

Foundations

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Foundations Theological Journal

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 ministry. Its particular focus is the theology of evangelical churches which are committed to biblical truth and evangelical ecumenism. It has been

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Editor

Dr Donald John MacLean
foundations@affinity.org.uk

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Cornhill Training Course (Scotland)

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Peter Williams
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Alistair Wilson
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Contents

3

EDITORIAL

6

GLORIES THAT FORM AND DEFORM IDENTITY

The Roads Ahead
by Rev. Dr. Peter Sanlon

30

DIVINE LIGHT AND HOLY LOVE

Genuine Conversion in the Works of Jonathan Edwards
by Rev. Robin Gray

54

SANCTIFICATION AND CONSISTENT GODLY LIVING

by Phil Heaps

73

PASTORING THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

by Mark Thomas

97

FAITHFULNESS AMIDST TRIAL AND PERSECUTION

by Dr. Patrick Fung

117

REVIEW ARTICLE - COMPLEMENTARIANISM

by Sarah Allen

123

BOOK REVIEW

Evangelicalism: A Very Short Introduction
J. G. Stackhouse

EDITORIAL

But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. (Jude 20-21, ESV)

The bi-annual Affinity theological study conference is always a highlight, and the 2023 conference was by all accounts no exception. For those of us (including myself!) who were unable to attend, the next best thing is to read the papers given at the conference, and it is a pleasure to present them in this edition of Foundations.

Under the theme of “A Firm Foundation: Priorities for the rising generation” five papers cover a variety of topics. The first paper is from Peter Sanlon on “Glories that Form and Deform Identity: The Roads Ahead.” Peter considers the live issues which affect us all today, sexual identity, mental health, pornography, abuse and family breakdown. In all of these areas society is bearing down on Christian ideals of person and worth. Manifestations of these problems vary but include consumerism, an attitude of victimhood, and self-love. In contrast to this we are called to “an ecclesiology of the cross” which “holds forth the promise of supernatural power to endure, live and die for Christ”. To understand what this is, read the article!

The second paper by Robin Gray focuses on Jonathan Edwards and his view of conversion, “Divine Light and Holy Love Genuine Conversion in the Works of Jonathan Edwards”. This might seem lacking in contemporary relevance, but surely it is not. On the one hand, in every age, there is a need to seek to understand the monumental transformation from life to death that is conversion. But particularly now with proposed bans on conversion therapy, it is vital to understand what true biblical conversion means. And there are few more helpful guides than Edwards. Robin guides us well through the riches of Edward’s teaching.

The third paper is “Sanctification and Consistent Godly Living” by Phil Heaps. Acknowledging the challenges of contemporary Christian living, Phil takes us to the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly to the Beatitudes convinced that they form “an ideal but underused framework for our discipling.” They do so by dealing with, among other things, “Sexual purity... Anxiety... navigating our increasingly polarised society... hate speech is referred to... The question of social activism and impacting society is covered... marriage and divorce... [and] materialism”. Building out from this, Phil argues that this discipling framework must be taught, practised in community (i.e. with a commitment to fellowship), be Christ centred and be fuelled by prayer. The paper then concludes with reflections on the language we might use to ensure our understanding of sanctification does not become imbalanced. Taken all in, this is a very stimulating paper.

Mark Thomas provides the fourth paper which considers “Pastoring the Twenty-First Century Church”. There is much in this paper to encourage, challenge and instruct. The reminder at the start is important: “Our approach [to pastoring] is not primarily focused on the problems people think they have. Our aim and purpose is to bring men and women to know God through the Lord Jesus Christ, to worship and serve him, and grow to be like him.” This is built on by considering “pastoring as Biblical, Theological, Evangelical, and Analytical and Experimental”. Other key themes are considered by Mark and significant figures from church history are well as contemporary theologians are used as foils. The close of the paper helpfully considers our contemporary situation and the challenges faced today, as well as those faced in every age.

The fifth, and last, paper from the theological conference is from Patrick Fung and considers “Faithfulness Amidst Trial and Persecution”. Patrick seeks to answer three questions: 1) How did the early church persevere and thrive despite persecution? 2) How did the missionaries in the Boxer Uprising in China in 1900 respond to the impact of persecution resulting in the rise of the indigenous church movement? 3) How do Christians today around the world continue to live out their faith in the context of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom? These are vital topics, and they

are handled very helpfully.

Finally, in this edition, we present an important extended review article by Sarah Allen. Sarah considers two recent books which have had a significant impact. Kristin Kobes du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* and Beth Alison Barr's *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*. Sarah's review is helpful in outlining the shortcomings of these volumes while also acknowledging the need for "Christians committed to a complementarian reading of Scripture to explore history and theology in a yet deeper and more honest manner, and to apply this with even greater care within their church contexts."

I hope the variety of these articles give much food for thought.

Dr Donald John MacLean

Editor of Foundations

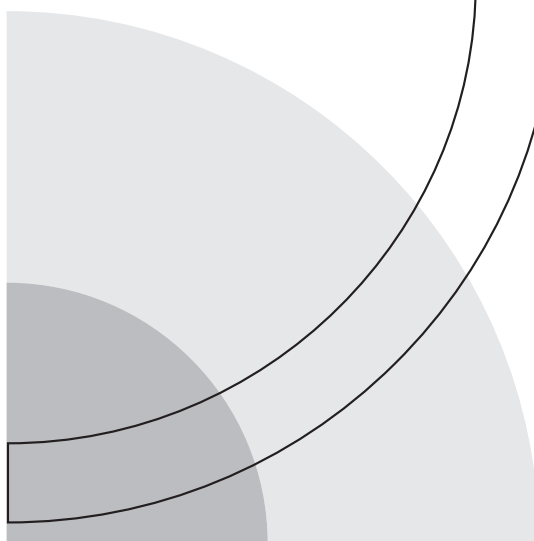
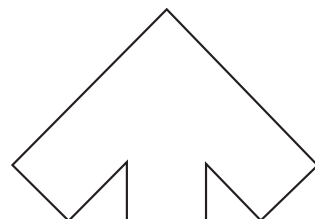
Elder, Cambridge Presbyterian Church and Assistant Professor of Historical Theology at Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

June 2023

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**Affinity
Theological
Study
Conference**

**2023
Papers**
A Firm Foundation:
Priorities for the
rising generation



GLORIES THAT FORM AND DEFORM IDENTITY

THE ROADS AHEAD

Rev. Dr. Peter Sanlon

Abstract

This paper seeks to analyse what has become the main presenting issue of the day for western culture, that of identity. This question penetrates a good deal deeper than the vexed matters of gender, sexuality and ethnicity; essentially it comes down to a clear and binary choice: whom do we love, worship and glorify – self or God? The quest for self-realisation and self-fulfilment may take many forms, from pornography to conspiracy theories to a culture of ‘victimhood’, but each of these are diverse expressions of the same fundamental motivation – to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever – Amen! (Rom 1:25). Against all this, the next generation is summoned to walk ‘The Road Less Travelled’, where we gather under the cross of Jesus Christ.

I. The Glory (weight) of the World (culture)

The wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in things as perceived by man is totally puffed up, blinded and hardened. - Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation 22.

If man will strike, strike through the mask! - Herman Melville, Moby Dick.

As creatures made by God our identities only have stability, joy and satisfaction when we discern who we are in union with the Triune Lord, in whose image we are made.¹ We are dependent beings, designed and constituted such that we need another – we live by worship and cannot but have hearts that restlessly seek peace in one greater than us.²

To say that we are worshipping creatures is to recognise that we are drawn towards glory. We are attracted and compelled to praise, pursue and seek union with that which appears glorious to us. If that which has glory and to which we are drawn is the God who made us, we enjoy the Spirit’s renewal, the Son’s redemption and the Father’s rule. If that which appears glorious to us is this world, then we will worship it and suffer the world’s allurements, the devil’s assaults, and the flesh’s ambitions. We will worship and pursue either the Creator or his creation. To worship and seek the glories of this world inevitably brings pain, harm and loss. Our dependent nature means that the harm done is felt and experienced at the deepest level of identity. We are formed by our world worshipping to feel our sense of identity burdened by the weight of this world’s glory.

The Greek word used for glory (*dóxa*) is derived from a word group that in its most basic sense means ‘weight’. It exerts pressure on things; it has substance and impacts. In biblical usage *dóxa* “above all, expresses God’s honour, glory and power. It does not refer to God in his essential nature,

1 ‘Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. No one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God.’ Calvin, *Inst.* 1.1.1.

2 ‘These humans, due part of your creation as they are, still do long to praise you. You stir us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.’ Augustine, *Conf.* 1.1.1.

but to the luminous manifestation of his person ... pre-eminently [it] is used in the NT, as it is in the OT, to describe God's transcendent being and majesty".³ It is God's glory that attracts Spirit-renewed hearts to seek, love and rejoice in Christ, rather than self. When we worship God and rightly honour his glory our identities are established on the love of God.

The majority focus of the NT usage of the term 'glory' is to do with God's glory and the glorification of him through his redeemed people. However, Paul teaches us there are different kinds of glory (1 Cor 15:40-41) and so this world also has a 'glory'. The world's glory has substance, power – weight. By means of its glory the world attracts, compels and draws out from us worship. The devil knows that the world has great glory – and he laid it before Jesus seeking to tempt him with it (Matt 4:8). Jesus explained that if we pursue and value the glory of people around us – individually or collectively as a culture – we will be unable to believe him:

I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? (John 5:41-44)

So, Paul followed in the footsteps of Jesus when he wrote, "Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ." (1 Thess 2:6)

When we value and care about the things of this world, we glory not in God but in things that are shameful. So God warns:

Many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. (Phil 3:18-19)

In the language of Romans, a culture is handed over to God when it exchanges "the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (Rom 1:23).

The glory of people in this world is fleeting and transitory, for all in due time die (1 Pet 1:24). And yet the glory of people, cultures – the world under the devil's authority – is real and weighty. God and this world have their own glory and we worship one or the other; being formed and shaped by that which we love and serve (Ps 135:15-18, Matt 6:24).

Theologians by vocation serve churches in a number of ways – one aspect of the ministry is alerting us to the reality of what is going on in church and world when all is seen through the lens of Scripture. In our case, that means helping remove the mask that the devil uses to make the world's glory appear more attractive than that of God's glory. Before we see in detail how our culture weighs people down with its devilish, worldly glory, we need to feel the pain of what it means for young people of the next generation to be shaped at the level of identity by the world. We need to accept that there is a problem and feel that it is more than merely an intellectual error to be corrected by the right information: Worship the world and you are harmed and hurt. We see the pain in many areas that shape identity, not least in the areas of:⁴

1. Sexual Identity

- There has been a significant decrease between 2014 and 2020, in the percentage of 16-24

³ *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Second Edition, Ed. M. Silva, Vol. 1, Entry on δόξα.

⁴ I am very thankful to David Greatorex and Simon Calvert of The Christian Institute for their advice and assistance in collating this research section on trends in British youth.

- year-olds who identify as ‘heterosexual or straight’.⁵
- Between 2009-10 and 2021-22, referrals to the NHS Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) at the Tavistock in London – which deals with under-18s – rose by over 4,500 per cent, from 77 to almost 3,600.⁶ The majority are girls; until a sudden increase in the last year in those whose birth sex is “not known”, girls made up well over 60%, sometimes over 70% of the referrals.⁷
 - A school in Brighton claimed in 2018 to have 40 pupils who did not identify with their biological sex, and a further 36 identifying as “gender-fluid”⁸
 - It was reported that in another school, 17 children were in the process of “changing gender”, with some pupils ‘grooming’ younger children to follow.⁹
 - It was reported in 2022 that almost one in 15 pupils at a leading secondary school identifies as transgender or non-binary. More than 60 youngsters at the school, which has about 1,000 students, declared their gender to be different from their birth sex or do not identify as either male or female.¹⁰
 - A YouGov poll commissioned by the organisation Sex Matters found that 79 per cent of teachers had pupils at their school who were trans or non-binary. The same poll also found that 85 per cent of teachers reported having more students in that category now than three years ago.¹¹
 - In January 2023 the 2021 Census released data from the first time the UK population were asked about “sexual orientation”. It found “that around 43.4 million people (89.4 per cent) identified as heterosexual, around 1.5 million people (3.2 per cent) identified with an LGBT+ orientation (‘Gay or Lesbian’, ‘Bisexual’ or ‘Other sexual orientation’). The remaining 3.6 million people (7.5 per cent) did not answer the question. The census question on gender identity was voluntary and posed to those aged 16 and over. The question asked: ‘Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?’ A total of 45.7 million people (94 per cent of the population) answered the question, with 45.4 million (93.5 per cent) answering ‘Yes’ and 262,000 (0.5 per cent) answering ‘No’. The remaining 2.9 million people (six per cent) did not answer the question.”¹²

2. Mental Health

- The NHS has been doing annual follow-ups to a survey on the mental health of young

5 See Table 7b of the ONS Statistics: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/datasets/sexualidentityuk/2012to2020/finalesexualorientationtable.xlsx>

6 ‘Referrals to GIDS, financial years 2010-11 to 2020-21’, GIDS, 3 May 2021, see <https://gids.nhs.uk/professionals/number-of-referrals/> as at 1 December 2022; ‘Referrals to the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) level off in 2018-19’, *The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust*, 28 June 2019, see <https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/news/stories/referrals-gender-identity-development-service-gids-level-2018-19/> as at 1 December 2022.

7 <https://gids.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GIDS-referrals-FYs-2010-11-to-2021-2022.xlsx>

8 *The Times online*, 25 November 2018, see <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/trans-groups-under-fire-for-huge-rise-in-child-referrals-2ttm8c0fr> as at 20 December 2022.

9 *Mail Online*, 17 November 2018, see <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6401593/Whistleblower-teacher-makes-shocking-claim-autistic.html> as at 20 December 2022.

10 *Mail Online*, 23 April 2022, see <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10746771/Nearly-one-15-pupils-leading-secondary-school-identify-trans-non-binary.html> as at 20 December 2022.

11 *The Times online*, 11 April 2022, see <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/8-in-10-teachers-school-trans-pupils-53b89n0lf> as at 20 December 2022; ‘Most secondary schools now have trans-identified pupils: Sex Matters’ new survey’, *Sex Matters*, 11 April 2022, see <https://sex-matters.org/posts/updates/school-survey/> as at 20 December 2022.

12 *First census estimates on gender identity and sexual orientation*, Press Release: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/news/news/firstcensusestimategenderidentityandsexualorientation>

people conducted in 2017. The evidence suggests a large and growing problem – there is an increase from 10.1% to 25.7% of 17-19 year olds described as having a probable disorder.¹³

- The above ongoing research shows percentages of children having possible eating disorders are high and increasing.¹⁴
- Government reports underline that mental health problems in children and young people have been exacerbated by lengthy losses of education and social interaction during the recent pandemic.¹⁵

3. Exposure to Pornography

- A British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) research project¹⁶ concluded: “The majority of the young people we spoke to as part of our research had seen pornography by the age of 13. In some cases as young as seven or eight years old.”
- 51% of 11-13 year olds, 66% of 14-15 year olds and 79% of 16-17 year olds report that they have seen pornography.

4. Sexual Abuse

- Ofsted’s review in 2021 of sexual abuse in schools and colleges¹⁷ found, “nearly 90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers”.
- “Girls... indicated that... the following types of harmful sexual behaviours happened ‘a lot’ or ‘sometimes’ between people their age... being sent pictures or videos they did not want to see (88%), being put under pressure to provide sexual images of themselves (80%), sexual assault of any kind (79%), feeling pressured to do sexual things that they did not want to (68%), unwanted touching (64%).”¹⁸

5. Family Breakdown

- In 2021 for the first time the majority of babies in England and Wales were born outside marriage.¹⁹
- In April 2022 “No Fault Divorce” became law in England and Wales,²⁰ making it easier to obtain a divorce. It is expected this will further increase the breakdown of family stability.²¹

13 https://files.digital.nhs.uk/02/4A5C4C/mhcyp_2022_tab.xlsx. See Table 1.2.

14 Ibid, see Table 1.3.

15 *The Annual Report of His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2021/22* - GOV.UK: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202122-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202122>

16 <https://darkroom.bbfc.co.uk/original/a1a32ec72e502038635964e5194097f0:2be060f6cfcddd02bdd5b489455e64fd/bbfc-parents-guide-to-age-verification-and-online-pornography.pdf>

17 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>

18 Ibid.

19 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/08/09/babies-born-wedlock-2021-first-time-record/>

20 *New divorce laws will come into force from 6 April 2022* - GOV.UK: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-divorce-laws-will-come-into-force-from-6-april-2022>

21 *UK lawyers brace for divorce surge in 2023 after ‘no-fault’ law change* | The Independent: <https://www.independent>.

This world exerts pressure on young people – it beguiles and seduces and pressures them to glory in its values, lifestyles and ambitions. In so doing it moulds their sense of identity into something that is harmed and pained. Our own health service's statistics and government registers bear that out beyond any doubt. The things the world glories in have not brought peace or joy. However, merely pointing out the hurt caused by worshipping the world's glory is not enough to turn hearts away from its allure. We are so damaged that we pursue and lust after that which hurts.

A vivid portrait of self-harming pursuit is given in Ahab – the ship's captain consumed with pursuing the great whale, Moby Dick. He lost a leg to the fearsome monster of the ocean but was still obsessed with it. When in the great novel he met with a one-armed English captain – who had lost his arm to Moby Dick – he could see in another wounded man the harm done by seeking the whale. Yet he could not desist. The English captain said:

No more White Whales for me; There would be great glory in killing him, I know that, but hark ye, he's best let alone; don't you think so, Captain?' - glancing at the ivory leg.

Ahab replied, 'He is. But he will still be hunted, for all that. What is best let alone, that accursed thing is not always what least allures. He's all a magnet.'²²

The glory of this world is accursed but still allures and so we must expose the architectonic structure of the world's glory to see better precisely *how* it brings its weight to bear upon people already harmed, yet still attracted, by it.

II. How the Culture's Glory exerts pressure on the next generation

You have heard in the gospel that you must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of heaven, and that in every city bonds and afflictions await you ... you will soon come to the town of Vanity Fair. In that town you will be beset by enemies, who will kill one or both of you. You must seal the testimony you hold with blood. Be faithful unto death, and the King will give you a crown of life. - John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress

Christianity and the world each have their complex forces which shape our sense of identity. Through successive ages, the world has layered multiple strata of identity-shaping sediment which exert pressure upon us. Historians, philosophers, sociologists and theologians have dug away to different levels to expose the architectonic forces that today shape the secular person's sense of self. Some reach back to the ancient world, others to the medieval, Reformation, Enlightenment or modern. Different aspects of culture may be highlighted as influencing our identity – philosophy, art, music, poetry, education, technology and much besides. One recent study on the development of the secular sense of identity reached back to the ancient world and observed that “More than anything else, I think, Christianity changed the ground of human identity.”²³ If Christianity provided an alternative sense of identity then it is no surprise that as our culture becomes increasingly secular, pressures increase on Christians to view themselves in ways shaped more by the world than God's Word. “The shift to secularity is a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”²⁴ Since those words were published in 2007 the secular culture we live in has become even more hostile to Christian convictions. As Christians journey through this world, they find that if they hold to a biblical sense of self, they will inevitably suffer

co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/no-fault-divorce-lawyers-uk-surge-b2250583.html

²² Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Everyman's Library, London (1991), 461.

²³ Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, Penguin, London (2015), 352.

²⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Harvard (2007), 3.

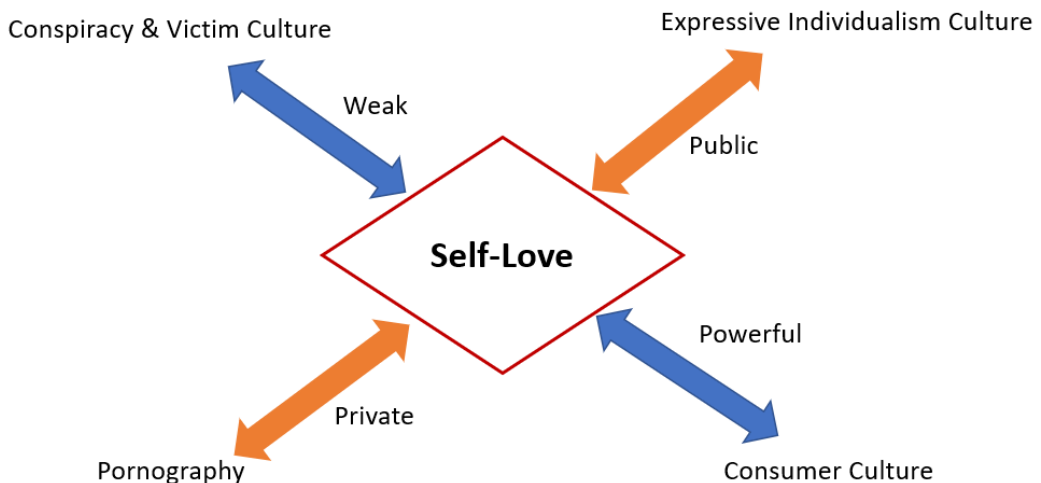
many injustices, face much opposition and often be misunderstood.

One of the difficulties for those who want to help future generations enjoy a sense of self shaped by Christ's gospel is that the forces of the culture which exert pressure upon the self are variegated and so widely assumed, that they are difficult to even notice and articulate, never mind resist. Many Christian books have been published seeking to help us understand the secular culture that so influences us, but most focus on either the American culture or only one strand of the forces at work. This paper highlights four major strands of power at work in our secular culture, that shape the next generation's sense of identity. Each has been explored in other academic and popular level works – but they have not thus far been drawn together so that we can see the impact on the self that they have in combination.

There are four major strands of power at work in our culture which together, and each in its own way, seek to make us into creatures whose identity is deformed by self-love. These four strands are 1) Expressive Individualism 2) Consumerism 3) Pornography 4) Conspiracy and Victim Culture. Together these appeal to and form within us deep self-love which seeks to make the self a final resting place of meaning and happiness. Augustine analysed the conflict between love of self and love of God, which differentiates the City of God and the City of Man:

The two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self. In fact the earthly city glories in itself, the Heavenly City glories in the Lord. The former looks for glory from men, the latter finds its highest glory in God, the witness of a good conscience. The earthly lifts up its head in its own glory, the Heavenly City says to its God: "My glory; you lift up my head." In the former, the lust for domination lords it over its princes as over the nations it subjugates; in the other both those put in authority and those subject to them serve one another in love, the rulers by their counsel, the subjects by obedience. The one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, "I will love you, my Lord, my strength."²⁵

The four strands of powers that impel us towards increasing self-love are laid out in the diagram below:



Before exploring each of these strands of power in more detail it is worth noticing that they foster an inherently unstable, vulnerable and irrational identity of self-love. The powers are mutually

²⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, 14, 28.

contradictory – pulling and pushing the self in opposite directions. The *Consumer Culture* seduces the self to feel powerful – I am able to buy and market whatever I think will satisfy me. Arrayed against that pulling the self away from such a sense of power is the *Conspiracy and Victim Culture*. Conspiracy culture urges me to believe myself to be weak and powerless in the face of international governmental conspiracies I cannot expose or overthrow. Similarly, the victim culture nurtures a sense of self that receives a range of exchanges and interactions that previous generations would view as normal or inevitable as if they are abusive and damaging in severe ways. A self that is broken and weak jostles for influence with a self that is powerful.

Expressive Individualism tells the self that I can only be who I really am when society accepts and applauds who I feel I am. This strand of power is fundamentally public – it demands recognition and signals its nature with flags, marches, lanyards and slogans. By contrast, the consumption of *Pornography* among the younger generation is fundamentally a private activity, seducing people into a self-love informed by secret shame and private sexual gratification. Pornography hollows out character and creates a deeply unstable sense of self through its tension with the public demands of expressive individualism.

The sense of identity our secular culture creates and impels the next generation towards is fundamentally unstable. This should not surprise us as we were created by God to love and worship a glory weightier than the world. “All humans have been created to be reflecting beings, and they will reflect whatever they are ultimately committed to ... we resemble what we revere, either for ruination or restoration.”²⁶ Out of love and compassion for those who are “curved in on themselves”²⁷ in self-love, and so torn apart by opposing unstable senses of self-hood, we need to better understand the nature of the powers we face.

1. Expressive Individualism Culture

Expressive individualism is the paradigm in our culture that forms people who feel they will only be their true selves when they are able to publicly express and manifest their inner identity, and be applauded by society for so doing. This is a significant advance upon a culture of individuality and takes matters further than a culture of authenticity. The crucial ingredient that makes expressive individualism so potent a power in a culture is its insistence that others in a society must approve, commend, support and applaud an individual’s inner perception of their self-identity. As Charles Taylor observed, “One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it.”²⁸ There is assumed to not be any ontological restraint or check on one’s assumed identity other than what one feels and desires to be; ensuring other people affirm the felt identity is the only challenge. Overcoming any resistance to public affirmation is an ethical imperative as those who decline to praise another for their acting out of their sense of identity is to violate, harm and assault one’s sense of personhood.

Picture a man who believes his inner real identity to be that he is in reality a dolphin. A culture shaped by religious impulses might resist the person making such a claim for himself on the basis of a religious text or what the church teaches. A culture shaped by individualism would take a *laissez-faire* approach – you live like a dolphin if you want, it’s your choice, just don’t make life difficult for others in society. A culture shaped by authenticity would praise the person for discerning their inner authentic dolphin identity, but would not necessarily support their acting like a dolphin. An expressive individualist culture would go further than any of these by working to dismantle any objection to a man embracing the identity of a dolphin. Media would run programmes that commend the dolphin lifestyle; people who query the reasonableness of feeling yourself to be a dolphin would be cancelled and have their jobs threatened; banners and flags would appear on

²⁶ Greg Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, Apollos, Nottingham (2008), 22.

²⁷ ‘Incurvatus se.’ Martin Luther, *Complete Works*, Vol. 25, 345, see also 291-92.

²⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Harvard University Press, Harvard (1992), 35.

government buildings affirming the right to live as a dolphin; taxpayers' money would be used to fund surgical procedures to make dolphin identities more credible; schoolchildren would be given classes to help them consider whether they too might have inner identities aligned with dolphins; churches would be surveyed to check how welcoming they are to aspirant dolphins; sports stars would be dropped from teams if they played at peak form but failed to publicly affirm the beauty of dolphin identities; politicians would be harangued by media asking if they agree that men can become dolphins. Such is the expressive individualist culture.

Carl Trueman has recently published an impressive book which details the history and significance of the expressive individualist culture.²⁹ He explores the roots of the culture in philosophy, art and literature. Trueman explains that in our expressive individualist culture, "Identity requires recognition by another."³⁰ This is why the rainbow flag has become so ubiquitous in our culture. If we are to understand the weight of pressure upon the next generation's sense of identity, we need to ponder the significance of the rainbow flag.

a. The Rainbow Flag

As Christians we understand that simple objects can in God's economy have a profound spiritual impact. Bread is one of the most common foods in the world but the words of Jesus in Matthew 26:26 mean that we treasure breaking bread as the most poignant expression of spiritual unity we have, and in the Lord's Supper we benefit from Christ's death in a spiritual but powerful way. So significant has the symbol of bread become that the most solemn and serious thing a church can do is forbid an unrepentant member from partaking of the broken bread, and in so doing the person is exposed to a restrained but real satanic attack (1 Cor 5:5, 1 Tim 1:20). Christians know that simple things such as bread can be – and are – used to auspicate, demarcate and enforce the power of both God and Satan. We may no more dare to say of the rainbow flag, "It's just a flag – it has no real significance or power" than we may say of bread broken in the Lord's Supper "It's just bread of no more significance than what I spread marmalade on this morning."

Numerous people in San Francisco were involved in designing the rainbow flag, but the person most publicly associated with it was a drag queen called Gilbert Baker. His 1978 design was a rainbow which claimed God's blessing for the gay lifestyle. In his autobiography Baker wrote:

Cleve and I danced the same way; we always raised our arms up over our heads, snapping our fingers like Diana Ross. We'd shake our hips like Tina Turner, acid cheerleaders twirling in psychedelic funkadelic circles. The crowd was as much a part of the show as the band. Everyone was there: North Beach beatniks and barrio zoots, the bored bikers in black leather, teenagers in the back row kissing. There were long-haired, lithe girls in belly-dance get-ups, pink-haired punks safety-pinned together, hippie suburbanites, movie stars so beautiful they left you dumbstruck, muscle gayboys with perfect moustaches, butch dykes in blue jeans, and fairies of all genders in thrift-store dresses. We rode the mirrored ball on glittering LSD and love power. Dance fused us, magical and cleansing. We were all in a swirl of colour and light. It was like a rainbow.

A rainbow. That's the moment when I knew exactly what kind of flag I would make.

A Rainbow Flag was a conscious choice, natural and necessary. The rainbow came from the earliest recorded history as a symbol of hope. In the Book of Genesis, it appeared as proof of a

²⁹ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, Crossway, Wheaton (2020). See also the abridged version: *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*, Crossway (2022).

³⁰ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, Crossway, Wheaton (2020), 60.

*covenant between God and all living creatures. It was also found in Chinese, Egyptian and Native American history.*³¹

Baker emphasises his desire for the flag to communicate that the God of the Bible blesses the movement. He said, “The rainbow’s in the Bible. It’s a covenant between God and all living creatures.”³²

The original flag had eight colours. It is worth noticing that there was a spiritual component to the colours. In line with the hippie movement’s connections with the occult and new age mysticism, Baker decreed that the turquoise colour represented ‘magic’ and the violet stood for ‘spirit’. Pink was the first colour because Hitler had made homosexuals wear a pink triangle badge – heading the flag with pink aimed to reclaim that dark history and celebrate homosexuality. The pink colour then stood for sex – gay sex in particular. It had to be dropped from the flag when the cost of the pink material was prohibitive for mass production. Seven colours did not hang evenly from lamp posts and so the turquoise stripe – representing magic or the occult – was dropped. These changes gave the six-colour flag widely promoted to this day, which has been used as the basis for various additions and refinements.

The occult-affirming aspect of the original rainbow flag is significant in that it is the nature of occultism that people are understood to place themselves under dark spiritual powers whether or not they understand themselves to have so done. In the occult world, if you use crystals, cards or magic rites you are under the influence of evil spirits even if you believe that the objects you play with are mere toys and have no supernatural significance. This is how the hidden kingdom of darkness operates.

Besides all the above, it remains the case that a flag denotes and encourages those who observe it, or fly it, to accept within themselves that they live and benefit from the power of the kingdom denoted by said flag; soldiers bleed for their nation’s flag; sports teams play for their flag, burning a flag is seen as a deeply provocative act. A flag is then an especially significant artefact in an expressive individualist culture, for it is the nature of a flag to evoke public sentiment and enforce public celebration. It is no insignificant matter then that the rainbow flag is ubiquitous in our nation. Yesterday I went on a few errands and I saw the rainbow flag flying outside my town’s fire station, hospital and a school. I saw the flag displayed in more than one shop window, on the side of a police car, on a bus and in the bank I visited. My football team (Nottingham Forest – I married into it!) has recently changed its logo to a rainbow-themed one and the captain of our team wears a rainbow armband. It is no exaggeration to say that I see the rainbow flag far more in my daily life than I do the Union Jack. In practical terms, we live in a nation that honours and lives under what the rainbow flag celebrates. The next generation is growing up with more felt pressure to honour the rainbow flag than the union jack – this creates profound challenges to churches that want to help them embrace a biblical identity.

A person can, spiritually speaking, live and serve under only one flag. We can have only one spiritual king – there really are only two spiritual kingdoms and we must choose which to honour. When God rescued his people from Amalek, “Moses built an altar and called the name of it, “The Lord is my Banner.” (Exod 17:15) The enemies of God’s people “set up their own standards” (Ps 74:4) but God’s people know the Lord has said, “Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations, and set up my standard to the peoples.” (Isa 49:22)

A flag which is an outward expression of allegiance and spiritual powers shapes the social imaginary of what sense of identity is blessed by God, and what is permitted and celebrated by our culture. The rainbow flag is far more than just a flag – there is no such thing as ‘just’ a flag; a flag always enforces and empowers. The rainbow flag is the sacrament of ungodly sexuality in the world. If we want the next generation to live under the banner of Jesus and his identity-shaping

31 Gilbert Baker, *Rainbow Warrior*, Chapter 5: www.gilbertbaker.com/rainbow-flag-origin-story/

32 *Rainbow Flag Maker was inspired by Bible*, CNN, 30 June 2015: www.edition.cnn.com/2015/06/30/us/rainbow-flagmaker-gilbert-baker/index.html

holy love, we will need to help them have confidence in their hearts and lives to resist the power mediated by the rainbow flag.

2. Pornography

There is a very broad and well-recognised problem in our culture arising from younger people being permanently connected to a screen. Even if the material being viewed is not pornographic and is just normal communications or news, the ever-present portable screen forms people to be permanently distracted, disengaged and dissatisfied.³³ This general aspect of technology shapes identities, but we need to be aware that the more extreme aspects of obviously sinful viewing are increasingly forming identities. Pornography has become embedded in mainstream Western culture to a degree unimaginable to previous generations. Technology with its own addictive powers means many people are permanently attached to a screen that has infinite reach to the darkest and most violent of visual images. The scientific research is conclusive and well established – pornography reprogrammes the brain, destroys normal sexual drive and fertility, embeds violent and misogynistic convictions, damages the ability to sleep, trashes normal concentration ability, and fuels depression. Crucially – for the purposes of our paper – pornography is one of the ways our culture exerts its worldly weight upon young Christians. The identity of a person is hollowed out by pornography leaving a husk to stumble through the motions of church and daily life.

The British Board of Film Classification has researched the reach of pornography and shockingly concluded that more than half of 11-to-13-year-olds have seen pornography and it is far from unusual to have 7-year-olds be exposed to it. The effects of this are traumatic and long-term.³⁴ The brain itself is damaged by pornography as it is summarised by the American Medical Association:

*We found a significant negative association between reported pornography hours per week and gray matter volume in the right caudate as well as with functional activity during a sexual cue-reactivity paradigm in the left putamen. Functional connectivity of the right caudate to the left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex was negatively associated with hours of pornography consumption.*³⁵

*[The effects of pornography] range from brain fog and social anxiety through to depression, negative body image and flashbacks. Eating disorders, on the rise in young people, cause more deaths than any other mental illness. Porn has a big impact on idealised notions of body image. Even three hours of porn use a week can cause a noticeable reduction in grey matter in key areas of the brain. When brain connections are involved, it means they impact behaviour and mood. Regular bingeing on hardcore internet porn can cause some users to develop mental health problems, compulsive use, even addiction. These interfere significantly with everyday life and life goals. Users often talk about feeling 'numb' towards everyday pleasures.*³⁶

Visual images of a sexual nature retrain a human being to no longer see themselves or other people through the lens of God's word. Augustine observed that the pornographic images popular in Roman culture (which were of course not mediated by a phone or computer) had the ability to train and impact people that exceeded mere verbal teaching. Augustine describes a young man

33 Jean Twenge, *1 Gen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy – and completely unprepared for adulthood*, Atria Books, New York (2017).

34 *Children see pornography as young as seven, new report finds*, BBFC: <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>

35 Kühn S, Gallinat J. *Brain structure and functional connectivity associated with pornography consumption: the brain on porn*. *JAMA Psychiatry*. 2014 Jul 1;71(7):827-34.

36 *The Effects of Pornography on the Developing Child, Part 1*, Handsam Education: <https://compliance.handsam.education/compliance-matters-issue-30/the-effects-of-pornography-on-the-developing-child/>

gazing at a picture on the wall which portrayed two gods engaging in a sordid demeaning act of a sexual nature. He concludes that the man who views it will inevitably desire to do the same as that which he sees and will announce his pleasure in so doing.³⁷ So it is today, the visual images watched and shared by the young people in our churches mentor and disciple them in ways that go deeper into the soul than the few minutes of Bible study or sermon they hear once a fortnight or less. The inner spiritual life of a person matters more than the outer body; what good is it to lose your soul but gain all the finery of this world? And yet the soul can be reached via a pornography of the body. Many fool themselves into thinking the merely digital has no physical impact – this is but one part of the pornographic deception. As Augustine reasoned, “Holiness of body is lost when the soul is violated.”³⁸

Pornography is widely available and intrusively so – hence the majority of children who encounter it do so at first accidentally. This is partly the fruit of our consumer technology-driven culture – another major strand of the world’s identity formation programme. However, it is also worth noting that the materialism of our culture shapes our identity to make our hearts more enthusiastic for sexual depravity. The sheer choice and loneliness of Western consumer culture numbs people to life and we become lukewarm about all that matters. John Cassian was a monk in the ancient church and an insightful analyst of the human heart. He drew a direct link between lukewarmness towards God and sexual sin. It is when our desire for God is lukewarm that we are vulnerable to the assaults of sexual sin. “On account of lukewarmness, the mind turns too readily toward the desires of the flesh. It needs to be restrained by the desires of the Spirit.”³⁹ As materialism makes us lukewarm, we are all the more vulnerable to the lure of pornography.

If all this were not enough, it is now clear that there is a sustained and very effective effort to normalise pornography among children via what is supposedly ‘sex education’. The most widely viewed website for sex education among children today is one that does not at all promote or explain what a Christian would understand to be godly sexual desires or behaviours. Quite the opposite: violent sex, bondage, sado-masochism, homosexuality and group sex are normalised via that supposedly educational resource.⁴⁰ Over 100,000 children visit that site each month, disciplining them into a pornographic culture. Advertising which uses a less extreme form of pornography to seduce one into the consumer culture is complemented by an educational frame bequeathed by the modern British curriculum.

We are fooling ourselves if we think that the weight of the pornographic culture is not already hollowing out the inner identities of young people currently in evangelical churches. For a young person to even hold to the concept of traditional biblical morality in this area is extraordinarily difficult. To avoid being crushed by the weight of the pornography culture requires the grace of God in effusive measure.

There are particular identity-shaping impacts of pornography on churchgoers that are unique to us. Secular psychologists and scientists have listed the damage they can discern – and it is extensive. However, there is a unique soul-destroying impact that is the burden only of the church attendee (or minister) who views pornography – it imposes the identity of one of Jesus’ most virulent enemies upon us: we inevitably become Pharisees – able to affirm doctrinal truths, able to put effort into evangelism, scornful of those less sound than us. The appearance is godly, the inner identity horrific. The Pharisees were the evangelicals of their day and till Christ returns stand as witness to the fact that those who hated Jesus more than any other, prized their Bibles. Pornography as it hollows out the inner soul inevitably forms evangelicals into Pharisees. Jesus said:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a

³⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, 2:7.

³⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, 1:18.

³⁹ John Cassian, *Conferences*, 4:6.

⁴⁰ BISH - *A guide to Sex, Love & You. Expert answers to your Qs 14+* (bishuk.com)

single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves ... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matt 23:15, 25-28)

Every person in church life I have pastored regarding pornography has reported the same thing: "I cannot remember when I last felt joy in church worship. It all feels so dry." This is the impact of pornography on the identity of churchgoers; it forms us into Pharisees who cannot feel the joy of the Lord because our hearts are secretly filled with another spirit. To be sure there are practical steps, discipline steps and parenting steps that need to be implemented to help counter the identity-forming reach of pornography in the souls of the next generation. We also need to recommit to and rediscover the holy, solemn heart-thrilling joy of gathering to worship God with his people on the Lord's Day. The means of grace have not changed since they were instituted and in a pornographic culture, our need for them is as acute as ever. Our identities are formed from the inside-out via either pornography or the means of grace.

3. Consumer Culture

That our Western culture is consumerist and materialistic is such an obvious reality that we can fail to appreciate the substantive weight with which it presses down on our sense of identity. The sense that we achieve happiness and fulfilment through things or experiences we buy is so much part of the air we breathe, that we struggle to analyse the implications and the ways that in recent years consumer society has begun to shape identities in new ways. It was back in 1993 that David Wells published his landmark book *No Place for Truth*⁴¹ which explored the changes being wrought on evangelical churches by the burgeoning culture of postmodernity in general, and consumerism in particular. In that first volume of what was to grow into a multi-volume study of culture and systematic theology, Wells noted that the cultural move into a market-driven society changed most ministers' sense of vocation:

In this new clerical order, technical and managerial competence in the church have plainly come to dominate the definition of pastoral service. It is true that matters of spirituality loom large in the churches, but it is not at all clear that churches expect the pastor to do anything more than to be a good friend. The older role of the pastor as broker of truth has been eclipsed by the newer managerial functions.⁴²

In his 1994 follow-up book *God in the Wasteland*, Wells developed his thesis further and again saw that consumerism was a key driver for the unhealthy changes to evangelicalism he described:

Technique is being substituted for truth, marketing action for thought, the satisfaction of the individual for the health of the church, a therapeutic vision of the world for a doctrinal vision, the unmanageable by the manageable, organism by organisation, those who can preach the Word of God by those who can manage an organisation, the spiritual for the material. At the centre of these substitutions is an individualism fired by a shallow, self-centred consumerism.⁴³

When Wells released his 1998 volume *Losing our Virtue*, he developed his analysis in the direction of how all the cultural changes impacting the church had transformed our ethics. This

⁴¹ David Wells, *No Place for Truth: or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (1994).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 233

⁴³ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*, IVP, Nottingham (1994), 86-87.

required reflection upon the changing sense of identity wrought by the weight of living in a consumer culture:

We need to reflect more on the questions of our lost moral fabric ... Questions of identity today stand at the centre of clashing perspectives on how we are to think about the human being ... there is considerable pressure for people to adapt to each new situation, to reconstruct themselves, to reach into the world around them to extract some meaning for themselves, some sense of who the "I" is. The emptiness of the internal narrative is concealed behind the surface appearances.⁴⁴

It is a sombre journey to read through Wells' classic series of books and see him trace and expound the pressure a consumer culture places upon people to reinvent and market themselves as an ever more fluid identity that conforms to the expectations of the moment. Technological developments mean that the vision painted by Wells has only accelerated. His works stand today as a realised prophecy.

In a culture where all is measured by financial worth people are given the illusion of power. Money is a form of credit, which can transform into anything one desires.⁴⁵ It offers the god-like ability to purchase whatever god you want. In such an environment character expires⁴⁶ – for character requires long haul consistency or, perhaps more realistically, long-term painful growth and maturing. The consumer culture instead pressures people to incessant image changes, the endless pursuit of which promises the world but never delivers genuine happiness. In secular consumer-driven cultures "we contrast less sin to grace than the ordinary to the exceptional."⁴⁷ The ability to purchase another experience, appearance or identity gives both the thrill of novelty and the inevitable banality of never really being able to stand out from the global crowd. As Francis Schaeffer wryly observed, all the rebels wear jeans but they are no longer rebels or individuals when they are all wearing the same jeans.

The UK has a massive problem with household debt – as a proportion of disposable income household debt in the UK in December 2022 stood at 133.8%.⁴⁸ This is not the highest it has been (In 2008 it hit 155.6%) but it is still a significant statistic. It is indicative of the way our consumer culture is built on credit, as opposed to the mere accumulation of capital. Our media understandably point out the practical dangers of so much personal debt in our economy,⁴⁹ however the point I wish to make is more theological and has to do with the identity-shaping power of a consumer culture shaped by credit. The theological significance of personal credit is that it extends my godlike ability to recreate myself and purchase an identity far beyond anything that could be earned by my labour. Money is godlike in its fluidity; credit extends that and so makes the illusion of power all the more beguiling. The deception that is wrought on young people in a credit-driven consumer culture is particularly pernicious – it promises endless forms of purchased identities but inculcates expectations for them being purchased without the sort of labour and work that would have in earlier generations chipped away at idealistic and false expectations. A consumer culture driven by earnings can be selfish and individualistic; a consumer culture driven by credit is illusory and deceptive at even deeper levels of the psyche. People's expectations of identities and the satisfaction levels they desire from what they buy detach from created reality and the limitations God places

44 David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*, IVP, Nottingham (1998), 140-143.

45 Phillip Goodchild, *Theology of Money*, SCM Press, London (2007).

46 James Davidson Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil*, Basic Books, New York (2008).

47 Pascal Bruckner, *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to Be Happy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (2011), 74.

48 *Household Debt: Key Economic Indicators*, House of Commons Librar: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn02885/>

49 *Debt warning for 2 million households ahead of Christmas*, Yahoo: <https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/christmas-debt-warning-bills-000119703.html>

upon our mortal lives. Advertising as an industry feeds off credit consumerism. In previous ages 'advertising' was sharing information about the best or competing versions of something we wanted or needed. Today, advertising is very different; it is designed to create in us a desire for something that we feel will complete us but which we do not actually need. Advertising is in the desire-creating business, and with consumerism built on credit, there is no need to limit the desires that can be foisted upon the next generation.

III. Conspiracy & Victimhood Culture

FLORRY: They say the Last Day is coming this summer.

KITTY: No!

ZOB: Great unjust God!

FLORRY: Well, it was in the papers about Antichrist.

NEWSBOY: Stop Press Edition. Result of the races. Sea Serpent in the royal canal. Safe arrival of Antichrist.

- James Joyce, *Ulysses*.

The conspiracy theory of society comes from abandoning God and asking 'Who is in his place?'

- Karl Popper

While consumer culture fills people with a sense of power (to purchase identity), conspiracy culture fills people with a sense of weakness (unable to control events). That there has been a proliferation of conspiracy theory-shaped outlooks in our culture has been widely commented on both by secular commentators⁵⁰ and Christian writers.⁵¹

"The 'golden age' of conspiracy theories, it seems, is now."⁵² In an era of declining educational standards, declining literacy, and the multiplication of sensory overload via screens and non-stop data, many people lack the tools or experience to distinguish reality from fiction. In a therapeutic age, if the claim makes me feel good about myself then I feel it to be true so it is real for me. As an economy struggles to provide the standard of living people have been led to feel entitled to, as a health service fails, and with fears of a pandemic in recent memory, anger, despair, addiction and disillusionment are on the rise in our nation. In such a context, it is no surprise that conspiracy theories are seized on by many.

Talking with somebody earlier in the year I mentioned that my wife was going to see the recently deceased Queen lying in state, and it is a sadness to me that the Queen had just died. The reply I got was, "Yes well, most people don't know she has been dead for over a year. They have just been pretending – it's all part of the plan." To report that I did not know what to say in reply would be an understatement. I began to realise that comments like that are an invitation to wade deeper into the conspiracy theory world. If you look intrigued, open to hearing more – shocked at the 'reality' being revealed behind the curtain pulled back – then you will be given more so-called 'research' about ever more outlandish conspiracy theories. If your conversations are occurring in a church context, then these can be joined in a gnostic manner with verses about Jesus revealing secrets and the end times described in Revelation.

50 *Why do so many people believe in conspiracy theories?* The Independent, 26.11.22: <https://www.independent.co.uk/independentpremium/long-reads/conspiracy-theories-covid-pandemic-book-b2232180.html>

51 Mark Meynell, *Wilderness of Mirrors: Trusting again in a Cynical World*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids (2015); James Beverley, *The QAnon Deception: Everything You Need to Know about the World's Most Dangerous Conspiracy Theory*, Equal Time Books, Concord (2020).

52 *Buying into conspiracy theories can be exciting—that's what makes them dangerous*, PHYS.org: <https://phys.org/news/2022-07-conspiracy-theories-excitingthat-dangerous.html#:~:text=Key%20themes%20in%20conspiracy%20theories%E2%80%94like%20a>

I have seen numbers of people become gripped by conspiracy theories; I have seen how somebody pulls away from other people, church and family to become convinced that the royal family, government, international agencies and so forth, are all engaged in a nefarious, highly-sophisticated plot to take over the planet. How this happens and why it happens does seem in part to be to do with the challenges we face in the external world, and also it arises from what students of the phenomena describe as a “conspiracy mindset”.

A person who embraces conspiracies as their worldview experiences a feeling of weakness before global, secretive forces they are powerless to defeat. The sense that there is a massive conspiracy to destroy capitalism, or church, or culture leaves those who are discipled in such an outlook feeling unable to change events. However, as agency is shed, a form of power is grasped; the power to know what others cannot see, is experienced and loved. A conspiracy theorist may well feel despair at the powers they imagine are arrayed against them, but they love and enjoy the sense of knowing what others cannot see. The sense that I know the mysteries of the universe and have worked it all out is a heady potion to drink. For those who are driven by self-love, conspiracy theories offer both the ability to blame others for one’s problems and to exalt oneself over them as the all-knowing seer. My failures are not my fault – it is the shadowy powers out there that have oppressed me.

The form of self-love engendered by conspiracy theories is then a well-armoured one. What is needed is truth and verifiability of evidence, but the self-love at the heart of the conspiracy theorists’ worldview prevents them from having the humility needed to learn thorough repentance. Somebody objected to my quoting John Calvin in a sermon recently. I asked why and the reply was a knowing whisper, “Oh I have been researching Calvin.” I raised my eyebrow to invite further disclosure and was solemnly told that “Not many people realise it, but Calvin was a Freemason. He was involved in all kinds of dark stuff.” I had never heard this kind of idea before – despite having taken university courses on Calvin and over the past decades read hundreds of books by and about him. With trepidation, I asked, “When you say research, what do you mean?” The answer was “a YouTube video”. Faced with a conspiracy theorist convinced they know better than all historical evidence and genuine scholarship there is no reasoning. If you try to present evidence it only further suggests to the conspiracy theorist that you are not awake to the secret truth of reality which they have. The problem is one of the heart; until the self-love of secret knowledge is repented of, no progress is possible.

How does conspiracy theory feel? First of all, it lets you feel like you are smarter than everyone. Political scientist Michael Barkun points out that conspiracy theory devotees love what he calls:

“Stigmatized knowledge”, sources that are obscure or even looked down upon. In fact, the more obscure the source is, the more true believers want to trust it. This is the stock in trade of popular podcast “The Joe Rogan Experience” – “scientists” who present themselves as the lone voice in the wilderness and are somehow seen as more credible because they’ve been repudiated by their colleagues. Ninety-eight per cent of scientists may agree on something, but the conspiracy mindset imagines the other 2% are really on to something. This allows conspiracists to see themselves as “critical thinkers” who have separated themselves from the pack, rather than outliers who have fallen for a snake oil pitch. One of the most exciting parts of a conspiracy theory is that it makes everything make sense.⁵³

Allied to conspiracy culture is its cousin, *Victimhood Culture*. There have always, since the murder of Abel, been victims in our cursed world. The supreme victim of injustice was none other than Jesus Christ. The centrality of a divine victim in our religion means Christians of all people should be sensitive to wrongs done and should grieve the pain of sin piled upon sin; it is also possible that we can be susceptible to granting excessive power to any who adopt a victim

53. Ibid.

identity.⁵⁴ In recent years there has been increased awareness and reporting in the secular culture of widespread and serious situations where people have been harmed and hurt by people from whom they had a right to expect care and protection. The secular culture has worked with its tools to bring its imperfect justice, investigation, and righting of wrongs. Almost all areas of society have been touched by such exposure of victims and it is right we mourn wrong done and support what we can to bring righteousness.

Alerting ourselves to the nature of victimhood culture should in no way be interpreted as deprecating the reality of wrongs done to victims or the rightness of seeking justice. Victimhood culture is something that has begun to shape our society partly through the widespread publicity surrounding genuine cases of abuse in all kinds of sectors, and partly through the widespread acceptance of critical theory as it has been embraced by educational establishments and the media. Scholars have noted that the wider cultural problems faced in the West are fuelling growth in a sense of victimhood: "Victimization is the tendency of the citizen coddled by the capitalist 'paradise' to think of himself in terms of the model of a persecuted people, especially at a time when crises sap our confidence in the benefits of the system."⁵⁵

As people are raised to view and understand the widespread existence of people being victimised by people and forces more powerful than them, young people are schooled in their expectations for life. The idea that I too may be a victim becomes a more realistic identity to embrace, the more people are publicly presented as such. Mike Ovey wrote about what he called "victim chic" – the tendency to find identifying as a victim increasingly trendy and popular. He explained that when a person adopts the identity of 'victim' they are covertly – or explicitly – identifying another as the 'oppressor'. A victim may, or may not, genuinely be a victim of a real wrong and injustice. We "use the word 'role' suggesting one may not genuinely be a victim, but only playing a game".⁵⁶ Adopting victim status, as Ovey explains, enables somebody to view their oppressor as wholly evil, intentionally wronging them. Victimhood is very much an identity and it can be magnified, embraced and embedded all the more permanently via its repeated proclamation. As a victim role enables one to view another as an evil oppressor, it also bequeaths an identity on the victim of innocence. In this sense, the identity adopted offers a version of what the gospel gives – justification. So, Ovey wrote of the victim role:

Our self-righteousness is associated with our self-construction. Conferring self-righteousness on myself is a sovereign judicial act. I define myself. This readily looks like establishing my own identity and nature independently of God. But, of course, to be a victim, I need another to be seen as victimizer. My act of self-acquittal has its corollary in my act of sovereign condemnation of the other as victimizer. Both acts resemble infringements on God's role.⁵⁷

At this point we see the family resemblance between conspiracy theory and victimhood culture – both offer an identity of power over others via a posture of weakness. The victim identity enables one to adopt a posture of weakness but from there, one has incredible power to demand the oppressor be cancelled, shamed, and permanently ostracised. There are situations where serious and grave punishments are merited for those who harm others – but it is important to note that the power offered in victimhood culture accrues to both genuine victims and any who adopt that identity in work, university or church.

French philosopher Pascal Bruckner paints a bleak portrait of a culture shaped by victimhood:

If all it takes to win is to be recognised as a victim, then everyone will fight for this gratifying

54. Nietzsche reckoned this a significant problem with Christianity.

55. Pascal Bruckner, *The Temptation of Innocence: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, Algora Publishing, New York (2000), 10.

56. Mike Ovey, 'Victim Chic' in *The Goldilocks Zone: Collected Writings of Michael J. Ovey*, Ed. C. Green, IVP, Nottingham (2018), 160.

57. *Ibid.*, 165.

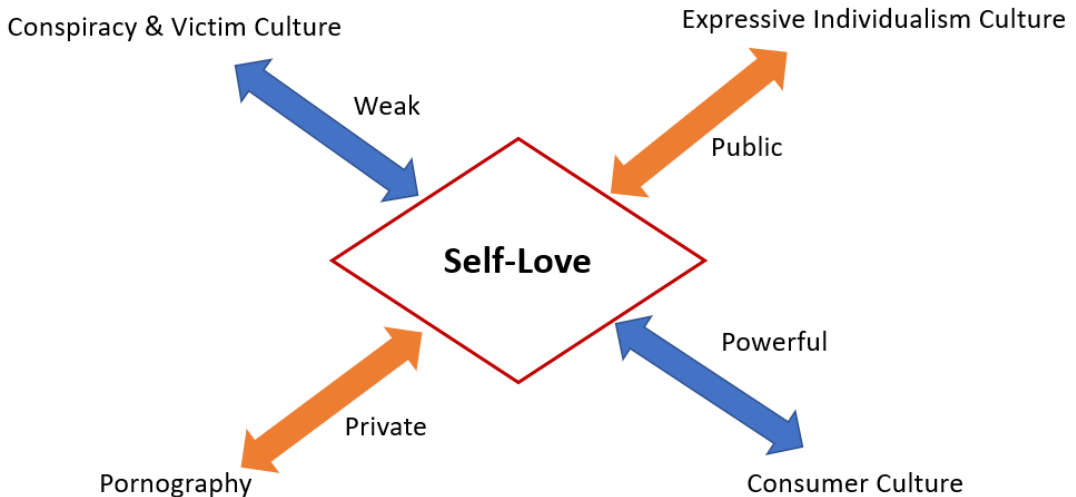
position. Being a victim will become a vocation, a full-time job. However, a former abused child who commits a homicide as an adult is no less a murderer even if he excuses his act because of his unhappy youth. Because historically certain communities were subjugated, the individuals who comprise them would thus enjoy a credit for misdeeds for eternity and would have a right to the jury's indulgence. Society's debt towards such and such of its constituents would automatically translate into leniency, into forbearance for any person belonging to one of these groups, even long after the time when they stopped being persecuted. What remains of legality if it recognises the privilege of impunity for some, if it becomes synonymous with exemption and is transformed into a machine for endlessly multiplying rights and without anything in exchange? This could lead to an environment of civil war in the microcosm, setting child against parents, brother against sister, neighbour against neighbour, patient against doctor, weaving relations of mistrust between everyone.⁵⁸

The *Conspiracy and Victimhood Cultures* of our late-modern Western era offer those who love themselves the invitation to experience power through weakness. Why would young people embrace the identities of conspiracy theorists and victims? Because they are highly plausible and widely encouraged in our culture, and because they offer via an apparent identity of weakness, power over the unknowing and power over the oppressors. All of these attractive benefits are shadow images of the power through weakness that the gospel offers, and they feed the self-love which displaces love for God.

IV. Mirrors of Self Love

We are such unstable creatures that feelings we pretend to have, we really do have at the end.
- Benjamin Constant, Adolphe

We have seen four aspects of the ways in which the world exerts identity-shaping pressure upon people. By demanding loyalty, obeisance, and fear; by offering acceptance, pleasure, and satisfaction, these aspects of the world are worshipped and form people into self-loving creatures.



Each of these four aspects of our world reflects back to us a vision of self that the world promises

58. Pascal Bruckner, *The Temptation of Innocence: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, Algora Publishing, New York (2000), 141.

will satisfy and rescue us from our sense of ennui and incompleteness. They combine with one another to destabilise our sense of identity. The private shameful formation of identity via pornography clashes with the pressure to adopt a public persona under the weight of expressive individualism. The posture of weakness ingrained in us by conspiracy and victim culture wrestles with the sense of power we feel as consumers with credit cards. Am I weak or powerful? Am I who I am alone or in public? I do not know and I fool myself into thinking that I am happy with the contradictions.

Advertising leverages and accentuates the weight of these aspects of the world. In the past advertising gave us information about something we needed; today advertising creates in us a longing for things we do not need.⁵⁹ The more weight the various aspects of the world have on people's sense of identity, the more advertisers will utilise them to sell us desires. Pornography, conspiracy and victim culture, and expressive individualism will all increasingly be foisted upon people's eyes in order to reach their hearts. And so the self is reflected again and again upon itself in a never-ending hall of mirrors.

Technology in general and social media in particular increases the weight of the world upon people's sense of identity. The ever more portable, ever-on, ever-present phones – which are far more than phones – mean that the world's messages are always broadcast to us. Advertising from big tech companies makes us feel that our phones are more than mere tools – the company we choose to buy into reflects and forms our identity. In the social media world, we are given 'free' services, where we pay the price of ourselves since we are the product.

The weight and power of the world, mediated by these four roads to the heart, are immensely damaging to image-bearing creatures. The next generation are a people who have already been deformed and hurt by being raised under the weight of this version of the world. Since Eden people have loved themselves, but the particular form of damage done by self-love at this stage of cultural development and history is unique to us. The harm done is so deep that many notice it, are sorrowful over it, and wish to bring remedies. That is true of the secular world as well as the church.

The challenge for the church is to embrace the road to recuperation and restoration that Jesus calls us to, rather than wider roads that subtly bow under the weight of the world's glory.

V. Missiology of Glory

That person who deserves to be called a theologian understands the visible and revealed things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. - Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation 20-21.

He left the choice of creed an open question, to be decided by the individual as he sees fit. Except he forbade the people to believe anything incompatible with human dignity... - Thomas More, Utopia

Without scriptural, informed spiritual effort, the flesh will succumb to the weight of the world's glory. The glory of the world with all the pressure it exerts does not vanish once we enter the door of the church. The world continues to weigh upon our churches and moulds us into people who try to use the world's methods. Francis Schaeffer warned that "the church's methods must be chosen with much prayer and care, and results alone will not now be the sole, simple criterion ...

59. I am thankful to Simon Calvert for making this point to me.

the church's or Christian group's methods are as important as its message."⁶⁰ Without conscious spiritual effort, our methods will reflect the approaches to organisation and work and relationships and life that the world glorifies and values.

When it comes to the task of mission in general, and to the next generation in particular, there is special pressure on the churches to imbibe by default a missiology of glory. A missiology of glory will intuitively avoid causing offence to the gods of this age and will seek to honour both God and the world. Superficial appeals to the Bible will be used to justify valuing the world's values – being all things to all people; meeting people where they are. Results will be sought and may even in human terms be achieved, collated and published. Positions of influence will be sought (for the sake of the gospel). Celebrities, secular and Christian, will be seen to have significance in building a platform for mission. Motives will at many levels be honourable. "Many who have taken up the tools of marketing have done so out of desires that could be laudable."⁶¹

When the organisational, leadership and financial models for mission used by the church to engage in mission, are recognisably relatives of those used by the world to build everything from sales of washing powder to Premier League football teams, a missiology of glory has been embraced. Matthew Roberts reflects at length on the identity confusion in our culture, and also notes that the identity confusion penetrates the hearts of those in church:

Christians may have transferred their worship and allegiance to God in Christ by the power of the Spirit, but still we tend to drift into the worship of other things, and cling to or pick up false identities from the things we worship. These may be things which are in themselves good when done out of worship for God – such as good family relationships, the fifth and seventh commandments – but which we elevate above God Himself and make into an idol. A Christian can be so proud of his family life that he tends to worship it rather than God who commands it. Or they may be things which are in themselves sinful, ideas or concepts or images which we use to justify disobeying God Himself. Such things lead to Christians holding false understandings of themselves, deriving false identities from these idols even while they know their primary identity is in the Triune God. Christians may have true faith in Christ and yet cling to an array of false identities: for example, a particular career, an exorbitant pride in family or nation, even the recognition that goes with a church ministry.⁶²

The missiology of glory will be unable to withstand the pressures brought to bear on the church by the world. So, while some metrics of mission improve (more church plants, more conversions, more into ministry training) the underlying spiritual challenges in the next generation of an identity nature will be untouched. Pornography and rainbow flag lanyards will still exert their siren call; victim culture will overwhelm church discipline; materialism and consumerism will reign six and perhaps seven days a week.

If we look at the next generation and see that the world has shaped their identities at deep spiritual and psychological levels, then we need to repent of a missiology of glory. Using the world's methods to speak of Christ and build churches will not be able to renew the next generation's sense of identity. Union with Christ, which grants the sense of joy and peace of knowing the holy-loving God, will come only by another, more painful and challenging route. A missiology of glory cannot grant a secure identity, distinct from the world. Repenting of it requires more than a change in method or a new programme to run. It will require us to look at the world and our mission through

60 Francis A. Schaeffer, 'True Spirituality' in *The Complete Works*, vol. 3 (Logos Digital Edition, Crossway Books, 1982), 362–363.

61 David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers and Emergents in the Postmodern World*, IVP, Nottingham (2008), 41.

62. Matthew Roberts, *Pride, Identity and the Worship of Self*, Christian Focus, Fearn (2023), 33. I am very thankful to Matthew for letting me read a prepublication copy of his excellent book, which applies the identity shaping theology of the Gospel to the Pride movement in a spiritual and judicious way.

the shame and brokenness of the cross. We will need to be willing to be treated by the world as Christ was treated. Missiology that forms identity in Christ-honouring ways needs whole churches together to embrace a way of being church that is genuinely crucified to the world. We need to live out an ecclesiology of the Cross.

VI. Ecclesiology of the Cross

Christ tells his disciples that each must bear his own cross (Matt 16:24). For whoever the Lord welcomes into his fellowship must prepare for a hard, toilsome, disturbed life - full to the brim with many and varied sufferings ... In peaceful times many preen themselves on their great works and godliness, only to learn when humbled by opposition that all this was hypocrisy. - John Calvin, Institutes 3:7:1-2

It is not that a Christian culture must make the name of Jesus Christ acceptable to the world; but the crucified Christ has become the refuge, justification, protection and claim for the higher values and their defenders that have fallen victim to suffering. - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics

In light of the spiritual realities explicated in this paper, the path towards renewal and restoration can solely be trod by those who accept a missiology of glory and can only be put to death by an ecclesiology of the cross. Worship of the world which deforms creaturely identity can only be banished by being replaced with worship of God. This is more than changing our individual thinking or behaviour; it amounts to being united to God in ecclesial worship, gathered and joined with others who are on the same journey as us – helping one another adopt a communal approach to life and mission which is shaped by and forms identities that are cruciform.

An ecclesiology of the cross is a shared approach to church that sees the glory of the world for what it is, and values the power found in the shame of the cross. Rather than attempting mission in ways that the world finds palatable, Christians who live out an ecclesiology of the cross help one another to praise God in the only way he truly can be worshipped – where Jesus is:

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. (Heb 13:12-15)

The world casts reproach, shame and derision on any who truly worships Jesus. We may imagine we can worship Jesus while living and valuing the glory this world has to offer – the positions of respectable privilege and comfort in late-modern Western society. However, the Bible says that those who continually praise God must journey to a place of shame like that where Christ was stripped naked, tortured and nailed to a tree. This speaks of more than a mere intellectual understanding of the logic of the atonement; it speaks of bearing the kind of abuse and rejection that Jesus suffered. It is only from that place in life that we can day by day – continually – acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

Any who lives like this will find their identity changed in deep, spiritual, personal and lasting ways. Such people will rejoice to fly the flag of Jesus Christ as master and commander of their hearts, possessions, identities and bodies. This will mean they can worship only Jesus – the one who died to redeem and restore. Conflict and derision from the world are inevitable, for such people will be unable to fly a flag or wear a lanyard at work or in school which proclaims they value the glory of this world. There will be pressure to conform – and some may even urge conformity as a missional tactic. Resisting such siren voices and enduring the shame of being ostracised by the world is difficult. Some will lose their preferred employment. Some children will be unable to follow the careers their parents had. Some churches will have less income and even less social respectability. All of this will be difficult, which is why we do not follow Christ alone but love

one another in a church. We are called to not only have a personal spirituality of the cross but a corporate ecclesiology of the cross. In the economy of God's Kingdom, nobody can have the former without the latter.

Perhaps too many of us in the past have thought we could hand on a form of Christianity that held to some doctrinal truths but resisted the spiritual power to endure cultural opprobrium – we thought a missiology of glory could hand on a theology of the cross. If the next generation of young people in our churches have at deep levels developed identities that are in step with the world's values, then surely this must be a significant part of the reason. Previous generations of Christians bear responsibility for the depth of spiritual identity transformation (or lack thereof) in the next generation. All of this is to say that the power of the cross to shape the identity of the next generation will be manifested when they see us rejoice to suffer a loss of respectability, prestige, comfort and money – because we value Jesus and his suffering more. The ecclesiology of the cross will show those who might covet the acceptance and solidarity felt under the rainbow flag, that the love between Christians is more real and deep. That love is not tested or proven except in the Church where believers help one another bear the world's opposition.

Jesus calls us to not be ashamed of his words in our generation. He taught:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (Mark 8:34-38)

So, denying self rather than Christ is the start of our pilgrimage. The world is there to be gained; we can opt to enjoy our culture's warm embrace and glory in its acceptance. But doing so bears the price tag of our souls. Jesus will return and we need to hold before our trembling hearts that future day for we are surrounded by mottoes, movements and cultural powers that have the ability to tempt us to love the world rather than Christ. The world is adulterous and woos us to love it rather than Jesus. The first step towards building and being part of an ecclesiology of the cross is to see the choice set before us as starkly as Jesus himself put it. Live under the cross together with his body or love the world. Face shame in this world or the next. The choice is ours; may we resolve to reject a missiology of glory by embracing an ecclesiology of the cross.

VII. A supernatural battle

'All who live devoted to God in Christ suffer persecution' (2 Tim 3:12). Do you imagine that because we are not currently persecuted by a pagan emperor, that we no longer face persecution? Only if the devil is dead, has persecution ended. But if our adversary is alive, how can he not insinuate temptations, how can he not be rampaging against us, how can he not be devising threats and schemes to trip us up? If only you lived devoted to God, you would find yourself persecuted. - Augustine, Psalm 127, 16.

The damage to our hearts which makes us doubt that God's ways are best was wrought by Satan in Eden. We do not feel that a missiology of glory can be relied on instead of an ecclesiology of the cross merely because it makes sense intellectually, nor solely because it seems to work, or it has been modelled to us by previous generations. Rather we long for a respectable world-affirming way to do mission because Satan heads an effective supernatural army with knowledge and weapons well calibrated to seduce our hearts. We are engaged in a supernatural battle (Eph 6:12). If we are resolved to embrace an ecclesiology of the cross, we must recognise that to do so is to take our place in a battle which is supernatural. The means that we must rely on are those which are fitted

to the supernatural war. Our strength must come from the Lord (Eph 6:10) not the slick advertising campaign a church administrator puts together for the internet. Only the strength of the Lord will enable us to help one another live under and bear the reproach of the world. Only the strength of the Lord will enable us to model repentance for secret pornography habits. Only the strength of the Lord will enable us to have sufficiently less of a materialistic consumer outlook that we are willing to lose out on promotion, rather than don the badge of Pride in the workplace.

Our corporate prayer will feel urgent, vital and necessary if our church community has members facing genuine problems due to honouring Christ over the world's values. Such prayer meetings will not look like a slightly religious version of a company's annual business meeting, but they will feel like supernatural gatherings of people in union with Christ. Were a world-worshipping person to wander in they might fall down in fear and awe at the felt presence of the supernatural God (1 Cor 14:24-25).

Created as creatures to worship God, we are living in a supernatural universe. The invitation to live out an ecclesiology of the cross is one which holds forth the promise of supernatural power to endure, live and die for Christ. All the glory of this world and all its respect, pleasures and pride cannot withstand the prayers of a church committed to living under the cross of Christ. None of us can organise or plan or strategise to make even one church embrace the shame of the cross, but God's supernatural power can be at work in any who admit their weakness and need of his grace. In churches where people cry out to God for his power to be shaped by the cross, the next generation will find a place where their identities can be formed into the image of Jesus.

VIII. The Road Less Travelled

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*
- Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken

For those who seek to maintain biblical convictions regarding identity, there are a limited number of paths forward. As the years roll on and fruit is tasted, many will sigh with regret and ruminate on the extent to which our choice of path was determined by the expectations of others; our fears; our temperaments; whether the weight of God's glory or the weight of the world's glory were our chief ballast; whether our churches will be seen to have strived for a missiology of glory, or the shame of an ecclesiology of the cross. The roads that diverge and which we all must choose from consist of the following:

1. Pivot to Gesture Church

The dominant worldview of the coming generation manifests in pressure to cancel speakers thought harmful, universities' safe spaces, trigger warnings, microaggressions, reparations for earlier generations' racial inequalities, identity politics and so forth. One way some churches will try to do mission in such a world will be to pivot towards this culture. They will wrongly think they can use some of the terms, ideas and concepts as window dressing for effective gospel mission, not realising that the ideology of the critical theorist has power and is unleashed merely by utilising its verbal constructs in public. The academic writings of men like Marcuse who outlined the strategy for cultural transformation were very clear that their words were crafted to change the world⁶³ –

63. See Herbert Marcuse, *Repressive Tolerance* (1968): <https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/publications/1960s/1965-repressive-tolerance-fulltext.html>

they cannot be harnessed or handled as mere window dressing for a cross-shaped ministry. The ministry and church get changed to value the things of this world if the world's terms and ideas are utilised – even with good motives.

2. Practise Private Piety Church

The world that has its own form of secular power today is so overwhelming and effective in breaking and cancelling those who speak against its values, that many churches will retreat into themselves. Unable to bear the cost of living counterculturally in the world, such churches will seek to keep going through the motions of Christian living – privately and within the church family. Programmes and events will be organised, and private Christian living may be encouraged. Such churches will be able to tell themselves they are Bible believing and Bible honouring. But while the Bible may be privately read and preached in the church it cannot be applied to the culture or those who live in it. Increasing funds will be spent on church staff in such churches – the 'gospel' preached will be unable to equip for faithful living outside the church and so one will need ever-increasing staff numbers to model private change in lives hermetically sealed from the world. Compromises will have to be made – for example in justifying wearing rainbow lanyards at work – but they can be for some time hidden from the church leadership who insulate themselves behind their private piety.

3. Puffed-up Chest Church

There will be those churches where people see there are immense cultural challenges and identity-shaping problems. The *Puffed-up Chest Church* seeks to attack the problems using politics, edgy messaging and aggressive differentiation from the world. Many in such churches will see the world's problems through political lenses – of either left or right. They will be susceptible to both conspiracy theories and strong leaders. The appearance of power in such a church will in reality be a form of aggression that lacks Christ's meekness and is unwilling to suffer ignominy. Worldly victory and a worldly fight are sought; the lost are aggressively opposed, not graciously loved.

4. Prepare for Long Haul Church

The road I pray you take – which I have over the past few years committed myself to – is patient, slow and open to the pain of rejection. It is the path which recognises that the spiritual identity crisis the next generation faces has already caused much harm and people will only find renewal and restoration when churches commit to a slow, patient, spiritually-minded commitment to live under the cross, together. It will involve the recognition that the supernatural work of God requires people to commit to being together and forgiving one another and to worship together – over the long haul of life. Superficial and professional relationships will, over time, be transformed into cross-shaped, life-laying-down, love for one another. Over the years as people in the church suffer for their honouring of Jesus over the world's idols, there will be those happy to comfort, support and care in practical ways. The next generation will see how such believers love one another (John 13:35) and want to be part of a Church that is shaped by the Cross rather than the world. Only in such communities can the identity that has been deformed by glorying in the world be remade in the likeness of the crucified Lord of love. There is no programme, strategy or technique that can enable our churches to walk this long road – and it cannot be marketed to the world as attractive or even worth the cost. And yet, for those with ears to hear, Jesus still invites us to find our deepest identity and joy in such a church.

May we help one another to turn from the missiology of glory and live out the identity found in an ecclesiology of the cross, not just for our sake but for the sake of those yet to be born.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Dr Peter Sanlon is Adjunct Professor of Systematic & Historical Theology at Westminster Seminary (UK) and for the past nine years has been a church minister in Tunbridge Wells. He holds theology degrees from Oxford and Cambridge Universities. He has published books on various topics including 'Simply God: Recovering the Classical Trinity' (IVP), and 'Augustine's Theology of Preaching' (Fortress). His booklet 'Plastic People' (Latimer Press) was an evaluation of identity debates around transgenderism. Published back in 2010 that work was used in more than one denomination to defend traditional views. In his free time, he enjoys tabletop historical wargaming. He is married with two school-age sons.

DIVINE LIGHT AND HOLY LOVE

GENUINE CONVERSION IN THE WORKS OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

Rev. Robin Gray

'Tis the most important change that ever persons are the subjects of. - Jonathan Edwards, *The Reality of Conversion* (1740)

Abstract

This paper opens up the key question of genuine conversion by delving deep into the mind of Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) on the subject, and in particular, his *Religious Affections*, which were the mature fruit of Edwards' deep reflection, years after many striking and 'surprising' events in his own ministry. Few minds have thought as hard and as deeply as Edwards about the subject of conversion, but fewer by far have written about the subject as incisively as he did. Whilst many other scholars and pastors have very helpfully brought Edwards' thinking to the attention of the contemporary church, this paper, as it succinctly summarises Edwards' main observations, will undoubtedly prove to be a precious additional resource in the hands of twenty-first-century pastors, not only in evaluating professed conversions in their own churches but in keeping a close watch on their own souls (1 Tim 4:16).

I. Introduction

The world abounds with millions of unconverted people who say they believe in Jesus. - John Piper, *Desiring God*¹

The above statement only makes sense if we allow that it is one thing to *profess* Christ, and another to *possess* Christ, and that conversion is the difference between the two. "Conversion" denotes a fundamental change of direction and a radical change of nature. Recognising its importance to genuine Christianity, a biblical understanding of conversion and evangelism is the "fourth mark" in Mark Dever's influential book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. And yet if Piper's statement is accurate, the church is not in the best of health. Furthermore, several Western governments are now seeking to ban "conversion therapy" in such broad terms that biblical preaching which aims at such a radical change could soon be outlawed. But are we sufficiently confident in our understanding of conversion to explain it, defend it, and recognise it? It is our argument here that if the church wishes to regain a robust and profound understanding of conversion, it would do well to turn to Jonathan Edwards as a scriptural guide whose insights into the nature of conversion and, crucially, the difference between genuine and false conversion, deserve to be retrieved and reflected upon afresh.

Jonathan Edwards (1703 – 1758) pastored during times both of localised and widespread religious revival in Britain's American colonies. The Northampton, Massachusetts, community of which he was pastor experienced its own revival in the years 1734-5. A few years later the Great Awakening swept through Northampton as it did the rest of New England, in the early 1740s. In

¹ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, Revised, Expanded edition (Multnomah, 2011), 47.

keeping with the concerns of the early evangelical movement of which he was a part, the great burden of Edwards' preaching was conversion: "the turning of the heart from sin to God".² One recent scholarly article asserts: "one cannot deny the preeminent place of conversion in his thought and preaching."³ Edwards stressed the overarching significance of conversion thus: "If there be such a thing as conversion, 'tis the most important thing in the world."⁴ Stressing the essence of conversion as "a great change", Edwards states, "'Tis the most important change that ever persons are the subjects of."⁵ The simple reason for this was that the difference between eternal life and damnation lay in whether a person was converted or not.

Amongst Calvinist pastors such as Edwards and his colleagues, the sovereignty of God in conversion was stressed, but not in such a way that the responsibility of the sinner to seek conversion was in any way diminished. Edwards inherited a "preparationist" view of conversion, whereby subjects of God's saving grace were (generally) prepared for it through their diligent use of various God-appointed means.⁶ Alongside this idea of preparation came an inherited "morphology" or recognised pattern, whereby a sinner passed through a number of steps or stages before it could be said they had indeed "come through" or been converted.⁷ Whilst Edwards did not reject either aspect of this legacy outright, his view of conversion possessed a different emphasis. Perhaps not least because his own conversion had not strictly followed the steps of the inherited "morphology" (his deepest experience of conviction of sin occurred after his conversion, not before it), the pastor of Northampton brought a combination of logical rigour and profound scriptural insight to bear in his exploration of the nature of true conversion. "Nature" is the operative word: in the words of a trio of Edwards' scholars he saw conversion "not so much a matter of a certain order or structure of experience as it is of an altered 'nature'"⁸

Edwards' theology was born out of an intense, lifelong study of scripture. As D.W. Kling puts it: "To understand Edwards is to understand that scripture informed the core of his being."⁹ During times of revival Edwards observed that individuals were prone to interpret their personal experiences as proof of having been converted – imagining that they saw Christ, texts of scripture suddenly coming to mind or hearing voices assuring them of salvation, amongst others. To this Edwards responded: "'Tis abundantly safer... to follow the light of Scripture, than to draw up rules from our own experiences." People could be deceived by such experiences, which could be caused by the devil, and "the Scripture is very careful to lay the main stress upon such things as Satan cannot imitate."¹⁰ The Bible formed his understanding of conversion and provided reliable examples, both of genuine conversion and, just as importantly, its counterfeit.

Revival brought converts, but it also brought hypocrites – people who made a great show of having been converted but whose lives called into question the credibility of their profession. Some cases of false conversion were easy to identify, others far less so. As Edwards' experience

2 Jonathan Edwards, 'The Reality of Conversion (1740)', in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 90.

3 David W. Kling, 'Jonathan Edwards, the Bible, and Conversion', in *Jonathan Edwards and Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 213.

4 Edwards, 'The Reality of Conversion (1740)', 92.

5 Jonathan Edwards, 859. Sermon on I Cor. 6:11 (Jan. 1747), in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online, Volume 65, Sermons, Series II, 1747*, ed. Jonathan Edwards Center, L31r, accessed online 30.12.22.

6 Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, 'Conversion: A Divine and Supernatural Light', in *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 375–76.

7 Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 66–70.

8 Wilson H. Kinnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney, eds., 'Editors' Introduction', in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), xix.

9 Kling, 'Jonathan Edwards, the Bible, and Conversion', 213.

10 Jonathan Edwards, 394. Conversion [1722] in Harry S. Stout (Ed.) *The "Miscellanies": (Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500), Works of Jonathan Edwards Online (WJEO) Vol. 13.*

of revivals grew, his position moved from the almost unbridled optimism of his early reports on the Northampton awakening, to a more seasoned and discerning view, borne out of much disappointment at seeing those who had claimed to be converted either backslidden or apparently never converted at all.¹¹ Edwards' great concern was the damage such false conversions did to the internal peace of the church and its witness to a watching world:

*'Tis by the mixture of counterfeit religion with true, not discerned and distinguished, that the devil has had his greatest advantage against the cause and kingdom of Christ, all along, hitherto.*¹²

If he could better ascertain where the essence of true conversion lay, pastors could be better instructed in discerning who among their flocks had indeed been "savingly wrought upon" and who were simply making "a vain show". Even more importantly, those who were self-deceived might be awakened to their perilous condition before it was too late.

II. Thesis

This paper seeks to outline the main emphases of Edwards' teaching on genuine conversion and its counterfeit, from the perspective that a thoughtful retrieval of these insights would be of significant pastoral benefit to the contemporary church. Much of what we would consider definitive proof of a person being genuinely converted would not be viewed by Edwards as such, and his highly perceptive and biblically rooted approach can give us a richer understanding of what conversion really is and how it manifests itself. However, contemporary Christians risk misinterpreting, and thereby misapplying, what Edwards meant by "affections". Further, Edwards himself was the first to stress that the signs of grace which he described were not in themselves a comprehensive test to give assurance of salvation one way or another, and he also warned against making absolute and definitive pronouncements about the spiritual condition of others.

III. Scope

The question of conversion permeates virtually all of Edwards' work, which currently runs to 73 volumes in the Yale *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, with still more of Edwards' papers and manuscripts awaiting transcription! A cursory search through his treatises, sermons and extensive *Miscellanies* yields myriad insights, meditations, and reflections on the nature of true conversion. A survey of everything Edwards had to say about conversion is therefore well beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is our thesis that two powerful motifs dominate Edwards' thought on conversion: divine light and holy affections, and that in these respects two of Edwards' works, one composed shortly before the revival in Northampton, and one written in the aftermath of the Great Awakening, enable us to coordinate the best of his thinking on genuine conversion. His 1733 sermon *A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul By the Spirit of God, Shown to Be Both a Scriptural, and Rational Doctrine* (published in 1734) takes the theme of "spiritual light" which permeates so much of Edwards' work on conversion and distills it into a concise and definite form. Of this work, Edwards' biographer George Marsden says it "encapsulates better than any other single source the essence of his spiritual insight. More concisely than anywhere else... he related his most profound theological reflections on his understanding of true Christian experience."¹³

Some thirteen years later, Edwards had experienced the highs and lows of multiple revivals,

11 George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 285.

12 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Volume 2: Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 86.

13 George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 157.

most recently the Great Awakening itself. It was in response to the sensationalistic excesses (“delusive enthusiasm” as Marsden describes it¹⁴) that took place during the Great Awakening that Edwards’ most comprehensive work on true and false conversion *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* was published. *Religious Affections* is widely recognised as a masterpiece within the canon of classic Christian literature and could be fairly said to be Edwards’ most thoroughgoing treatment of the signs which indicate a person is truly converted. All of these signs reside in the “affections”, a difficult term for modern readers to understand and which we will endeavour to define in due course.

Whilst reference will be made to other works, it is *A Divine and Supernatural Light* and *Religious Affections* that we will be primarily concerned about in this short study. Between them, they assert a powerful thesis: what distinguishes a true convert from a false one is that the former has been granted a new spiritual sense through the Holy Spirit uniting himself to the person’s soul and infusing a new and vital principle into it. This spiritual enlightenment is *qualitative* – it bestows the ability to apprehend the truth, beauty and glory of God and Christ on an experiential level that the unregenerate are incapable of. It is also *effective* – those, and only those, who have received this light are truly changed and demonstrate the fact they have been genuinely converted through the lively exercise of holy affections. Such affections can be counterfeited, however, so great care and discernment are required in evaluating their manifestation in ourselves or others.

IV. A major caveat: No final judgments before the time

For all his depth of study into discerning between true and false converts, Edwards did not believe it was possible to make a final pronouncement on whether a person was truly converted or not and, in fact, strongly urged against doing so. Marsden notes that Edwards took exception to George Whitefield’s hasty pronouncements on the spiritual state of people he barely knew – including many New England pastors – on his first visit to the colonies. Edwards even went so far as to personally admonish the young Whitefield about this.¹⁵ Edwards states plainly:

*Hence they do greatly err that go about to make a separation between true and false Christians in the world, as though they had power of discerning and certainly distinguishing between godly and ungodly, and so will venture positively and absolutely to decide concerning the state of others’ souls. They do err that will positively determine for persons that they are converted, but more especially they who are positive and peremptory in determining against ’em, being forward to say of one and another that they never were converted, and that they hadn’t a jot of true grace in their hearts... Such persons take upon them the part of the judge, and anticipate the work of the day of judgment.*¹⁶

So, if a final determination on the state of a person’s soul cannot, and indeed should not, be made, why go to such lengths to discover the differences between true and false converts and to elucidate the qualities that are peculiar only to genuine conversion? The answer is that whilst absolute pronouncements were not possible, very helpful *indications* as to whether a person was converted or not could indeed be discerned. People could be disabused of notions that in their minds proved decisively one way or another as to their own or another’s condition. An emphasis on discerning between true and false religion was not a warrant to be censorious of others, but rather an impetus for individuals to “see to their own souls”.¹⁷ They could be directed away from the

¹⁴ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 285.

¹⁵ Marsden, 211.

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards on the Matthean Parables. Volume 1, True and False Christians (on the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins)*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, Adriaan Cornelis Neele, and Bryan McCarthy (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books: The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2012), 71–72.

¹⁷ Bryan McCarthy, ‘Introduction: Historical Context’, in *Sermons by Jonathan Edwards on the Matthean Parables. Volume 1*,

quicksand of inconclusive signs of conversion to surer biblical grounds for their hope.

V. Regeneration, conversion and hypocrites

As we have seen above, by “conversion”, Edwards generally meant the great change by which a sinner becomes a Christian. It is a person’s entrance into the Christian life. He generally used the term “regeneration” to refer specifically to the new birth, but also used “conversion” in this sense.¹⁸ At other times he was at pains to distinguish them, even asserting that regeneration could take place some considerable time before conversion. This short explanation is given by way of a disclaimer to readers who may wish to explore some of the works of Edwards for themselves and be somewhat bemused by the differing uses of terms. For our purposes, we are considering conversion as Edwards usually referred to it, as “the great change” whereby a person who was dead in sin becomes alive in Christ, encompassing regeneration, repentance, and faith in Christ.

Edwards’ preferred term for false converts was “hypocrites”. By this he did not mean that such false converts were deliberately deceiving others, but rather that in most cases they were also self-deceived. Furthermore, Edwards freely acknowledged the presence of hypocrisy in true believers. What made a person truly a hypocrite was the absence of any sincerity whatsoever. By contrast, regarding true believers, “Though there be a great deal of hypocrisy, yet if there be any sincerity, that little sincerity shall not be rejected because there is so much hypocrisy with it.”¹⁹

VI. “A Great Change”: The reality of conversion (1740)

Before we explore *A Divine and Supernatural Light* and *Religious Affections*, another work of Edwards provides a helpful point of entry into his view of conversion in general terms.

His 1740 sermon *The Reality of Conversion* begins by asserting the very fact of conversion. “There is such a thing as conversion” he states as his doctrine, drawn from the text of John 3:10-11.²⁰

In this sermon, rather than define conversion as a series of experiences taking place in a specific order, Edwards repeatedly describes it in such terms as “a change”, “a change of nature”, and “a great change”.²¹ The example of suffering Christians who refused to renounce their faith showed that a fundamental inner change had occurred in them. The cause of such resolve can only be “some mighty work of God on their hearts, changing their natures and infusing principles that strengthened them and carried ‘em far beyond the strength of nature”.²²

Edwards also explains why conversion, understood specifically as a change of *nature*, is necessary to salvation. Man’s true happiness consists in union with his Creator. Yet “man can never be happy in union with and in the enjoyment of his Creator with an unholy nature, for holiness of nature is conformity of nature with God” and “mankind are, as they are born into the world, universally of an unholy nature and, therefore, they can’t be made holy but by a change of nature”.²³ Unholiness and holiness cannot be united but rather are at complete odds to one another. The remedy for unholy man to be united to his holy creator is for his unholy nature to be changed to a

20.

18 For example, he states “The doctrine of conversion, or of the new birth, is one of the great and fundamental doctrines of the Christian religion” in “The Reality of Conversion”, 81.

19 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 8, Ethical Writings*, Ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 182.

20 Edwards, “The Reality of Conversion (1740)”, 83.

21 *Ibid.*, 84-85.

22 *Ibid.*, 89.

23 *Ibid.*, 85.

holy one, and this is the supernatural work of God in conversion.

Interestingly, in the “Application” section of the sermon, Edwards gives numerous directions to his unconverted listeners, at the conclusion of which he says: “If you follow these directions, in all probability you will be converted.”²⁴ As a Reformed theologian who stressed the sovereign and supernatural work of God in conversion, he also placed on his hearers their responsibility to diligently use all the appointed channels through which conversion is typically brought about. In this sermon, he gives no less than *seventeen* directions to that end. It may be that in Edwards’ directions towards those who would be converted we see John “Rabbi” Duncan’s point when he said “I would like to sit at Jonathan Edwards’ feet to learn what is true religion, and at Thomas Boston’s to learn how I am to get it,” the implication being that Boston might not give quite so many directions for would-be converts to follow.²⁵

Given the fact that conversion is absolutely necessary for unholy people to be united to the holy God, and that damnation ensues without conversion, Edwards concludes: “If there be such a thing as conversion, ’tis the most important thing in the world; and they are happy that have been the subjects of it and they most miserable that have not’.”²⁶

VII. True conversion and “The Sense of the Heart”: A divine and supernatural light

Light was Edwards’ favourite biblical image for conversion²⁷, depicting God’s saving communication of his truth and love to creatures who were helplessly darkened by sin.²⁸ Whilst Edwards’ references to 2 Corinthians 4:6 are understandably frequent in this regard, the text he takes for *A Divine and Supernatural Light* is in fact Matthew 16:17. The essence of divine truth cannot be revealed by flesh and blood, but only by God acting directly and immediately upon the creature, just as God the Father revealed the identity of Christ to Peter. This light does not propose new information that is not already found in Holy Scripture, nor does it present novel ideas or experiences to the imagination. Rather it illuminates the mind to see divine truth aright, in all its glory, excellency and beauty.

The uniqueness of this divine illumination consists in the way the Holy Spirit communicates it. A common theme in Edwards’ doctrine of conversion is that the Holy Spirit may, and often does, operate upon persons in a non-saving way. There are a range of ways in which the Spirit of God may act on the mind of “a natural man” without conversion. What makes the Spirit’s work in conversion unique is that he communicates *himself* to the creature: “He unites himself with the mind of a saint, takes him for his temple, actuates and influences him as a new, supernatural principle of life and action.”²⁹ The Holy Spirit acts in the mind of a saint “as an indwelling vital principle” and this principle is “infused” into the soul. Edwards’ understanding of the Spirit communicating his own nature to the mind of the creature has been described as “placing him [the illuminated creature] on an entirely different epistemological level” to the unregenerate person.³⁰ This divine and supernatural light which has been bestowed grants “a true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the Word of God, and a conviction of the truth and reality of them, thence

24 Ibid., 104. Here Edwards cites Proverbs 2:1-5 in support and argues that his directions “are agreeable to God’s word”.

25 John M. Brentnall (ed.), *Just a Talker’: The Sayings of Dr John Duncan* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 176.

26 Edwards, “The Reality of Conversion (1740)”, 92.

27 McClymond and McDermott, ‘Conversion’, 377.

28 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 55.

29 Ibid., 124–25.

30 The quotation above is used by K. P. Minkema to describe the thrust of an earlier work by Edwards, namely *Spiritual Understanding of Divine Things Denied to the Unregenerate*, which states negatively what Edwards would later set out positively in *A Divine and Supernatural Light*. *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online, Volume 14, Sermons and Discourses 1723-1729*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press) 68.

arising".³¹

In this sermon, Edwards takes the difference between the unregenerate and the regenerate to be the depth to which divine truth sinks into a creature. In the unregenerate, there is at best only rational assent and notional understanding. In the regenerate, the truth "reaches the bottom of the heart and changes the nature".³² One person may know only propositionally that honey is sweet, but the other has tasted it and knows it experimentally to be so.³³

The word Edwards uses repeatedly to describe the apprehension of divine truth granted by this spiritual light is "sense"; and because this sense is in the inner man, he frequently calls it "the sense of the heart": "'tis not a thing that belongs to reason, to see the beauty and loveliness of spiritual things; it is not a speculative thing, but depends on the sense of the heart."³⁴ Here Edwards is not pitting "reason" and "sense" against one another, for the assent and approval of the mind play their part in the believer's reception of the truth. But he is placing the *essence* of saving faith in this latter quality, the sense of the heart:

*Such a conviction of the truth of religion as this, arising, these ways, from a sense of the divine excellency of them, is that true spiritual conviction, that there is in saving faith. And this original of it, is that by which it is most essentially distinguished from that common assent, which unregenerate men are capable of.*³⁵

Referring to 2 Corinthians 4:6, Edwards says "This plainly shows, that there is such a thing as a discovery of the divine superlative glory and excellency of God and Christ; and that peculiar to the saints; and also that 'tis as immediately from God, as light from the sun".³⁶

It might be argued here that Edwards appears to be describing only *regeneration* rather than conversion as it is more fully understood. Certainly, there is a strong emphasis on the divine action in bringing about the new birth, viewed very much from the perspective of new and transformative light or knowledge imparted to the creature. But in explaining this light's effects Edwards also encompasses the illuminated person's hearty approval of God's plan of redemption, and earnest reception of Jesus Christ as Redeemer: "This light, and this light only, will bring the soul to a saving close with Christ."³⁷ He is, as it were, aiming at the heart of what constitutes genuine conversion, not simply sketching a particular logical stage in the *ordo salutis*.

Edwards concludes the sermon with an important final observation: the evidence of a person having received this divine and supernatural light, and thus having been genuinely converted, is "universal holiness of life".³⁸ By this Edwards does not mean sinless perfection, but rather an obedience that extends into every department of life that is motivated by a sincere love for God:

*But this light, as it reaches the bottom of the heart, and changes the nature, so it will effectually dispose to an universal obedience. It shows God's worthiness to be obeyed and served. It draws forth the heart in a sincere love to God, which is the only principle of a true, gracious and universal obedience.*³⁹

By the time of *A Divine and Supernatural Light's* publication for a wider audience the year after it was preached, revival had broken out in the Northampton community of which Edwards was

31 Jonathan Edwards, 'A Divine and Supernatural Light', 126.

32 *Ibid.*, 140.

33 *Ibid.*, 127-28.

34 *Ibid.*, 137.

35 *Ibid.*, 129-30.

36 *Ibid.*, 132.

37 *Ibid.*, 139.

38 *Ibid.*, 139.

39 *Ibid.*, 140.

pastor, and he could say confidently in his Preface that such a doctrine, as he had outlined in his treatise, had since been “clearly exemplified” in his own congregation.

VIII. The Great Awakening⁴⁰

Further revival came about in spectacular fashion when the period known as Great Awakening dawned on Northampton as it did in much of the rest of New England with the visit of the English itinerant preacher George Whitefield in 1740. Whitefield preached for conversions – and got them in great numbers. However, with the Awakening came convulsions that upset the once-settled religious landscape. “Old Lights” who were sceptical of the revival’s “enthusiasm” were pitted against “New Lights” who embraced, often without too much discernment, many of its more sensationalistic manifestations. The result was that whilst many people may have been converted during this period, the church was in a mess. Settled ecclesiastical authority had suffered a major blow, with clergy divided amongst themselves, and New Light converts seceding from their congregations on account of their allegedly “graceless” ministers. It was in response to this confusion that Edwards wrote *Religious Affections*, and in doing so conferred upon the church a profound, searching and scriptural work on the essence of true religion.

We should point out here, given the title of the work, that Edwards uses the terms “religious” and “religion” *positively*, in keeping with the Christian tradition up until recent times. In contemporary evangelicalism “religion” is a term that has come to be used pejoratively to denote legalism or “works righteousness”, pitted against the “relationship” of true Christianity, or the “grace” of the gospel. Edwards would not recognise this use of the term. Rather, he contrasted true religion with false religion, and true believers with hypocrites.⁴¹

IX. Holy love: Religious affections

*But it is doubtless true, and evident from these Scriptures, that the essence of all true religion lies in holy love; and that in this divine affection, and an habitual disposition to it, and that light which is the foundation of it, and those things which are the fruits of it, consists the whole of religion.*⁴²

The Great Awakening promised much, and even delivered much, but by its close it had degenerated into chaos and confusion. One of its most prominent critics was Charles Chauncy, the pastor of First Church in Boston. Chauncy, whom we might describe today as a moderate or even a “protoliberal”, placed reason above affections, and decried the enthusiasm of the Awakening, especially the emphasis placed on emotional experiences. It is perhaps surprising, given the fact that they engaged in something of a pamphlet war, that Edwards and Chauncy agreed on a great deal; Edwards’ loathed many of the same excesses that Chauncy did. But he was a defender of the genuineness at the heart of the Awakening and was unwilling to concede the heart of authentic Christianity to reason and the intellect. Chauncy’s famous statement was: “an *enlightened mind*, not *raised affections* ought always be the guide of those who call themselves men; and this in the affairs of religion, as well as other things.”⁴³ In stark contrast, Edwards asserted that a truly enlightened

40 I am greatly indebted to George Marsden’s chapter “A House Divided” from his *Life* for an understanding of the convulsions of the Great Awakening and their impact on Edwards.

41 For example, Timothy Keller is a proponent of the “Religion versus The Gospel” dichotomy. See, for example, Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centred Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 65, which features a table pitting “Religion” versus “Gospel” in nine different ways.

42 Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 107.

43 Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England* (Boston, 1734), 327, cited in Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 281.

mind *resulted* in raised affections, leading to the significantly more famous thesis of his treatise: “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.”⁴⁴

Contemporary readers can immediately run into trouble here, by substituting “emotions” for the less familiar term “affections”. This is a mistake. To begin with, there is no commonly accepted definition of what is meant by the emotions, but such consensus as there is tends to make emotions very much a “felt” experience, rooting them in the body in a fundamental way. By contrast, Edwards’ understanding of the affections situates them in the *soul*, not the body. More specifically, for Edwards affections are heightened inclinations of the will. The will exists in the soul. Therefore, although affections generally have an effect *on* the body, they do not reside *in* the body; a disembodied spirit is just as capable of experiencing affections as an embodied one.⁴⁵ As Ryan J. Martin explains:

*By replacing affections with emotions (often done to make Edwards more intelligible and contemporary), interpreters have left readers with a distorted Edwards. Edwards did not conceive of affections as corporeal feelings at all, but as strong movement of the will.*⁴⁶

Further, the crux of Edwards’ argument in *Religious Affections* is that true religion consists in great part in *holy* affections. A hypocrite may experience a great many heightened affections, as was the case in the Awakening, but these affections are not holy, and therein lies the fundamental difference. We should therefore be very wary of invoking Edwards in an argument for heightened “emotions” *per se* in Christian life and worship.⁴⁷

In his preface to the work, Edwards describes his great burden for the project at hand. The failure of the church to distinguish between true grace and hypocrisy has given the devil the greatest advantage during the past period of revival, and through his mischief, he has succeeded in ruining much of its promise.

*And so it is likely ever to be in the church, whenever religion revives remarkably, till we have learned well to distinguish between true and false religion, between saving affections and experiences, and those manifold fair shows, and glistening appearances, by which they are counterfeited; the consequences of which, when they are not distinguished, are often inexpressibly dreadful.*⁴⁸

One of the “inexpressibly dreadful” things, alongside the schism, scandal and sensationalism of the excesses of the revival, is that countless people could be self-deceived as to their own spiritual state.

Edwards begins Part 1 with the text which is the basis for his whole argument, 1 Peter 1:8. The Apostle Peter was writing to suffering Christians, who manifested the genuineness of their faith by two things: love *to* Christ and joy *in* Christ. Both these qualities clearly belonged to the affections, hence Edwards could state the doctrine: “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.”⁴⁹

He goes on to define his understanding of the affections, as we have noted, as heightened inclinations of the will. Being *heightened*, they are those inclinations which are “lively”, “vigorous”, and “sensible”.⁵⁰ Being heightened *inclinations*, they are either strongly inclined towards an object, or are equally repulsed by it; they are greatly pleased or greatly displeased with something:

44 Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 95.

45 *Ibid.*, 96.

46 Ryan J. Martin, *Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology): “The High Exercises of Divine Love”*: 33 (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 235.

47 For a comprehensive and persuasive argument against equating “affections” with “emotions” see Ryan J. Martin, *Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology): “The High Exercises of Divine Love”*: 33 (London: T&T Clark, 2020), esp. 17–23.

48 Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 88.

49 *Ibid.*, 95.

50 *Ibid.*, 96–97.

As all the exercises of the inclination and will, are either in approving and liking, or disapproving and rejecting; so the affections are of two sorts; they are those by which the soul is carried out to what is in view, cleaving to it, or seeking it; or those by which it is averse from it, and opposes it.⁵¹

Being inclinations of the *will*, the affections cannot be described as mere feelings; being movements themselves, they propel the person towards or away from an object and are the ground of motivation for all holy action: “the affections are very much the spring of men’s actions... he that has doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion.”⁵² Whilst there are many affections that are *not* the result of saving grace, one thing is sure: *unaffectionate* religion is clearly dead:

That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull and lifeless wouldings⁵³, raising us but a little above a state of indifference: God, in his Word, greatly insists upon it, that we be in good earnest, fervent in spirit, and our hearts vigorously engaged in religion.⁵⁴

The *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and the promise of circumcision of the heart in 30:6 clearly situate real religion in “vigorous engagedness of the heart.”⁵⁵

The things of religion are so great, that there can be no suitableness in the exercises of our hearts, to their nature and importance, unless they be lively and powerful. In nothing, is vigour in the actings of our inclinations so requisite, as in religion; and in nothing is lukewarmness so odious.⁵⁶

The Scriptures plainly demonstrate that genuine faith manifests itself in various holy affections in the Bible, such as godly fear; hope in God; love for God and Christ; hatred of sin and evil; holy desire; holy joy; religious sorrow; gratitude, and compassion. Love itself takes the central place among these, as “the Scriptures do represent true religion, as being summarily comprehended in love, the chief of the affections and fountain of all other affections.”⁵⁷ Love is the fountainhead of all other affections: “From a vigorous, affectionate and fervent love to God will necessarily arise other religious affections.”⁵⁸

Edwards illustrates his point with the ultimate example of Christ himself to demonstrate the truth that true religion consists in holy affections:

The Lord Jesus Christ was a person who was remarkably of a tender and affectionate heart; and his virtue was expressed very much in holy affections. He was the greatest instance of ardency, vigour and strength of love, to both God and man, that ever was.⁵⁹

Edwards describes the religion of heaven as one which “consists very much in affections” of “holy and mighty love and joy, and the expression of these in most fervent and exalted praises.”⁶⁰ It is hard to argue with Edwards’ thesis here, given the abundance of clear scriptural examples laid out in support of the doctrine that the heart of true Christian experience lies chiefly in holy

51 *Ibid.*, 98

52 *Ibid.*, 101.

53 A word coined by Edwards to mean weak inclinations; “it is as if a man were always to say that he ‘would’ believe or perform but never actually does”.

54 *Religious Affections*, 99.

55 *Ibid.*, 99.

56 *Ibid.*, 99-100.

57 *Ibid.*, 106.

58 *Ibid.*, 108.

59 *Ibid.*, 111.

60 *Ibid.*, 113.

affections.

Part Two takes an interesting turn, in that Edwards' now seeks to demonstrate that many manifestations of the affections in religion are *not* conclusive proof of a person being genuinely converted. It is worth us taking note of these "no certain signs" and reflecting on how we may have taken them to be more reliable than, according to Edwards, Scripture itself would allow.

X. The twelve "No Certain Signs"⁶¹

1. Very great affections

Edwards is at pains to say that genuinely holy affections *should* be very great and raised very high. High affections should therefore not be denounced as "enthusiasm" by rationalists who claim such displays are proof of delusion. However, they are no surer of genuine conversion either, because "there are religious affections which are very high that are not spiritual and saving."⁶² The children of Israel, after their deliverance at the Red Sea, were greatly affected by God's mercy and sang to his praise, but very soon forgot his works. The greatest example of such non-saving affections was the adulation that greeted Christ at the triumphal entry to Jerusalem, with the same crowd who shouted "Hosanna!" shouting "Crucify!" only a few days later.⁶³

2. Effects on the body

Physical manifestations were a frequent spectacle during the times of the Great Awakening and again attracted derision from the rationalists. Although he does not mention this in *Religious Affections*, Edwards' own wife, a woman he esteemed as deeply spiritual and mature, had undergone several physical religious experiences.⁶⁴ He was very much convinced that these were indeed the manifestation of holy affections to a very high degree. However, Edwards could see no rule from scripture or experience which could separate natural affections, which could also have a great effect on the body, from truly religious ones. In human persons, *all* vigorous affections, not just holy ones, influence the body by virtue of the union between the soul and the body. Therefore, affections manifesting themselves in the body were no proof that they were holy.⁶⁵

3. Speaking much about religion

A person's being "full of talk" was grounds for some to brand them a Pharisee, but grounds for others to be persuaded that they were genuinely converted because "their mouth is now opened". Again, as far as Edwards is concerned, the jury is out, because "that persons are disposed to be abundant in talking of the things of religion may be from a good cause and it may be from a bad one."⁶⁶ On the whole, Edwards is more negative in his assessment of an overly talkative person who is ready to speak of his experience in every company and on every occasion: "it is rather a dark sign than a good one."⁶⁷

61 For a full list of the headings in JE's own words, see Appendix I.

62 *Religious Affections*, 130.

63 *Ibid.*, 131.

64 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 240–49.

65 Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 132.

66 *Ibid.*, 136.

67 *Ibid.*, 137.

4. The person is not the author of their affections

As we have mentioned before, Edwards was very alert to the fact that a person can be acted upon supernaturally and yet not savingly. Just because a person discovers an affection that seems to have come upon them from the outside, does not mean it was the saving work of the Holy Spirit. A person can also be acted upon by the Holy Spirit in a non-saving way, and he can also be acted upon by the devil, or evil spirits. Thus, having affections that appear not to have been aroused by the person experiencing them is no proof of them being genuinely gracious.⁶⁸

5. Texts of Scripture coming into the mind

Another commonly reported phenomenon of religious experience in Edwards' day was of verses of Scripture coming suddenly to the mind of individuals, and for them to claim this as a basis for God's saving and gracious dealings with them. Edwards would allow that if an affection was aroused by a text coming into the mind in this way, it could indeed be from God – but only if the truth of the Scripture was the ground of the affection, and not the fact that it came suddenly and unexpectedly.⁶⁹ And, of course, the devil could suggest texts of Scriptures to the mind – just as he had in fact to Jesus himself during his testing in the wilderness.⁷⁰

6. An appearance of love in the affections

"The more excellent a thing is, the more will be the counterfeits of it."⁷¹ Love is the most excellent of all Christian virtues and graces, but this does not mean it cannot be faked. Indeed, it will be the area of the Christian life where the most subtlety and ingenuity of Satan and human self-deception will be employed to peddle the most convincing of false wares. There is a love which will in the end "wax cold" and thus show itself not to be genuine.⁷² So, the mere *appearance* of love does not prove finally that truly gracious affections are present.

7. Having many affections

Sometimes it is the presence of several affections that persuade a person of their "good estate" but, once more this is "no sure sign". Edwards was a great advocate of the fruit of the Spirit being displayed in "entireness and symmetry of parts", whereas false religion "wont to be maimed and monstrous", lacking such completeness and proportionality.⁷³ And once again there are numerous examples in Scripture of the unconverted displaying a great variety of false affections (such as Saul in the OT and the pre-conversion Paul in the NT). As in the case of true love, from which all other gracious affections flow, "so from counterfeit love in like manner flow other false affections".⁷⁴

8. Affections occurring in a certain order

Edwards is actually at pains here to defend the step-by-step morphology of conversion his tradition insisted upon: "first, such awakenings, fears and awful apprehensions followed with such

68 Ibid., 141-142.

69 Ibid., 142.

70 Ibid., 144.

71 Ibid., 146.

72 Ibid., 147.

73 Ibid., 146.

74 Ibid., 150.

legal humblings, in a sense of total sinfulness and helplessness, and then, such and such light and comfort".⁷⁵ Some are prejudiced "if great affections of joy follow great distress and terror" and make that a reason to distrust the conversion. Edwards responds, "Surely it can't be unreasonable to suppose, that before God delivers persons from a state of sin and exposedness to eternal destruction, he should give them some considerable sense of the evil he delivers from".⁷⁶ On the other hand, stressing the correct *order* of steps over the *effect* such steps have wrought in the person is also misguided. Just as the devil can counterfeit saving graces, "so he can counterfeit those operations that are preparatory to grace."⁷⁷

9. Zealous engagement in religious duties

Edwards argues from Scripture that the truly godly clearly should be zealous in religion. However, the Israelites were frequently found to be engaged in the external duties of worship and yet their "services were abominable to God".⁷⁸ So it was also with the Pharisees who "made long prayers and fasted twice a week" yet were devoid of grace. Edwards even refers to a Jewish neighbour (during his time in New York) who was very devout in all his religious activities. Edwards goes no further, but clearly implies that this neighbour, in not knowing Christ, had no saving grace, despite all his outward zeal.⁷⁹

10. The person praises and glorifies God with their mouth

"Many seem to look upon it a bright evidence of gracious affection, when persons appear greatly disposed to praise and magnify God" says Edwards, and whilst no Christian would take such affections as evidence *against* their conversion, neither can it be taken as sure evidence *for* it.⁸⁰ Multitudes were so greatly affected by the works of Christ in his earthly ministry that they glorified God in response, and yet how few of them proved to be true believers.⁸¹

11. That a person believes their affections are of divine origin and are confident they are converted

A person's own confidence in having been genuinely converted is not a certain sign either way. Many genuinely converted people have this confidence, but many hypocrites have a false confidence. Some are censorious towards people who possess a full assurance of salvation, and regard it as presumption, but Edwards stresses that in Scripture it was "common for the saints... to be assured."⁸² But confidence does not prove that a person is converted either. Hypocrites can possess an even greater confidence than saints, and this can come across as an "overbearing, high-handed and violent sort of confidence... affecting to declare itself with a most glaring show in the sight of men".⁸³

12. A person's display of affection is pleasing to the godly

75 Ibid., 151.

76 Ibid., 151-152.

77 Ibid., 158.

78 Ibid., 164.

79 Ibid., 165.

80 Ibid., 165.

81 Ibid., 166.

82 Ibid., 167.

83 Ibid., 171.

When there are “many probable appearances of piety in others, it is the duty of the saints to receive them cordially into their charity, and to love them and rejoice in them as their brethren in Christ Jesus.”⁸⁴ However, the godly can be deceived; appearances of piety may be only that. This is because “The true saints have not such a spirit of discerning, that they can certainly determine who are godly, and who are not. For though they know experimentally what true religion is, in the internal exercises of it; yet these are what they can neither feel, nor see, in the heart of another.”⁸⁵ It is better to err on the side of charity than of censoriousness, and the propensity to judge others is itself a dangerous sign of being unconverted oneself. Edwards states that those who “have been most highly conceited of their faculty of discerning, and have appeared most forward, peremptorily and suddenly to determine the state of men’s souls, have [themselves] been hypocrites, who have known nothing of true religion.”⁸⁶

According to Edwards, we could be the subject of *all* twelve of the affections and experiences described above, and yet be a stranger to saving grace:

*There may be all these things, and yet there be nothing more than the common influences of the Spirit of God, joined with the delusions of Satan, and the wicked and deceitful heart.*⁸⁷

Here we might pause and consider whether our contemporary evangelical church culture takes the same view as Edwards on conversion and, if not, reflect on why that is so. Would we look to such signs as those above to assure ourselves of our own or another’s spiritual condition? Are we quick to pronounce in absolute terms that a person is “saved” based on such signs? Would we now think twice about doing so?

88

XI. The twelve “Distinguishing Signs of Truly Holy and Gracious Affections”

1. Truly holy affections have the *saving* work of the Holy Spirit as their source

The first sign stresses the divine origin of the religious affections in a genuine convert. It is here we see one of the main points of contact between *A Divine and Supernatural Light* and *Religious Affections*, with Edwards once again prioritising the Holy Spirit instilling a new and vital principle in the soul, through his uniting himself to and indwelling that person. Edwards cites 1 Corinthians 2:14-15 to show the great contrast between the “spiritual” and the “natural” person, going on to stress that “spiritual” does not mean immaterial or that which is opposed to the physical, but rather refers to the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in a person.⁸⁹

A natural or carnal person may be acted upon by the Holy Spirit, but not *savingly*.⁹⁰ What distinguishes true converts, and what makes them *spiritual* is that the Holy Spirit himself has communicated his own nature to them.⁹¹ There is thus no true “spirituality” apart from union with the third person of the Trinity.

The Spirit of God so dwells in the hearts of the saints, that he there, as a seed or spring of life, exerts and communicates himself, in this his sweet and divine nature, making the soul a partaker of God’s beauty and Christ’s joy, so that the saint has truly fellowship with the Father, and with

84 *Ibid.*, 182.

85 *Ibid.*, 181.

86 *Ibid.*, 185.

87 *Ibid.*, 185.

88 See Appendix II for the signs in Edwards’ own words.

89 Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 198.

90 *Ibid.*, 206-207.

91 *Ibid.*, 201.

*his Son Jesus Christ, in thus having the communion or participation of the Holy Ghost.*⁹²

True Christians experience something that is entirely different in *nature* and *kind* from the unregenerate due to uniquely being “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).⁹³

It is therefore very important to think about such non-spiritual experiences that a natural person can have, which could lead them into thinking they are “spiritual” when they are not. Balaam is an example of one such natural person whom the Spirit of God operated upon, but not savingly. The Holy Spirit acted upon him according to a natural principle – the sense of seeing – but did not grant any *new* sense to him.⁹⁴ Imagining that one sees or hears things of a spiritual nature is therefore no *proof* of these experiences being gracious, indeed: “These imaginations do oftentimes raise the carnal affections of men to an exceeding great height.”⁹⁵

This new spiritual sense shows itself not just at conversion, but also in progressive sanctification, an individual’s growth in genuine holiness.

2. Attracted to divine things for their own sake

A true convert’s love for God and the ways of God arises from their supreme excellency and glory, not in the first instance because he stands to benefit personally from any goods that God may confer.

*The divine excellency and glory of God, and Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the works of God, and the ways of God, etc., is the primary reason, why a true saint loves these things; and not any supposed interest that he has in them, or any conceived benefit that he has received from them, or shall receive from them.*⁹⁶

Self-love is not the proper motive of love for God, but rather the loveliness of God himself:

*What chiefly makes a man, or any creature lovely, is his excellency; and so what chiefly renders God lovely, and must undoubtedly be the chief ground of true love, is his excellency. God’s nature, or the divinity, is infinitely excellent; yea ‘tis infinite beauty, brightness, and glory itself.*⁹⁷

That is not to say that a desire for their own happiness in God is unbecoming in a saint; rather the reason that a believer came to desire their own happiness in God was the result of a prior love for God for his own loveliness. Seeking one’s happiness in God is the *fruit*, not the root of love for God.⁹⁸

This distinguishes true and false converts, because false converts may have a great interest in God with regard to the benefits they might derive from him, but they lack a love for God whose foundation is the loveliness of God himself. Affection and gratitude from self-love exist in natural persons towards their neighbour, and they can be exercised towards God as well.

Having an inaccurate view of who God really is, or of the heinousness of their own sin in his eyes, may also move a person to love “God”. But this is a false ground, prompting a false love, resulting in a false hope:

And so having formed in their minds such a God as suits them, and thinking God to be such an one as themselves, who favours and agrees with them, they may like him very well, and feel a sort

⁹² Ibid., 201.

⁹³ Ibid., 204.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 206.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 217.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 240.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 241.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 243.

*of love to him, when they are far from loving the true God.*⁹⁹

Who God is *in himself*, is the ground of truly gracious love, gratitude, and delight in God. The ground of the hypocrite's love, gratitude and delight is *self*, and what he can get *from* God. The hypocrite's great joy is joy in himself; all the gospel does is fuel his pride and inflate his sense of self-importance.¹⁰⁰

3. The beauty of holiness is the spring of all ***Holy Affections***

The third sign builds on the second, and “zooms in”, as it were, on what particularly it is about God that the true saint finds lovely and excellent. In a word, it is his holiness:

*The first objective ground of all holy affections, is their moral excellency, or their holiness. Holy persons, in the exercise of holy affections, do love divine things primarily for their holiness: they love God, in the first place, for the beauty of his holiness or moral perfection, as being supremely amiable in itself.*¹⁰¹

It is not *only* God's holiness which true saints are attracted to, “but their love to God for his holiness is what is most fundamental and essential in their love,” and this in turn “causes a delight in God for all his attributes.”¹⁰²

The “new spiritual sense” conferred in regeneration has the beauty of holiness as the object of its delight. It loves holiness, finds sweetness in holiness, rejoices in holiness and hates that which is opposed to holiness. Whilst he may be greatly affected by the “awful majesty” of God, the hypocrite has “no sense or relish of that kind of beauty” which is meant by the beauty of holiness, or the excellency of God in his moral perfections.¹⁰³

4. Gracious affections spring from divine illumination

Here we see that the illumination of *A Divine and Supernatural Light* is the epistemological foundation of the heightened inclinations of *Religious Affections*:

*Holy affections are not heat without light; but evermore arise from some information of the understanding, some spiritual instruction that the mind receives, some light or actual knowledge. The child of God is graciously affected, because he sees and understands something more of divine things than he did before.*¹⁰⁴

There is a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge (Rom 10:2), whilst the true believer not only receives divine knowledge at conversion but grows in it (Phil 1:9).

There are many allegedly “spiritual” experiences which cannot be said to be a result of divine illumination because they leave the person none the wiser about God, Christ and the gospel. Seeing shapes, colours, bright lights or hearing sounds or voices are of a very different order to true spiritual enlightenment, such that Edwards can categorically state: “affections which arise from such impression on the imagination, are not gracious affections”. Gracious affections arise from instruction, not from ignorance.

Edwards' position is neither the pure rationalism of Chauncy nor the sensationalism of the extreme New Lights, but rather marries divine knowledge and holy affection, with the former the

⁹⁹ Ibid., 244-245.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 251.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 256.

¹⁰² Ibid., 256.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 263.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 266.

basis for the latter.¹⁰⁵

5. Conviction concerning the reality and certainty of divine things

“All those who are truly gracious persons have a solid, full, thorough and effectual conviction of the truth of the great things of the gospel.”¹⁰⁶ These convictions, which Edwards appears to equate with saving faith, go beyond mere assent. For example:

*With respect to Christ's being the Son of God, and Saviour of the world, and the great things he has revealed concerning himself, and his Father, and another world, they have not only a predominating opinion that these things are true, and so yield their assent... but they see that it is really so: their eyes are opened, so that they see that really Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.*¹⁰⁷

The effect of such deep-seated conviction regarding God, Christ and the gospel upon the heart is an abiding alteration in a person's conduct. The New Testament shows that the Apostles were given a sure and abiding confidence in the truth, and this in great measure motivated their actions. Conversely, there are hypocrites who boast of a knowledge of divine things, yet their conduct shows no alteration from the time when they claimed to be ignorant of such knowledge. Affections that are not accompanied by convictions regarding divine truth are not to be relied upon.¹⁰⁸

6. Gracious affections are attended with *evangelical humiliation*

“Evangelical humiliation is a sense that a Christian has of his own utter insufficiency, despicableness, and odiousness, with an answerable frame of heart.”¹⁰⁹

Edwards makes a distinction between *legal* and *evangelical* humiliation. Legal humiliation can be experienced by a natural person, with the Holy Spirit working in a common way and exciting natural principles, such as that person's conscience. It can make a person see that they are sinful, guilty, and deserving of wrath, without saving them. Evangelical humiliation is unique to the genuinely converted, in that they see the *odious* and hateful nature of their sin. This can only come from a spiritual apprehension of the *beauty* of holiness, which makes such a contrast possible.¹¹⁰

Only evangelical humiliation truly makes a person bow down within. Many may be legally humbled yet have no *humility*, whereas the stamp of true religion is that a person be truly contrite. The prodigal son, the woman of Canaan, the tax collector in the temple, and Job after his rebuke from the Lord, all display this latter quality.

Edwards quotes Calvin, quoting Augustine: “if you should ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, I would answer, firstly, secondly, and thirdly, and forever, humility.”¹¹¹ Evangelical humiliation is the basis for the core Christian duty of self-denial, which consists in a person denying both his worldly inclinations *and* in denying his natural propensity to self-exaltation.

There is a false humility which has manifested itself down through the ages of the church and Edwards' own day which feigns self-abasement and yet is abominably puffed-up: “It seems to be the nature of spiritual pride to make men conceited and ostentatious of their humility.”¹¹²

105 Cf. n. 55.

106 *Religious Affections*, 291.

107 *Ibid.*, 292.

108 *Ibid.*, 294.

109 *Ibid.*, 311.

110 *Ibid.*, 312.

111 *Ibid.*, 314; cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2:2:11.

112 *Ibid.*, 319.

Whilst false humility may be hard to detect, it distinguishes itself in two ways. Firstly, the falsely humble are often disposed to compare themselves favourably with others. Secondly, they will think highly of their humility. The truly poor in spirit and broken in heart have an entirely different temper. They esteem others as better than themselves (Phil 2:3) and consider their own humility to be very small.

7. Gracious affections are attended with a great change of nature

“All spiritual discoveries are transforming” asserts Edwards: “they make an alteration in the very nature of the soul”, citing 2 Corinthians 3:18. The soul is so deeply affected by what it beholds of God through being granted spiritual sight, that it is changed in the process. This happens at conversion, but as the text Edwards cites makes clear, it is also progressively changed ever after.¹¹³

The change of nature manifests itself with regards to holiness and sin:

*Conversion (if we may give any credit to the Scripture) is a great and universal change of the man, turning him from sin to God. A man may be restrained from sin, before he is converted; but when he is converted, he is not only restrained from sin, his very heart and nature is turned from it, unto holiness: so that thenceforward he becomes a holy person, and an enemy to sin.*¹¹⁴

The mark of true grace is that this change of nature is *abiding*, and should indeed grow and deepen in its effects as, for example, Paul exhorts in Romans 12:1-2 and Ephesians 4:22-24.

8. Truly gracious affections tend *to* and are attended *with* the lamblike, dovelike spirit and temper of Jesus Christ

This is where the behaviour of the enthusiasts during revivals – marked as it was by censoriousness, schism and show – is contrasted with the “spirit of love, meekness, quietness, forgiveness and mercy, as appeared in Christ”.¹¹⁵ Edwards calls this “the Christian spirit” and is “the distinguishing disposition of the hearts of Christians, as Christians”.¹¹⁶ The beatitudes of Matthew 5:5, 7 and 9, the virtues of Colossians 3:12-13; the qualities of charity stressed in 1 Corinthians 13:4-5; and the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 all testify to the fact that “humility, meekness, love, forgiveness, and mercy... especially belong to the character of Christians”.¹¹⁷

Christ’s depiction in Scripture as a lamb, and the Holy Spirit’s as a dove, illustrate in a particular way these characteristics. As a Christian is renewed in the whole person, so he comes more and more to resemble Jesus, who is full of grace.¹¹⁸

But surely Christians are to be bold as well as meek? Edwards agrees but argues that Christian boldness is very different “from a brutal fierceness, or the boldness of beasts of prey”.¹¹⁹

A forgiving, loving and merciful spirit, after the image of the perfect original in Jesus, is what characterises true Christians, and “nothing can be invented that is a greater absurdity, than a morose, hard, close, high-spirited, spiteful true Christian”.¹²⁰

9. A softened heart and a tenderness of spirit

113 Ibid., 340.

114 Ibid., 341-342.

115 Ibid., 345.

116 Ibid., 345.

117 Ibid., 346.

118 Ibid., 346-350.

119 Ibid., 350.

120 Ibid., 356-357.

One of the characteristics of false affections, however “melting” they may initially appear to be, is that they tend to leave the heart hardened towards God in the long run, making a person less sensible of their sin, and less prone to genuine conviction. Gracious affections, however, “are of a quite contrary tendency; they turn a heart of stone more and more into a heart of flesh”.¹²¹

This tender-heartedness, which Edwards compares to the sensitivity of a little child, allows Christians to experience genuine conviction for sin, and to possess a healthy (not servile) fear of God: “It becomes such sinful creatures as we, to approach a holy God (although with faith, and without terror, yet) with contrition, and penitent shame and confusion of face”.¹²²

The true saint becomes more and more sensitive to sin after conversion, such that they continue to be convicted throughout their lives, but hypocrites experience the reverse: “A false conversion puts an end to convictions of conscience.”¹²³

Tender-heartedness grants not only sensitivity to sin and a right fear of God (which the hypocrites do not possess) but also “a gracious joy” (Psalm 2:11) and “a gracious hope” (Psalm 33:18; 147:11).¹²⁴ The true Christian is, therefore, a person of gracious contrasts:

*He has the firmest comfort, but the softest heart: richer than others, but poorest of all in spirit: the tallest and strongest saint, but the least and tenderest child amongst them.*¹²⁵

10. “Another thing wherein those affections that are truly gracious and holy, differ from those that are false, is **beautiful symmetry and proportion**.”¹²⁶

Edwards is quick to stress here that true saints are far from perfect. They are in many ways defective “through the imperfection of grace, for want of proper instructions, through errors in judgment, or some particular unhappiness of natural temper, or defects in education, and many other disadvantages that might be mentioned”.¹²⁷ However, they lack the “monstrous disproportion” in affections that is present in “the counterfeit graces of hypocrites”.¹²⁸ Sanctification is a universal work which affects every part of the person, conforming them to the image of Christ, so that “there is no grace in Christ, but there is its image in believers to answer it... feature for feature, and member for member. There is symmetry and beauty in God’s workmanship.”¹²⁹ Irregularities may, and do, appear in true saints, but they are not of the same magnitude as those which manifest themselves in hypocrites:

*The body of one that was born a perfect child, may fail of exact proportion through distemper, and the weakness and wounds of some of its members; yet the disproportion is in no measure like that of those that are born monsters.*¹³⁰

11. Gracious affections create a desire for more of God; hypocritical affections are self-satisfied

121 Ibid., 360.

122 Ibid., 362-363.

123 Ibid., 364.

124 Ibid., 364.

125 Ibid., 364.

126 Ibid., 365.

127 Ibid., 365.

128 Ibid., 365.

129 Ibid., 365.

130 Ibid., 365.

Edwards perhaps reveals some of his own spiritual character in his description of this sign, which takes on elevated language as he expresses the true Christian's hunger for God:

The more a true saint loves God with a gracious love, the more he desires to love him, and the more uneasy is he at his want of love to him: the more he hates sin, the more he desires to hate it, and laments that he has so much remaining love to it: the more he mourns for sin, the more he longs to mourn for sin: the more his heart is broke, the more he desires it should be broke: the more he thirsts and longs after God and holiness, the more he longs to long, and breathe out his very soul in longings after God.¹³¹

By contrast, a hypocrite's longings cease upon his supposed "conversion":

It may be before, while the man was under legal convictions, and much afraid of hell, he earnestly longed that he might obtain spiritual light in his understanding, and faith in Christ, and love to God: but now, when these false affections are risen, that deceive him, and make him confident that he is converted, and his state good, there are no more earnest longings after light and grace: for his end is answered; he is confident that his sins are forgiven him, and that he shall go to heaven; and so he is satisfied.¹³²

Edwards quotes his Puritan predecessor Thomas Shepard's work on the Parable of the Ten Virgins (which he quotes in *Religious Affections* more than all other works combined): "An hypocrite's last end is to satisfy himself: hence he has enough. A saint's is to satisfy Christ: hence he never has enough."¹³³ Lifelong holy longings are the preserve only of the true saint.

12. Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice

Although it comes last, the twelfth sign is the greatest and most important of all:

Christian practice is the most proper evidence of the gracious sincerity of professors, to themselves and others; and the chief of all the marks of grace, the sign of signs, and evidence of evidences, that which seals and crowns all other signs.¹³⁴

Once again, Edwards insists on "universal obedience" as the clearest indication of genuine conversion. Truly gracious affections in a person "cause that a practice, which is universally conformed to, and directed by Christian rules, should be the practice and business of his life."¹³⁵ Practice shows what affections are really in a man: "a man's actions are the proper trial what a man's heart prefers."¹³⁶

A true Christian's behaviour is *universally* conformed to Christian rules; he does not pick and choose which areas of his life and conduct will be placed under the commands of God and which will not. Rather, every department of his life will be directed by them: Jesus says, "ye are my friends, if ye do *whatsoever* I command you" (John 15:14).¹³⁷ This will also be the highest priority of his life; Christian practice will be what he is chiefly engaged in. It can thus be described as his "his work and business", regardless of his calling or employment. Christians "not only do good works, but are *zealous* for good works" (Titus 2:14).¹³⁸ Thirdly this universal obedience will be lifelong; its

131 Ibid., 377.

132 Ibid., 378-379.

133 Ibid., see Thomas Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins Opened and Applied* (1660). Part 1, 157.

134 Ibid., 443.

135 Ibid., 383.

136 Ibid., 427.

137 Ibid., 385.

138 Ibid., 387.

persevering character is what distinguishes it from the obedience of hypocrites: it is “that business which he perseveres in through all changes, and under all trials, as long as he lives”.¹³⁹

Universal obedience means parting with “our dearest lusts” as well as applying ourselves to those Christian duties which we find most difficult.¹⁴⁰ Edwards readily admits that true Christians may be subject to sin and backsliding, but not to such a degree as that he is put out of the way of universal obedience forever.¹⁴¹ This obedience is not merely outward (though it manifests itself outwardly) but is “obedience of the soul”.¹⁴²

Edwards insists on his point here (in what is the most substantial treatment of any sign) with an involved scriptural argument, before going on to state that it is Christian practice which is the proper proof of the following: saving knowledge of God; genuine repentance; saving faith; belief of the truth; coming to Christ; trusting in Christ for salvation; gracious love; humility; fear of God; thankfulness; gracious desires and longings; a gracious hope; a truly holy joy, and Christian fortitude.¹⁴³

XII. Conclusion

Edwards brings a formidable amount of logical argumentation and scriptural support in asserting what conversion is and what distinguishes genuine conversion from false. He argues for the divine and supernatural illumination of the soul in conversion, a mighty work of God without which a person remains in darkness, blind to the glory of God in Christ. Whatever religious affections an unenlightened person may experience or display, these are but counterfeits of the genuine article, which can only be manifested in those to whom the Holy Spirit has communicated a new and vital principle. It is this supernatural light which is the foundation of holy love, or genuine religious affections. However much a true saint may enjoy the subjective experience of all the religious affections, his best measure of whether he truly possesses them is in looking not to his feelings but his practice. An all-encompassing, highly prioritised, lifelong perseverance in Christian conduct is what distinguishes true saints from hypocrites.

Of all the reflections we might have at the close of this survey, perhaps the most obvious is: “Does Edwards set the bar too high?” For example, are there not many genuine converts who are, for one reason or another, strikingly less than symmetrical in their manifestation of Christian graces? Edwards’ own extremely self-disciplined, intense and exacting spiritual life certainly seems to be revealed in the pages of his work on conversion, the subject of which, it is said, “consumed him”.¹⁴⁴ His burden for the salvation of souls, the peace of the church and the advance of God’s kingdom – all of which false conversions and their deleterious effects threatened to undermine – meant that his remarkable intellect left no stone, or Scripture, unturned in his quest for the heart of genuine conversion. But in the process, was the “dove-like spirit” he wrote of so eloquently, less evident in his forceful insistence on a degree of spiritual grace and duty amongst believers that might cause the bruised reeds among them to break? These, and other questions, are worthy of discussion. But for whatever shortcomings there may be in Edwards’ doctrine of genuine conversion, he offers the contemporary church a deeply searching, if equally discomfiting, insight into its nature.

139 *Ibid.*, 384.

140 *Ibid.*, 387.

141 *Ibid.*, 390.

142 *Ibid.*, 422.

143 *Ibid.*, 444-449.

144 Kling, ‘Jonathan Edwards, the Bible, and Conversion’, 214.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Robin Gray is the Minister of Gardenstown New Church, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland, on the North Aberdeenshire Coast. He is married to Megan and they have a 3-year old daughter, Jessica.

APPENDIX I

“Showing what are no certain signs that Religious Affections are truly gracious, or that they are not” from *Religious Affections*, Part Two.

1. 'Tis no sign one way or the other, that religious affections are very great, or raised very high.
2. 'Tis no sign that affections have the nature of true religion, or that they have not, that they have great effects on the body.
3. 'Tis no sign that affections are truly gracious affections, or that they are not, that they cause those who have them, to be fluent, fervent and abundant, in talking of the things of religion.
4. 'Tis no sign that affections are gracious, or that they are otherwise, that persons did not make 'em themselves, or excite 'em of their own contrivance, and by their own strength.
5. 'Tis no sign that religious affections are truly holy and spiritual, or that they are not, that they come with texts of Scripture, remarkably brought to the mind.
6. 'Tis no evidence that religious affections are saving, or that they are otherwise, that there is an appearance of love in them.
7. Persons having religious affections of many kinds, accompanying one another, is not sufficient to determine whether they have any gracious affections or no.
8. Nothing can certainly be determined concerning the nature of the affections by this, that comforts and joys seem to follow awakenings and convictions of conscience, in a certain order.
9. 'Tis no certain sign that the religious affections which persons have are such as have in them the nature of true religion, or that they have not, that they dispose persons to spend much time in religion, and to be zealously engaged in the external duties of worship.
10. Nothing can be certainly known of the nature of religious affections by this, that they much dispose persons with their mouths to praise and glorify God.
11. 'Tis no sign that affections are right, or that they are wrong, that they make persons that have them, exceeding confident that what they experience is divine, and that they are in a good estate.
12. Nothing can be certainly concluded concerning the nature of religious affections, that any are the subjects of, from this, that the outward manifestations of them, and the relation persons give of them, are very affecting and pleasing to the truly godly, and such as greatly gain their charity, and win their hearts.

APPENDIX II

Showing what are distinguishing signs of truly gracious and holy affections, from *Religious Affections*, Part Three.

1. Affections that are truly spiritual and gracious, do arise from those influences and operations on the heart, which are *spiritual, supernatural* and *divine*.
2. The first objective ground of gracious affections, is the transcendently excellent and amiable nature of divine things, as they are in themselves; and not any conceived relation they bear to self, or self-interest.
3. Those affections that are truly holy, are primarily founded on the loveliness of the moral excellency of divine things. Or (to express it otherwise), a love to divine things for the beauty and sweetness of their moral excellency, is the first beginning and spring of all holy affections.
4. Gracious affections do arise from the mind's being enlightened, rightly and spiritually to understand or apprehend divine things.
5. Truly gracious affections are attended with a reasonable and spiritual conviction of the judgment, of the reality and certainty of divine things.
6. Gracious affections are attended with *evangelical humiliation*.
7. Another thing, wherein gracious affections are distinguished from others, is, that *they are attended with a change of nature*.
8. Truly gracious affections differ from those affections that are false and delusive, in that they tend *to*, and are attended *with* the lamblike, dovelike spirit and temper of Jesus Christ; or in other words, they naturally beget and promote such a spirit of love, meekness, quietness, forgiveness and mercy, as appeared in Christ.
9. Gracious affections soften the heart, and are attended and followed with a Christian tenderness of spirit.
10. Another thing wherein those affections that are truly gracious and holy, differ from those that are false, is *beautiful symmetry and proportion*.
11. Another great and very distinguishing difference between gracious affections and others is, that gracious affections, the higher they are raised, the more is a spiritual appetite and longing of soul after spiritual attainments, increased. On the contrary, false affections rest satisfied in themselves.
12. Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice. I mean, they have that influence and power upon him who is the subject of 'em, that they cause that a practice, which is universally conformed to, and directed by Christian rules, should be the practice and business of his life.

SANCTIFICATION AND CONSISTENT GODLY LIVING

Phil Heaps

Abstract

This paper will lead us to the Sermon on the Mount and to the Beatitudes in particular (Matt 5:3-12) demonstrating that this 'Jesus Seminar' is unparalleled as 'a discipleship course for the 2020s'. Here is material which is intensely practical and yet is addressed directly to the human heart; here is a masterclass for the formation of Christian character but one which is to be worked out in the corporate context of the church. The Lord Jesus Christ – and the Beatitudes are, supremely, a delineation of Christ's own spiritual character – calls his people to a radical obedience which is motivated by humility, 'poverty of spirit' (Matt 5:3) but which is the only path to the growth for which God looks, growth in holiness.

I. Introduction

The doctrine of the Christian life is a huge subject. Every New Testament book has something distinctive to say on the matter, and almost every chapter has a bearing on the subject – and that is without venturing into the riches of the Old Testament. There are also numerous ways of organising the material, whether topically¹ or by exegeting major passages.² One simple way of dividing up the subject is into the *What?*, the *How?*, and the *How Much?* of the Christian life:

- *What* does the Christian life look like? What is its essence and character?
- *How* is growth in holiness to be pursued and promoted?
- *How much* progress should we look for? What should be our expectations in the matter of godly living, both for ourselves and for others?

Rather than attempt a comprehensive synthesis, the approach of this paper is more modest and practically focused. We will consider one topic under each of these three headings, to stimulate our consideration of the Christian life for our own spiritual good and that of our fellow church members.

II. *What?* A discipleship course for the 2020s

1. A thought experiment

Imagine a group of church leaders gathering to design a discipleship course to use in their respective churches.³ They are rightly concerned that such a course should equip their people to live well for the Lord in the specific time and culture in which we live, our complex world with its particular challenges. But what topics should they include? They start with a whiteboard

1 E.g., Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), 746-62; John M. Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2008); Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

2 E.g., Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016); J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2014; originally published 1877).

3 *Discipleship* courses feel far less common than *Evangelistic* courses (Alpha, Christianity/Life/Hope Explored etc.). Does this suggest a need to rebalance our focus?

brainstorming session...

"We live in a highly sexualised society, pornography is a huge issue; we need to give our people practical help in this whole area of sexual purity."

"Anxiety is a big problem too, and mental health, especially with our younger people; social media just seems to stir things up."

"I agree. And it's not just anxiety. Society seems to be getting more and more polarised. Our people need help with navigating that. Some Christian blogs and tweets are pretty inflammatory."

"Guys, I think you're letting cultural issues shape our priorities; what about basic spiritual disciplines? Shouldn't we start from there and work up?"

"I agree. I reckon what our folks need, more than anything, is help with prayer. If their prayer lives are right, surely the other things will fall into place?"

"But we mustn't be pietistic! Activism is a bridge into our culture. What about covering how we should impact society?"

"I think the problem is society impacting us! Our marriages for example; some of them are pretty rocky; one of the members was just asking me what I thought of no-fault divorce."

"I'll bet it's a money issue! Actually, we need to tackle that too. Materialism is such a blind spot. We live in an acquisitive society; are our members really any different from their non-Christian neighbours?"

"Some teaching on giving might help our church finances!"

"But we mustn't be legalistic. We don't want the 'do this, don't do that' morality of a former generation. Some of our older members could do with teaching on not being judgmental!"

"I think that's a caricature; or if there's some truth in it, we've overreacted. We need to raise the bar!"

"Yes, but we can't give people a list of rules. That's Pharisaism! We need to tackle the whole gospel/law thing."

"What they need are broad principles – something simple yet profound to help them organise their Christian living."

"I still think Christians today are too lax; we need something on self-discipline."

"Absolutely. And you know, the tide of hostility is rising; we need to prepare our people for persecution."

Together, the leaders look up at the words on the whiteboard: "sexual purity... anxiety... polarised... hate speech... help with prayer... impact society... divorce... money... giving... legalism?... judging... raise the bar... law/gospel... broad principles... self-discipline... persecution". Then someone pipes up:

"And it needs to be short. Our people aren't really readers. We can't just give them J. C. Ryle's Holiness!"

Perhaps it is no surprise that discipleship courses are more scarce than evangelistic ones! Covering all that ground in short compass would seem to be mission impossible. Except that the world's best discipleship course does just that.

2. Commending the 'Jesus Seminar'

The single, simple, 'big idea' in this first section of the paper is that Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* is an ideal but underused framework for our discipling.

This section in Matthew's gospel is exactly the place we might expect to find a fully-fledged framework for discipleship. All four Gospels begin by highlighting their major preoccupation with the identity of Jesus, and their backwards-looking concern to show continuity with God's prior Old Testament revelation. In Matthew's case, both things are evident in his opening verse: Jesus is identified as Messiah, and Matthew evokes the history of Israel, beginning with Abraham, and climaxing in David, before reaching its fundamental crisis point in the Exile. Having started here, Matthew's gospel moves inexorably forward to its great climax (28:16-20), which is now forward-looking ("all the days to the end of the age"), but with the spotlight still firmly fixed on Jesus, finally revealed as "God the Son". Indeed, Matthew 28:16-20 arguably refers to almost all the most important things we could ever consider: God as Trinity, the person of Christ (as Lord of all), the gospel events (pictured in baptism), the great task of the church, the great promise of Christ's presence, and the great prospect of an "age to come". But along with everything else, there is a profound description of the Christian life in just a few words: "...to obey everything I have commanded". Thus, Matthew's readers are encouraged to revisit the commands of Jesus in this gospel as the framework for discipleship through the whole church age. Furthermore, when it comes to the commands of Jesus, first and prominent is the great teaching block contained in chapters 5-7, specifically addressed to disciples (Matt 5:1).

3. Covering our bases

It is striking to consider how relevant Jesus' teaching is to the very areas of discipleship raised by our thought experiment. Sexual purity is dealt with in 5:8, 27-30.⁴ Anxiety is addressed in 6:25-34.⁵ Instruction for navigating our increasingly polarised society is given in 5:9, 23f and 6:14f, whilst hate speech is referred to in 5:22. Practical help with both the motivation and content of prayer is provided in 6:5-13 and 7:7-11, with further spiritual disciplines of giving and fasting treated in 6:3f, 17f. The question of social activism and impacting society is covered in 5:13-16, marriage and divorce in 5:31f and materialism in 6:19-24. Meanwhile, 5:10-12, 5:43-47 and 7:6 prepare us for the growing hostility of Western society towards *Biblical Christianity*.⁶ On a more theological note, gospel/law issues are raised in 5:17-20.⁷ Simple yet profound organising principles for Christian living are given in 6:33 and 7:12,⁸ and the whole sermon can be read in under 15 minutes... but no one can complain that the bar is set too low (5:48)!

The suitability and applicability of Jesus' words – to the very topics we need to cover in our

4 For a helpful discussion of how we got to where we are, see Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

5 For a helpful discussion of anxiety, see Matthew A. Lapine, *The Logic of the Body* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2020).

6 See the excellent online article: www.firstthings.com/article/2022/02/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism

7 On gospel/law issues, see the counterpoints volume, Wayne G. Strickland, *The Law, The Gospel, and the Modern Christian, five views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

8 Not to mention 'the Lord's Prayer', which has often been used to organise teaching on the Christian life; see, for example, *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, questions 99-107.

discipleship – can be seen by considering, as an example, Jesus’ teaching on the topic of sexual immorality (5:8,27-30). Jesus’ words are immensely practical. “Are you tempted by pornography, or the billboard posters, or the unhelpfully dressed young people spilling out from the local college? Do you feel the urge to look at that? Then remind yourself of something that you want to see even more (5:8)”. “It’s not just a matter of seeing but also of touch (right eye and right hand), so be careful there too. Some people are ‘huggy’. That’s all well and good. But a lingering hug for other people’s spouses? Is that wise? Be wise. Touch can be arousing. There are plenty of people who need hugging, so this shouldn’t restrict you... unless you have less than pure preferences.”

Jesus’ language is deeply realistic: to renounce pornography, or to stop cohabiting, may feel like losing an eye or a hand, a part of you... but everything is at stake (the “Gehenna of fire” is a powerful incentive!). And Jesus’ description of heart lust (mental undressing) is vitally important not least to the debate concerning same-sex-attraction – it is not enough simply to refrain from gay practice – there is a whole inner world to be renounced and avoided.⁹ All of this is to say that Matthew 5-7 is exactly what we need in order to disciple people in our highly sexualised society.¹⁰ The same practical wisdom is on display in each of the other areas that Jesus covers.

4. Helping us with our blind spots

Thus far we’ve seen that Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount* addresses many of the discipleship areas that we instinctively see as particularly pertinent to our age; Jesus speaks directly to the very things we want help with. But there is another, possibly even greater, benefit to recognising these chapters as an ideal framework for discipleship: it prompts us to ask, “What else does Jesus include, that we might be inclined to overlook?”. If these chapters provide such an admirable treatment of the things we instinctively recognise as important in discipling, what else is covered that we might leave out, but which is equally vital to the *What?* of the Christian life?

One thing that stands out from Matthew 7:15-23 is the need to equip disciples to watch out for religious charlatans. In past ages, a pastor may have been able to keep abreast of the vast majority of what his congregation was likely to be reading, but those days are long gone. People have immediate access to literally millions of books and sources of teaching. Thus, it is increasingly important to teach our people discernment as to what they encounter online. They need to beware of those who make the broad way safer, or the narrow road broader; those who value success over humility, or who feed on the sheep rather than feeding them. They need to judge people and ministries by their fruits, not by their slick and impressive self-presentation. A second but related point is the need to warn our people as to the nature and danger of fake holiness – whether that means lowering Christ’s standard to make it achievable (cf. 5:20,31,34-36), or ostentation in religion (6:1f,5,7f,16), or a critical and judgmental spirit (7:1-2), or hypocrisy (7:3-5). A further vital aspect of discipling is teaching people to live in the light of the ultimate future, with an eye to future reward (5:4-9; 6:1,4,6,18). This is a constant emphasis in the New Testament, but often seems muted in Western Christianity (perhaps due to our preoccupation or obsession with the present). In addition to these areas we might add: the need for an authentic response to the misery of our world (5:4,7); the vital importance of an appetite for godliness (5:5); the need to avoid both compromise and isolationism (because we will be prone to one or the other!) (5:13-16), and the need for honesty (5:33-37). Also, in an age of entitlement, we need to be disciplined in a readiness to renounce our rights (5:38-42).

Put simply, the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount can be sorted into two categories: the areas that we know we need to include in our discipling, and the areas that we need to include in our discipling but haven’t realised yet!

⁹ Nevertheless, at the same time we need to maintain the vital distinction between sin and temptation, lest we collapse the two into one, and lose all the comfort of Hebrews 4:15 and 2:18.

¹⁰ A further helpful resource is a robust, unashamed, literal interpretation of Song of Solomon, seen as expounding Proverbs 5:15-19!

We could further add that Jesus' method of discipling is also (as we might expect) exemplary. Tim Keller talks about this in his excellent little book, *How to Reach the West Again*, under the title of countercultural catechesis.¹¹ Repeatedly in Matthew 5 we encounter the words "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." Jesus was taking the slogans of his age and critiquing them, whether adding depth or repudiating them. In a similar manner, we need to think carefully through the slogans of our age: "You have heard it said 'follow your heart' but I say to you that the whole of human history is a grim record of human beings following their hearts: ruin and misery mark their ways; You have heard it said 'Be true to yourself!', but just who are the abusers and despots of this age being true to, if not themselves?"

5. A question of character

Having identified Matthew 5-7 as not only an excellent discipling resource for the things we want to talk about but also a way of exposing our discipleship blind spots, it is instructive to see where Jesus starts – namely, with the Beatitudes.

Not only are the Beatitudes a striking and memorable opening; but they are also, primarily, a matter of character. Whilst thinking about this paper, I had a whiteboard session, similar to the one envisaged earlier, asking church members to suggest topics for an up-to-date discipleship course. Quite a number of their suggestions dovetailed with my earlier illustration. But strikingly, no one mentioned character. I wonder whether, and how soon, it would be mentioned if you tried the same experiment in your church, or local fraternal? Yet Jesus starts here. That should give us pause for thought in our discipling. Character is vital. But what sort of character traits does Jesus have in mind? Clearly the Beatitudes are not to be seen as entry requirements ("live like this and you will be eligible to join"), but rather as a portrait of kingdom citizens ("this is how citizens live; live like this because you're in the kingdom"). These qualities presuppose that God is at work – cleansing and renewing, removing hearts of stone and replacing them with hearts of flesh, writing his law on human hearts – because that is exactly what would happen when the kingdom came (Jer 31; Eze 36).

So far, so good. But the difficulty comes when we try to closely define what Jesus means by each of these characteristics, particularly the first four (I think the later Beatitudes are easier to define and describe). What exactly is it to be poor in spirit? What is being mourned over? What is meekness? What is this righteousness which is so earnestly desired? Many commentators take the line that this is the reaction of a sinner confronted with God's holiness, and his own sinfulness, and perhaps the exacting and demanding standard which Jesus lays down in the sermon.¹² Faced with this unscalable cliff, the appropriate reaction is what Don Carson calls "personal acknowledgement of spiritual bankruptcy ... the deepest form of repentance ... a full, honest, factual, conscious and conscientious recognition before God of personal moral unworth".¹³ Sinclair Ferguson speaks of being "emptied of self-importance, self-confidence, self-righteousness".¹⁴ Martyn Lloyd-Jones refers to Philippians 3: there can be no reliance upon family background, nationality, temperament, natural position in life, wealth, education, personality, intelligence, general or special ability, morality, conduct or good behaviour.¹⁵ So Carson writes: "At the very outset of the Sermon on the Mount we learn that we do not have the spiritual resources to put any of the Sermon's precepts into practice".¹⁶

11 Tim Keller, *How To Reach The West Again* (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2020).

12 Think perhaps of 5:20, the heart righteousness of 5:22,28;37, the challenge of 5:44, and the impossible standard of 5:48!

13 D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 1978), 20.

14 Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, (Edinburgh; Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 17.

15 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Sermon on the Mount*, (Leicester: IVP, 1976; first published 1959-60), 55.

16 D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 20.

According to this schema, a sort of gospel progression can be traced in the early Beatitudes. Firstly, “poverty of spirit” is the attitude of a sinner confronted with the seriousness of his sinfulness and his inability to earn or even contribute to salvation. It is the “coming to one’s senses” of Luke 15:17, the empty-handedness of faith. This then leads to “mourning” which is seen as “mourning over personal sin”, the repentance which is a prerequisite to entering the kingdom (Matt 4:17). In like manner, “hungering and thirsting for righteousness” is nothing short of that desire for justification, the Father’s declaration that we are perfectly righteous in God’s sight on the basis of Christ’s saving merits, received by faith. Being “merciful” then follows on naturally: we who have received gospel mercy should be quick to show it.¹⁷

This is certainly a widespread and attractive suggestion for understanding the Beatitudes, which I’m rather nervous to question. After all, it is held by wise and godly commentators whose judgments I deeply respect. And of course, these truths are right and proper, and abundantly confirmed by other New Testament teaching. But might we be so concerned to synthesise this sermon with our overall gospel understanding that we impose a foreign grid? Very tentatively, I want to suggest a different (though not contradictory) approach, at least for consideration. This approach was first suggested to me by a study of the word “meek” in the third Beatitude, which doesn’t fit so self-evidently into the gospel progression schema. The Greek word for meek (*práos*) occurs three further times in the New Testament, two of which are in Matthew:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle (práos) and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:29)

Say to the daughter of Zion, “Behold, your king is coming to you, humble (práos), and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.” (Matthew 21:5)

In both these instances the word refers to Jesus himself. What if Matthew 5:5 also refers to Jesus? More broadly, might it be that each of the Beatitudes is perfectly exemplified by the one who is preaching the sermon? It certainly seems intrinsically reasonable. After all, disciples are followers of Jesus (Matt 4:19f; 16:24; 19:21,27) and following is not merely adherence to his teaching but imitation (1 John 2:6, Phil 2:5, 1 Pet 2:21). God’s intention is to conform us to his Son’s image (Rom 8:29, see 2 Cor 3:18).

Many of the Beatitudes are self-evidently exemplified by Jesus. We’ve already considered meekness, which Jesus explicitly attributes to himself (Matt 11:29).¹⁸ Such meekness is powerfully on display in the gentleness of his interactions (Mark 5:34,41) and his patience with his dull disciples. The same is true of mercy: “mercy relieves the consequences of sin in the lives of others (both sinners and those sinned against).”¹⁹ It is “...getting down on your hands and knees and doing what you can to restore dignity to someone whose life has been broken by sin”²⁰ (like the Good Samaritan, stopping for the sake of the bruised and broken man). Once again, how perfectly this describes our saviour (Mark 5:19, 10:47f)! What about heart purity? Jesus of all people was “holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners” (Heb 7:26).²¹ As for “peacemaker”, it perfectly sums up his whole mission (Eph 2:14). “Suffering persecution” is a similarly accurate description, given that Jesus was reviled as in league with the devil, slandered as inciting political revolt, mocked, and hated. This takes us back to the earlier Beatitudes: The one who said “blessed are those who mourn” was aptly described by Isaiah as “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (53:3) – poignantly

17 Note also, the sermon starts with *poverty of spirit* and ends with *asking*, a gospel inclusio.

18 See also 2 Corinthians 10:1: “I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness (*prautes*) and gentleness of Christ...”

19 Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 31.

20 Ibid.

21 Might this quality of heart-purity also cast light on the strange moment in John 8:6,8 where Jesus stoops to write on the ground? There is no shortage of (completely unverifiable) speculation as to *what* Jesus wrote, but could it be mere doodling and a downward gaze, given that a woman caught in the act of adultery would likely be scantily clad?

displayed in his tears over Jerusalem. Similarly, Christ was one who hungered and thirsted for righteousness: nothing was more important to him than to see God's will done, both in his own life and the life of others (John 4:34). Indeed, the only earlier reference to righteousness in Matthew's gospel (3:15) fits this paradigm. Thus, seven of the eight Beatitudes can easily and naturally refer to Christ, and supremely to him. But what about the first item, "poverty of spirit"?

6. Poverty of spirit

In the Old Testament, "poor" seems almost a technical term for those who, in their need, are cast upon God. Time and again "poor" is juxtaposed with trust:²²

This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. (Psalm 34:6)

As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God! (Psalm 40:17)

When the humble see it they will be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. For the LORD hears the needy and does not despise his own people who are prisoners. (Psalm 69:32-33)

For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation. (Psalm 149:4)

The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. (Isaiah 29:19)

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. (Isaiah 41:17)

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Isaiah 57:15)

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2)

But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD. (Zephaniah 3:12)

Furthermore, "poverty of spirit" is contrasted with *pride* in the book of Proverbs:

It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud. (Proverbs 16:19)

One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honour. (Proverbs 29:23)

In the light of this Old Testament background, we can reasonably construe "poverty of spirit" as a combination of faith and humility, which is then nowhere better exemplified than in the Saviour. In this case "poor in spirit" would be broadly synonymous with "lowly in heart", the very quality that Jesus pairs with meekness in Matthew 11:29.²³ If all this is so, then the Beatitudes are *primarily* a description of that character perfectly exemplified in Christ, and thus not *intrinsically* tied to

²² In each of the given references, the Hebrew word for poor (*'anw / 'aniy*) is present; the English translations vary: poor, humble etc.

²³ Micah 6:8 would provide another co-location of beatitudes in its call for righteousness, mercy, and humility.

personal sinfulness. Nevertheless, they are clearly *suitable* for sinners, whose humility factors in their moral failure and whose mourning includes contrition. This would make the Beatitudes a perfect portrait of Christ, yet painted in such a way as to beckon, rather than repel, sinners.

The goal of this extended digression on the Beatitudes, and particularly on “poverty of spirit” as the trusting humility exemplified by Christ, is to draw out three basic points:

- Christ prioritises character
- In terms of character, Christ prioritises humility, and
- Christ is the great exemplar of all these character traits.

If Christ’s very first discipleship topic is “Christlike character”, of which the very first trait is humility, we might profitably ask whether our discipling starts there, and if so, why not?²⁴ The great goal for ourselves and those we serve should be Christlikeness. God’s primary concern is for our character and attitudes, including those “religious affections” to which Jonathan Edwards turns his attention.²⁵ And an early focus on character is very economic, seeing that godly actions will follow if our character is right. Focusing on character is also an excellent opportunity to address the misconception that Christianity is defined by what you *do*. “Poor in spirit” is not something you *do*, but something you *are*. Perhaps if this focus on humility as the bedrock of discipleship had been more to the fore, we would have avoided some of the scandals that have troubled the Christian church in recent years.

Humility, the Beatitudes, and indeed Matthew 5-7 could detain us for far longer, but we must turn now to the second section of this paper.

III. *How?* Jerusalem church priorities

1. ‘Disciple making’ or ‘Building the Church’?

Having considered the *What?* of holiness, we turn in this second section to the *How?* How is growth in holiness to be pursued and promoted? Once again, this section does not attempt to provide an exhaustive synthesis or a ground-breaking insight. Instead, the goal is an easy-to-remember rule of thumb, as we seek to live consistent Christian lives and to nurture others to do the same.

Returning to the end of Matthew’s Gospel, we see that Jesus sends out his disciples to “make disciples”: this is to be their great mission, and ours, to the end of the age (Matt 28:19). Earlier in the gospel, however, Jesus describes his agenda for this present age in terms of what *he himself* will do, namely build his indomitable church (Matt 16:18). Juxtaposing these two descriptions, we see that *‘disciple making’ and ‘church growth’ are two sides of the same coin*: the church grows as disciples are made, and disciple-making is intrinsically tied to church.

The book of Acts describes the first generation of this ‘disciple-making / church-building’ activity. Though we might rightly affirm that Acts is ‘descriptive’ rather than ‘prescriptive’, we should also remember that it describes what Jesus himself continued to do and teach (Acts 1:1). Therefore, Acts is, in some senses, normative. In particular, the description in Acts 2 of the first church is very instructive for us. The church’s commitments are memorably summed up towards the end of the chapter: “...they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). This was the atmosphere of the first (and arguably archetypal) local church, and it was in this atmosphere that the first disciples made disciples. Thus the single, simple, ‘big idea’ in this second section of my paper is that these four qualities in Acts 2:42 provide an admirable ‘grid’ when it comes to the ‘How?’ of holiness.

24 Perhaps C. J. Mahaney, *Humility* (Colorado Springs, Multnomah, 2005) should be one of the first books we recommend to new converts?

25 Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986; Originally published 1746).

2. Head first

The first thing that characterised the Jerusalem church was its *commitment to the apostles' teaching*. This in turn reminds us of the centrality of *teaching* in the matter of promoting holiness.

We've already seen this emphasis in Jesus' ultra-compact description of the Christian life: "*teaching* them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20, NIV). Indeed, the first section in this paper has been entirely devoted to what Jesus "taught" (Matt 5:2). This emphasis is also seen in Jesus' prayer that his people be "sanctified by the truth" (John 17:17).

Paul's practice also shows the importance of *teaching* for sanctification. In his great letter to the Romans, Paul begins his detailed section on 'Christian Living' with a reference to discerning God's will, and the "renewal of your mind" (Rom 12:2). Similarly, in Ephesians 4, he describes ungodly Gentile behaviour as springing from "the futility of their minds", their darkened understanding, and their ignorance (4:17f). By contrast, Christians "learn Christ", they are taught the truth in him, and they have been renewed in the spirit of their minds. Having laid this foundation – that holiness is 'head first' – Paul then goes on to teach what it looks like in practice: we are to replace lies with truth, and theft with hard work and generosity; corrupt talk must be replaced with edifying conversation, and malice with kindness. All this is a matter of *instruction*.

Peter displays the same emphasis in his first letter: "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Pet 2:2). The immediate context makes it very clear that this milk is none other than "the living and abiding word of God" (1:23).

The practical outworking of all this is that *we must teach holiness*: both the necessity for it (Heb 12:14b) and its essential character and practical expression. In doing so we must walk a middle path between a neo-Pharisaism which 'clarifies' and defines every aspect of obedience with an ever-increasing canon of rules, and a vague generality which never wrestles with the actual, nitty-gritty expressions of holiness in everyday life. As we saw in the first section, the Sermon on the Mount is an excellent example of such teaching, as is Romans 12-13, Ephesians 4-5 and many other passages.

At this point it might be helpful to stop and ask: am I calling the people in my congregation to be holy? Am I *teaching* them what holiness looks like, at a practical level, in their everyday lives? Or is working this out largely "left as an exercise for the reader"? If we are not *teaching* holiness, we cannot expect our people to be *living* it.

3. Growing together

Having emphasised the importance of *teaching* holiness, we need to recognise that this is only the first step. The second thing that characterised the Jerusalem church was their *commitment to fellowship*, namely partnership and 'shared community life'.

The fact of the matter is that holiness is not something to be developed in splendid isolation but as part of a local church.²⁶ For one thing, much of Christian living is relational. It is a perennial temptation and beguiling falsehood to define holiness as a purely individual thing: "I could be a much holier person if only I didn't spend so much time with other people!". But so many of the instructions for godly living are all about relating to others, not least Jesus' great summary: "do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matt 7:12). Likewise, Paul's instruction in Ephesians 4:17ff is all about how you interact with other people. Thus, the *What?* of holiness is clearly and profoundly relational. But so is the *How?*. Holiness is not only 'taught' but 'caught'. Just as we learn to speak by listening to others, so our 'conversation' (in the KJV 'way of life' sense of the word) is also learned by seeing and imitating others.

Nowhere is the importance of example in the business of Christian living more prominent than

²⁶ It is sadly ironic that some people who rightly emphasise holiness are less than exemplary in their practical commitment to a local church: someone like A. W. Pink springs to mind.

in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Three times he makes this point explicitly:

"Join with others in following my example" (3:17a)

"Take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you" (3:17b)

"Whatever you have... seen in me – put it into practice" (4:9)

In the light of these verses, our eyes are opened to see how much of the letter is Paul's example to the Philippian Christians: how to cope with hardship and face an uncertain future (1:12-26); rejoicing amidst suffering (2:14-18: "I am... So you too should..."); renouncing 'privileges' and straining towards the goal (3:3-16). In Chapter 2, Paul presents three further examples: Timothy, with his unique concern for the interests of others and of Christ (2:19-24), Epaphroditus, who risked everything to carry out his gospel service (2:25-30), and above all, the Lord Jesus, who put the interests of others above his own (2:4ff).

Just as a picture may be worth a thousand words, so a consistent example of godliness may be worth a multitude of sermons on godliness. This has three immediate applications:

Firstly, we must not expect our people to grow in holiness if their only exposure to the Christian community is an hour or so on Sunday mornings. We need to create contexts in which Christians spend time together, by opening our homes, sharing our lives, and working, resting and playing together.

Secondly, we must aspire and plan to spend time with those people whose Christian life is exemplary, who carry about with them the fragrance of Christ. Also, we must teach others to have the same ambition: to identify and spend time with godly Christians and thus to learn godliness.

Thirdly, we need to make sure that our own lives are exemplary. Otherwise, we will find that all our teaching on sanctification will produce little fruit.

4. It's all about the cross

So far we have considered that holiness is *taught*, but also *caught*. We must be committed to clear, detailed instruction on holiness, but also to the community life where young Christians can watch and learn from older, mature saints. These two elements correspond to the Jerusalem church's devotion to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship. The third thing that characterised the Jerusalem church was *the centrality of the cross*, expressed in their devotion to "the Breaking of Bread" which I take as a reference to the Lord's Supper.

a. *What fuels holy living?*

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. (Rom 12:1 NIV, emphasis added).

It is a sight of God's mercy, supremely revealed at the cross, which prompts the costly holiness to which God calls all of his people. Similarly, when Paul speaks of living by faith in the Son of God, it is particularly with respect to him as the one "who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20b). In fact, it is not only individual texts but the very structure of a number of Paul's epistles that make this point: he first expounds gospel realities (Rom 1-11, Eph 1-3, Gal 3-4, Col 1-2) then addresses practical godliness (Rom 12ff, Eph 4ff, Gal 5f, Col 3f). People cannot live on a diet of challenge (this is an easy mistake for young preachers to make). Christians will not grow in holiness if they are merely instructed in holiness; they need to be sustained by a sight of Christ and his saving love.

At this point we see the value of taking Acts 2:42 as a suggestive paradigm for our pursuit and

promotion of holiness. On the one hand, some people's 'recipe for holiness' seems to consist almost entirely in focusing on the grace of God in the saving work of Christ.²⁷ This overlooks the actual practice in the New Testament epistles of clearly describing and exhorting believers to godliness (the letter of 1 Peter has over 40 imperatives; Romans 12 has a similar number). On the other hand, the teaching and even modelling of holiness is not enough: if believers are to pursue a growth in godliness that doesn't harden into self-righteousness or dissipate into a vague 'niceness', they must be absolutely gripped by the grace of God in the gospel, and the self-giving love of Christ demonstrated at the cross. Thus Frances Havergal's hymn provides an excellent paradigm:

*Thy life was given for me
Thy blood, O Lord, was shed,
that I might ransomed be
and quickened from the dead:
Thy life was given for me
what have I given for thee?*

5. God must do it!

This second section of the paper has suggested that the atmosphere of the early church, captured in Acts 2:42, provides an admirable framework for the pursuit and promotion of holiness. Thus we have seen that holiness must be 'taught', 'caught' and 'fuelled'. But there is a fourth and final characteristic of the church that has a profound bearing on the *How?* of holiness: "they devoted themselves... to the prayers".

Prayers are first and foremost an expression of dependence on God. Just as 'thunder is what lightning sounds like' so 'prayer is what faith sounds like'. We pray because 'we cannot', but 'God can'. Relating this to the matter of Christian living, we are reminded that holiness is God's work in us, and no amount of teaching, modelling, or even focus on the cross can replace this element and emphasis.

Our utter dependence on God in the matter of sanctification²⁸ is made clear in a number of places. Paul's wish for the Thessalonians is that *God himself* would sanctify them completely (1 Thess 5:23). Just as significant are Paul's various prayers for the churches to whom he writes.

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil 1:9-11)

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:9-14)

²⁷ Perhaps Dane C. Ortlund's books *Gentle and Lowly* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020) and *Deeper* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021) exemplify this approach.

²⁸ In *Justification* we depend totally upon God in *his* work for us. In *Sanctification* we depend totally upon God in *our* work for him.

It is easy (and profitable) to preach these passages as a template for godliness.^{29, 30} But we must never forget that Paul is recounting his *prayers* for the Christians. Yes, these prayers provide profound instruction as to the shape of the Christian life. But also, such Christian lives will only be lived if God enables them, hence Paul's *prayer*. The same can be said of Jesus' words in John 17:17: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth". If all we take away from this verse is that "*truth* is the means of sanctification", we have forgotten that it is a *prayer*: ultimately *God* is the 'means' of sanctification. It is God who sanctifies, whether by his word, or by trial (Heb 12:10), and we must never forget it.

Practically speaking, this final emphasis raises a number of searching questions:

- Do we really believe that, unless God enables it, we are utterly unable to live those godly lives which are absolutely necessary?
- Are we praying explicitly, regularly and fervently for our own growth in holiness?
- Are we praying similarly for the godliness of our fellow brothers and sisters? Is this a theme in our corporate prayers?

IV. *How much?* What 'growing in holiness' means

1. Sanctification or consistent godly living?

The goal of this paper has been to provide practical stimulus as we consider the huge topic of sanctification. Thus far we have looked at the *What?* and the *How?* of sanctification, and we have considered how Matthew 5-7 and Acts 2:42 might inform the content and balance of our discipling. In this final section, we turn to the question of *How much?*, namely, what should our expectations be?

The title I was given for this paper was 'Sanctification and Consistent Godly Living'. Ironically, the two halves of this title capture two competing (or complementary?) perspectives on the Christian life. Whereas 'Sanctification' suggests a *process* of *increasing* in holiness, 'Consistent Godly Living' suggests a *settled state*. Indeed, the various theological paradigms of the Christian life fit broadly into one of two families corresponding to these two halves of the title. A representative of the Reformed approach would be Wayne Grudem, who defines sanctification as "a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives".³¹ On the other hand, there are the various 'holiness theologies' that describe a 'normal' Christian state of settled godliness, to which the newest Christian may aspire, and which they can achieve. In some of these theologies, being 'sanctified' may be used to describe the attainment of that state of 'consistent godly living'.

My own understanding of Scripture and experience inclines me towards the Reformed approach of seeing sanctification as the lifelong process of growth in holiness. Nevertheless, I want in this third and final section to raise a number of qualifications to guard against a simplistic version of this paradigm, and the wrong implications which could easily be drawn. In particular, I want to

29 Philippians 1:9-11: All you need is love (the Beatles were right!) But... (1) not irrational, but informed, v9c; (2) not indiscriminate, but discerning, v10a; (3) not immoral, but upright, v10b; (4) not momentary, but forward-looking, v10c; (5) not intangible, but practical, v11a; (6) not introspective, but God-promoting, v11b. (and it's not easy, whatever the Beatles may have sung!).

30 Colossians 1:9-14: WWJD = 'What Would Jesus Do??' Rather... WWJ Deserve? (a worthy life), WWJ Delight in? (a pleasing life) => "Have nothing in your life that you do not know to be worthy of Christ or believe to be pleasing to him". This will include... (1) bearing fruit in every good work; (2) growing in the knowledge of God, (3) patiently enduring by God's power, and (4) joyfully giving thanks, above all for salvation! Note the balance: doing and knowing; 'grit' and joy. If we are to live such lives, we need to have a spiritual grasp of God's will.

31 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 746.

question the approach which simply views the Christian life as ‘a lifelong process of sinning less’ and uses that as an organising framework.

2. Radical obedience from day one

The first thing we need to stress is that Jesus calls for radical obedience from day one. In Mark 8:34, Jesus teaches both the crowds and his disciples that if anyone wants to be his disciple then they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. This sits rather awkwardly with a description of the Christian life in which a person becomes more holy bit by bit over a whole lifetime. In this case, the impression is easily (though unintentionally) given that “new Christians will necessarily sin ‘quite a lot’” (after all, if they didn’t, how could they possibly be sinning less and less every day and month and year and decade for the rest of their life?). By contrast, Jesus called for a zero-tolerance approach to sin from the outset.

This is not to say that new Christians (or indeed any Christians) will live perfectly. After all, Jesus gave us a prayer in which we pray for forgiveness with the same regularity as we pray for daily bread (Matt 6:12,11). Thus, we expect that, at the end of each day, there will be things which we regret and must confess. We never get to a point where we can go no further; we never ‘arrive’ (Phil 3:9-14; Job 42:6). Nevertheless, the newest Christians have everything they need for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3) from day one. We must aim each day (and teach new converts to aim each day) to live in full obedience to all that Jesus commanded (Matt 28:19), and our theological paradigm of the Christian life must not undermine that call and expectation. Can we really say that the Daniel of chapter 6 was self-evidently holier than the Daniel of chapter 1? Rather, we see a consistent godliness displaying itself both in teenage years and in old age. Personally, I wonder whether I am bolder now in my witness than as a teenager on Beach Mission thirty years ago.

3. Changing seasons

There is a second problem with a certain sort of gradual sanctification model. Sometimes our description of the Christian life in terms of *growth* fails to come to terms with the fact that life itself is full of *changes*. The impression is given that each year the Christian faces the same or similar challenges, and (if she is growing in grace), copes with them a bit better each year. But the reality is rather different.

Consider a young person who converted in Freshers’ Week at university. They need to learn what it means to be a Christian student. Hopefully, they’ll be a better Christian in their third year than they were in their first year: after all, they’re growing in grace. But then their environment changes, they must learn how to be an unemployed Christian, then a Christian in their first job. They may need to learn about being a Christian newlywed, or a Christian navigating singleness as the years pass. The challenges of being a Christian mum change as children grow up from babies to toddlers to juniors then teens.

The fact is: it is very hard to compare the different stages of life in terms of growth on one axis: “I thought I was a thoughtful person till I got married”, “I thought I was a patient person till I had kids... or struggled to have them”. Retirement and old age bring their own challenges. So much of ‘living the Christian life’ is learning to live Christianly in each new life situation. But when we talk about ‘growth’, it tends to assume something fixed that we can measure against – life remains the same, and we get ‘better’ at living it as time passes. In this model, ‘sanctification’ is rather like a child with a wall chart whose height is marked with a line and a date at various intervals, and who is thus seen to be growing – sometimes a little, sometimes in spurts – as the months and years pass. But the reality is, life keeps changing: it’s more like marking the child’s height on a young sapling which is itself growing and changing as time goes by!

Rather than thinking of growth over a lifetime, it may be more helpful to think about particular

stages in life. For example, a Christian teenager should aim to be as holy as a teen can be, knowing that it is entirely possible to be a godly teen. (Do we actually believe that? If not, is it any surprise that we are not growing godly teens?) You only get seven years to master being a Christian teen! You only get one shot at trusting God on your first day at work (though there will be other new beginnings). The great goal is to learn what it means to live a Lord-worthy, Lord-pleasing life in every new situation (Col 1:12). Perhaps sanctification is as much about learning to *be* holy in each new circumstance as it is about becoming *more* holy in a fixed environment. This may help shed light on the struggles that Christians face in later years. A Christian who has lived well over a lifetime may struggle in retirement as they face a small handful of big challenges. Yes, they will draw on lessons learned over many years, but they may be facing entirely new trials: immobility, inability to concentrate, the challenge of submitting to church leaders who are younger than them!, etc... There are specific temptations of youth and of old age, and we need to discuss them, prepare for them, and factor them into our theology of sanctification.

4. What about growth?

Hopefully, by this point, you are itching to push back. After all, the New Testament *does* speak a lot about growth, not just about changing circumstances. That is absolutely true. But we need to remember that *not all growth is growth in holiness* (in the sense of ‘sinning less’). This becomes immediately clear when we consider the Lord Jesus himself. We are explicitly told in Luke 2:52 that “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man”. Clearly Jesus *grew*, and not just physically, intellectually and socially, but (in some sense) spiritually: “he grew ... in favour with God”. At the same time, we know that this growth was not a matter of “sinning less” since Jesus was sinless for his whole life (Heb 4:15; 7:27). We should also add Hebrews 5:8f into the mix, where we are told that Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered” and was “made perfect”. Yet Jesus was already morally perfect. This process of perfecting was not in terms of moral character, but in maturity and ‘fittedness to the task’.

Take the example we had earlier of the Christian teen who aspires to be as holy as a teen can be. Does that mean they have now done most of their growing? Absolutely not. There will be plenty of opportunities for growth in knowledge and wisdom, and a deepening understanding of scripture, the world, and how the former applies to the latter. The fact that they don’t know these things as a child is not a deficiency, yet their growth in these areas is good. Similarly, they may grow in gifting. As time passes, both their ability and their responsibility increase. They are no longer simply learning, but also teaching (in whatever sphere) (Heb 5:12).

A biblical example here is Paul’s exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 4:

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. (4:1)

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God’s family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more. (4:9-10)

In neither case is Paul criticising their current behaviour – quite the opposite! – but he sees potential for growth. Christian growth of this sort is more like a balloon than a bottle. If you can put more water in a bottle, it means that it wasn’t full before (thus growth in *holiness* always implies previous deficiency). But you can put more air in a full balloon (thus growth in *gifting* or *love* may simply be an increased capacity rather than a prior deficiency).

All of this is to say that, though growth in holiness is a vitally important part of the Christian life, it doesn’t sum up or exhaust what it means for Christians to grow. A relatively young Christian

might attain a consistently godly life yet still pursue a lifetime of growth. We need to remember that there are two sorts of immaturity: natural and culpable. Culpable immaturity is when you should be mature but aren't (Heb 5:12); natural immaturity is simply the reality that when you are a child you speak, think and reason like a child (1 Cor 13:11). We should aim for *holiness* at all stages, but *maturity* will necessarily require time and experience.

5. Hang on in there!

I remember, during my theological training, attending a course on preaching. The lecturer announced that "Preaching is about one thing, and one thing only: Change!". Despite his being perhaps my all-time favourite preacher, on this occasion I had to disagree. Preaching *often* aims at change, but sometimes it simply *reassures* the faithful to *keep* doing what they are *already* doing. In the same way, we should not narrowly characterise the Christian life in terms of *sanctification*, *growth* and *progress*, as if these are 'the be all and end all'. Sometimes the great thing is simply to hold on.

Certainly, *progress* is a key element in the New Testament portrayal of the Christian life: healthy Christians grow (2 Thess 1:3); lack of growth is unhealthy (Heb 5:12); we pray that Christians would grow in love (Phil 1:9-11; 1 Thess 3:12), grace (2 Pet 3:18) and the knowledge of God (Col 1:10). Virtues should be stockpiled! (2 Pet 1:5-8); the new self is *being renewed* (Col 3:10), we are to "be 'being transformed'" (Rom 12:2). But sometimes the great call of Scripture is for 'mere perseverance' rather than 'more progress':

Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. (Eph 6:13)

...the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. (Matt 24:13)

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. (Heb 10:36)

Sometimes the reality is that "you need to obey today, just as you obeyed yesterday" rather than "you need to sin less today than you did yesterday". Sometimes the need is not to learn more, but simply to be reminded of what we already know. Indeed, our need to keep being reminded is not a *deficiency*, any more than our need to keep eating is a deficiency: it is simply part of the humbling *reality* of our experience. What we need is "a long obedience in the same direction".³² We need to do today what God commands: aiming to glorify and please him; seeking the good of others (Christians and non-Christians); loving others today. We may need to fight the same fight each day (just as one key reason for reading Scripture is to be fed today, not merely to develop overall).

A minister friend of mine once wrote to me: "It's noticeable in Revelation 2 and 3... that the two main commands that Christ gives to his churches are, 'Repent' and 'Hold fast'. In other words, get back on track if you've gone off it and then stick to it." This insight needs to be factored into our understanding of the Christian life, particularly those of us who hold to a Reformed position of gradual sanctification. Every persevering Christian is a testimony to God's saving grace. Some dear saints can be discouraged by a (perceived) lack of personal growth when they should be encouraged by the evident grace of perseverance. To 'keep going' is no small thing, and if we define the Christian life exclusively in terms of growth we are likely to miss or downplay that encouraging truth.

6. More models

Earlier we identified two basic sanctification models: gradual growth over a lifetime, and a

³² The title of a book on discipleship by Eugene Peterson, but the original quote is from Friedrich Nietzsche!

settled state of godliness. Whichever approach we adopt, Scripture commends other models from nature and experience that may help us as we think about the Christian life.

a. Growing up

Scripture uses the analogy of a growing person with respect to both corporate growth (Eph 4:11-16) and individual growth (1 Pet 2:2). One aspect of human growth is that there is a more marked growth during childhood, whereas adulthood is a time of maturity. In a similar vein, we might expect a *new* Christian, particularly from an unchurched or untaught background, to be unaware of many of God's basic requirements for holy living, and so to learn and implement these things over a period of at least some time. Nevertheless, the time comes when there is something of a shift in focus from *growing* to *being*. Thus a child eats in order both to live and to grow taller, but at a certain point, the upward growth stops. The "milk/meat" terminology in Hebrews 5 likewise suggests a move from immaturity to settled maturity. Should we distinguish between sanctification and perseverance as *ongoing* works of God enabling both growth and life, but with a shifting balance as a person grows to maturity? In this respect sanctification would then be analogous to learning: though we must always be ready to stretch (or even replace) our systems, the reality is that, as we mature, our new insights tend to slot into an existing settled understanding. I remember a young man in my previous church describing his early experience of listening to sermons as "like living in a greenhouse" – he was learning so many new things. As time passed, he continued to benefit, but there was a shifting balance from learning to serving.

b. Bearing fruit

Another fruitful biblical image is that of a fruit-bearing tree. Initially, there is evident and obvious 'growth' in height, but for a mature tree, the evidence of 'growth' is annual fruitfulness. Thus Paul can write to young Timothy: "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress" (1 Tim 4:15) whereas for an older worker, it may not be progress so much as ripe fruitfulness that is on display.

c. Growing old together

Another helpful analogy is that of a developing relationship, and in particular a human marriage. (This metaphor is used for Christ and the whole church, Ephesians 5, but it may also prove helpful for thinking about individual growth). In a marriage there is not just growth but change: the buzz and anticipation of courtship is *replaced* with a deepening love. Likewise, in sanctification there may be an early ardour, not lost, but replaced by a settled and deepening understanding, and the accumulation of mutual experience. The challenge is to ensure that this is not simply a cooling off from the commendable zeal of earlier days (cf. Heb 10:32-34).

7. Why so different?

As we start to draw this third section to a close, it is worth reflecting again that Christians come to very different conclusions when it comes to their expectations of the degree of growth in holiness in themselves and others. At one end of the spectrum is 'Christian perfectionism', for example, the Wesleyan teaching of *Perfect Love*. This optimism is also seen in other strands of holiness teaching. We might think of the last words of Maria Taylor, wife of Hudson Taylor, and missionary to China. On her deathbed, Maria is reported to have said that not a cloud had come between her soul and the Saviour for the past ten years.³³ At the other end of the spectrum is a deeply pessimistic account

³³ Roger Steer, *J. Hudson Taylor: A Man in Christ* (Milton Keynes: OMF / Paternoster, 2001; originally published 1990), 242.

of attainable progress, where sanctification is seen as a lifelong struggle, with frequent setbacks.³⁴ Why is it that Christians, reading the same Bible, and equally concerned to pursue holiness, have come to such different conclusions? What are we to make of (what feels like) a great gulf between our own experience and the experience (as far as we can ascertain it) of others in Scripture, church history and today? Was grace given to people *because* of the particular challenges they faced, or were the challenges given (as in the case of Job) because they already had the grace to respond well?

Some of the differences in expectations may come down to a *difference in terminology*. For example, those at the optimistic end may defend their view by saying that what they have in mind is an absence of conscious, volitional sin, whereas those at the pessimistic end want to stress that unintentional sins and sins of omission are still sins. Nevertheless, even when allowances are made for different terminology, a significant difference remains in the positions held.

To what degree might *differences in temperament* affect a person's expectations regarding sanctification? Will a 'glass-half-empty person' be drawn to emphasise the ongoing struggle and remaining sin, whilst a 'glass-half-full person' overstate the progress made? The observation that "I'm not what I one day *will* be, but nor am I what I once *was*" may be simple, but there is a great deal of wisdom in its balance. Without papering over the significant differences in theologies, it is worth acknowledging the danger on both sides: "You're so naïve about your capacity to sin!" "You're so introspective and self-absorbed when you should be focusing on Christ!". Just as God has *gifted* us differently, so God has 'temperamented' us differently too, and we need each other if we are to think right about the Christian life in general, and our own attainments in particular.

Furthermore, we need to be careful not to confuse holiness with spiritual experience. It may be that our actual experience is tied to the wider situation that God sovereignly grants us to live in. Those who are caught up in revival may speak of a felt sense of God that others might rarely experience. It is God's sovereign right to dispense such circumstances and experiences as he chooses, but we are all reassured that we have what we need for life and godliness, whatever our felt experience.

There may be a further factor explaining why Christians come to such different conclusions. We tend to interpret our experience through our theological grid. This is an uncomfortable thought! We prefer to think of ourselves as coming to Scripture with a blank sheet, objectively weighing up what we read, and coming to a reasoned conclusion.

This combination of temperament, experience and theological grid will certainly have a bearing on the way we read individual texts. For example, take Galatians 5:17: "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, *to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*" Is that final phrase an expression of frustration akin to Romans 7:19, or a positive observation that the indwelling Holy Spirit enables us to stop doing those things that were once natural to us? Our conclusion will likely be shaped by our overall expectation with respect to sanctification.

Or consider 2 Chronicles 32:31: "...in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon... God left [Hezekiah] to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart." Is this verse primarily an indication of the inward depravity of Hezekiah, or does it testify to the power of God at work in him on all the other occasions when God enabled him to respond in a godly way? Our instinctive answer to such a question, and the way we 'preach it', will be shaped by our overall approach. We need to be alert to this dynamic.

8. Optimism and realism

In the light of all that we have considered thus far in this third section of the paper, what expectations are we to have, and to give to our people, in terms of achievable holiness? Surely there

³⁴ This is evident in the writings of, for example, John Newton.

is a need for both optimism and realism.

In terms of *optimism*, God sanctifies (Phil 2:13), so he will not be ultimately thwarted. John Murray's insistence on the actual dethronement of sin at conversion is helpful.³⁵ Wayne Grudem too is pastorally optimistic: mature Christians can hope to be free for significant periods from conscious or wilful acts of disobedience in word and deed.³⁶

In addition, we should always hold onto the possibility that we may yet experience more of God and his sanctifying grace than we perhaps expect. In this regard, I have to confess that I was more inspired by reading Andrew Naselli's history of the Keswick movement than by his subsequent critique of it (though the book as a whole was helpful).³⁷ I would rather hold out for the possibility of an experience that I haven't had, than the deadening "this is all there is".

Nevertheless, *Realism* is equally important. We need to understand 1 John 3:6 in a way that doesn't contradict 1 John 1:8. It's possible to have a 'Scriptural construct' which is unreal or unrealistic: we say the right things, bringing out 'clichés', but knowing deep down that things aren't really like that. This is ultimately corrosive to faith. Similarly, a repeated determination that "today is the first day of the rest of my life" can breed weariness and cynicism. We must never forget that the Lord is pleased with faithful plodding.

We need to have a pastorally-tailored approach. Some of our people need to be boldly challenged that "without holiness no-one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). Others in our congregations need to be reassured that "God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do." (Heb 6:10). This is analogous to the practical challenge of applying 1 Thessalonians 5:14: "admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all". It is uncomfortably easy to admonish the fainthearted and the weak whilst encouraging the idle (leaving them unchallenged) if our approach is pastorally tone-deaf. In the same way, we need to target our optimism and realism such that people hear what they need to hear in order to move forward in their Christian lives.

V. Conclusion

When I was kindly asked to give this paper, I was supplied with a sample paper from a previous year. This paper on *The Intermediate State* was erudite, copiously footnoted and with an admirable bibliography. I was thus lulled into a false sense of possibility. The paper you have just read bears a very different stamp. In the main that reflects the limitations of its author. But in my defence, I would also ask whether a larger subject could possibly be conceived (excepting perhaps 'the doctrine of God') than 'sanctification and consistent godly living'?

Given the unwieldy size of the subject, we have divided it into three pies, and considered a tiny slice from each. The goal has been practical:

- firstly, to suggest that the Sermon on the Mount is a 'Discipleship course par excellence' and to encourage us to use it as such, or at least to let it inform our discipleship and alert us to areas we may be inclined to skimp on, not least the primary importance of character, and above all humility;
- secondly, to suggest that the commitments of the Jerusalem Church provide an admirably balanced framework for considering how we should go about promoting godliness in our lives and in our churches, and to ask whether one or more of the four elements are lacking in our own approach;
- thirdly, to think through our theological framework for understanding the Christian life, to

³⁵ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 141ff

³⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 752.

³⁷ Andrew D. Naselli, *No Quick Fix* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2017).

make sure that it hasn't become simplistic or unbalanced.

The disparate nature of the three sections precludes a conclusion in the normal sense. Nevertheless, it may be worth 'joining up the dots' or at least two of the dots, one from the first section and one from the third. One key conclusion from the first section was the importance of *character* when it comes to the *What?* of holiness. One observation from the third section was that the Christian life is as much about holiness in each new life situation as it is cumulative growth 'on one axis'. But character is one of the *constants* through life: whatever new situations arise, we should face them with the trusting humility that heads the list of Jesus' beatitudes. This is one further reason for stressing character in our pursuit and promotion of holiness: character will stand us in good stead, however else the practical shape of holiness may change as we progress through life. May God indeed grant us both to grow in holiness and to live consistent godly lives, by his enabling Spirit, for the honour and renown of his Son.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Heaps is co-pastor at Highbury Baptist Church, where he is trying to work out how to shepherd a small, inner-city church after sixteen years in a much larger, town church. He's married to Ruth and (like Job) has three beautiful daughters. And a son.

PASTORING THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

Mark Thomas

Abstract

This paper begins with the tremendous, transcendental reality that God himself is the Pastor of his people (Ps 23:1, 80:1), and then fleshes out in detail how the pastoral office of the undershepherd is described in Scripture. Throughout, the calling of the pastor is described and illustrated with many examples in the Reformation and Puritan tradition – not least from the ‘three Bs’ of Bucer, Baxter and Bridges. The climactic feature of this paper is its recognition and analysis of contemporary culture and how it impinges on young people attached to churches. Whilst there are timeless issues and considerations that every pastor and church must face, there are some that are peculiar to today, and pastors are urged to face up to these – they include anxiety, exhaustion, ‘influences’ and, as in Paper 1, the whole question of ‘identity’.

I. Introduction

In considering this subject, it is a wise approach to start with the big picture before we descend to the details.

The big picture is that God himself is the Pastor of his people, and his aim in pastoring them is that the salvation planned by the Father in eternity and secured by the Lord Jesus Christ in history is applied to them by the Holy Spirit.

This salvation means an undoing of all the effects of sin: on our status before God in justification, reconciliation and adoption, on our nature in regeneration and sanctification, and ultimately the complete removal of all vestiges of sin, together with all the remaining effects of the curse, in the new heaven and new earth where righteousness dwells – this is the perfection, the fullness and the end of salvation.

This salvation comes to us “in Christ” – all our deliverance from sin flows from his saving work in history and flows to us through union with him. Thus, all pastoral help comes through communion with Christ by his Spirit.

In addition, our salvation in Christ restores us to a higher state than that experienced by Adam and lost in sin. There is a wonder and glory in knowing Christ as Redeemer that is beyond unfallen Adam’s experience of God as Creator and Sustainer. Isaac Watts put it well:

*Where He displays His healing power,
Death and the curse are known no more;
In Him the tribes of Adam boast
More blessings than their father lost.¹*

A number of corollaries flow from this big picture:

1. God himself is at work in the salvation of his people – not just initially when we are born again, but continually and at every point. This is a ground of great confidence, both for Christians and for those who shepherd them:

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until

¹ From the hymn, *Jesus shall reign where'er the sun*.

the day of Christ Jesus. (Phil 1:6)

2. The final outcome is assured. Each one of his people will ultimately inherit a full and perfect salvation: justified, sanctified and glorified. This certain hope, when grasped by faith, does so much to keep us looking forward while we travel as strangers and pilgrims through this cursed vale of tears.

3. This salvation is to be progressively experienced: a change of status in justification, adoption and reconciliation is a once-for-all act of God, but the Christian's awareness of its reality and implications must grow and deepen throughout our whole lives. Similarly, regeneration is a once-for-all act of God, but it leads to a lifetime of progressive sanctification – a deepening and broadening of the restamped image of God in Jesus Christ upon the whole person. Glorification is certain, but a growing confidence in and awareness of its reality is to be the work of a lifetime. Restored fellowship with God and his people, that is relationships of love that flow out of the Christian's experience of the love of God in Jesus Christ, is to be a growing characteristic and delight of each believer. In short, God is at work to make each Christian "complete in Christ" (Col 1:28).

This big picture also raises some questions:

1. How complete can and should our salvation be this side of glory? Our justification and regeneration are complete, but our grasp of our justification, seen for instance in our assurance, and our incomplete sanctification, seen all too readily in our less-than-Christlike lives, are evident. What can be expected in this life, and what should pastors aim for in their own lives and the lives of their people? This is complicated further when we consider the 'non-sinful' effects of the curse, things which are not to be repented of and put off and will be removed in glory. Things like physical ill health and disability, mental illness and developmental deficits, difficult relationships, and the effects of poverty and suffering. How much is our pastoral role to help people overcome these, and how much is it to help our people live godly lives in the midst of them, while they look forward to their final release in glory? On the one hand, an over-realised eschatology can be deeply damaging, but on the other hand, we must never lose sight of the fact that these things are not neutral and irrelevant – just things to be put up with – but that the Lord uses them for his own glory in the sanctification of his people. Often these struggles form part of the furnace that the Lord uses to bring his people forth as gold.

2. What means does God use to shepherd his people? What is the role of an under-shepherd, and what roles are other Christians to play? What is the place of the Word of God, prayer and the fellowship of the Church?

II. God as Shepherd

The imagery used for God's relationship to his people is rich and varied: think for instance of Creator, Sustainer, Father, Redeemer, Healer and King.

But in considering "pastoring the twenty-first century Church", it will be helpful for us to consider the Lord as the Shepherd of his people.

In the Old Testament, in addition to Psalm 23, Jeremiah 23:1-4 and Ezekiel 34, we have passages like:

And he blessed Joseph, and said, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day". (Gen 48:15)

But He led forth His own people like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. (Ps 78:52)

Oh, give ear, Shepherd of Israel, Thou who dost lead Joseph like a flock; Thou who art enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth! (Ps 80:1)

Come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand... (Ps 95:6-7)

Like a shepherd He will tend His flock. In His arm He will gather the lambs, and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes. (Isa 40:11)

It presents us with a picture of God as one who leads and guides his people, tending to them in their weakness, providing them with food and water and protecting them from their enemies.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is described as the “good” (John 10:11), “great” (Heb 13:20) and “chief” (1 Pet 5:4) Shepherd of the sheep and he functions as a Shepherd during his earthly ministry and today, from the right hand of God.

He is characterised by compassion and self-sacrifice in providing for his sheep and delivering them from harm:

And when He went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things. (Mark 6:34)

I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. (John 10:11)

Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.’” (Matt 26:31)

In the parable of the lost sheep, he is pictured as seeking and restoring his sheep:

What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the other ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he puts it on his shoulders, rejoicing. (Luke 15:4-5)

Ultimately, he will vindicate his people, separating the nations “as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matt 25:32) and then he will remain his people’s Shepherd forever:

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the centre of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes. (Rev 7:16-17)

III. Under-shepherds of God’s people

The shepherd motif applies to those whom the Lord sends to pastor his people. The leaders of Israel are described in this way (2 Sam 7:7) and so particularly is David who was called from shepherding sheep, to shepherd God’s people Israel (2 Sam 5:2).

Yet it is still the Lord himself that shepherds the people through them: “You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (Ps 77:20).

In the New Testament, the same applies. In 1 Peter 5:1-4, Christ is the Chief Shepherd of the sheep, and the elders are to shepherd the flock of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the “Shepherd and Guardian (Overseer) of our souls”, (1 Pet 2:25) while in Acts 20:17, Paul calls the Ephesian elders to himself, and when they arrive he tells them, “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28) and in 1 Peter 5:2 elders are to shepherd the flock of God, exercising oversight. This relationship between shepherding and oversight is important to recognise.

Without entering into the relationship between elders and ministers, it should be noted that in Ephesians 4, apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers are gifts of the ascended Christ to the Church who each exercise word ministry by which the saints are equipped and built up. The ministry of the Word is the primary way in which the sheep are pastored. While all elders

are to be apt to teach, those who “work hard at preaching and teaching” (1 Tim 5:17) can be seen to have the primary role in shepherding the sheep.

All Christians have a part to play in caring for one another. The Lord Jesus Christ has given various gifts to his people. Some of these gifts are to be recognised in men appointed to the offices of elder and deacon, but as Paul identifies in Romans 12:3-8, all Christians should exercise “sound judgment” in recognising the gifts they have been given for the good of the body and other Christians individually, and should exercise them appropriately. In addition to prophecy, teaching and exhortation, he refers to service, giving, leading and showing mercy (Rom 12:3-8). Other gifts are listed elsewhere in the New Testament.

Also, Christians are to pray for one another, encourage one another (*parakaleoæ*, which includes encouraging, comforting, exhorting, admonishing and persuading) and build one another up (1 Thess 5:11) as well as teach and admonish each other in their singing (Col 3:16). Paul is convinced that the Roman Christians were “full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another” (Rom 15:14). He also recognised that not all Christians are gifted or equipped to help their brothers and sisters in all circumstances, and some things are best left to others (Gal 6:1).

Fathers also have a particular responsibility to bring up their children in the “discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4, c.f. Deut 6:7; 11:19) and the repeated calls in Proverbs to “my son” to hear his father’s instruction and not forsake his mother’s teaching.

This identifies the vital place that Christian fellowship and the Christian family have in the shepherding purposes of God. They add to the richness of the life of the Church and we need to identify and encourage ways in which this can be promoted and encouraged. Having said that, they in no way take away from the primary responsibility of pastors to pastor their people. Rather, when well marshalled, they are great allies in shepherding the people of God.

Historically, two significant ways in which Christian fellowship and the Christian family have been thus marshalled are fellowship meetings and family worship. Fellowship meetings have been established at various points in church history, such as with Spener². They became a significant factor in early Methodism in the eighteenth century. In Wales, they contributed significantly to the spread of the gospel and the growth of believers who, in many cases, had irregular gospel ministry in their churches. Various rules were drawn up to guide them, the most famous being *The Experience Meeting* by William Williams, Pantycelyn, published in 1777³. It is full of wisdom on how to encourage honest, edifying fellowship and avoid some of the pitfalls. The spiritual quality of the leader of the meeting is critical.

Around the same time in Scotland, John Brown, Haddington, produced his *Divine Warrants, Ends, Advantages and Rules, of Fellowship-Meetings, for Prayer and Spiritual Conference together with Rules Agreed Upon by Some Praying Societies*. In *Divine Warrants* he says:

The important ENDS for which such societies ought to be formed and conscientiously attended, are, 1. To promote and increase the knowledge of the truths, ordinances, and works of God, Col 3:16; Ps 116:2. 2. To express and exercise mutual sympathy among the members, Rom 15:1,2; Gal 6:2 3. To provoke and encourage one another to holiness and virtue, in all manner of conversation, Heb. 10:24,25; Eph 4:15,16. 4. To communicate one another’s gifts and graces to their mutual edification, 1 Pet 4:10; Eph 4:12,13. 5. To render Christians faithful and friendly watchers over, counsellors, warners, and reprovers of one another, 1 Thess 5:14; Heb 3:13; 10:24. 6. That they may join together in prayer, praise, and other spiritual exercises, Matt. 18:19, 20.⁴

² McNeill, John Thomas, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (Harper San Francisco, 1977), 182ff.

³ Williams, William, *The Experience Meeting: An Introduction to the Welsh Societies of the Evangelical Awakening* (Regent College Publishing, 2003). English translation by Bethan Lloyd-Jones.

⁴ Published in Brown, John, *The Posthumous Works of the Late Rev. Mr. John Brown, Minister of the Gospel At Haddington* (R. Morrison and Son, 1797), 257-265.

Small groups have become very common in our churches and usually involve prayer and bible study. Williams and Brown would encourage us to maximise the benefit likely to accrue from these meetings by having a focus on Christian experience and encouragement in the practical outworking of the Christian life.

Many guides are available to help with family worship, some rather overwhelming. As is so often the case, it is vital that fathers do not try and do too much, and so find they are unable to keep it up, and in the process frustrate their children. Reading the Word with some comments, honest prayer which adores God and seeks his blessing on the family and the church, and perhaps some singing, held at a time when family members can be available (perhaps around the tea table) is a useful aim. Not everything needs to be done together, and every day does not need to be the same. Iain Murray's comments deserve consideration⁵.

In addition to these two 'formal' approaches, the informal and organic should be encouraged: believers visiting and praying with one another; recommending books and sharing their problems and their joys, and families living their lives with an awareness of God, talking about Christian things when they sit and walk, lie down and rise up (Deut 6:7) and praying for God's help in their difficulties as they arise.

IV. The purpose of shepherding

John Owen, in the final question of his *A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God and Discipline of the Churches of the New Testament*, helpfully asks,

Q. 53. What are the ends of all this dispensation and order of things in the church?

*A. The glory of God, the honour of Jesus Christ the mediator, the furtherance of the gospel, the edification and consolation of believers here, with their eternal salvation hereafter.*⁶

Put more simply, the purpose of the Church is the worship of God, the evangelism of the world and the building up of believers with an eye to eternity.

In pastoral terms, this means our approach is not primarily focused on the problems people think they have. Our aim and purpose is to bring men and women to know God through the Lord Jesus Christ, to worship and serve him, and grow to be like him.

Andrew Davies⁷ helpfully points out that the Puritans typically saw pastoring as *Biblical*, *Theological*, *Evangelical*, and *Analytical* and *Experimental* and we can use these four headings to orientate our thinking.

1. Pastoring must be biblical

Firstly, it must be biblical. This means more than using the Bible to find answers to people's problems – a kind of Christian version of a secular problem-focused therapy. It goes deeper. It means we must come to see ourselves in the way the Bible views us. We must see ourselves and all our issues as people who stand before God. The effects of sin are such that we are by nature alienated from the life of God, with futile minds, darkened understandings, and hard hearts (Eph 4:16-19). We love darkness rather than light and will not come to the light for fear that our deeds will be exposed. We see ourselves as being at the centre of everything. But our need is to reorientate ourselves so that God is in the centre and we view ourselves and our lives in relation to him. Christians, facing the struggle between flesh and Spirit need to do this continually.

⁵ Iain H Murray, 'How to Do Family Worship': A Response', *Banner of Truth*, 653 (2018), 31.

⁶ See: John Owen, 'A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God and Discipline of the Churches of the New Testament', *The Works of John Owen D.D.* (vol. 15, New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851), 445-530

⁷ Edward Donnelly, 'The Gospel Minister in the Bible', *The Gospel Ministry Today: papers read at the conference of The John Owen Centre for Theological Study, September 2002* (Evangelical Press, 2005), 7-23

This leads inevitably to a humbling of self and a sense of self-realisation. Our hopes and ambitions and desires are not the big things we thought they were. We live our lives in the presence of God – his holiness searches all our petty ambitions, and his glory is worth far more than our ‘successes’ – in fact, his glory is the only thing that really matters.

It also leads to a change of priorities and a sense of servanthood. Saul of Tarsus, when he was confronted by the Lord Jesus Christ was humbled to the ground and cried out, “Lord, what shall I do.” At times we struggle to know the answer to that question, but even then, it must be our desire:

O our God, wilt Thou not judge them? For we are powerless before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on Thee. (2 Chr 20:12)

It was so for our Saviour whose plea, “not my will, but yours be done” is surely the paradigm and high-water mark for our humility and self-denial.

It gives us a vision of the people the Lord has saved us to be. There is nothing so liberating as knowing that as Christians we are new men and women in Jesus Christ with a new heart, a new love, a new Lord and a new life. His law is written on our hearts, our idols have been dethroned, and his Spirit dwells in us to enable us to walk in his ways. We have fellowship in light with the God of light, and the promise that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We have a home in heaven where there will be no sin, sorrow or sickness. And it all comes to us freely, the product of blood-soaked love.

Colossians 1:28 tells us, “And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ.” God’s purpose is that Christians may be complete in Christ, mature and well-rounded, conformed to his image, knowing him and representing him in the world. And this comes about through the proclamation of Christ, as believers take hold of who he is, what he has done for us, what he is doing in us and what he will do for us as we are united to him in his death and resurrection.

2. Pastoring must be theological

Secondly, it must be theological. This isn’t the same as theoretical or academic. Rather, it means that it is the true knowledge of God and the gospel that the Lord uses to transform us.

Derek Tidball refers here to Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ sermons on Ephesians 4:17-5:17 as “an outstanding example of good pastoral theology”.⁸ In particular, he identifies a sermon concentrating on the “therefore” in Ephesians 4:17 as one that “explained the relationship between doctrine and practice”.⁹ In the second, less doctrinal part of Ephesians, Lloyd-Jones shows how “each practical issue is an application of spiritual truth. Thus in 4:17-24, certain standards of behaviour are required because we are entirely new creatures in Christ. In 5:3-17 certain patterns of behaviour are to be rejected because, as is stated in verses 1 and 2, we are children of God. Ephesians 5:18-21 lays down the doctrinal principle about the control of the Spirit out of which teaching regarding relationships arises in 5:22 - 6:9. He goes on to quote Lloyd-Jones:

Failure in the living of the Christian life, therefore, must ultimately result from a failure somewhere or other to understand the doctrine and the truth... You do not appeal to the will of people to make them holy; instead you get them to understand the doctrine. It is not a matter of decision, it is a matter of understanding.

Doctrine helps to provide us with the ‘why’. Sadly so much preaching, teaching or pastoral care

⁸ Tidball, Derek, *Skilful Shepherds: Explorations in Pastoral Theology* (1997), 26, fn. 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

never tells us 'why', because it is too concerned with telling us 'how' or 'what'.¹⁰

What Tidball says of the relationship between doctrine and practice must also be said of the relationship between doctrine and experience and between doctrine and self-understanding. We are “sanctified by the truth” (John 17:17) and transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:1-2). The implications of this are that understanding, embracing and applying the truth is vital for a Christian to be complete in Christ. As such, shepherding involves explaining the truth and applying it to people’s lives.

In a similar vein, Davies quotes William Perkins, “The blessed life ariseth from the knowledge of God”,¹¹ and it was William Ames who said, “Theology is the doctrine or teaching of living to God... men live to God when they live in accord with the will of God, to the glory of God, and with God working in them”.¹²

3. Pastoring must be evangelical

Thirdly, it must be evangelical. That is, we have to know how to apply the truths of the gospel, and this means law as well as grace.

The law has two main functions in the life of a believer. Firstly, it convicts of sin with a gospel purpose – to drive men and women to Christ for forgiveness. Secondly, it shows the paths of righteousness in which Christ would have his people walk by the power of the Spirit. That is, it puts meat on the bones of love to God and to our neighbour.

A failure to see the seriousness of sin can be a problem for Christians and non-Christians alike, and the law is designed by God to make us aware of his holiness and his unflinching standards. In these lightly antinomian days, it is important for Christians to come to terms with the fact that there is a holiness without which no one shall see the Lord (Heb 12:14). Similarly, duty is a biblical principle, a part of our gospel obedience. Paul informs Timothy, “in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15), and John tells us, “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:15).

Grace, by comparison, draws from sin to God. The law can convict us and drive us, but without grace, it only drives us from one sin to another, and deeper into despair. True repentance is a fruit of grace. It takes an awareness of the goodness and mercy of God to draw us from our sins and back to God in repentance. This applies both in conversion where, as the old proverb says, “more flies are caught with honey than with vinegar”, and also in the Christian life (a life of repentance) where, for instance, backsliders are told, “I will heal their apostasy, I will love them freely, For My anger has turned away from them” (Hos 14:4).

The grace of God in forgiveness is never an end in itself, but is designed to lead us to God in lives of thankful worship and service. Paul says, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Tit 2:11-12). And Peter tells us, “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God” (1 Pet 3:18).

4. Pastoring must be analytical and experimental

Fourthly, it must be analytical and experimental. Not every problem is the same, and not every person is in the same condition. Is the person we are seeking to help a believer or an unbeliever? The comforts of God’s children don’t apply to those who are not yet saved. Erroll Hulse writes, “It

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹¹ Donnelly, *The Gospel Minister in the Bible*, 100.

¹² Ames, William, *The Marrow of Theology* (Baker Books, 1997) 1.1.1.6.

is true that it is not possible to determine in an infallible way whether a person is regenerate, but nevertheless Puritan writings demonstrate the importance of using the biblical data to ascertain this question as carefully as is humanly possible.”¹³ Pastoral counsel for unbelievers must focus on real faith and repentance, and the necessity of the new birth. Things that appear similar must be distinguished, for instance, habitual sin must be distinguished from frequent, strong temptation and the flaming missiles of the evil one. Also, not every problem with the same symptoms has the same cause – depression, for instance, may have a number of spiritual causes, or it may be a result of other things such as difficult life circumstances or ill health.

It is here that the shepherd’s knowledge of the word of God, his dealings with others, and also his experience of God’s dealings in his own life is so vital. Charles Bridges quotes Luther as saying, “Prayer, meditation, and temptation, make a Minister”¹⁴.

To mix metaphors, we must seek to become skilful physicians of souls, able to diagnose the malady and apply the cure (or at least recommend it to the patient). We must seek to approve ourselves to God as workmen who do “not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

V. The remit of the shepherd

We need to consider the breadth of the shepherd’s responsibility. This is related to the question asked in our introduction, “How complete can and should our salvation be this side of glory?”

One consideration is our response to practical and ‘physical’ difficulties in life: financial problems, ill health, injustice, childcare demands, caring for sick relatives and so forth. The New Testament places a great responsibility on believers to “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ”. While the social state has to some degree taken away the hard edge of such difficulties for many, people still experience great needs, and we require wisdom in knowing how best to help them. Paul refers to such gifts as service and giving in Romans 12, and the office of deacon in the New Testament is important here. The men appointed to serve tables in Acts 6 were required to be “full of the Spirit and of wisdom”. Helping the saints in practical ways is not beneath a minister or elders – in Acts 6 the apostles just didn’t have the time and needed help so that they could focus on what they had been called to do. Charles Bridges notes “As a general rule, partial assistance – giving a stimulus to their own exertions – is more efficient as well as more economical, than a complete deliverance from their difficulties”¹⁵. The ministry of Thomas Chalmers has useful insights for us. G. R. Evans comments, “there is an ancient duty to protect the helpless. One-parent families are perhaps the modern Western counterpart of the widows and orphans of the New Testament.”¹⁶ We have not fallen captive to a ‘social gospel’ just because we go around “doing good” (Acts 10:38). Rather, we should do good to all as we have opportunity, especially to the household of faith (Gal 6:10). To help a brother in need as we are able is just a natural outworking of love (1 John 3:17).

Another consideration is what “spiritual” issues should a shepherd seek to address, and what issues are beyond his remit? Or perhaps more pointedly, what issues are beyond his competence?

The rise of professionals in medicine and the social sciences in more recent years is well known, and this has meant that shepherds are suffering a crisis of confidence and often feel on the back foot. It is as if the ‘professionals’ are the ones who can really help people, and that the contribution of a shepherd is amateurish at best.

While there is much to be applauded in the discovery of new knowledge and the development of ways to help people, it needs to be noted that every approach to helping people has a theoretical

13 Hulse, Erroll, ‘The Puritans and Counselling Troubled Souls’, *Foundations*, 8 (1982), 10.

14 Bridges, Charles, *The Christian Ministry With an Inquiry Into the Causes of Its Inefficiency* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 60.

15 Ibid., 356.

16 Evans, G. R. (ed), *A History of Pastoral Care* (A&C Black, 2000), 5.

undergirding that inevitably plays out in the help it offers. The enlightenment introduced, as David Cornick noted, “the establishment of the primacy of reason, the autonomy of the human self, and the slow shrinking of the realm of the supernatural”.¹⁷ The resultant post-enlightenment secularism and naturalism mean that much of this work is being done without a distinctly Christian understanding of what it means to be human. Man’s inherently spiritual and moral nature as a creature made in the image of God and the devastating effects of sin and curse upon him are minimised or dismissed.

Eric L. Johnson notes that:

In the premodern West, the soul’s worst problems were understood to be ethical and spiritual. However, the replacement of theism with naturalism as the worldview underlying the care of souls in the West necessitated that psychic problems be understood solely in terms of natural dynamics (i.e. biological and psychosocial).¹⁸

Thus among secular, naturalist ‘shepherds’, ethical and spiritual causes and effects are largely ignored or dismissed, and hence diagnoses and treatment options are often lacking. This is particularly true when it comes to issues of guilt and shame, self-hatred, loneliness, meaninglessness, and unforgiveness¹⁹. In addition to this, a secular, naturalist approach has no godly target in view. It does not seek to make people more like Christ, more thankful for grace received and more confident in the promises of God. It does not seek to prepare them for glory.

(M)odern psychology has simply made what the majority of (mostly modernist) intellectuals today consider to be a compelling case: that its version of human beings is simply better than those that went before it – more accurate, more comprehensive and less distorted. All of this has contributed to the crisis in the church.²⁰

Thomas Oden addressed,

[T]he Church’s critical loss of confidence in its own insights. He quoted one therapist, Paul Pruyser, who had spent a lot of time in dialogue with clergy: “I became aware that much of the instruction was one-sided, with the consent of both parties: the theologians sat at the feet of the psychiatric Gamaliels and seemed to like it. Pastors were eager to absorb as much psychological knowledge and skill as they could, without even thinking about instructional reciprocity... I have learned that ministers would be hard put to know what to teach, from their own discipline, to members of the psychological professions even if they were specifically asked and salaried to do so.”²¹

It is true that, as Johnson notes, “(t)he triune God did not convey through Scripture his *entire* understanding of human beings, so the use of other, relevant sources of knowledge about human beings for Christian psychotherapy and counselling is legitimate and highly desirable, so long as they function subordinately to Scripture”, and it is at this point that the Christian shepherd’s contribution should become evident. We have an understanding of humanity that is better and more accurate than the secular, naturalistic one, and we have better tools at our disposal to help people. We are sent by God with the Word of God and the promise of the aid of his Holy Spirit. In fact, we have the promise that God himself will shepherd the people through us. This spiritual, truly supernatural element is the one we must never forget.

When it comes to our understanding of humanity, Johnson makes a three-fold distinction in

17 David Cornick, ‘Post-Enlightenment Pastoral Care: Into the Twentieth Century’, in G. R. Evans (ed.), *A History of Pastoral Care* (A&C Black, 2000), 362.

18 Johnson, Eric L., *God and Soul Care: The Therapeutic Resources of the Christian Faith* (IVP Academic, 2017), 216-217.

19 Ibid., 217.

20 Johnson, Eric L., *Psychology & Christianity* (IVP Academic, 2010), 25-26.

21 Cornick, *Post-Enlightenment Pastoral Care: Into the Twentieth Century*, 376. quoting from Oden’s 1984 work *The Care of Souls in the Classical Tradition*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia.

the way the fall has affected men and women. Firstly, “humans have become disordered ethically and spiritually, a relational malady called sin”. This he subdivides into original sin, sinful desires, sinful actions and “vices or habitual patterns of sinful actions”. Secondly, there are soul disorders that contemporary psychology calls “syndromes characterised by symptoms and usually various kinds of biopsychosocial damage”. Thirdly, “while not a disorder per se, suffering can contribute to the development of a disorder – especially when experienced chronically in childhood together with some genetic vulnerability”²². In theological terms, this means men and women are affected by both sin and curse.

Johnson’s position is that “These three perspectives together provide a more complex and comprehensive approach to psychopathology than any one by itself. The challenge for the Christian community is to develop a unified framework of discourse and diagnosis based on Christian worldview assumptions”²³.

The shepherd has a responsibility to address sin issues, and to promote godly living in the face of “biopsychosocial damage” and the effects of suffering and trauma. There are areas where specialists and medical professionals are well-placed to help. Bipolar disorder, for instance, requires more than a spiritual remedy. Those who need such help should always be pointed to such specialists, and their help should be encouraged and welcomed. However, even in those cases, the spiritual needs of the individual should not be neglected.

To say this is no different from shepherds of former generations emphasising the need to involve a ‘physician’ in some situations. Richard Baxter does this in his great work *The Reformed Pastor*, as does David Dickson in his *Therapeutica Sacra*, where he tells us that we:

*[M]ust distinguish worldly sorrow, and Hypochondriack-passions and Perturbations of mind from Cases of Conscience, and spiritual Exercise in the Wrestlings of Faith, that for a natural Disease and Distemper a pertinent Remedy may be called for from the bodily Physicians... In such a Case, where both the bodily Distemper and spiritual Exercise are joined, Circumspection is necessary, that proportionable remedies be used by the Physician, and the Pastor, or prudent Friend, that bodily Medicine and spiritual Consolations may be each in their own time and order wisely made use of.*²⁴

Sometimes the best solution to a downcast spirit is sleep, fresh air and exercise, but even that can be helped along by a dose of thankfulness, and consideration of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

We must also realise that some problems will not be resolved. This includes, but is not limited to certain effects of sinful choices.

*The Word of God indicates that certain ethical and moral patterns bring negative results which the grace of God does not necessarily change in this life... Ten of the best counsellors in the world could never sort out the wretched fruits that came from David’s lust and murder, since most of these things were imposed on David as divine chastisement for his (forgiven) sin.*²⁵

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones provides helpful guidance in diagnosing distressed people in his 1974 Rendle Short Memorial Lecture for the Christian Medical Fellowship, entitled, “Body, Mind and Spirit”²⁶. He suggests that you start with the question, “Is it physical?” Is there, for instance, an illness or imbalance causing the distress? If so, appropriate medical treatment is needed. Secondly, “If it is not physical, is it spiritual?” “I have always found that with persons in this spiritual category,

22 Johnson, *God and Soul Care: The Therapeutic Resources of the Christian Faith*, 211.

23 Ibid.

24 Dickson, David, *Therapeutica Sacra: Showing Briefly, the Method of Healing the Diseases of the Conscience, Concerning Regeneration* (Second edn., James Watson, 1697), 326.

25 Martin, Albert N., *Pastoral Theology, Vol. 3: The Man of God, His Shepherding, Evangelizing, and Counseling Labors* (2018), 630.

26 Reprinted as Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn, *Healing and Medicine* (Kingsway, 1987).

there is a clear diagnostic point. They always show a readiness to listen and they almost jump at any of the verses quoted that give them relief. They hold on to what will bring comfort and release. One must not be put off by their appearing at first to demur a little, with a, 'Yes, but...' They are really doing this in the hope that you can go on to make your case still stronger. They *want* you to make your case and in my experience it is a diagnostic pointer to those in this group." Spiritual cases need "detailed proof". "One must be precise and detailed in bringing to bear the scriptural arguments", maybe more than once. Patience is needed. Merely telling them 'Don't worry' is not only wrong, it can be real cruelty." Thirdly, he refers to psychological problems, or 'mental illness'. "I think that you will find almost invariably that those who are mentally ill do not really listen to you. You quote Scripture, they do not listen. They keep repeating the same statements and give the impression that they are waiting for you to finish so that they can say their piece over again... You notice the difference as compared with those in spiritual trouble: the latter are anxious to have help. The others are not."

His last category is the 'demonic': "in my experience, what appears to me to be the results of demonic activity is a very, very common cause of people's coming to see the minister". Lloyd-Jones differentiates between demon 'oppression', or 'satanic attacks' and 'demon possession'. The diagnostic points for satanic attacks are, "First, the sudden onset of the condition; second, it was something unexpected in this type of person, and something they have never had before. Suddenly these excellent people are changed and become more or less useless... Another diagnostic element is extreme weakness... Then the last diagnostic point is that they, of course, make no response to any medical treatment, no matter what it is. They also baffle all those who treat them medically or psychiatrically." In these cases, "you will always be able to deliver them by reasoning with them out of the Scriptures. I do not mean by just quoting Scripture but deploying the whole basic arguments of Scripture concerning salvation, calling and service."

Regarding 'demon possession' the diagnostic points are, "You generally find a history of dabbling with spiritualism or the occult in some form... They may also have experimented with drugs. One clear diagnostic point is that one becomes aware of a dual personality. There is another person; you see it in the face, hear it in the voice. It is an unnatural and quite different voice and can very often be accompanied by horrifying facial expressions. There is also – a most important point – an alteration between what we may call a normal and an abnormal element. These persons can be one moment quite normal and can discuss things quite readily for a time; then suddenly they change. The 'other' person seems to take charge... A still more significant pointer is their reaction to the name of our Lord. I always tell ministers who are confronted by the duty of treating such cases to use the phrase - 'Jesus Christ is come in the flesh' and to note the reaction. Talk to them of 'the blood of Christ' and you will generally see that they will react quite violently to this."

This last area, recognising a demonic element, whether by means of "fiery darts" or something more oppressive, is an area that a naturalist will be completely unable to diagnose or help. While we must not be naive, and there is a real need for discernment (1 Cor 12:10). To dismiss this element would be a major pastoral weakness.

VI. Work of the shepherd

A review of the biblical data shows the shepherd's work to consist of knowing, seeking, finding, accompanying, feeding, tending, strengthening, restoring, leading, ruling and protecting the sheep.

This covers both evangelism, which is the calling in of Christ's elect sheep, "And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock *with* one shepherd" (John 10:16) and also the pastoral care of Christians in the full variety of their conditions.

Different periods of history have emphasised different elements of pastoral care, and also different ways of going about it, but the consistent concern of godly shepherds has been the same

in principle through the ages. Augustine, for instance, stated,

*[D]isturbers are to be rebuked, the low-spirited to be encouraged, the infirm to be supported, objectors confuted, the treacherous guarded against, the unskilled taught, the lazy aroused, the contentious restrained, the haughty repressed, litigants pacified, the poor relieved, the oppressed liberated, the good approved, the evil borne with, and all are to be loved.*²⁷

The Reformation brought about a variety of changes in pastoral practice. According to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, “[t]he art of pastoral care was to be crafted from the discipline of penance, the celebration of the Eucharist within the context of the Christian year and the skills of the confessor, a doctor of souls.”²⁸ However,

*[T]he landscape was to be irrevocably changed by the reformation. As ‘justification by faith alone’ laid waste the penitential system, the whole panoply of confession and works of satisfaction fell into disrepair, for they were no longer needed. Redefinitions of Eucharistic theology laid waste the bold symbolic statement that had held the world together for three hundred years, and the ritual year suffered grievous assault and died.*²⁹

Luther’s “new understanding of the Christian faith – ‘The sum of the gospel is this: who believes in Christ has the forgiveness of sins’ – implied a dramatic simplification of the Church.”³⁰

So it was that,

*[T]he early reformers created a new world. In place of the visual culture of late medieval Catholicism with its central symbol of God made present in Eucharist host, they offered a God who had come in Jesus Christ, and spoke still through the words of Scripture and sermons in the language of every man and woman. It is hard after four centuries to capture the thrill of immediacy, the sense of involvement and participation which rippled through early Reformed Europe. Holiness was no longer the prerogative of the few but the possession of all. All were priests. All resonated with the glory of God.*³¹

Reformation period soul care focussed on the Word of God, particularly as preached by men called of God to do so, but also as shared on a more personal level in conversation and visitation or as written in letters. Prayer was vital, and the sacraments played an important part in strengthening the spiritual lives of believers. The involvement of laymen was encouraged – an outworking of the principles of the priesthood of all believers – but not in such a way as to remove either the role or the primacy of those called of God. Confession of sin retained a place, but this was on a voluntary basis to a minister, as was best for the unburdening of the soul. Calvin for instance is quoted as follows: “we should lay our burdens on one another’s breasts, to receive among ourselves mutual counsel, mutual compassion, and mutual consolation”.³²

One difference which perhaps needs to be recovered in some circles is the change brought about in the role of the shepherd as ‘spiritual director’.

The Protestant director does not claim so much of authority; nor seek to make permanent the relationship in which he gives counsel. He is a physician for a crisis who expects his patient to recover and normally to control his own health... Perhaps a more constant difference lies in the fact that the Protestant... does not assume the position of sole guide, as is normally the case with

27 Sermon ccix quoted in McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls*, 100.

28 David Cornick, ‘The Reformation Crisis in Pastoral Care’, in G. R. Evans (ed.), *A History of Pastoral Care* (A&C Black, 2000), 223.

29 *Ibid.*, 227.

30 *Ibid.*, 230.

31 *Ibid.*, 244.

32 McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls*, 241.

*Roman Catholics.*³³

From the Reformation on, there has been a great consistency of opinion in the elements of a shepherd's work. Martin Bucer in his 1538 work *Concerning the True Care of Souls*³⁴, described by David Cornick as "the most comprehensive and systematic pastoral theology of the Reformation era"³⁵, approaches it under five headings as follows:

1. How the lost sheep are to be sought
2. How the stray sheep are to be restored
3. How the hurt and wounded sheep are to be bound up and healed (including a discussion of penance)
4. How the weak sheep are to be strengthened
5. How the healthy and strong sheep are to be guarded and fed (including a discussion of excommunication for unrepentant troublemakers of the Church)

In the following century (1656), Richard Baxter in his *The Reformed Pastor*³⁶, lists seven functions of pastors:

1. Labouring for conversions
2. Advising those under conviction of sin
3. Building up Christians:
 - i. the young and the weak
 - ii. those who labour under a particular corruption
 - iii. backsliders
 - iv. the strong
4. Families
5. Visiting the sick
6. Reproving and admonishing offenders
7. Exercising church discipline

Charles Bridges, in the section *The Pastoral Work of the Christian Ministry* of his 1849 work, *The Christian Ministry* lists the following "Cases":

1. The infidel
2. The ignorant and careless
3. The self-righteous
4. The false professor
5. Those under natural and spiritual convictions
6. The young Christian
7. The backslider
8. The unestablished Christian
9. The confirmed and consistent Christian

More recently, Timothy Z. Witmer, in his 2010 book *The Shepherd Leader*³⁷ seeks to subsume the whole of a shepherd's duty under four headings as shown in the table below. He also helpfully shows that the shepherd has a responsibility both to the Church as a whole (the macro level), and to individual Christians (the micro level).

³³ Ibid., 200-201.

³⁴ Bucer, Martin, & Peter Beale, *Concerning the True Care of Souls* (Banner of Truth, 2009)

³⁵ Cornick, *The Reformation Crisis in Pastoral Care*, 237.

³⁶ Baxter, Richard, *The Reformed Pastor. (5th Abridged Ed.) Edited By William Brown* (1974).

³⁷ Witmer, Timothy Z., *The Shepherd Leader* (P & R Publishing, 2010).

	KNOWING	FEEDING	LEADING	PROTECTING
MACRO Public / Corporate Ministry	<p>Accurate membership roles</p> <p>Knowing the flock's corporate strengths, weaknesses, traits and opportunities</p>	<p>Pulpit ministry</p> <p>Christian education</p> <p>Sacraments</p>	<p>Vision casting</p> <p>Mission and Purpose</p> <p>Ministry decisions</p> <p>Committee leadership</p>	<p>Public instruction and warning from the Scriptures</p> <p>Awareness of cultural "wolves"</p> <p>"Tell it to the church" step of Matt 18:17</p>
MICRO Personal / Relational Ministry	<p>Knowing the sheep personally</p> <p>Knowing which elders are caring for which sheep</p> <p>Strategy for regular, personal contact</p>	<p>Discipleship</p> <p>Mentoring</p> <p>Small group</p>	<p>By example in personal godliness, family life, church commitments</p> <p>Counselling</p>	<p>Private warning</p> <p>Matt 18:15-16 steps to restore wandering sheep</p>

Each of these divisions cover the same basic territory.

Certain clear needs stand out:

The need to know who our people are, and have some acquaintance with their condition. This can only be achieved by spending time with them, listening, and asking questions. A sympathetic ear, appropriate confidentiality, and compassionate and wise responses will help foster the trust that makes this possible.

The need to feed the sheep with appropriate food in the right-sized portions. This applies to the healthy sheep that need strengthening and equipping, and the less healthy who need food tailored to their specific needs.

The need to identify strengths and weaknesses in the church as a whole as well, its ministries, and the individual sheep.

The need to provide leadership that is evidently for the glory of God and the good of the sheep, and that is not self-serving in any way.

The need to be examples to the flock of everything we wish to develop in them. Our food is more readily eaten, and our lead is more readily followed, when people can see the good it does us. Think of hard-working Paul among the idle Thessalonians, 2 Thess 3:6-9.

The need to reprove sin and to identify error which would otherwise harm the sheep. This takes courage; wolves are not puppies, and sin is never the Christian's friend.

1. Developing strategies

We need to develop strategies to meet these needs. Using Witmer's headings, we need to consider the following:

a. Knowing

Witmer quotes some unpublished class notes of Timothy Keller, giving the elements of personal ministry presented by Paul in Acts 20:

Inspection (Acts 20:28): A pastor seeks to become intimately familiar with all the characteristics, circumstances and needs of the people; the people should be conscious that their pastor knows them.

- Visible Caring (Acts 20:31): A pastor shows that he loves and cares in his visitation. The pastor in his contacts seeks to be transparent enough so the people see how he feels (“*with tears*”). The pastor by his presence shows that he cares. By being available (“*night and day*”) the pastor expresses the love of the Good Shepherd.
- Diagnosis (Acts 20:20a): Paul was careful to declare the profitable: he adapted his ministry to the “deficits” (needs) of the hearers. So pastors must move beyond inspection and caring and diagnosis. What are the specific spiritual conditions and spiritual needs? What are the person’s deficits?³⁸

At the micro level, we have to know the individuals we are responsible to pastor. That includes the housebound and children in families.

b. Feeding

At the macro level this means our regular preaching and teaching. We need to give people the food that is right for them, milk and meat in due season, and the word needs to be applied. We need to consider how this should affect our attitude towards age-appropriate teaching such as Sunday School during the morning sermon. Similarly, are we sufficiently invested in what is being taught to our children and young people? What is the purpose of the message in our mid-week prayer meetings?

At the micro level, pointing our people towards good resources - including audio and video for those who find reading difficult - can be of great significance. The internet is a dangerous place for the undiscerning, and we need to protect our people against wolves. Devotional literature is of great value to warm the heart, give a ‘taste’ of spiritual things and promote love for the Saviour. As Baxter said, “It is not the reading of many books which is necessary to make a man wise or good; but the well-reading of a few, could he be sure to have the best.”

c. Leading

At the macro level, we need to consider the strengths and weakness of the church in such areas as worship, teaching, fellowship and evangelism. This means considering aims, methods, structures and resources, but primarily giving attention to our workers, encouraging and training them as we are able.

At the micro level, it means the importance of personal example, that people may imitate us as we imitate Christ (1 Cor 11:1). All that we wish to see develop in our people should be developing in us. This includes such things as pure, honest speech, zeal, consistency and humility. All the fruit of the Spirit should be evident in all our relationships: with Christ, with the church, with our own families and with the world, and where we fail there should be honest recognition, the seeking of forgiveness where necessary, comfort and peace rooted in the astounding grace of God, and a striving for greater faithfulness to Christ.

d. Protecting

³⁸ Ibid., 122-123.

At the macro level this includes warning our people about the spiritual dangers that are 'doing the rounds'. Such things as false teaching and unhealthy emphases need to be identified so that our people can protect themselves from the wolves. Endemic spiritual diseases need to be identified such as complacency, despondency or introspection.

At a micro level, it means addressing the things that threaten to damage individuals: such things as unhealthy interests, spiritual imbalance, unresolved conflicts, or an unwillingness to forgive. The nature of the body is such that what affects one can have an effect on all. A root of bitterness causes trouble and by it many are defiled (Heb 12:15). When people start to withdraw and no longer attend, action is needed to follow them up. Sheep do not survive well without a shepherd. Witmer quotes the Christian Reformed Church publication, *Building Bridges* as follows, "the best time to reclaim disaffected members is within six to eight weeks. During this time the potential dropouts are in fact waiting for the church to pay attention to them so that they can talk about whatever is bothering them. After this initial two-month period it is much more difficult to re-involve such members."³⁹ Once genuine backsliding sets in, as Baxter notes, "Much skill is required for restoring such a soul."⁴⁰

X. The tools of the shepherd

Fundamentally, if the people are to be well shepherded, God must work by his Spirit, through his Word. This means the fundamental place must be given to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). But we need honest, earnest creativity to use the Word of God well.

Shepherds have often said, "I do most of my pastoral work from the pulpit." That may well be true. The public proclamation of the Word is the shepherd's main tool. As John Owen noted, "The first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word."⁴¹ That being the case, much thought and prayer must be given to how our preaching and teaching meets the need of the flock. This raises important questions about how we select our texts, and how we apply the Word. In it all our prayer must be that the sheep hear the Shepherd's voice and follow him.

Perhaps a more significant question is, 'What is the purpose of our regular preaching on the Lord's Day?' There is much talk about "expository preaching", particularly in reformed circles, but what that means needs to be explored. While all our preaching should explain and apply biblical truth, we need to recognise that the pattern of preaching consecutively through books of the Bible has not been the only model in the history of the church and is not without its dangers. A careful reading of Iain Murray's article, '*Expository Preaching*' - *Time for Caution*⁴² may do many of us - and our people - much good.

But the shepherd is to teach and apply the Word in other ways as well. In Acts 20:20, Paul reminds the Ephesian elders, "how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house". Face-to-face visitation has a noble history. For instance, Baxter and his assistant met with fourteen families every week between them, spread over two days. Families came to Baxter, while his assistant went to them. In that way they were able to meet with the several hundred families in Kidderminster every year. Witmer, recognising the difficulties associated with home visitation in modern urban society with most people working away from home, recommends monthly telephone contact, by elders, with each family and adds, "supplementing monthly phone contacts with a realistic plan of home visitation would be beneficial, if practicable".⁴³ A generation of older ministers regard the contemporary

³⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁰ Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor. (5th Abridged Ed.) Edited By William Brown*, 100.

⁴¹ John Owen, 'The True Nature of a Gospel Church and Its Government', *The Works of John Owen D.D* (vol. 16, New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), 74.

⁴² <https://banneroftruth.org/uk/resources/articles/2010/expository-preaching-time-for-caution/>

⁴³ Ibid., 133.

decline in visiting as a serious deficit. Surely personal, face-to-face contact must be our aim.

Baxter advocated teaching families using a catechism. We can think of small group bible studies, family visitation, pastoral counselling and private conversation. Much good has been done historically by means of pastoral letters – just think of John Calvin, Samuel Rutherford and John Newton. What about their modern equivalents: emails, texts and electronic messages?

In addition to giving away evangelistic resources such as bibles, books and DVDs we can provide evangelistic bible studies, and evangelistic visiting, with plenty of time for people to ask questions. As Richard Baxter observed,

I have found by experience, that some ignorant persons, who have been so long unprofitable hearers, have got more knowledge and remorse in half an hour's close discourse, than they did from ten year's public preaching. I know that preaching the gospel publicly is the most excellent means, because we speak to many at once. But it is usually far more effectual to preach it privately to a particular sinner.⁴⁴

Prayer is vital. As Eric Alexander noted,

In the Christian church over the years, we have turned the truth upside down, and commonly speak of 'praying for the work' – the implication being that prayer is an additional ingredient to our Christian service. The truth is that prayer is the real work, and apart from it all other work is in vain. The reason for that is quite simple. It is that essentially this work in which we are engaged is God's work, not man's.⁴⁵

Much good would surely be done if shepherds spent more of their time seeking the blessing of the Chief Shepherd on their flocks. In fact, we have no reason to believe any good will be done without prayer for the Chief Shepherd's blessing.

There is no substitute for consistent godliness. Point 11 in John Owen's chapter *The Especial Duty of Pastors of Churches* is "That wherewith I shall close these few instances of the pastoral charge and duty is that without which all the rest will neither be useful unto men nor be accepted with the great shepherd, Christ Jesus; and that is, a humble, holy, exemplary conversation, in all godliness and honesty."⁴⁶ Consistent godliness creates a hearing for the gospel, and for Christian teaching. The apostle Paul commented in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 and 2:10, "you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake... You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers". Further, the success of pastoral work depends on the blessing of God, and what right do we have to expect that the blessing of God would rest on unholy instruments? M'Cheyne's comment is well known, "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness." "It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God." As Baxter said, "Lastly, consider whether the success of your labours depends not on the assistance and blessing of the Lord. And where hath he made any promise of his assistance and blessing to ungodly men?"⁴⁷

Personal experience of the power of the truth is essential. We pass on to others the truths that have helped us – we have confidence in the food of his word because it has fed our own souls. Augustine said, "I go to feed so that I can give you to eat. I am the servant, the bringer of food, not the master of the house. I lay out before you that from which I draw my life."⁴⁸ As George Cowie noted, "God makes ministers a blessing to others by blessing themselves first. He works in them in

44 Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor. (5th Abridged Ed.) Edited By William Brown*, 18.

45 Alexander, Eric J., *Prayer: A Biblical Perspective* (Banner of Truth, 2012), 39.

46 Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and Its Government*, 88.

47 Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor. (5th Abridged Ed.) Edited By William Brown*, 86.

48 Kenneth G Brownell, 'The Gospel Minister in History', *The Gospel Ministry Today: papers read at the conference of The John Owen Centre for Theological Study, September 2002* (Evangelical Press, 2005), 43.

order to work by them.”⁴⁹

Doing practical good should not be undervalued. Even apart from its intrinsic value, kindness opens a door into a person’s life. Charles Bridges notes, “our Lord’s example in combining kindness to the body with love to the soul... ‘a man’s gift maketh room for him’ (Prov 18:16).”⁵⁰ Have we lost some of our relevance here because people think we are unconcerned for them in their need?

Persistence and a willingness to suffer are necessary. As shepherds, we should work hard, and be prepared to bear hardship for the sake of the flock. Being faithful doesn’t mean having it easy. Sacrifice is involved in shepherding. Having listed some of his sufferings for the sake of the gospel Paul says, “Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches” (2 Cor 11:28).

Authority is another tool of the shepherd, but a difficult one to define. So often in the New Testament, the apostles appeal to the churches rather than commanding them. It is safe to say that the authority of pastors is not invested in them personally, but in the office they fulfil. Even then, it is not in the office per se, but in the faithful functioning of it. It is the authority of Christ, and submission to Christ only occurs when the shepherd is faithfully leading the flock in accordance with Christ’s will.

Shepherds are not to be authoritarian, but to use their authority for the church’s good. They are not to lord it over the flock but are to lead by example (1 Pet 5:3). Their rule is to be like the rule of a father who leads his family well: “He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?).” (1 Tim 3:4-5)

John Angell James commented:

*The authority of pastors is not legislative or coercive, but simply declarative and executive. It is difficult to define its limits with precision. He is to command, yet he is not to lord it over God’s heritage. It is rather like marriage. The union is founded on mutual love, confidence and esteem. There should, then, be no contests for power. Since the pastor’s prerogative is undefined he should be afraid of extending it and his church cautious of diminishing it.*⁵¹

The Galatians received Paul as an angel of God, as Christ himself, and would have plucked out their eyes for him (Gal 4:14-15). Paul in his turn had sacrificed for Christ and for his church: “From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus” (Gal 6:17).

John Owen has an interesting comment on this issue. He sees gifts as being prior to office in the church: “The original of all church order and rule is in gifts; the exercise of those gifts is by office; the end of all those gifts and offices is, edification.”⁵² Further, he sees authority in preaching as flowing from unction, not office. “It is a consequent of unction, and not of office. The scribes had an outward call to teach in the church; but they had no unction, no anointing, that could evidence they had the Holy Ghost in his gifts and graces. Christ had no outward call; but he had an unction – he had a full unction of the Holy Ghost in his gifts and graces, for the preaching of the gospel. Hereon there was a controversy about his authority. The scribes say unto him, Mark xi. 28, ‘By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?’ The Holy Ghost determines the matter, Matt. vii. 29, ‘He preached as one having authority, and not as the scribes.’ They had the authority of office, but not of unction; Christ only had that. And preaching in the demonstration of the Spirit, which men quarrel so much about, is nothing less than the evidence in preaching of unction, in the communication of gifts and grace unto them, for the discharge of their office: for it is a vain thing for men to assume and personate authority. So much evidence as they have of unction from God in gifts and grace, so much authority they have, and no more, in preaching: and let everyone, then, keep

⁴⁹ Quoted in the preface to Philip, Robert, *The Life and Times of George Whitefield* (Banner of Truth, 2007), vi.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 356.

⁵¹ James, John Angell, *Christian Fellowship: The Church Member’s Guide* (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004), 25.

⁵² John Owen, ‘The Duty of a Pastor’, *The Works of John Owen* (vol. 9, New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851), 453.

within his bounds.”⁵³ This is the authority we should be seeking: authority that evidences itself. May the Lord preserve us from relying on the outward form of an empty, powerless office.

In summary, John Owen described the duties of a pastor in this way⁵⁴:

- Feeding the flock by diligent preaching of the word
- Continual fervent prayer for them
- The administration of the seals of the covenant is committed unto them
- To preserve the truth or doctrine of the gospel received and professed in the church and to defend it against all opposition
- To labour for the conversion of souls unto God
- To be ready, willing, and able, to comfort, relieve, and refresh those that are tempted, tossed, wearied with fears and grounds of disconsolation, in times of trial and desertion
- A compassionate suffering with all the members of the church in their trials and troubles
- Care of the poor and visitation of the sick
- The principal care of the rule of the church is incumbent on the pastors of it
- There is a communion to be observed among all the churches of the same faith and profession in any nation
- A humble, holy, exemplary conversation, in all godliness and honesty

XI. The heart of the shepherd

The heart attitudes of the shepherd are perhaps the most significant issue of all.

On a personal level, he is to be a sheep of the Chief Shepherd, and as such is to be characterised by humility, obedience and fellowship with God. These issues are primary. As a pastor once said to me, “If a man wants to be a pastor, he should start by being a good sheep.”

In relation to the flock, Scripture gives us clear guidelines. Love to God and to his people is primary. We are to “shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28) – they are precious to him and so should be precious to us.

Next is a desire to do them good, even though it costs us. Ezekiel 34, with its New Testament counterpart in John 10, gives us much insight. It condemns false shepherds who fed themselves at the expense of the flock – indeed they sometimes fed themselves on the flock, and used them for their own comfort (John 10:1). Rather than putting themselves out to seek, strengthen and heal the flock, they dominated the weak for their own ends (John 10:10), and abandoned them when they wandered away (John 10:12). Such were the hirelings our Good Shepherd warns us of in John 10: 8, 10, 12-13. Peter similarly warns us not to shepherd others for our own benefit, exerting our authority to make us feel good or to compensate for our inadequacies, but to willingly and eagerly keep watch over them and be examples to them: “shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:2-3).

Ted Donnelly comments, “Some pastors are so insecure that they regard anything as a threat which they themselves do not do or do not control.”⁵⁵ Al Martin comments on just one way this can show itself: “Some men in pastoral ministry have an unmortified lust to control others, and their ego is fed when people become dependent on their frequent personal counsel.”⁵⁶ The way we treat the flock says a lot about ourselves.

⁵³ Ibid., 454-455.

⁵⁴ Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and Its Government*.

⁵⁵ Donnelly, *The Gospel Minister in the Bible*, 20.

⁵⁶ Martin, *Pastoral Theology, Vol. 3: The Man of God, His Shepherding, Evangelizing, and Counseling Labors*, 629.

The issue of example is critical here, as it identifies that we are on the same journey, among the sheep, under the watchful eye of the same Chief Shepherd. We are not a class above, or apart. Self-sacrifice follows. The shepherd protects his flock from the wolf and the bear, but self-sacrifice is needed in the more mundane matters of the weekly grind also. In John 13, the Lord humbled himself and took the form of a servant (cf. Phil 2:7) to wash his disciples' feet. In doing this he left an example for us to follow. One of the most telling questions to expose our true heart attitude towards serving others is given by our Lord in John 13:12: "Do you know what I have done to you?" As John says in his first letter, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." (1 John 3:16) Zeal and earnestness are also needed – a willingness to get on with the job, in season and out of season. Paul reminded the Ephesian elders of his earnestness, "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears" (Acts 20:31). John Angell James wrote a whole book entitled *An Earnest Ministry the Want of the Times*⁵⁷. A sense of personal inadequacy, leading to a dependence on and confidence in God is also vital, if we are to remain small and humble in ourselves, and yet confident in our work.

XII. Obstacles to effective shepherding

These come in many forms, and sensitive shepherds have always been aware of them. There can be obstacles in ourselves, preventing us being the shepherds we should be, and obstacles outside of ourselves that make the work particularly challenging. Charles Bridges addresses these "causes of the want of success in the Christian ministry". Firstly, "General Causes" such as those found in the people we are ministering to or in the external context: the enmity of the natural heart, the power of Satan and local hindrances due to the particular context of the congregation.

But he identifies two that have particular relevance to our situation. Firstly "the withholding of divine influence" which he regards as the main cause of the want for ministerial success. Bridges stresses that God must work if there is to be any real spiritual success:

Do we not know accomplished and devoted Ministers, who are less honoured in their work than others of their brethren of far inferior qualifications? And do we not find differences of effect under the same ministry, and even under the same sermons, which can only be explained by sovereign dispensation of divine influence?... And do we not realize the same difference in our Ministerial experience – in our pastoral as well as in our pulpit work; that sometimes a single sentence is clothed with Almighty power – at other times it is only the feeble breath of a worm?... 'Until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high,' the wilderness, notwithstanding the most diligent cultivation, must remain a wilderness still.⁵⁸

We need God to bless our pastoral work – he is the Chief Shepherd of the sheep.

Secondly, he refers to "the want of a divine call". It is men called to preach the Word of God that are the main instruments in shepherding the Lord's people. For such men, Bridges identifies both an *external call*, "a commission received from and recognised by the Church", and an *internal call*, "the voice and power of the holy Ghost, directing the will and the judgment, and conveying personal qualifications" as essential and makes this observation, "The *external call*, though necessary and authoritative in its character – yet, as being the mere delegation of man, is evidently not of itself a sufficient warrant for our work. The *internal call* is the presumptive ground, on which our Church delegates her authorized commission." The Christian minister works in a fundamentally experiential context – God has worked in us and called us, and so we expect God to work through us.

Secondly, as regards causes "connected with our personal character" Bridges lists such things as a lack of entire devotedness to the work, conformity to the world, the fear of man, a want of

57 James, John Angell, *An Earnest Ministry: The Want of the Times* (Banner of Truth, 1993).

58 Bridges, *The Christian Ministry With an Inquiry Into the Causes of Its Inefficiency*, 80-81.

self-denial, a spirit of covetousness, a neglect of retirement, spiritual pride, absence or defect of personal religion, defect of family religion and want of faith. Baxter, similarly identifies pride, negligence in study and in duty, a focus on worldly interests and undervaluing the unity and peace of the whole Church. We could add despondency, the desire for pre-eminence, defensiveness and self-pity. A strong common theme is the need for humility, devotedness to the Lord and a believing commitment to the work. As regards which, if any of these affect us, each man must answer for himself.

XIII. Twenty-first-century context

The nature and need of man is unchanged since the fall, and the nature of salvation and the means the Lord uses to shepherd his sheep are similarly unchanged. This means that pastoring the twenty-first-century church is the same in principle as pastoring the church in any other age – people are people and the gospel is the gospel. But there are factors that we have to address if we are to shepherd our people faithfully.

1. New context

The main difference is our *context*. As noted above, we live in a post-enlightenment age which is secular and naturalistic. This means that people do not have a Christian or even theistic worldview. Problems are to be understood, and solutions are to be found ‘from below’ and not ‘from above’. The subsequent movement from modernity to postmodernity “means a shift from a culture which derived its values from Christianity to a culture that is secular, liberal, humanist and above all relativist: There is no absolute truth excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth.”⁵⁹ There are, of course, gross inconsistencies here. All people have a ‘natural’ awareness of God and of aspects of his character, even though they suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18-23). This means that people live with the uneasy truth of God shining through the cracks, particularly in times of trouble when he is to be blamed or called upon for help.

But while we are all influenced by this context, there are other factors at play including a person’s religious background, education and preferences. This means that, while it is important to identify the context in which we are living, we must be careful about making assumptions concerning the views of a particular individual – these are best discovered by getting to know him personally. James Sire⁶⁰ points out that a worldview can be expressed by the “rock-bottom answers” to eight questions: 1. What is prime reality - the really real? 2. What is the nature of external reality (that is, the world around us)? 3. What is a human being? 4. What happens to a person at death? 5. Why is it possible to know anything at all? 6. How do we know what is right and wrong? 7. What is the meaning of human history? 8. What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview? There are, of course, a whole range of answers to these questions, even on the same street and in the same house.

David Green⁶¹ helpfully identifies some of the issues we face in seeking to shepherd in our British postmodern culture. The specifics he identifies are:

Firstly, in the area of morality, “It’s not just a case of people becoming *less* moral; it’s a case of people being moral *about different things* because their morality is no longer formed by Christian teaching.” We see this with the way that people can regard slavery, injustice, inequality and negatively affecting the planet as evils, and lust, greed, selfishness and idolatry as acceptable, even good.

59 Steve Turner, quoted in David Green, ‘The Gospel Minister in Contemporary Society’, *The Gospel Ministry Today: papers read at the conference of The John Owen Centre for Theological Study, September 2002* (Evangelical Press, 2005), 124.

60 Sire, James W., *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (InterVarsity Press, 2020), 8-9.

61 Ibid.

Secondly, in cultural awareness, people born since the 1960s no longer view Christianity as a part of the British way of life. They view it as a counter-culture. “The younger generation... have never lived in a society in which it is normal or fashionable to be a Christian.” Thus, when people become Christians, the implications of discipleship can require significant lifestyle changes. Green gives the example of our doctrine of the Lord’s Day.

Thirdly, affluence is expected. Children are taught that they can achieve whatever they want in life, and people expect a life of comfort. “If they can’t attain it, or if things go wrong, then there must be somebody out there we can blame or sue.” We need to develop an understanding that we are “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb 11:13).

Fourthly, means of communication are such that people are now living their lives in “a howling blizzard of signals”⁶². The content and worldview of much that is presented is antithetical to Christianity and so requires careful evaluation. The visual-medium itself stirs us emotionally and can be addictive. People are aware that the people giving them this content have an agenda – they are trying to sell them something – and so people are wary of being exploited. We need to show that when it comes to the gospel, we are seeking their good and not our own.

Fifthly, commitment has waned due to the influence of relativism and consumerism. “People live now by the exercise of *choice*, not the exercise of *responsibility*... ‘Is this what I want *today*?’” The fruit of this is easy to see in family life, and also in the church. Related to this is a lack of consistency. People can hold a whole eclectic mix of opinions and can behave accordingly. Fundamental discipleship issues of consistent commitment to Christ, to his will and to his people in all areas of life need to be developed. They are the fruit of a committed heart.

Sixthly, “[t]he postmodern generation is the first in twenty centuries of Christianity in which authority has been systematically and institutionally despised.” Respect is not automatically granted because of a person’s position. It is to be earned, and until it is, people are treated with suspicion and even disdain. This is evident in the family where “[p]arents are seen as part of a repressive ‘establishment’ and children’s needs are given priority”, as well as in the workplace and society more generally. And the church is not exempt. There is no virtue in a wrong or naïve submission to any old claim of authority – Christians are not mindless doormats, and injustice and oppression are not to be condoned. At the same time, Christian discipleship does require submission (or subjection), that is treating others in the way God would have us treat them because of the relationship God has established between us. This can only be done when we put aside insisting on having our own way. We are to submit to one another (Eph 5:21), and there is to be submission within the God-ordained relationship of marriage (Eph 5:22-33) and the family (Eph 6:1-5), the workplace (Eph 6:5-9), the state (Rom 13:1-6) and the church (1 Cor 16:16), all under the umbrella of obeying God rather than men (Acts 5:29). The alternative is all too often not a fair and reasonable democracy, as people claim, but the tyranny of the loudest voice and the last man (or woman or child) standing. When faced with constant challenges, church leaders must not swing to the one extreme of becoming controlling and not allowing the people to think for themselves, nor to the other extreme of shying away from any and every challenge. They need to be men of integrity, to show their submission to the Word of God, and to demonstrate self-sacrificing love, “For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake.” (2 Cor 4:5)

2. Specific issues

We can identify specific issues that are currently endemic:

- Anxiety. Life is overwhelming for many people for a whole variety of reasons.
- The challenges of living longer. How can we be useful in retirement and live faithfully when we decline physically and mentally?

⁶² Robert Hughes, quoted in *Ibid.*, 128-129.

- Life in a hostile culture. Christians are citizens of heaven and this world is not our home. How do we live so as to remain faithful to the Lord, and yet only give to those around us the offence of the cross?
- A lack of Christian worldview among those who are converted. There is more work to be done in teaching those newly converted, and more to be learned by them. There are more obvious things in life that need to be put off and put on.
- Exhaustion. Life is demanding, especially if we aspire to the consumerist ideal, or don't want our children to "lose out". But it comes at a cost, both in terms of our personal contentment, and our stewardship of money and resources for the Lord.
- Identity. This is increasing in significance at present. Questions such as "What is my role as a husband/wife/father/mother/child?", "What does it mean to be a man/woman?", and "What does it mean to be human?" are everywhere, and the damage being caused by the answers of our secular, naturalistic society is evident all around us. We need good thought-out answers to these questions, lived out by good role models in our churches.
- The easy availability of influences. The internet influences our opinions – it can give you information on any question you may have, and if you like it, you are given more and more of it – you are pulled down the "rabbit hole". In addition, social media influences the way people interact. While people should talk to each other on social media with the same courtesy with which they would talk to each other in person, increasingly the opposite is happening, with face-to-face communication becoming harsher and less tolerant.
- Strained relationships and a lack of forgiveness, often over matters of preference and opinion, which should all be covered by love.

3. Perennial problems

In the midst of all this, Christians face the same perennial spiritual diseases: lack of assurance, temptation, suffering, lack of guidance, sense of spiritual desertion (a child of light walking in darkness), depression (be it spiritual or otherwise), difficulty in prayer, concern for the salvation of loved ones. Our approach to treating these things needs to be the same as it ever was.

It is here that particular great truths of Scripture are especially useful: the finished work of Christ, justification, the sovereignty of God in providence, regeneration, union with Christ in his death and resurrection, and the faithfulness of God to his promises. The better we learn them, and the more we live upon them, the better we will be able to feed others with the food that gives us life.

The Puritan period saw the raising up of men who were great shepherds of the sheep. Some of their classics bear careful study today, not only for the good of our own souls, but also to help us shepherd others. In this category are such works as Richard Sibbes' *"The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax"* and *"The Soul's Conflict with Itself, and Victory over Itself by Faith"*, Thomas Books' *"Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices"*, William Guthrie's *"The Christian's Great Interest"*, William Bridge's *"A Lifting Up for the Downcast"*, John Owen on *"Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers"* and *"The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded"* and Bunyan's *"The Pilgrim's Progress"*. Their works excel in identifying the problem, discerning its causes and applying the Word of God as both scalpel and soothing balm.

XIV. Conclusion

The greatest privilege in the world is to be a Christian, a son of God by faith in Jesus Christ. The next greatest is to be a shepherd, and to know the Lord shepherding his people through us. May the Lord help us to do this faithfully to the glory of his name and the good of his Church.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Thomas has been Minister of Borrass Park Evangelical Church, Wrexham, since 2003. He also currently serves as General Secretary of the Evangelical Movement of Wales.

FAITHFULNESS AMIDST TRIAL AND PERSECUTION

Dr. Patrick Fung

Abstract

This paper begins with an in-depth treatment of the narrative of persecution in Luke-Acts, showing how it was first directed against Jesus and then against his disciples. The key consideration is not simply that persecution happened, but that the early church needed to know how to respond to it. The next section of the paper we describe in detail the Boxer Uprising in China in 1900 and in particular the response of the church, exemplified in the approach of Dixon Edward Hoste (1861-1946), Hudson Taylor's successor as leader of the China Inland Mission. Hoste's approach was humble, gracious, visionary and deeply instructive for the church today. We conclude with a survey of the state of anti-Christian persecution in the world today, both 'east' and 'west', and calls us to prayerful, patient, self-denying witness.

I. Introduction

In one of his best-known books, *The Cost of Discipleship*, first published in 1937, the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer."¹ Bonhoeffer's unwavering commitment to his faith ultimately led to his death. He was hanged on 9 April, 1945. The last words of the 39-year-old Bonhoeffer were, "This is the end – for me, the beginning of life."²

Opposition to the Christian faith leading to persecution was nothing new since the formation of the early church until today. We may be familiar with the word persecution. However, it would be good to first clarify what we mean when we use this word. Chee-Chiew Lee, in her recent book, *When Christians Face Persecution* very helpfully defines persecution in the Introduction which I will summarise below.

First of all, according to the Cambridge English Dictionary, "persecution" involves an "unfair or cruel treatment over a long period of time because of race, religion or political beliefs". The word "treatment" is important as it indicates action, not just a mindset. Unfair treatment entails some form of discrimination while cruelty often involves physical suffering. However, we need to take note that opposition does not always involve persecution and not all persecution results in martyrdom.³

Second, while it is possible to separate racial, religious, and political motives behind modern-day persecution, in the first century, all three aspects were knitted together closely and not easily separable. The early church Christians faced both physical and verbal opposition often resulting in persecution as they proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ.

This paper aims to look at the subject of persecution from three aspects, namely: biblical-theological, historical, and finally, contextual. First, this paper will explore a "biblical theology of facing persecution" through the lens of Dr. Luke in the books of Luke-Acts. How did the early church persevere and thrive despite persecution? Second, it will examine from history the example of the

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, first published in 1937.

2 History.com Editors, "Anti-Nazi theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer is hanged", <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/defiant-theologian-dietrich-bonhoeffer-is-hanged>, accessed August 1, 2022.

3 Chee-Chiew Lee, *When Christians Face Persecution - Theological Perspectives from the New Testament* (London: Apollos, 2022), 3.

Boxer Uprising in China in 1900. How did the missionaries respond to the impact of persecution resulting in the rise of the indigenous church movement? Finally, it will examine the contemporary context. How do Christians around the world continue to live out their faith in the context of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom?

While I will focus on the books of Luke-Acts in exploring a biblical theology of persecution, I also acknowledge that many scholars have examined this subject in a more comprehensive way covering both the Old and the New Testaments. I would like to particularly mention the work done by Glenn M. Penner in his book, *In the Shadow of the Cross: A biblical theology of persecution and discipleship*. Penner explored suffering and persecution throughout the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Penner highlighted that the reason behind persecution goes right back to the conflict between the serpent and the offspring of the woman in Genesis 3:15 and echoed in Revelation 12.⁴

In the first section of this paper, I will examine the records of the early church as described by Dr Luke. The idyllic picture of the early Christian community in Jerusalem with the joyful massive conversions after the powerful preaching of Peter in Chapter 2 was almost immediately met by a violent storm of opposition and waves of persecution in Chapters 4, 6 and 8. Yet, the church remained steadfast, trusting in the sovereign rule and grace of the Lord (Acts 4:24). The early Christians viewed suffering for Christ as a privilege and an honour (Acts 5:41). While persecution became widespread in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), the spreading of the gospel continued. Peter was imprisoned and James was executed (Acts 12), Paul was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14) and in the end was arrested and sent to Rome (Acts 21-23). Yet Luke carefully chose to start and end the book with a common notion, that the record is all about the Kingdom of God. Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God before he left his disciples in the first chapter (Acts 1:3). Paul proclaimed the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ while under house arrest in Rome in the last chapter (Acts 28:31).

In the second section of this paper, I will explore from history the story of the Boxer Uprising. In the span of just less than three months in 1900, hundreds of missionaries were killed by the Boxers including fifty-eight China Inland Mission (CIM) missionaries and twenty-one children. It could not have come at a worse time as the founder of the CIM, Hudson Taylor, was ill and was unable to lead the Mission. In the aftermath of the incident, the indemnity issue was high on the agenda of the foreign powers and many missionary agencies. Yet, the CIM, after much prayer, formally decided “not to enter any claim against the Qing government for lives lost, bodily injury or loss of property, but also to refrain from accepting compensation even if offered”. They counted suffering as part of the cost of serving Christ, bringing the gospel to the Chinese in China. Despite the suffering, the CIM came to a realisation that “the Chinese Church would ultimately come to the front and prove themselves equal to the facing of danger and bearing of responsibilities, growing into leadership.”⁵ The indigenous Chinese Church began to grow.

In the final section of this paper, I will examine Christian persecution in the contemporary context. Missiologist Todd Johnson described Christian martyrdom as a pervasive phenomenon. According to Johnson, there are “discernible changes in the patterns of persecution in terms of geography and Christian tradition, and the authoritative positions of the persecutors”. In 1910, over 90% of all Christians lived in Europe and North America (the Global North). By 2010, this had fallen to less than 40%, with the majority of Christians located in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Global South). In the twentieth century, the majority of Christian martyrs were Europeans. In the twenty-first century, a disproportionate number of Christians in the Global South are killed. In addition, Johnson indicated that more Christians in the South have experienced persecution with 75% occurring in the south in 2010, and that this figure will continue to increase.⁶

⁴ Glenn M. Penner, *In Shadows of the Cross- A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship* (Bartlesville: VOM Books, 2004), 22-27.

⁵ *Chinese Recorder*, 1900, 511.

⁶ Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo, “Christian Martyrdom as a Pervasive Phenomenon”, *Springer*, Volume 51, Number 4, July/

II. A biblical-theological review of Luke-Acts examining persecution

Luke's two-volume work of Luke-Acts on the origins of Christianity constitutes about one-quarter of the New Testament. Let us first look at the book of Luke to see how Luke describes persecution.

1. Persecution is against Jesus

The gospel of Luke clearly identifies that persecution is, first and foremost, against Jesus. Even in an early chapter, Simeon said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:34-35) Even at the beginning of Jesus' ministry after his testing in the wilderness, people tried to throw him off a cliff even in his own hometown of Nazareth (Luke 4:29). This rejection continues throughout his ministry on earth. Jesus himself predicted his rejection and death (Luke 9:44; 18:31-22).

2. Persecution is against his disciples

Though the disciples' persecution was still in the future, Jesus predicted that they will be like him, rejected, hated, and ostracised (Luke 6:22). Their reputation will be defamed on account of the Son of Man. Their suffering is evidence that they are true messengers of God who will receive their reward in heaven (Luke 6:23). They should not be surprised, as the prophets in the past faced the same treatment (Luke 11:49).

3. Persecution is part of God's plan

Repeatedly Jesus used the phrase "everything must be fulfilled" or "necessary" (Luke 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 25-26, 44), describing that his death is according to the will and plan of God. God's servant, the Messiah must die (Luke 24:26; 44). Similarly, the persecutions that the disciples would face are within the plan and will of God. Jesus told his disciples that they would be persecuted "because of the Son of Man" (Luke 6:22). Persecution comes to the disciples not despite their association with him but because of it.⁷

4. Persecution is with God's promise

In Luke 10:19-20, Jesus said, "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." This is in the context of Jesus sending out the seventy-two and with their joyful return. Ultimately, the fate of the disciples lies not in the hands of the persecutors but of God. We are not to fear those who can kill the body but to fear him who has the power to throw us into hell (Luke 12:4, 5).

Jesus also promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit will teach them what they should say before rulers and authorities (Luke 12:11): "Do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say." The disciples should not worry about how they can defend themselves as Jesus will give them words and wisdom that none of the adversaries will be able to resist or contradict (Luke 21:14).

August 2014, 2-9.

⁷ Penner, 118.

5. Persecution is a daily mindset

Compared to the gospels of Mark and Matthew, Luke added “daily” to the taking up of one’s cross. “Then he said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me’” (Luke 9:23, emphasis added). The cross was the instrument of capital punishment during the Roman Empire. It was the symbol of humiliation. Luke stresses the ongoing continual nature of self-denial even if it entails death. The disciples of Jesus must daily renew their attitude of saying “no” to self even to one’s own life. It is a day-by-day following of being ready to suffer for his sake.

According to the teachings of Jesus, Luke also describes a juxtapositional attitude that the disciples should embrace while facing persecution: The disciples can rejoice despite persecution (Luke 6:22-23) as they await their reward in heaven. They should love and do good to those who persecute them (Luke 6:27). They should fear God more than the persecutors (Luke 12:4-5). Luke encourages the readers to persevere in times of testing. Luke gives the readers a painful picture of reality, but at the same time hope: “You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life” (Luke 21:16-19).

The gospel of Luke ends with the story of the Emmaus Road. Luke records two disciples who found themselves engaged in conversation with a fellow traveller. The traveller listened as they explained to him what they had heard. Finally, he said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah *have to* [must] suffer these things and then enter his glory?” (Luke 24:25-26). This is also the last time Luke uses the word “must” in the gospel to indicate that Jesus’ death was in accordance with the will of God. Everything must be fulfilled.

Despite persecution, Jesus encourages the reader to “stand firm” (Luke 21:16-19). The theme of perseverance in Luke’s gospel continues into the second volume, the book of Acts.

As we come to the book of Acts, the first thing we notice is how the early church acknowledged the sovereign rule of God in the midst of persecution.

6. O Sovereign Lord

In Acts 4, we witness waves of persecution initiated by the Sadducees (4:1 and 5:17). They were the ruling class of wealthy aristocrats. Peter and John were viewed as unschooled, ordinary men. Yet, they took note that these men had been with Jesus when they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19-20)

On their release, Peter and John went straight back to their own people. Having been bold in witness, the early church was also bold in prayer.

First, they turned *together* [*homothumadon*] in prayer to God (Acts 4:24a). Out of twelve times in the New Testament, this word *homothumadon* appears eleven times in the book of Acts. When persecution came, the early church was united.

Second, *Despotēs, Sovereign Lord*, is a term used for a ruler of unchallengeable power. The Sanhedrin might utter warnings, threats and prohibitions, and try to silence the church, but their authority was subject to a higher authority still, and the edicts of men cannot overturn the decrees of God.⁸

Third, the early church acknowledged God as the God of creation, history and revelation. He is the God of creation, who *made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them* (Acts 4:24). He is the God of revelation, who *spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of... David*,

⁸ John Stott, *The message of Acts: the Spirit, The Church & the World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 99.

and in Psalm 2 he is also the God of history, who had caused even his enemies (Herod and Pilate, Gentiles and Jews, united in a conspiracy against Jesus) to do what his *power and will had decided beforehand should happen* (Acts 4:28).⁹

Fourth, they asked God for boldness to proclaim his word and God's mercy to bring healing through the holy name of Jesus (Acts 4:29-30). The early church did not ask for revenge but mercy while facing hostility.

In answer to their united and earnest prayers, *the place... was shaken* (Acts 4:31). As Chrysostom commented, "that made them the more unshaken" as they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

7. The Persecutors

Luke very carefully defended Christianity in the book of Acts by arguing that Christians were neither seditious nor subversive but, on the contrary, legally innocent and morally harmless.¹⁰ More positively, they exercise a wholesome influence on society.

Professor F. F. Bruce very helpfully highlighted that the Roman authorities often showed goodwill to Paul and other Christian missionaries, or at least admitted that there was no basis for the accusations pressed against them by their opponents.¹¹

In Cyprus, the proconsul of the island province is favourably impressed by Paul and Barnabas, and by their message and activity (Acts 13:6-12). At Philippi, a Roman colony, the chief collegiate magistrates apologised to Paul and Silas for their illegal beating and imprisonment (Acts 16:38-40). At Corinth, the proconsul of Achaia, Gallio (member of an influential Roman family), decreed that the charges brought before him against Paul by the local Jewish leaders relate to internal disputes of Jewish religion, and declared him guiltless of any offence against Roman law (Acts 18:12-16).

At Ephesus, the Asiarchs, leading citizens of the province of Asia, showed themselves to be Paul's friends, and the chief executive officer of the city administration absolved him and his associates of anything in the nature of public sacrilege (Acts 19:35-40). During Paul's last visit to Judaea the procurators Felix and Festus successively found no substance in the charges urged against him by the Sanhedrin, whether of attempted violation of the sanctity of the Jerusalem temple or of stirring up unrest throughout the empire (Acts 24-25). The Jewish client king Agrippa II agreed with Festus that Paul had done nothing deserving either death or imprisonment and that he could have been discharged on the spot had he not taken the decision out of the procurator's hands by appealing to have his case referred to the imperial tribunal in Rome (Acts 26). When Paul was taken to Rome to have his case heard, he occupied the time of waiting by preaching the gospel there for two years, under constant surveillance, without any attempts to hinder him (Acts 28).

When the early church faced persecution, opposition and hostility came from both the Jews and the Gentiles. Different groups of opponents may vary in their motives and may employ different forms of opposition.

8. Religious opponents

Luke portrayed that the disciples began to be persecuted by the Jewish local authorities. These Jewish leaders included Pharisees, scribes (experts in the law), Sadducees, chief priests and elders (Acts 4-5). These leaders were often members of the Sanhedrin which was the local ruling authority in Jerusalem. Even the Greek-speaking Jews from the diaspora in Jerusalem also opposed Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:9-12). Saul was among those who

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ Ibid., 26.

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1988, 8-10.

initiated the first wave of persecution in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1-3). After Saul's conversion, during his missionary journeys (Acts 13-19), Paul would face opposition from the Greek-speaking Jews in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus (Acts 13:45; 14:2; 17:5; 18:6; 19:9). It was the Jews who incited a crowd to oppose Paul when he was in the Jerusalem temple (Acts 21:27-34). Even some Jews later conspired with the Sanhedrin to kill Paul (Acts 23:23-35).

In Acts, we can see that many of the Jewish opponents are those who rejected the inclusion of the Gentiles as God's people, insisted on the practice of circumcision (Acts 15:5), and denied the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 23:6). Luke demonstrated that the early believers were persecuted by the Jewish religious leaders who supposedly knew God's law. The religious leaders opposed them as they felt the threat to dearly held traditional values with regard to circumcision, ethnicity and observance of the law.

9. Pagan opponents

However, Luke also gives evidence that opposition came from the Gentiles as well. The Christians were opposed for different reasons including, the threat of economic losses as in the case of the owner of the slave girl in Philippi (Acts 16:19) and, more importantly, potential threat of social unrest viewed by the authorities as in the case of Paul in Iconium (Acts 14:5) and Jerusalem (Acts 22:24).

Luke's characterisation of the Gentile authorities in Acts is diverse – from hostile to friendly. The magistrate at Philippi had unduly punished Paul without trial, violating Paul's right as a Roman citizen (Acts 16:22-24). However, as indicated earlier, many showed goodwill to the Christians. They were not inherently against the Christian faith but were trying to fulfil their duty to keep law and order. Even towards the end of the book of Acts, Luke emphasised that Paul was not found guilty of any punishable crime. Having heard Paul's defence, King Agrippa said, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment." Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar." (Acts 26:31-32)

10. Satanic opponents

In the Gospel, Luke described Satan as one being cast down from heaven when the kingdom of God is proclaimed (Luke 10:18-20). Satan was also portrayed as a tempter, influencing believers to oppose the will of God as in the case of Judas when Satan entered his heart (Luke 22:3).

During the first missionary journey, while in Cyprus, Elymas the sorcerer opposed Paul and Barnabas and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Paul declared, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun." (Acts 13:8-11)

When Paul was on trial before King Agrippa, he gave his testimony about his encounter with the Lord Jesus. Jesus commissioned him to "open the eyes of both Jews and Gentiles and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:15-18). Paul was not disobedient to the heavenly vision (Acts 26:19). The gospel was to turn people from darkness to light, from the bondage of the power of Satan to freedom and forgiveness in Christ.

However, as we can see in the book of Acts, as soon as the Spirit came upon the church, Satan launched a ferocious counterattack. Pentecost was followed by persecution (Acts 4). As John Stott describes, Satan attacked on three fronts: His first and crudest tactic was physical violence as he tried to crush the church by persecution. Second, having failed to destroy the church from the outside, he attempted internally through moral corruption or compromise as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). Satan's third tactic was distraction, deflecting the apostles from their priority

responsibilities of prayer and preaching by preoccupying them with conflicts and administration, which was not their calling (Acts 6).¹²

While Luke refers to the destructive work of Satan in the book of Acts, it was more indirect. Other parts of the New Testament, particularly Revelation, develop a much more comprehensive concept of Satan as the instigator of persecution.

11. Response to persecution

We will now look at how the early church Christians responded to persecution as recorded in the book of Acts. Luke portrayed a variety of responses to persecution in Acts.

Luke was very clear that the disciples were counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Jesus' name (Acts 5:41). At Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, Paul and Barnabas told the disciples that "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Twice Peter asserted that they would rather obey God than men – the opposing authorities (Acts 4:19; 5:29). When Peter was in prison, the church was praying earnestly for him (Acts 12:5). Paul testified about the pain he had to endure from persecution. He told the Ephesian elders that he "served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of his Jewish opponents" (Acts 20:19, 23-24). Peter, Stephen and Paul, all witnessed for Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8-12; 5:29-32; 7:1-53; 23:1-9) while Paul also witnessed before the governors, Felix, Festus and King Agrippa (Acts 24:10-21; 25:6-7; 26:1-23). What happened in the book of Acts was a fulfilment of what Jesus already predicted: "They will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name." (Luke 21:12).

12. Wisdom and defence

Keener notes that Peter's defence before the Sanhedrin displays amazing wisdom with the rhetorical technique of irony. It is ironic that Peter and John should be charged for a benefaction with the healing of the paralytic. As Keener pointed out, "one benefaction should weight the burden of proof in favour of the speakers' positive character, and hence one's innocence."¹³ Peter was viewed by the authorities as "unschooled" (Acts 4:13), yet they were astonished by Peter's ability to present such a wise defence.

A similar situation also occurred in Stephen's trial. His opponents could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave Stephen (Acts 6:9-10). "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15).

When Paul stood before the tribunal, he also demonstrated wisdom. He asked the Roman commander to give him a chance to defend himself against the charges of the crowd at Jerusalem (Acts 21:39). He wisely chose to speak in Aramaic, the heart language of the Palestinian Jews at that time. He gave his own testimony of how he had persecuted the Way in the past and the change in his life because of Jesus. He also focused on the doctrinal difference between the Sadducees and Pharisees regarding resurrection as the Sadducees had a problem with resurrection. When he stood before Felix and Festus, he tried to prove his innocence by showing that the accusations were unfounded (Acts 24:10-21; 25:8-12). Paul also exercised his Roman citizenship rights twice in two different circumstances and in different manners (Acts 16:37; Acts 22:25). In the former situation it was after Paul was beaten up, but in the latter it was before the centurion was about to flog him.

13. Staying or leaving

¹² John Stott, *The message of Acts: the Spirit, the Church & the World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 105.

¹³ Keener, *Acts*, vol. 2, 1145-1148 quoted in Chee-Chiew Lee, *When Christians Face Persecution*, 65.

Paul's experience at Corinth in the book of Acts is worthy of attention. When preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, the people opposed Paul. He shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles" (Acts 18:5-6). However, Paul did not leave Corinth. He was able to continue his ministry with the open door from Titius Justus, a worshipper of God. Many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptised. Even when the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment, Gallio, who was the proconsul of Achaia at that time, refused to be the judge for the case. The Lord also spoke to Paul in a vision, telling him not to be afraid as he had many people in the city. So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

Thus, from the record, we can see that several factors influenced Paul to stay in Corinth despite opposition. First, it was a direct vision from the Lord himself to take courage. Second, while some doors were closed, other doors were opened. Also, the authorities were not openly against Paul's preaching. Both external circumstances and personal experience were important as Paul stayed in Corinth.

On the other hand, Luke also recorded how Paul avoided certain places or changed his planned route because of opposition.

In Acts 14, at Iconium, Paul and Barnabas spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the gospel (Acts 14:7). Paul did not insist on staying in a place when the situation became volatile but fled to another place so that the preaching of the gospel might continue.

In Acts 17, while in Thessalonica, Paul went into the synagogue, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. But some of the Jews became jealous, so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea (Acts 17:10). Paul and Barnabas did not argue with the believers and went onto Berea (Acts 17:10).

In Acts 20, because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. Ramsay makes a speculative comment, "Paul's intention must have been to take a pilgrim ship carrying Achaian and Asian Jews to the Passover. With a shipload of hostile Jews, it would be easy to find opportunities to murder Paul."¹⁴ Thus Paul decided to choose a longer but apparently safer route.

On other occasions, Paul accepted the risk he had to take for the sake of the gospel. While he was fully aware that danger and persecution awaited him in Jerusalem, compelled by the Holy Spirit, he insisted on going there, believing that his life was worth nothing to him, except only with the aim to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given him – the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace (Acts 20:24). When the brothers and sisters pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem, he answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 21:13)

14. Summary of theological perspectives

Luke, the author, in his two volumes of Luke-Acts, gives us a realistic but positive picture of persecution.

Jesus had warned his disciples that they would be persecuted because of him (Luke 21:17). The disciples will be hated and betrayed even by their loved ones, those who are close to them (Luke 21:16). Jesus predicted that the disciples would stand trial before authorities, governors and kings

14 William Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton), 287.

(Luke 12:11). But Jesus' promise to his disciples was that they need not worry about how they will defend themselves, for the Holy Spirit would teach them at the time what they should say (Luke 12:11).

The early church was united (*homothumadon*) in prayer during persecution. The disciples acknowledged the sovereign rule and grace of God, the Lord of creation, history and revelation. The disciples did not retreat but boldly asked God for two things: They asked God for the courage to continue to proclaim the Word of God. They asked God to stretch out his hand to bring healing. Despite persecution, seeking God's truth to be proclaimed and God's mercy to heal remained a top priority for the church.

In response to persecution, Peter, Stephen, and Paul demonstrated much wisdom in presenting their defence. The centrality of the Word of God, the proclamation of the gospel including the crucifixion, resurrection and exaltation of Christ, and the honouring of Christ's name remained key in their ministry. Although the disciples might suffer the utmost shame when they identified themselves as followers of Christ, they persevered in their faith.

The different Christian responses to persecution under various circumstances reflected in Acts demonstrate resistance, resilience, and perseverance in the midst of persecution. However, it does not mean that the disciples responded in the same way every time persecution arrived. At times the believers chose to flee and avoid danger. At other times, the disciples decided to stay, or even confront danger directly, as in the case of Paul going up to Jerusalem. External circumstances, personal experience – and in particular the prompting of the Holy Spirit – are all important factors affecting their decision. It would be wrong or overly simplistic to judge a person's obedience to God based on their decision to stay or leave.

The work of the Holy Spirit is evident throughout the book of Acts. While the disciples faced opposition and persecution, the Spirit remained at work. The Spirit enabled the believers to speak with power and wisdom as in the case of Peter, Stephen and Paul (Acts 4:8; 6:10). Besides, many signs and wonders occurred to testify to the message proclaimed by the disciples (Acts 2:22; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3; 15:12; 28:5).

In the many stories recorded in Acts, the disciples were not depicted as being passive recipients of persecution. They took the initiative, they proclaimed Christ courageously, forgave their persecutors, as in the case of Stephen, and entrusted themselves to God. They were victors over, not the victims of, persecution.

III. A historical review of the Boxer Uprising: a case study of persecution and the response

The Boxers, or Yi He Quan (Righteous and Harmonious Fists), created what is probably one of the most widely reported incidents in modern Chinese history. The exact reasons for the Boxer Uprising are debated. There were multiple inter-related factors, including anger at the seizure of territory by foreign powers, irritation at the acquisition of properties in the interior by missionaries, offences by foreigners (including missionaries) acting against time-honoured traditions, the failure of an attempted peaceful reform while the Empress Dowager was still fully in power, and reaction to the unprecedented privileges granted to Roman Catholic priests.¹⁵ Also, the Chinese could not

15 Joseph Esherick makes a detailed analysis of the origin of the Boxers in his book, *The Origin of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley, California: University Press, 1987). He claimed that "there is no major incident in China's modern history on which the range of professional interpretation is as great", indicating the complexity in understanding the Boxer incident. Another detailed analysis can be found in Latourette's book, *A History of Christian Missions in China*, 501-526. Previous work by Chinese scholars can be found in Wu Jingheng and Cai Yuanpei, ed., *Yihetuan Yundong Shi* (History of the Boxer Movement), (Shanghai: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1931), 75-78. However, more recent studies have been conducted and were presented at a conference in 2001 at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the UK which resulted in the publication of the book, by Robert Bickers and R. G. Tiedemann, *The Boxers China and the World* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) which gives a more nuanced understanding of the Boxer Uprising.

forget losing both Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860), which resulted in great humiliation due to the signing of the unequal treaties and the forced opening of treaty ports.

1. The Boxer crisis

During the Boxer Uprising, both native believers and missionaries went through severe trials and suffering. The exact number of local Christians killed or attacked cannot be ascertained.¹⁶ Latourette estimates nearly two thousand native Christians, including three Mongolians were killed, with Shanxi province facing the worst of all the violence.¹⁷

Just before the Uprising, CIM had a total of 811 missionaries in China.¹⁸ More than forty cables were received by the CIM London office between 20 July and 26 November 1900, announcing the death of many of them.¹⁹ Nearly one-third of all the CIM missionaries working in Shanxi province were murdered within a few months. Also, among the 126 missionaries killed in Shanxi, the CIM suffered the most significant loss compared to other mission societies with forty-seven of their own missionaries killed, mainly in Taiyuan Fu.²⁰ CIM lost 58 missionaries and 21 children in total. Many other mission societies were also severely affected.²¹

The founder of the CIM, Hudson Taylor was unwell and realised that he could not provide leadership at such a critical time as he was far too weak. Even his wife Jennie dared not show him all the letters from China, fearing that they could prove to be too much for him. Before the Boxer Uprising, William Cooper was perceived to be a promising younger CIM colleague who could succeed Hudson Taylor. However, Cooper was killed during the Boxer Incident, and his body only found many months later. Taylor knew that he needed someone urgently to take on leadership, someone who understood the China situation well. To many people's surprise, Taylor appointed a young leader, Dixon E. Hoste, who was only 39 years old, to take over his leadership to handle the Boxer crisis.

2. Not to accept compensation even if offered

One of Hoste's major contributions in handling the crisis was the decision that the CIM would not accept any compensation from the Chinese government, even if offered. In February 1901, the China's Millions published the following in accordance with Hoste's decision:

It will be well for missionaries to take a more Christ-like course; and even gladly to suffer the loss of all things, that the gospel be not hindered. Our own Mission has decided to make no claim whatever, either for life or property, and has assumed the responsibility of the orphan children of the martyred Missionaries.²⁰

However, relatives of some members of the CIM had applied directly to the Foreign Office, making claims for compensation for lives lost. The CIM London Council responded promptly by writing to the British authority that "this Mission should be entirely disassociated from all claims for life, or bodily injury, that may be put forward by (relatives or friends)" of members.²²

The CIM's response to the indemnity issue was not passive though it decided to make no claims.

¹⁶ *Chinese Recorder*, 1901, 150.

¹⁷ Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China*, 512, 517.

¹⁸ A. J. Broomhall, *The Shaping of Modern China, Part VII-It is Not Death to Die*, 638.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ For all the names of martyred CIM missionaries, see Irene Cheung ed., *Christ Alone- A Pictorial Presentation of Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy* (Hong Kong: OMF Hong Kong, 2005), 109 and A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy*, Appendix XXXIII, 90.

²¹ Brandt, *Massacre in Shansi*, 264-67.

²² *Ibid.*

In June 1901, a party of eight from different mission groups, led by Hoste, headed to the province of Shanxi at the invitation of the Governor, Ceng Chunxūan. They were Dr E. H. Edwards (1856-1916) of the Shouyang Mission, Rev Moir Duncan (1861-1906) and Dr Creasy Smith (1873-1929) of the British Missionary Society (BMS), Dr Irenaeus Atwood (1850-1913) of the American Board and, Archibald Orr-Ewing (1857-1930), Carl Henrik Tjader (1866-1929) and Ernest Taylor (1875-1948), along with Hoste, of the China Inland Mission.²³ Settlement and indemnity were high on the agenda of the Governor.

Hoste's visit to Shanxi was "the most painful experience".²⁴ Though the Governor had put out the most elaborate reception, Hoste could not ignore the suffering that had happened. Hoste and his party were met by the provincial treasurer, provincial judge, the tartar general, city prefect, and other mandarins who welcomed them with all politeness and cordiality, repeatedly expressing their regrets for the events of 1900.²⁵ However, Hoste was more eager to give time to the local Christians, particularly the leaders who were waiting for him.

Hoste, representing the CIM, already made it clear to the officials that the CIM would not claim any compensation for lives lost, bodily injury, or the loss of property.²⁶ However, CIM should make every effort to help local Christians receive compensation for their losses during the Boxer Uprising. Hoste believed that the Chinese Christians were "not in the service of foreigners" and should be under the protection of the Chinese government.²⁷ As the local believers had suffered, Hoste believed that the CIM should offer a helping hand to assist fellow Chinese believers to claim rightful compensation. Therefore, the main negotiation between Hoste and the officials was about compensation for the local Chinese Christians rather than for the CIM.

The position on indemnity taken by Hoste representing the CIM was different from others in understanding the relationship between the local church and mission societies. The American mission societies made a united presentation of their claims to the Department of State. The American government included in their demands "indemnities for societies, individuals and Chinese who had suffered in person or in property in consequence of their being *in the service of foreigners*."²⁸ Thus, many American mission societies argued that the Chinese believers were to serve the purpose of the foreign missionaries, implying that the Chinese Church "belongs" to the missionaries, at least from a persuasive rationale of claiming compensation. Thus, to compensate the missionaries for lives and property loss also meant compensating the Chinese as well.

This view was not accepted by the CIM, particularly Hoste as the General Director. He insisted that the CIM, as a foreign agent, should not claim "blood money"²⁹ while at the same time being eager to help Chinese believers to receive compensation not because they belong to the CIM but rather because they were fellow believers. Hoste acknowledged the independence of the local churches while at the same time being willing to offer help. This marks the difference between Hoste and other mission leaders in handling the Boxer crisis.

Hoste's concern included far more than just compensation for the Chinese Church. He was concerned about the affairs of the local believers in the aftermath of the Uprising. Hearing in place after place the grim details of torture and maiming, terror and coercion, Hoste called this "the most painful experience of his life".³⁰ Despite the crisis, Hoste was impressed by the strength of the indigenous Chinese Church and the rising of local leaders.

23 A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy, Part VII-It is Not Death to Die*, 725-826.

24 A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy, Part VII-It is Not Death to Die*, 727.

25 *Ibid.*, 726.

26 *Ibid.*, 730.

27 *Ibid.*, 724.

28 A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy, Part VII-It is Not Death to Die*, 722.

29 Kaiser, *Christian Missions in Shanxi*, 110.

30 A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy, Part VII-It is Not Death to Die*, 729.

3. Response from the Chinese Church

Despite the suffering of the local believers, Broomhall reports that many local believers risked their life in assisting the missionaries to escape, offering practical help and hiding places at great cost, with amazing faith.³¹ Eva French (1869-1961), from the CIM, wrote how the Shanxi native Christians helped the missionaries by hiding them in their homes, taking significant risks. French commented that these local believers fully realised the dangers and difficulties, “but not fearing to endanger their lives, denying themselves of food that the missionaries might have it, and sitting up late at night to make chicken-broth for those of our party who were too ill to eat other food”.³² The local Chinese Christians, though young in faith, offered help to the Western missionaries. The young indigenous church began to show its strength as it went through the baptism of fire.

This decision by the CIM came at a great cost. Following the Uprising in 1900, income for the CIM dropped significantly and returning to the interior and also repairing of all damaged properties had inflated their expenses. The CIM faced many uncertainties, but not accepting compensation remained a firm decision.

The Governor of Shanxi, Ceng Chunxūan, agreed to offer compensation for the losses of local Christians. The local church leaders were waiting for Hoste to advise on how to proceed.³³ Hoste had a challenging job to ensure integrity on both sides, that the local Chinese believers would not exaggerate any claims, and the officials would be fair in compensating the amount due to the local Christians. Both sides were looking to Hoste for help. Hoste, who had worked for ten years under a Chinese leader, Hsi, had won the confidence of both the local Chinese Church leaders and the government. Both sides had little trust in the other. The officials believed that the claimants would inflate their figures while the claimants felt that the officials would avoid responsibility and not give them fair treatment.

Hoste was eager that all claims would be honest and accurate. He therefore insisted that each claim was to be investigated carefully before it was given to the Governor. Also, there should be no “carelessness or overstating” of the claims with “careful and thorough examinations”.³⁴ Hoste also made it very clear that none of the money received should go to the CIM, but for the native Christians only. So that every claim could be carefully investigated, Hoste felt strongly that the help of local church leaders was essential. Hoste selected over forty local leaders representing the different districts in the province and submitted the names to the Governor.³⁵ The Governor accepted the names and informed the local officials that these names were formally appointed and accepted to “superintend the native indemnity”.³⁶

Hoste then wrote a subsequent letter to be sent out to all the Chinese Church leaders in Shanxi emphasising the importance of integrity.³⁷ First, Hoste encouraged the local Christians that if they were willing to forgive their enemies and therefore not wish to claim compensation, they would do well. Second, if they would like to claim compensation because of bodily harm or property loss, “there must be no carelessness or overstating, lest God’s name be dishonoured before your enemies” and thus the official and the Church should have nothing to do with their affairs.³⁸ Also, Hoste insisted that the leaders who had been appointed to manage these affairs must first make a

31 See some examples in Luella Miner’s book, *China’s Book of Martyrs: A Record of Heroic Martyrdoms and Marvellous Deliverances of Chinese Christians during the Summer of 1900* (New York: Pilgrim, 1903).

32 Marshall Broomhall, *Martyred Missionaries of the China Inland Mission*, 270-272.

33 A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor’s Life and Legacy, Part VII-It is Not Death to Die*, 728.

34 *Ibid.*, 728-729.

35 *China’s Millions*, 1901, 163. See Figure 3.2.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Only the English translation is available in *China’s Millions*. The original letter which was written in Chinese could not be traced.

38 *China’s Millions*, 1901, 163.

careful and thorough examination of the claims.³⁹

4. Response from the governor

Hoste's care and concern for the Chinese Church did not go unnoticed, particularly by Governor Ceng. Ceng was impressed by Hoste's meticulous approach to working with the Chinese Church, ensuring the local believers submitted accurate and honest claims.

On 11 October, 1901 (the twenty-seventh year of the Kwanghsu dynasty), Governor Ceng, with the agreement of Hoste, issued an official edict. Placards were placed wherever the CIM had worked and suffered throughout Shanxi.⁴⁰ Ceng greatly praised the CIM for not claiming compensation. The edict stated that the CIM wished for no indemnity and would rebuild the churches using its own funds. Ceng also commended the behaviour of these missionaries by stating that the Christian faith exhorted all men to live virtuously and all desire for revenge is discouraged. But, most importantly, Ceng particularly commended Hoste, for being able to carry out these Christian principles to the full and that his mode of action deserved the fullest approval as they had learned from their master Jesus.⁴¹ Also, Ceng saw for himself the action taken by the CIM for famine relief. During the first six months of 1901, in the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising, the CIM forwarded 15,000 taels⁴² to China for famine relief, mainly for the worst-hit Shanxi Province.⁴³ In response, Ceng himself allocated another 10,000 taels to be distributed for famine relief out of his own accord.⁴⁴

5. Hoste saw the potential of the Chinese Church beyond persecution

Though Hoste made every effort to help the Chinese Church claim compensation for what was right, he did not focus on the suffering of the Chinese Church. Hoste had the foresight to see the potential of the Chinese Church rising to the challenge. He believed that the Boxer Uprising would accelerate the independence of the Chinese Church.

Despite the suffering of the CIM due to the Boxer crisis, Hoste's vision on the establishment of the indigenous Chinese Church was best explained in an article, published in October 1900 *Chinese Recorder* (barely four months after the traumatic incident), entitled, "Possible changes and developments in the native churches arising out of the present crisis".⁴⁵

First, Hoste highlighted that change was necessary. He saw that "the future was pregnant with change. The abrupt removal and prolonged absence of the missionary must necessarily lead to great *changes* in its form and character."⁴⁶

Second, Hoste indicated that the current system employed by missionaries did not encourage self-government in the native churches. He commented that under the current system, the work centred around the missionary who carried executive authority and financial control in their hands. Thus, the local believers were dependent upon funds administered by missionaries. "Such a relationship was not, to say the least, in the direction of developing in them the independence of

39 Ibid.

40 *China's Millions*, March 1902, 33, 36.

41 *China's Millions*, 1902, 36. The record of the full letter in Chinese was published in the 1902 *China's Millions*, 36. Also see *Qingmo jiaolan* (Late Qing Incidents), Volume III (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1998), 187-208.

42 A tael was a former monetary unit in China and East Asia.

43 *China's Millions*, 1901, 146.

44 A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy, Part VII-It is Not Death to Die*, 731. Also *China's Millions*, 1902, 9.

45 D. E. Hoste, "Possible Changes and Developments in the Native Churches arising out of the Present Crisis," in *Chinese Recorder*, October 1900, 509-512. Also published in the book by Marshall Broomhall, *Martyred Missionaries of the China Inland Mission- Perils and Sufferings of Some who Escaped* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1901), 279-281.

46 Ibid., 279.

thought and initiative in action."⁴⁷ Though Hudson Taylor himself was a firm believer in developing the indigenous Chinese Church, Hoste's observation is that CIM missionaries fell far short of that standard.

Third, Hoste insisted that the authority of the missionaries should remain one of a spiritual nature, acting only as guides and exemplars and avoiding dependency. However, Hoste observed that the current system did not tend to produce such a relationship between the missionary and the native believers. He thus commented that the current system had "practically postponed the independence and self-government in the native churches indefinitely."⁴⁸ Hoste felt that this unhealthy relationship would hinder the Chinese mind to "withstand the missionary action and combat their views."⁴⁹ Without letting go, it would only indefinitely postpone the independence and self-government of the native churches.

Finally, Hoste believed that the present crisis, the Boxer Uprising, might, in the end, provide an opportunity for the native church to take on leadership in the absence of missionaries. Greater changes would certainly take place with the absence of missionaries "in whom the centre of gravity of power, influence, and initiative had rested."⁵⁰ This would lead to a period of greater re-arrangement in the mutual relationship with the native leaders. Hoste observed that those local Chinese leaders who were used to being only in the background "under the old regime would come to the front; and proving themselves equal to the facing of danger and bearing of responsibility, grow into leadership."⁵¹

Hoste urged all CIM missionaries to embrace the character of sympathy and exercise much humility. He recognised that while local believers were not free from faults, peculiar to their temperament and position, missionaries would need to "exercise much humility and patience in dealing with their self-will and self-complacency, calling for much tact, power of sympathy and quiet firmness in the foreigner".⁵² Hoste recognised that this was a considerable challenge to the CIM missionary community. However, he felt that the pain of a mindset change would be nothing compared to "the fundamental injuries to character, mental and spiritual caused by the bondage of an artificial relationship which much the individuals concerned may honestly wish it otherwise, produce uniformity of will and thought at the expense of manhood".⁵³

The Boxer crisis had brought about a significant mindset change to the CIM and its workers under the leadership of Hoste, believing that the local Chinese believers would rise up to the challenge of taking responsibilities to lead the Chinese Church.

6. Summary of historical perspectives

The early church understood that suffering for Christ is part and parcel of being his disciples. Jesus had said to his disciples that they "must take up their cross daily to follow him" (Luke 9:23). The CIM missionaries understood and accepted that commitment. Yet the CIM's decision of not accepting compensation "even if offered" in the aftermath of the Boxer crisis was most unexpected. There are a few important lessons we could learn from the response of the CIM.

First, we need to acknowledge that there could be a variety of responses to persecution. Not everyone agreed with CIM's response. The *Chinese Recorder* in 1902 published an article from the *New York Independent*, by Charles Denby (1861-1938), the former minister to China, that

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Marshall Broomhall, *Martyred Missionaries of the China Inland Mission*, 280.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 281.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 281-282.

emphasised “the rights of missionaries” in the context of the aftermath of the Boxer crisis

*The missionary does nothing but good. He clothes the naked. He feeds the hungry and comforts the heavy laden. If in addition, he teaches Christianity, can he teach any better system of morality? Let there be reason in all these things, but do not by neglect to secure proper terms to deprive the Chinese of the right to have the assistance of these devoted agents of the cross who are surely but slowly spreading civilization.*⁵⁴

Thus, the notion that the Chinese Church needed to continue to depend on foreign missionaries had remained strong in the mindset of many foreigners in contrast to Hoste’s conviction. Many Western churches and foreign Missions held onto the belief that the Chinese Church was too weak to stand on its own, particularly with crises like the Boxer incident. Hoste is right in encouraging all Christians to “embrace the character of sympathy and exercise much humility”.

Second, it is the importance of upholding integrity even in the midst of a crisis which bears witness to our Christian faith. While Hoste supported the Chinese Church to claim compensation for lives lost and property damaged, Hoste insisted that there should be no “carelessness or overstating” of the claims with “careful and thorough examinations”, lest God’s name be dishonoured.

Third, an authentic relationship is developed through journeying together with those in persecution and suffering. During the Boxer crisis, the young emerging Chinese Church offered a helping hand to the CIM missionaries, helping them to escape, to hide in safe places and to provide for them when the CIM missionaries were totally helpless. At the same time, the CIM leader, Hoste, saw the great potential of the Chinese Church to ultimately “come to the front and proving themselves equal to the facing of danger and bearing of responsibilities, growing into leadership” without depending on the missionaries.

Thus, the Boxer persecution, though as painful as it might be, brought growth to both the CIM and the Chinese Church, not in numerical number necessarily, but in faith, strength and trust, journeying together beyond the crisis.

IV. A review of Christian persecution in the contemporary context

1. The global scene

Currently, various resources are available to inform us of the state of persecution around the world. One excellent publication is the book by Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends and Possibilities*. Johnstone traces through church history, the “flow of persecution”. Other sources include research by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF), the Open Doors World Watch List, etc.⁵⁵

The Pew Forum reports that one-third of the world’s population is facing increased religious restriction, with the stark reality that seventy-five per cent of religious persecution is against Christians.⁵⁶ The total number of countries with “high” or “very high” levels of government restrictions has been mounting as well. Most recently, that number climbed from 52 countries (26% of the 198 countries and territories included in the study) in 2017 to 56 countries (28%) in 2018.⁵⁷ As of 2018, most of the 56 countries with high or very high levels of government restrictions on religion are in the Asia-Pacific region (25 countries, or half of all countries in that region) or the

⁵⁴ *Chinese Recorder*, 1902, 147

⁵⁵ For a comprehensive list, see William D Taylor, Antonia van der Meer, reg Reimer, *Sorrow and Blood-Christian Mission in Contexts of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom*, Pasanda, CA: William Carey Library, 3-4, 513-518.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 3,

⁵⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/21/key-findings-on-the-global-rise-in-religious-restrictions/>, accessed October 7, 2022.

Middle East-North Africa region (18 countries, or 90% of all countries in the region). The Asia Pacific region also saw several instances of widespread use of government force against religious groups.⁵⁸

Thomas Schirrmacher, Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, made an important observation that those who face religious restrictions are not only Christians but also Muslims. However, Schirrmacher highlighted that it was the scale of persecution against Christians that has “no parallel”.

*There is hardly a parallel to the fifty thousand Christians in the Indian state of Orissa driven from their homes between 2008 and 2009 and the five hundred people killed in these events. There is equally no parallel to the 100,000 Christians driven away by force of arms on the Maluku Islands of Indonesia during 2000–2001, where several thousands died. In Sudan and Nigeria, very large numbers of Christians died – huge in scale, however complicated the situation may be in these countries which are divided between Islam and Christianity. The enforced removal of hundreds of thousands of Christians out of Iraq during 2007–2011 is currently without parallel in the world of religions.*⁵⁹

Others have recorded similar incidents of massive persecution in different parts of the world. For example, Patriarch Aleksei II estimated that by the late 1930s Russia’s Communist government was responsible for the deaths of some 80,000 Orthodox clergy, monks, and nuns. Executions of priests in 1918-19 and 1930-31 alone have been estimated at over 15,000 and 5,000 respectively, not counting deaths in prisons and labour camps.⁶⁰ Historically, we shall also not forget the crucifixion of the twenty-six martyrs of 1597 in Nagasaki, Japan. “On signal, the executioners pierced both sides of each person’s body with a long spear up through the left and right ribs towards the opposite shoulder.”⁶¹

2. Stages of Persecution

Various scholars have described the phases of the religious persecution of Christians. This begins as disinformation, becomes discrimination, and finally turns into full-blown persecution. “If no action is taken against discrimination, the fine line to *persecution* is easily crossed.”⁶² In many situations, persecution ends up as violent persecution. What starts off as rumours and disinformation gets propagated by the media and public opinion, which often turns against Christians. Often Christians themselves do not have access to the resources to rectify the disinformation. Thus, it slowly becomes regarded as truth. On more than one occasion, Christians in a particular country were thought of as working for the CIA with seditious activities.⁶³

Marvin Newell very helpfully describes the six different degrees of persecution from the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 10. Persecution can begin with the least form of hostility and then progresses in ascending order to the ultimate experience. Christ shows his disciples that they will be prevented outright from proclaiming the gospel (v. 14), rejected if given the opportunity (v.14), detained (v. 17, 19), abused (v. 17), pursued with the intent to harm (v. 23) and finally martyred (v.28).⁶⁴

It would be impossible to write a detailed record of current persecution of Christians from

58 Ibid.

59 *Sorrow and Blood*, 53.

60 *Sorrow and Blood*, 196.

61 Yuki, D. R., *The Martyr’s Hill Nagasaki*, Nagasaki: Twenty-Six Martyrs Museum, 2002. 14.

62 Charles L. Tieszen, “Re-Examining Religious Persecution Constructing a Theological Framework for Understanding Persecution”, *Religious Freedom Series*, Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft (Culture and Science Publ.), 2008, 46.

63 *Sorrow and Blood*, 12-14.

64 Ibid., 92.

every region around the world, nor was it the intention in this paper. Thus, I have only given a few examples above. However, we need to acknowledge the grim realities of persecution. Schirmmacher indicates several reasons behind the worsening global religious freedom scenario as well as persecution.⁶⁵ First, Christians are being oppressed by the respective majority religion or by control of religion by the government. In many places around the world, Christians remain the minority. Second, the large population size of a country has caused the government to increasingly control religious freedom out of concern for national security. Third, countries which had been colonised in the past seek to strengthen their own identity through a revitalisation of inherited religious traditions. They increasingly oppose, often violently, any religions considered “foreign”. Fourth, Christianity and particular groups of its representatives have become voices for human rights and democracy. Fifth, Christianity often jeopardises established corrupt business interests and their religious toleration. Finally, in many countries, there is a strong link between nationalism and religion, thus leading to the oppression of “undesired” religions in the country.

3. The modern secular west

It will be far from the truth to believe that persecution does not occur in the traditional Western Christian states. If we take persecution to mean “unfair treatment over a long period of time because of race, religion or political beliefs”, certainly this applies to the West as well. Janet Epp Buckingham, in “The Modern Secular West”, highlighted this truth. The kinds of restrictions Christians face in the secular West range from mild to severe, but are usually couched in the language of “tolerance”. They are often enforced by the laws of the countries. They may include freedom of public expressions of religion, including preaching, evangelism and free expression.

One case in point is a Swedish pastor who faced criminal charges for preaching a sermon in his church on the biblical view of homosexuality. He was initially found guilty and sentenced to one month in jail for expressing “disrespect” to homosexuals. This was finally overturned in the light of the European Convention on Human Rights.⁶⁶ A Canadian pastor requested the use of a public park stage in the centre of town for a play. He was rejected on the basis that religion is controversial. When his church put on the play regardless of having a permit, the pastor was charged with trespassing. However, in the end he successfully defended his actions on the basis that he had attempted to get a permit.⁶⁷ In other countries like Britain, nurses and professional caregivers have faced professional discipline for offering to pray for patients and clients.⁶⁸ France has been in the vanguard of restricting religious clothing. It was the first Western country to ban the wearing of religious symbols in public schools, referred to as the “headscarf ban”. Christian students who stand up for their beliefs are humiliated. Students have even been arrested for erecting pro-life displays on campuses.⁶⁹ Legal protection for human rights has become a double-edged sword.

In William Barclay’s commentary of the gospel of Luke, he mentioned that Jesus promised his disciples three things – that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble. We must not be tempted into the illusion that the world is actually a friendly place that does not mind our identifying with Jesus. As a matter of fact, it is the opposite: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18).

4. Wang Ming Dao and the indigenous Chinese Church

Wright Doyle and Yading Li wrote a moving article on the life of Wang Ming Dao, a man “in

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁶ *Blood and Sorrow*, 223.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

trouble”.⁷⁰ Wang, born in 1900, the year of the Boxer Uprising, is widely recognised as one of the most influential and respected Chinese Christian leaders who worked to build the indigenous Chinese church. He became a pastor in Beijing. His church, the Christian Tabernacle, grew steadily and by 1949 had a membership of about 570, making it one of the largest evangelical churches in Beijing at that time. Wang took a firm stand against any form of political involvement. Under the guidance of, and supported by, the Communist Party, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) was organised to direct the nationwide Christian church. However, Wang refused to join the TSPM.

In September 1954 an accusation meeting was called by authorities, with attendance required from all churches of the city. Many were incited to criticise Wang, making ugly charges against him, in the summer of 1955. On August 7, 1955, he preached his last sermon at the Tabernacle, taking as his Scripture, “The Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners”. Wang was arrested, along with his wife and eighteen young Christians, and taken to prison. Wang was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for what was called “resistance to the government”. After being confined in a cell for a period of time, he cracked and signed a confession. He was released, but he had a guilty and grieved conscience. When his mind returned to normal, he and his wife agreed that he must tell the authorities that his statement had been made under duress and did not represent his true feelings. He finally revoked the previous confessions in 1958 and was immediately returned to prison for 22 years; his wife was sentenced too, to prison and labour camps.

Despite the long years of imprisonment, Wang never criticized communism as an ideology, as some have averred, and he never opposed the government or called for it to be overthrown, though he was accused of being a “counter-revolutionary”.⁷¹ Wang made a clear stand on the separation of church and state. Yet, he vigorously opposed any evils or injustices that occurred in society and he insisted that Chinese Christians should live a holy life.

What can we learn from Wang’s life? It is his uncompromising stance in preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ even under persecution. The hallmarks of his preaching were repentance, holiness, purity, and truth. He spoke strongly against a false gospel, a compromised gospel. “We must exert all our strength to oppose the false gospel... For the sake of the commission that God has entrusted to me, for the protection of the church, for the good of mankind, and for the glory of God.” (*Spiritual Food*, 127).

5. A call to unceasing prayer

In Matthew 24 in the “Parousia Discourse”, Jesus gave the disciples a stern warning about the end of the world’s history. The kingdom has come with the first coming of Jesus. It has been inaugurated, but it has not yet been consummated. Disciples are citizens of two countries. They belong both to this age and to the age to come. They live at the intersection of the ages, hence the glory and the shame of the Christian life and the Christian church. As Michael Green points out, “Hence the ambiguity of Christian experience. We are not what we were, but equally, we are not yet what we shall be. The kingdom inaugurated at the first coming of Jesus will be consummated by his return at the end of history.”⁷²

Jesus warned his disciples in Matthew 24 about the sufferings to come. They will, as he had predicted already, be persecuted and hated (v. 9, 21, 29). The persecution is to come from all nations, and the disciples will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death because of our association with Jesus (v.9). This persecution will take its toll, in that many will fall away and lawlessness will lead to the cooling off of love.⁷³ Yet the gospel of the kingdom will be preached to the whole world,

⁷⁰ *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, <http://bdconline.net/en/stories/wang-mingdao>, accessed October 7, 2022.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: the kingdom of heaven* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 250.

⁷³ Richard France, *Matthew: an introduction and commentary*, (Vol. 1) (Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 341-242.

and then the end will come.

As global Christians, we share the pain, scars and bruises and hear the cries and distress of our persecuted brothers and sisters. We may be living in a comfortable safe environment, but we cannot pretend not to know.

First, there is a need for accurate, comprehensive information. Too often, exaggerated or false reports are available on the internet. What starts off as a rumour slowly becomes an accepted fact. Stories should be confirmed from multiple sources. Miriam Adeney rightly points out that good stories or biographies need to include the right context, sin and failures, as well as honour and dignity.⁷⁴ Stories of persecution should not be motivated by sensationalism but should drive us to prayer.

Second, accurate comprehensive information should drive us to urgent prayer for the persecuted Christians. All stories should begin, end and be infused with prayer. The late president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, Diane Knippers said:

Pray not only for a broken heart, but a big heart. Your heart will be broken. You will weep. Sometimes you will be tempted to pull away. You will feel guilty because you have so much – materially and freedom. Pray for a heart big enough to obey the God of the nations. Big enough to embrace a child sold into slavery. Big enough to remember Chinese Church leaders. Big enough to play your part in the household of faith.⁷⁵

Third, there needs to be thoughtful advocacy and prayerful action. No matter where we stand on the understanding of the separation of church and state, Jesus has encouraged his disciples to be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). Light exposes darkness. Effective advocacy demands courage, creativity, and wise communication through various means, including social networks, arts, music, drama, film etc. In this way, God's people are well informed, and governments are made aware of the situations.

V. Conclusion

The early church disciples were not depicted as being passive recipients of persecution. They took the initiative to the end. They proclaimed Christ courageously and entrusted themselves to God. They were the victors over, not the victims of, persecution.

The CIM missionaries understood and accepted the cost of sacrifice. The CIM's decision not to accept compensation, even if offered, in the aftermath of the Boxer crisis was most unexpected. Yet out of the Boxer crisis, the church began to grow. As Hoste indicated, the Chinese Church ultimately came to the front, proving themselves equal to the facing of danger and bearing of responsibilities, growing into leadership.

Finally, there is no evidence that persecution is on the decline. Jesus warned his disciples in Matthew 24 about the sufferings to come. As global Christians, we must help to distribute accurate and comprehensive information, encourage urgent prayer, and take courageous and thoughtful steps to help both Christians and the authorities to be well-informed so that they can take appropriate action.

Let me end by referring to the Celtic Christians' "tricoloured theology of martyrdom". White Martyrdom spoke of the costly pain of leaving behind family, clan, and tribe to spread the gospel of Christ. Green Martyrdom spoke of self-denial and penitential acts that led to personal holiness. But Red martyrdom spoke of persecution, bloodshed, or death.⁷⁶

As Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his

74 Miriam Adeney, "How Sainly should Biographies be?", *Sorrow and Blood*, 159-166.

75 Faith J. H. McDonnell "Accurate Information, Urgent Intercession, Thoughtful Advocacy, and Courageous Action", *Sorrow and Blood*, 482-485.

76 See Yvonne and William D. Taylor, "Final Themes- Lessons from Celtic Christianity", *Sorrow and Blood*, 475-476.

cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Dr Patrick Fung is currently the General Director of OMF International (formerly the China Inland Mission). OMF currently has 1,400 missionaries sharing the good news with East Asia's people. Patrick was one of the Keswick Bible conference speakers in the UK in 2011 & 2015.

REVIEW ARTICLE

JESUS AND JOHN WAYNE: HOW WHITE EVANGELICALS CORRUPTED A FAITH AND FRACTURED A NATION

Kristin Kobes du Mez, Liverlight: New York (2020), 368 pp, (£20.40 Amazon)

AND

THE MAKING OF BIBLICAL WOMANHOOD: HOW THE SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN BECAME GOSPEL TRUTH

Beth Alison Barr, Brazos Press: Grand Rapids (2021), 256 pp, (£11.75 Amazon)

The two books in this review will be familiar to many readers. They have figured in US best seller charts and have been broadly approved of by both the secular and Christian press. Given the accusatory subtitles and satirical iconography on both book covers, and the assertive and often caustic voice adopted by their writers, this attention is no surprise. This review seeks to ask if their attention is justified, and if they bring a material contribution to the debate on sex, gender and power in the evangelical church.

Kristin Kobes du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Captured a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (June 2020) and Beth Alison Barr's *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (April 2021) are examples of an increasingly vocal movement "deconstructing" evangelical culture.¹ Some such critics have left the faith altogether. Others, like these two writers, reject the descriptor "evangelical" but see themselves as prophetic, orthodox Christians, pointing to the sins of a bloated, historically ignorant conservative church culture. As consumers of the values and trends within American Christendom, UK evangelicals must pay careful heed to both their assertions and their approach. Du Mez and Barr pinpoint disturbing traits which are evident, though maybe in much more muted tones, in British church culture. It is undeniable that ungodly understandings of and desires for power have and continue to corrupt the church's life, and that harmful conceptions of gender are sometimes involved in these sins. At the same time, their methodologies and subsequently some of their conclusions, have serious flaws, which we will do well to note.

I. Problematic masculinity

Du Mez's contention in *Jesus and John Wayne (JJW)* is that in the first half of the twentieth century, in evangelicalism, politics and the secular entertainment industry a form of "muscular", "rugged, American masculinity" was promoted in a symbiotic and therefore mutually reinforcing manner.² This came from men "who were anxious about their own status, and the nation's", and

¹ These works frequently focus on gender. Examples include Rachel Held Evans' *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband 'Master'* (Thomas Nelson: Edinburgh, 2012); Aimee Byrd's *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Zondervan; Grand Rapids, 2019); Nadia Bolz Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (Canterbury Press: Norwich, 2019).

² Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright Publishing: New York, 2020), 11. It is worth noting that Du Mez makes no reference to the British 19th century "muscular Christianity" which was not exclusively, or even predominately, an evangelical phenomenon.

provided a defence against different waves of perceived threats, including communism, feminism, Islam, globalism and industrial decline.³ For Du Mez, John Wayne epitomises this commodified value system: in numerous films, his risk-taking stands against enemies (invariably untrustworthy non-whites or non-Americans) neatly combined “resurgent nationalism with moral exceptionalism” and implied an often vulnerable, subservient femininity.⁴ He was the ideal American, despite the moral disarray of his private life, the kind of man Christians had in their minds’ eyes as they read about how to be a man or thought about who to vote for. Though Du Mez’s research on masculinity began over 15 years ago, Donald Trump’s presidency is presented as definitive proof for her thesis. His shadow hangs over the whole book, being discussed in the introduction, at the start of chapter one and at the end of the final chapter. Du Mez argues that the evangelical embrace of his political career wasn’t a surprise, nor was it pragmatic; instead, it was the natural result of decades of evangelicalism’s deliberate involvement in the Republican Party and its celebration of charismatic, domineering, even abusive, male leadership. It is a convincing argument.

Du Mez substantiates this thesis through an overview of evangelical subculture from the 1950s onwards. She identifies numerous figures (including Billy Graham, parenting broadcaster and writer, James Dobson, and Jerry Falwell Senior and Junior) who sought to influence Republican Party tactics, including an aggressive foreign policy, and to ensure Republican voters from among the evangelical constituency. She suggests, too, that from the 1960s onwards, evangelicalism shifted from a northern and progressive outlook on race to one which, though supportive of equal rights and desegregation in theory, was reluctant to give welcome or opportunities to black believers, or to examine its complicity in racism. We learn about a persistent focus on women’s calling to domesticity and submission and 1990s purity teaching which emphasised female responsibility and male lust. The Gospel Coalition and the “Young, Restless and Reformed” movement come under her scrutiny as she explores how networks and organisations, as well as churches have shielded culpable individuals. These different threads, Du Mez contends, came together to create an inward-looking evangelical culture which facilitated and excused sexual abuse, and fostered xenophobia. She depicts a culture saturated by a desire for power and reputation, where good sacrificial, gentle leaders were absent, or cravenly silent. This analysis of how unbalanced constructions of manhood can be perpetuated across secular and church environments is sobering and at times shocking, especially given the exposure of recent and historic abuses of power in British as well as in American evangelical churches and parachurch organisations.

II. Telling Gaps

Du Mez writes very well. Her narrative is fast-paced and well-structured. In covering so much ground and mentioning so many individuals, however, she minimises important distinctions between figures and even omits significant detail. Billy Graham, for example, did support military action and shared a platform with Nixon, but he also advised Democratic presidents. She also fails to reckon properly with the reasons behind evangelicals’ responses to aspects of social change from the 1950s onwards. For example, while Du Mez identifies “fear” as the motive inducing what she sees as a reactionary response to progress in civil and women’s rights, the sexual revolution and the domestic and international spread of atheistic worldviews, she doesn’t consider that compassion for victims of family breakdown or concern for the lost could have played a part in some campaigns.⁵ Perhaps more significant is an unwillingness to distinguish between innocuous words or behaviours and explicit corruption. This means that Billy Graham’s athletic metaphors, the Promise Keepers’ call to servant leadership, or John Piper and Tim Keller’s acknowledgement that Mark Driscoll had been used by God, despite his evident sin, are presented as part of a problematic culture. This

³ *JJW*, 17.

⁴ *JJW*, 31.

⁵ *JJW*, 59.

seems an unfair and even simplistic approach, resulting from her unsympathetic hermeneutic. Sadly, Du Mez's important and valuable exploration of power is weakened by a reluctance to admit distinctions, or even to discuss the range of meanings and values within expressions of manhood. Language of strength, protection, courage and even battle, is not necessarily harmful, though of course it can be used to validate aggression and minimise the call all Christians have to gentleness and compassion. A willingness to consider this, and the variegation and complexity of evangelical cultures and their contexts, would make for a more accurate assessment of evangelical culture.

In part, the weakness of analysis stems from Du Mez's conclusion that evangelicalism itself is not so much a theological or ecclesial position, but a cultural construction, a form of white patriarchy which persistently seeks to hold on to power, not through the local church, but through a broader consumer culture.⁶ To support this perspective, Du Mez highlights the truth that black protestants behave and vote differently from white evangelicals, with most eschewing that label even though they may hold very similar doctrinal views. She also notes, sadly with some accuracy, how little theological literacy, and even church involvement, there is among self-described evangelicals. Significantly, biblical interpretation for her becomes a choice between a Christ who may be either a "conquering warrior ... or a sacrificial lamb who offers himself up for the restoration of all things", but not both.⁷ In the same way that she sees any description of masculinity which involves military imagery as dangerous, she rejects a biblically nuanced understanding of Christ's identity. Similarly, she sees inerrancy as a recent and politically convenient idea, rather than a new expression of an historic doctrine. Defining a broad movement in this way allows Du Mez to bypass its spiritual and theological dimensions and makes for a thinness in her exploration of a complex subject. The reasons for particular stances and activism are reduced to a self-serving desire for power, rather than any gospel focus, or commitment to biblical faithfulness or the good of others however poorly worked out. Networks in the early 2000s, for example, were based "*most foundationally* on a commitment to patriarchal power", rather than anything else.⁸ This is an outrageous declaration which deliberately obfuscates the way in which complementarian views were just one of several theological concerns uniting reformed Christians, the foundation of which was a commitment to a particular understanding of scriptural, rather than patriarchal authority.

III. A Shared Secular Framework

Patriarchy is the key idea shaping both *JJW* and to an even greater extent, Beth Alison Barr's, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood (MBW)*, a book which argues that conservative evangelicalism's sometimes prescriptive description of femininity is far from traditional and biblical. Du Mez and Barr continually use the term to refer to the hierarchical social structure within the conservative evangelical world.⁹ Barr takes time to explain her use: it is a system "that promotes male authority and female submission".¹⁰ The word has had a popular resurgence over this last decade as fourth wave feminism has flourished, but in academia, it has largely been abandoned for being far too broad to be a useful tool for analysis.¹¹ In these two books, however, it becomes a convenient rallying point for grievance, shorthand for the systematic oppression of women. While Du Mez's more detailed argument mitigates some of the methodological weaknesses which come with the

6 *JJW*, 6. By consumer culture, Du Mez is referring to the publishing industry, online writing and traditional news outlets, as well as items which can be bought in a store.

7 *JJW*, 5.

8 *JJW*, 204, (italics my own).

9 *JJW*, 54.

10 *MBW*, 13 & 15.

11 For example, Charlotte Higgins, *The Age of Patriarchy: how an unfashionable idea became a rallying cry for feminism today*. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/22/the-age-of-patriarchy-how-an-unfashionable-idea-became-a-rallying-cry-for-feminism-today>. Accessed 2/1/23.

term, for Barr, they are clear to see.

The problems with Barr's use of the ideology of patriarchy are threefold. First, it can blunt understanding of how class, nationality, economics, and significantly, human biology, shape attitudes; second, it blurs distinctions between very different experiences (churches which disallow female elders and fringe movements which prevent women from working outside the home; pay rates in Texas and laws in ancient Gilgamesh are all deemed patriarchal); last, and most importantly, its own exclusive logic is at odds with more than a few verses of the Bible. If patriarchy, a promotion of male authority, is "a product of sinful human hands" which the gospel overcomes, then both Old and New Testament promotion of masculine leaders have to be explained away as sin, as do directions on marriage and the use of male names for God.¹² Barr's chapter on Paul follows a standard egalitarian argument that to preserve the reputation of the church he was fitting in with the secular expectations in regard to gender roles, and that a "redemptive trajectory" should be followed, but she does not develop her reasoning, beyond a discussion of Bible translation practices later on. By using this ideological terminology then, Barr sets up an argument that she doesn't follow through, and she also forecloses a worthwhile analysis of the detail of how certain iterations of "biblical womanhood" have indeed promoted a distorted version of femininity and made women vulnerable to abuse.

IV. Barr's Idiosyncratic Stories

MBW is a book of two interwoven stories. One, threaded throughout the pages, is Barr's own experience of the complementarian church and the treatment, from clumsy to cruel, she says she has received. This, she says, is what has led her to tell the book's other story, of how the church through the ages has kept on mirroring secular patriarchy. These two levels mean that the book has a heightened emotional pitch and makes high claims of authority. Barr presents herself as a truth-speaking victim, as well as a historian. Repeatedly using the first person, she ties her research to her experiences, using this as a validating and illustrating mechanism. For example, she claims that "from my own experience ... inerrancy creates a climate of fear".¹³ She frames questions her students ask her, and their astonished responses to her answers, heading one sub-chapter "Wait, Dr Barr, What?".¹⁴ Whereas Du Mez concentrates largely on the construction of masculinity over one century and in one country, and so creates a tight and to some degree plausible, if polemical, argument, the very breadth of Barr's chronological and ecclesiastical range and her emotive, personal grievance, makes for a less convincing whole.

Barr's specialism is Medieval Church history, and so this occupies a significant part of the book. She argues that prior to the Reformation, while patriarchy shaped society, some women had prominent teaching and preaching roles in the church, and this means that post-reformation, and especially later evangelical, views of womanhood are an aberration from traditional Christian views of womanhood. Tudor mystic Margery Kempe, the astonishingly learned Hildegard of Bingen, Christine of Pizan, "Bishop" Brigit of Ireland and numerous other Saints are all introduced. She is right that the religious life provided unique opportunities for devotion, study and self-expression. Yet not all this history is quite as it seems.¹⁵ The "preaching" she says undertaken by many was most often not to mixed church congregations, so doesn't quite fit what most readers might understand by the word. The "ordination" of Brigit was said to have been a mistake.¹⁶ Hagiographies of women

12 35 & 36, 25.

13 *MBW*, 151.

14 *MBW*, 190.

15 Kevin De Young in his Gospel Coalition review lists several of Barr's inaccuracies. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-making-of-biblical-womanhood-a-review/>.

16 This is discussed in many sources. See, for example, Britannica article: <https://www.britannica.com/story/st-brigid-the-compassionate-sensible-female-patron-saint-of-ireland>. (accessed 2.1.23).

who defeated dragons didn't necessarily mean that the men who told these stories were themselves open to female leadership in the church of their day, any more than Catholics who venerate female saints today are ready to see women preaching. If Barr overstates these stories, she at the same time underestimates the activity of women in the first few centuries after the Reformation, many of whom wrote, studied, and influenced the church, though in a very different context.¹⁷ Barr herself acknowledges that there is a range of scholarly opinion on the reasons for shifts in female activity in the Enlightenment period and beyond, including technology and economics, however, her conclusion is simplistic: the church has simply replicated the period's secular "cult of domesticity". Again, when she gives examples of female authority, whether the Countess of Huntingdon in the eighteenth or women revival preachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, her depictions often overstate their power. Evangelistic proclamation or involvement in strategy is not the same as pastoral leadership. Given the good range of material she cites, these chapters present a lost opportunity to explore the detail of how women worked in the church in previous generations in their wider context, a story that is certainly worth retelling.

One striking element of the book is how often Barr's illustrations of "biblical womanhood" ideology, intended to shock the reader, are brief anecdotal descriptions of teaching on submission or domesticity, alongside restatements of Bible verses or simple observable fact. For example, we hear about a conference seminar about baking as an example of stereotyping, and that James Dobson taught that women were "physically weaker", an undeniable reality.¹⁸ Tudor homilies preached "let women be subject to their husbands, as to the Lord", a mere citation of Ephesians 5:22, echoed by writers five centuries later in their "literal" reading of Paul.¹⁹ Again, Barr's range of material and her ambiguous engagement with Scripture weakens her argument; to really claim that "biblical womanhood" is a damaging category, she needs to provide more extreme examples and more detailed analysis.

Like Du Mez, Barr does recount a few shameful incidents of abuse which happened in complementarian circles and identifies the much-discussed teaching of ESS by some who sought to link marital order to a false understanding of the Trinity. In this way, both writers connect a belief in male headship in the home and Church with disturbing theological and cultural interpretations, drawing a straight line of causation, with Barr not even recognising any economic or political factors which might also be at play. Near the end of the book, Barr writes "Du Mez is right... Hierarchy gives birth to patriarchy, and patriarchy gives birth to the abuse of both sex and power".²⁰ Her answer is to "stop it" and "be free!", encouraging readers to make the same journey she has done, moving from complementarianism to egalitarianism, and from a belief in Scripture's inerrancy to a more liberal understanding of revelation.²¹

In a recent podcast, Du Mez argues that this type of "activist history" is not necessarily different from historical narratives which support the status quo.²² She is right that no analysis can come from a neutral place without presuppositions, yet in both *JJW* and *MBW*, we find examples of church history crafted to promote ideology without due attention to nuance and with a resistance to ambiguity or theological context. It is interesting to compare these books with other recent egalitarian writing which does greater justice to complementarian positions and their surrounding contexts; "activism" does not need to be overtly hostile or lacking in detail.²³ Still, both texts provide

17 For example, Katharina Schutz Zell, 1498-1548; Olympia Morata, 1526-1555; Henriette Von Gersdorf, 1648-1726.

18 *MBW*, 166, 122.

19 *MBW*, 122, 189-9.

20 *MBW*, 207.

21 *MBW*, 206, 218.

22 <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.com/episode-170-kristin-kobes-du-mez-a-modern-church-history-of-toxic-masculinity/>

23 Christianity Today's *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, for example, critiques a particular, at times very unhealthy complementarian culture, but pays attention to the nature of the mega-church, the rise of digital communication,

readers with urgent and important questions about the relationship between the evangelical church and abuse of power, particularly in relation to sex. Barr is correct that the contemporary church needs to listen to women and write them back into church history. We can hope that this deconstructive approach gives rise to a new willingness among Christians committed to a complementarian reading of Scripture to explore history and theology in a yet deeper and more honest manner and to apply this with even greater care within their church contexts.

Sarah Allen

Regional Director of Flourish, London Seminary's training programme for women, a writer and a teacher.

and leadership personalities as significant factors in its production. Andrew Bartlett's *Men and Women in Christ* (IVP: Nottingham, 2019) is a careful exploration of biblical texts from an egalitarian evangelical perspective which maintains an irenic tone throughout.

BOOK REVIEW

EVANGELICALISM: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

J. G. Stackhouse New York: Oxford University Press (2022), 144pp, (£7.45 amazon.co.uk)

Denominational struggles by evangelical ministers and churches across the UK, and more widely, illustrate the demands of day-by-day endeavours to understand, defend and live out the Christian faith within the visible church. John Stackhouse is a Canadian scholar of religion. He tells us “I wrote this book as an evangelical, a faithful and critical member of a family that ... has both blessed and wounded me.” He writes on the origins of evangelicalism, his understanding of how it should be defined, its international expansion and modern challenges, and closes by asking ‘the end of evangelicalism?’

Much of the time he keeps an authorial distance, as when he speaks of “the so-called evangelicals of the eighteenth-century revivals”, partly because he writes for an “outside” audience. Thus, we have expressions such as “the Bible is typically touted by evangelicals as their supreme authority”, and the observation that “(m)issilogists suggested that Christianity grew best when the gospel ... came as a correction and completion to the extant religions, and especially tribal religions.” He gives us by and large a naturalistic history, as when he writes of Carey’s “record of failing to convert a single Indian through his preaching.”

In what perhaps many will see as the key chapter of the book, he considers the marks of evangelicalism. His first option “is to view evangelicalism the way that many evangelicals themselves see it, as denoting the true faith” – as representing, quoting the title of John Stott’s early book, simply *Basic Christianity*. He suggests that “This definition, however, is problematic for observers who want to avoid picking sides in ecclesiastical conflicts.”

His second option is to view evangelicalism as a movement, “as connected in a joint endeavor” – a position he wisely rejects on grounds that it gives no clear boundaries. His preferred position is to see evangelicalism as a style, “One might see Christianity in the modern era occurring in three main styles: a conscientious maintenance of the past, a determined freedom toward the present and future, and a way between the two.” The difficulty with this essentially social definition of evangelicalism is that it can potentially apply to all manner of social manifestations, of which the British Conservative Party is but one. But it does allow him to helpfully insist that “Conservative” should not be used...as a synonym for evangelical. Conservative churches are conservative. Evangelicals, by contrast, have been only selectively conservative, and are ready to be radical in certain areas.

Evangelicals are, he suggests “fully Trinitarian”, “biblicist”, “conversionist”, “missional”, “populist” and “pragmatic” – by which he means a concern to get things done. “Here is where the conversionist, the missional, and the populist qualities of evangelicalism combine into a driving pragmatic force that shows up particularly in two ways: transdenominationalism and adaptation.” He identifies modern challenges to evangelicalism as biblical criticism and liberal theology, science and secularism, and imperialism and social justice, but regards the main issue threatening evangelicalism as same sex marriage.

He is helpful in several ways. He brings a careful observation of historical detail, such that we encounter names and movements unfamiliar to most Christians, and he does not limit himself to the English-speaking church. He makes the persuasive suggestion, for example, that “The eruption of indigenous evangelicalism ... came largely with the rise of a form of Protestantism that offered a distinct alternative ... in some ways, to mainstream evangelicalism: Pentecostalism”, and gives a helpfully specific account of the forms of “holiness”, “second blessing”, and “Pentecostal” movements, that well repays reading.

He illuminates when he observes “it is Pietism as a renewal movement and Puritanism as a reform movement that provides the two main modes of evangelical life.” He is less helpful when he suggests “The Puritans agreed on what they did not want – a temporizing Church of England – but they did not agree on what they did want. And once they were in charge, their differences erupted into fractious competition.”

He is helpful when saying that one should not pick and choose, and that “Evangelicals are best discerned, therefore, as manifesting all of the defining emphases... The whole thrust of original evangelicalism was toward the heart and the hands as adding to correct doctrine in the head.” Or, as he sums it up, “evangelicalism is not a matter of merely agreeing with ... a checklist. It is a matter of living consistently in accordance with it.” Thus, “the notion of a ‘non-observant’ or ‘nominal’ evangelical would be a contradiction in terms.”

The author is revealing for what he thinks of as “second order questions”:

Whether hell will be eternal torment or a limited time of punishment terminated by extinction; whether hell is actually a form of purgatory leading eventually to universal salvation; whether the unevangelized yet have access to Christ's saving merit through whatever dim light of revelation they receive; whether Adam and Eve were literal direct creations of God or symbols of humankind's hominid ancestors; and whether women could properly be ordained to pastoral ministry as full equals with men.

He sees the bible as containing “ambivalences” such as over “the emancipation of slaves and the full participation of women in society.” We can understand Stackhouse’s position by recognising his “biblical feminism” stance, which for him means, he tells us elsewhere, a doubleness in Scripture: simultaneously a patriarchalism that shows up from the Torah to Paul’s own ministry (including, controversially, Jesus’ ministry as well) and yet also an egalitarianism that is also evident throughout the Bible. He explains this as “Holy Spirit pragmatism”, whereby God works with people, including whole cultures, according to our capacity for change. Hence, while he usually remains detached in his observations about manifestations of evangelicalism, we may sense that he is not unsympathetic when for example, he says of the years following the turn of the century, “For increasing numbers of evangelicals, the Bible itself became less a window onto a divinely ordained reality to which one had to submit than a mirror of one’s own perceptions and preference... thus rendering evangelicals liberals in all but name.”

His historical detachment marks him off from, for example, J C Ryle – wholly absent from this book – who, when speaking about evangelicals within the Church of England, asked “Has Evangelical Religion any distinctive principles? I answer, it has. Are they worth contending for? I answer, they are.” Indeed, “without Protestant and Evangelical principles, a Church is as useless as a well without water.”

A “very short” history of evangelicalism leaves inevitable gaps, so the coverage needs to be judged by balance rather than completeness. The names that recur most often are John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, Billy Graham and, to a lesser extent, John Stott, and still less, Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Scotland and Wales are absent, as are key figures such as Jim Packer, despite Stackhouse having succeeded to the position Packer held at Regent College. The contribution of the people associated with Princeton is absent, apart from fleeting mentions of Warfield and Machen. Reliance on passing remarks risk caricature, as when we have Francis Schaeffer’s work dismissed as “mere tracts for the times, largely forgotten a single generation later.”

Readers most likely to find it helpful are those who already know a fair amount about the history and character of evangelicalism and who count themselves as eclectic in regard to the issues covered in this book. It is likely to become a standard reference in accounts of evangelicals and evangelicalism, albeit one that evangelicals of the J C Ryle sort will find somewhat equivocal.

Ian Shaw

Professor Emeritus, University of York

Affinity is a partnership of gospel churches, evangelical agencies and individual Christians committed to working together to advance the work of the gospel in the UK and Ireland and around the world.

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www.affinity.org.uk

  @affinitytalks

office@affinity.org.uk

PO Box 905
Haywards Heath
RH16 9TJ

07936 048259

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