped to engage the broad array of objections to Christianity. This, I believe, is dangerous – the absence of a negative feedback loop tends to promote unstable dogmatism.

I do not deny that Poythress has a wonderful gift for simple and clear expression of deep theological truths. I do, however, argue that Poythress' self-imposed limitations have potential dangers. Could it be that if the church fully embraces Poythress' recommendations and follows his advice as stated in the book, a generation of theologians would arise who are unfamiliar with philosophy and its history, because they have been advised that it is damaging to theology? My point is demonstrated by the "Further Reading" sections at the end of each chapter. Poythress does include some primary sources: Aquinas, Calvin, Turretin and Charnock, among a few others; but most of the further reading books are written by either Poythress or Frame.¹

Two Further Objections

Throughout the work, Poythress argues that Greek philosophy has infiltrated theology, leading to theologians viewing Aristotle's categories as epistemologically basic. Poythress correctly argues that this place must be reserved for the Trinity. I disagree with his overall conclusion about the damage caused to theology, but I will only address one aspect of his argument on this issue.

Poythress claims that theologians have absorbed Aristotelian metaphysics, but this generalised claim does not match the historical evidence: Melancthon was influenced by Aristotle and humanism and was opposed by Luther because of this. But Melancthon rejected Aristotelian metaphysics because it includes doctrines that are patently inconsistent with Christianity: the eternity of the world, the mortality of the soul, and the high view of human free will. All three are rejected by Christian orthodoxy. Richard A. Muller summarises Aquinas' use of Aristotle:

While Aquinas accepted much of the Aristotelian approach to contingency and valued highly Aristotle's denial of determinism... he also recognised that Aristotle could not have developed his views in relation to monotheism,

¹ The most frequently occurring further reading suggestions are; Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*, Phillipsburg: P&R, 2018; and John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, Phillipsburg: P&R, 2015.

*creation ex nihilo, or an understanding of providence acceptable in the Christian theological and philosophical context.*²

Poythress' lack of precision is again perhaps due to his desire to write simply. The discussion of metaphysics generally, rather than focusing on specific areas of Aristotle's writings, is an example of how this damages his argument.

Poythress' main criticism of classical theism is its dependence on Aristotelian categories. Poythress seems to conflate the history of philosophy (which he claims is damaging to theology) with philosophy itself as an intellectual tool and method. In my view it is ironic that in order to challenge aspects of the history of philosophy, and in theological discussion of the Trinity, Poythress uses typically philosophical arguments.³ The conflation of philosophy with the history of philosophy leads him to make statements that seem to encourage Christians to jettison philosophy when he actually means to jettison particular philosopher's ideas. In my view this is dangerous, as it can be understood as trying to persuade Christians to think that philosophy as an intellectual discipline is damaging to theology. Instead, philosophy has historically been understood by theologians from Aquinas to Bavinck as a vital tool to aid the pursuit of truth in theology. Poythress goes so far as to come close to equating the discipline of philosophy with Gnosticism⁴ and appears to suggest that the influence of philosophy on some areas of theology is in part the work of the devil (456).

My second main objection to Poythress' argument is about his discussion of historic orthodox articulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. At some points he seems to imply that his overall emphasis on the Trinity as the foundation of theology is novel:

Valuable as our tradition [classical Christian theism] has been, it can be enriched. Perhaps there are other possibilities for enrichment. Perhaps starting with God's Trinitarian character can be explored (239).

A charitable interpretation would be that Poythress is emphasising his multi-perspectivalism. But it seems easier to understand the statement as claiming that the church has failed to build its theology on the doctrine of the Trinity. One is reminded of the late John Webster's comment that only the doctrine of

² Richard A. Muller, *Divine Will and Human Choice: Freedom, Contingency, and Necessity in Early Modern Reformed Thought* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 127.

³ Poythress engages in typically philosophical reasoning most clearly, precisely when he discusses Aristotle's categories: Poythress, *Trinity*, 227-228. Cf. Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centred Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Illinois: Crossway, 2013).

⁴ "The philosopher thinks that he knows the actual situation, but the naïve believer does not." Poythress, *Trinity*, 336.

the Trinity can bear the weight of the central place in dogmatics.⁵ Poythress' emphasis on the Trinity is not new, although some of his claims are, and some of these new claims depart from the Trinitarian theology set out in the patristic, scholastic and Reformed traditions. In places, his attempted enrichment of classical Christian theism appears to be closer to neo-classical Christian theism.⁶ That said, Poythress' discussion of the Trinity is predicated on his view of human epistemological dependence on God: "If we feel a sense of mastery in knowing God, it is always an illusion" (465). This profound maxim pervades Poythress' work and is commendable.

Poythress explores various scholastic distinctions in Turretin's *Institutes*, particularly the formal, real and eminent. Unfortunately, he does not discuss the key distinction between persons and nature in the Trinity – the modal distinction. This is hinted at in Aquinas⁷ and is developed in Reformed orthodoxy, particularly in Turretin.⁸ Awareness of these developments in understanding the distinction between persons and nature in the Trinity would go a long way towards resolving some of the difficulties that Poythress' arguments seek to address.⁹

More generally, Poythress makes assumptions about where different theologians "begin". This oversimplification of the patristic and scholastic theological endeavour as "beginning" with either the persons or the essence, has been shown to be contrary to the historical evidence by Lewis Ayres.¹⁰

Poythress argues that his multi-perspectivalism can be used in understanding the Trinity and in articulating a Trinitarian understanding of the divine attributes. He summarises his argument in the context of his suggested enhancement of classical Christian theism:

The enhancement consists in saying that these two difficulties – Trinity and attributes – are in fact analogous. The Trinity is reflected in the attributes, and therefore the exposition of the attributes can appeal to the mystery of the Trinity. We can affirm a perspectival distinction between the attributes

⁵ John Webster, *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume I: God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 155, 161-169.

⁶ Neo-classical theism covers several models of God within the theistic spectrum. Classical theism affirms divine simplicity, timelessness, immutability and impassibility. Neo-classical theism rejects at least one of these properties. I suggest that Poythress' attempt to enhance the doctrine of divine simplicity may place him closer to neo-classical theologians.

⁷ *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars*, Question 39, Article 1.

⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Volume 1* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1992), Third Topic, Q. XXVII, III.

⁹ The modal distinction would be particularly relevant to Poythress' arguments in Poythress, *Trinity*, 320-323.

¹⁰ Lewis Ayres, "'Remember that you are Catholic' (Serm. 52, 3): Augustine on the Unity of the Triune God," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 (2000), 39-82.

precisely because their unity and diversity reflect the archetypal unity and diversity in the Trinity.

Poythress claims that neither Augustine nor Aquinas take this theological step but that both have the necessary theological frameworks for it. He makes similar claims about Charnock and Turretin. Poythress fails, however, to note that both Augustine and Aquinas refrained from taking the step that he suggests for significant theological reasons. The reason for these limits in Augustine and Aquinas is that they both argued that the only distinctions between Father, Son and Spirit are the relations of origin. Without appealing to the doctrine of appropriations or even Aquinas' method of *redoublement*, it does not make sense to read the Trinitarian distinctions back into the divine attributes without clear qualifications.

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Sin and Grace: Evangelical Soteriology in Historical Perspective

Tony Lane, Apollos, 2020, 347pp, £15.99 (Amazon)

Tony Lane is Professor of Historical Theology at the London School of Theology. His book is very easy to read but he "has a remarkable depth and breadth of knowledge" (Robert Letham).

He begins by explaining the framework of theology, the familiar fourfold structure that can be summarised in four words: Creation – Sin – Grace – Glory. "Sin and Grace" are the focus of this book; "Creation and Glory" are briefly mentioned.

Part one: "The need: Sin" (9-66)

- "As a result of the fall, our desires have been affected by sin. This means that to a greater or lesser extent they have become inordinate and disordered" (14). And again, "Sin starts as orientation of our lives, as a disposition of the heart, which leads to sinful desires, which lead to sinful thoughts, which lead to sinful deeds" (20).
- He also highlights "two different truths taught in Scripture", the one is that "we are all sinners" and the other is the distinction between "the righteous and the sinners". "It is important to maintain both sides of this tension".

- In regard to the bondage of the will, he writes that while, “we can do what we desire (within limits), we cannot control what we desire”.
- He discusses original sin and the debate between Pelagius and Augustine as well as the Enlightenment’s rejection of the doctrine of fallen human nature. Liberal theology followed enlightenment thinking on this, and “Neo-Orthodox theologians reaffirmed and expounded the doctrine of original sin, but most of them did not see this as being the result of a fall.”
- He also deals with the issue of guilt and of the wrath of God.

Part two: “Becoming a Christian”, (67-160)

First, he deals with the necessity of salvation by grace and of prevenient and efficacious grace, including the doctrines of election and predestination:

- “Classic Arminianism is not Semi-Pelagianism since Arminius agreed with Augustine that we cannot make the first move towards God. It is more accurate to call Arminianism Semi-Augustinianism, because it shares with Augustinianism the belief that we can do no spiritual good without God’s prevenient grace” (79).
- In this section he discusses the teaching of Augustine, Calvin and Barth. “For Barth the gospel message is not that we shall be accepted by God if we repent and believe, but that we are already accepted and just need to recognize that fact.” “Barth’s message appears to point clearly to universalism” (89).
- He summarises TULIP briefly. On “limited atonement” he states, “This doctrine was not taught by Calvin but was developed after him” (92). “It must not be equated with the oft repeated statement of Peter Lombard that Christ’s death is sufficient for all but efficient for the elect alone.”

Second, his next six chapters deal with “Baptism and initiation”. Four of the chapters deal with baptism.

- He identifies a fourfold Christian initiation; Repentance, Faith, Baptism, Receiving the Holy Spirit. He has researched evangelical evangelistic resources and notes that most do emphasis the first two aspects – repentance and faith – although often “this is reduced to an unbiblical phrase such as ‘invite Jesus into your heart’” (96). However, the other two aspects are often missing.

- Regarding baptism: "According to the New Testament, one becomes a Christian at least in part by baptism". "Faith and baptism are the proverbial two sides of the coin" (98).
- Regarding reception of the Spirit: "There is a lot of sense in making the laying on of hands to receive the Spirit part of the ceremony of baptism" (102).
- Regarding repentance: "Repentance involves total commitment in principle" (109); "we cannot have Christ as Saviour without having him as Lord. There is no forgiveness of sins without repentance" (110). "Calvin argued strongly that repentance comes after faith and forgiveness of sins." But "he was totally against the idea, taught by some today, that it is possible to have faith and the forgiveness of sins without repentance and discipleship" (112).
- "Today we have a polarization between the belief that salvation is by baptism (Roman Catholics) and the belief that it is by faith (evangelicals). The New Testament takes no sides here, because conversion and baptism are always held together, so we must resist the false dichotomy" (117).
- He supports the "dual practice" of Baptists and Paedobaptists, by arguing that "For those raised in a Christian home, both infant baptism and adult baptism are not isolated events but simply one stage in a lengthy process" (147).

Part Three: "Being put right with God: Justification" (210-274)

Here are six chapters, the first four mainly deal with the Roman Catholic and Protestant disagreement on justification and the more recent ecumenical agreements.

- He summarises Augustine's view, "which is not about God's putting us right with himself through the work of Christ on the cross, but about God's changing us within by the work of the Holy Spirit" (162).
- He defines Justification as "...acquittal, as the not guilty verdict in a law court. This is a legal or 'forensic' definition of justification." In contrast to Sanctification: "Justification refers to our standing before God; sanctification refers to God's work in renewing and transforming us into the image of Christ... Justification is about God's accepting me; sanctification is about God's changing me" (165).
- "The essence of the Protestant doctrine is that justification and sanctification can be distinguished, but not separated" (166).
- "According to the New Testament we are justified by faith, but the final judgement is according to works" (173).

- He calls us to be faithful to two teachings: “The promise of acceptance to the worst of sinners does not rule out the demand for total commitment from all believers.” “Being faithful to this tension is a challenge for Christian theology... There are two opposite dangers that threaten us and that we need to avoid. One danger is antinomianism, which says it doesn’t matter how we live. The other danger is legalism, which says that we need to earn God’s acceptance by our works.” (174) “Cheap grace breaks our tension by offering forgiveness without repentance” (175).
- On Assurance: Calvin defines it “implicitly part of saving faith”. However, Bullinger taught “assurance is something separate from saving faith” (201).
- He talks through the Regensburg Colloquy of 1541, the Council of Trent of 1547, Hans Kung on Justification 1957, and the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” of 1999, signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican.
- “Through my own studies of this subject I have been made more aware of the valid concerns underlying Catholic theology. This has not led me to abandon a protestant doctrine of justification, but has made me more sensitive to ways in which that doctrine can be abused” (241).

Part Four: “Living the Christian Life: Sanctification” (275-316)

His closing four chapters deal with: Sanctification, Perseverance, Simple lifestyle, Perfection:

- “The heart of sanctification is being transformed into the likeness of Christ, becoming more like him.” This process requires discipleship, following Christ, denying self, taking up one’s cross. “It means saying ‘No’ to ourselves, to our own desires, and saying ‘Yes’ to God’s will” (278).
- “Another major aspect of sanctification is that we should ‘become what we are’.”
- On perseverance: “is it necessary for salvation not just to start the Christian life, not just to become a Christian, but also to continue in it to the end, to remain a Christian? The consensus of the New Testament is that such perseverance is necessary. Final salvation is not unconditional, contrary to the claims of many today.”
- “The New Testament teaches three different things: perseverance is necessary for salvation; there is a real danger of falling away and losing our salvation; and yet God will keep those who are his.” He

shows how four popular views fail to balance these three teachings in their synthesis; the Catholic tradition, the Reformed tradition, the Arminian tradition, and the new view of “Once Saved, Always Saved”.

- On the simple lifestyle he builds on the 1974 Lausanne Covenant: “An evangelical commitment to simple lifestyle”. Calling us to avoid “affluent materialism” as well as “ascetic legalism”, he outlines five principles from Calvin to help us: Detachment from the world (“It flows from biblical eschatology, not Greek dualism” 300), Use without enslavement, Moderation, Stewardship, Generosity.
- On Perfectionism: “I think that Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection is mistaken, but that we can also learn from it. First, Wesley’s focus on entire sanctification is on love, on sin being expelled from the heart by perfect love” (313).

Summary

The book is written in clear and easy sentences, there are many helpful summaries of complex theological issues, and plenty I could affirm and learn from – and just a few areas where I would disagree. This is a beneficial and edifying book.

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Pastors and their critics: A guide to coping with criticism in ministry

Joel R. Beeke and Nick Thompson, P&R, 192pp, £9.11 (Amazon)

I have no crystal ball but I would hazard a guess that the next few years would be a really good time for individual pastors and their leadership teams to reflect deeply on how they handle, respond to, and give, criticism, both from within and without their local congregation. The challenges of rebuilding congregations after lockdown, of how to respond to high level cases of pastoral abuse, the way that gospel people seem divided on how to respond to the social issues of our time – all of these have the effect of putting pastors in the line of fire when it comes to criticism. Even without those challenges, sooner or later, a pastor will find (horror of horrors!) not everybody thinks everything he does is brilliant all of the time. If the Apostle Paul was not above having his motives and methods questioned (see 2 Corinthians to start), how much less is the ordinary pastor, even if our congregations are largely sympathetic and supportive?

The truth is, faithful gospel ministry will inevitably bring us into contact with criticism, whether deserved or not. By God's grace, criticism can be a doorway to further gospel growth, in our own lives and in the churches we serve. We need to be prepared, or perhaps to relearn, how we deal with it and how we respond well. To this end, Joel Beeke and Nick Thompson have helped us enormously with this book.

Having set out what they see as a largely unaddressed problem in the introduction, they say "we are not aware of a book that deals comprehensively with the various dimensions of criticism in the Christian ministry from a biblical and Reformed position" (14). This is what they are hoping to address in this book. It is not overlong, and can be read helpfully in the rough and tumble of church life. It is divided into four sections, looking at the biblical foundations for coping with criticism, practical principles for responding individually, practical principles for fostering a healthy culture of criticism in the church, and a theological vision for responding well. The book ends with a helpful appendix on how those training for ministry might prepare themselves in advance for facing criticism.

I really like this book. In fact it is a book on criticism in which I cannot find anything to criticise! What hooked me from the start was the opening assertion that the first target of unjust criticism in the Bible is God! From there I found the biblical examples, personal recollections from Beeke's ministry, and the many quotes from historical and recent works of pastoral theology very helpful. I like the combination of a more experienced and a younger author; they are both thoroughly centred on Christ, full of grace, supportive of pastors but do not consider them to be somehow above the local congregation. They have a high view of the importance of personal holiness, and the book drips with the good effect of meditating on Scripture. You will be left with constructive, practical ways of engaging with criticism, wisdom on when not to engage with it, and be given the humbling but helpful insight that there is more to be learnt from criticism than we might wish to admit.

The book is very helpful in leading us away from going over situations where we might have been criticised, to thinking instead about the actual needs of the people we serve. For me, the standout sentence was: "The priority of our praying should be souls, not situations". For encouraging humble and persevering service in both seasoned and starting pastors, this book is highly recommended.

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