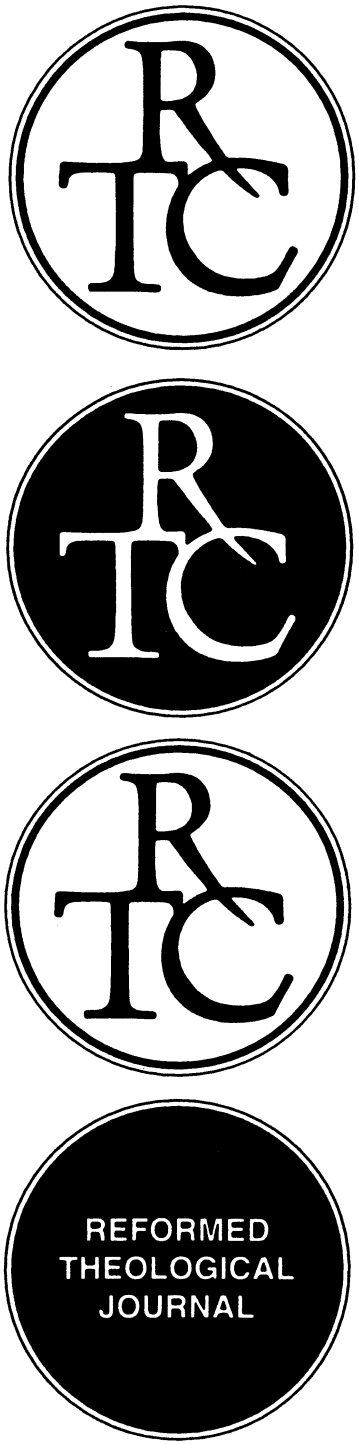

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‘CONSECRATED GLOW’

Desiring the Pastoral Office

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Understanding the call to the Pastoral Office (PO) continues to be a challenge and mystery to the Church. In 1831 W S Plumer discovered there was no satisfactory essay on the subject (PCM, 2020, 2.231). The title of Dave Harvey’s (2012) book, *Am I called?* indicates questions are still being asked around the subject of a call to the PO. Attempts have been made by the Church to clarify the nature of a call. Important distinctions were made by Calvin (4.3.10,11) and Turretin (18.23) between a general gospel call to the Christian life and service addressed by God to all people and a special call to the PO addressed to some people.

They further defined the special call by describing its internal and external aspects (Calvin, 4.3.11; Turretin, 18.23). The dissection of the internal call was achieved by Bannerman (1.429,430) and found to consist of appropriate gifts, graces and desire. While these distinctions provide some clarification for the Church on a call to the ministry, confusion remains around the element of desire. In this article, after attempting a definition, four aspects of desiring the PO are identified and discussed.

In seeking a definition of desiring the PO, various terms used in the literature are noted and definitions offered are mentioned.

First, terms used. Some of the terms used to describe the desire for the PO include ‘genuine zeal’ (Bucer, 2019, p.41), ‘impelled’ (Turretin, 18.23), ‘feel constrained’ ‘compelled’ ‘inclination’ ‘inwardly moved’ (Bridges, 2009, p.5,6), ‘spiritual longing’ (Bannerman, 1.430), ‘irresistible’, ‘overwhelming craving’, ‘raging thirst’ (Spurgeon, 1.23), ‘constraint’ ‘disturbance in spirit’ (Lloyd-Jones,1982, p.106), ‘godly ambition’ (Harvey, 2012, p.188), ‘awareness’ (Harman, 2015, p.5), and ‘a stirring of God’ (Milton, 2018,p.28). These terms indicate the desire for the PO is a strong desire; longing, craving, ambition.

Second, adjectives used. Some of the adjectives used in the literature to describe the desire for the PO include ‘sincere’ (Calvin, 4.3.11), ‘unconquerable’ (Alexander, 2005, p.43), ‘awakened’, ‘overpowering’, ‘ruling’, ‘pure’, ‘controlling’ (Hoppin, 1884, p.89-92), ‘intense’, ‘earnest’ (Paxton, in PCM, 2020, p.369), ‘all-absorbing’, ‘unquenchable’ (Croft, 2018, p.68), ‘enlightened’ and ‘sanctified’ (Martin, 1.57). These adjectives support the aspect of strength and add the aspects of permanence, purity and sincerity.

Third, definitions offered. Calvin and Turretin define a legitimate desire for the PO. Turretin defines the desire as ‘a man is conscious before God that he is impelled to undertake this office not by ambition, or avarice, or any other carnal affection, but from a sincere love of God and a desire to build up the church’ (18.23). His definition follows Calvin’s description of desiring the PO:

> there is the good witness of our heart that we receive the proffered office not with ambition or avarice, not with any other selfish desire, but with a sincere fear of God and desire to build up the church (4.3.11).

These definitions align with the aspects of strong, sincere and pure found in the terms used in the literature. Definitions of desire in social sciences claim desire is distinguished from emotion but related to it. Sometimes emotion precedes, accompanies, or follows desire (Burton, 2024). Social sciences also categorise desires, ranging them from weak to strong. The range includes wish, drive, urge, impulse, compulsion, longing, craving, yearning. Desire for the PO is accompanied by negative and positive emotions and belongs to the stronger range of emotions, not a wish but a craving.

From these terms, adjectives and definitions the term 'desiring the PO' will be used in this paper in the sense of; a strong, constant, sincere and pure longing to fulfil the duties of the PO. The four areas of this desire to be considered are: nature, origin, object and necessity. In each section a tension in the literature will be highlighted. Such tension will indicate and contribute to the current challenge facing the Church of understanding the call to the PO.

1. NATURE OF DESIRING THE PASTORAL OFFICE

Two aspects of the nature of the desire for the PO which appear in the literature are, strength and permanence. The terms 'strong' and 'abiding' are used of the desire (Plumer, 1874, p.28; Paxton, 2020, 1.369). Appeal is made in support of these terms to the meaning and tenses of the words in 1 Timothy 3.1 which describe the desire for the PO: 'the saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task' (Plumer, 1874, p.28; Martin, 1.57).

One aspect of the nature of the desire for the PO is permanence. In discussing this aspect of the desire Turretin uses the phrase, 'essential permanency' (2.106). Martin (1.58) finds support for the concept of abiding desire in a man's heart in the tense used in the verbs 'aspire' and 'desire' in 1 Timothy 3.1. Both words are in the present indicative tense indicating the desire is continual. Thus, one aspect of the desire for the PO in a man is that it is not a whim or phase, but a settled inclination.

The other aspect of the nature of the desire for the PO is strength. Support for this aspect is found in the word 'aspire' used in 1 Timothy 3.1. It means to reach out, to stretch for, indicating earnestness and craving. This aspect of strength reflects the terms used in the literature to describe the desire: 'unconquerable, unquenchable, all-absorbing, overpowering'. Hence, Plumer maintains the desire for the PO is 'not a faint desire easily overcome by trial' (1874, p.29). This aspect of strength is marked by the triple attributes of progression, variety, and prevalence.

One attribute of the strength of the desire for the PO is progressiveness. Croft asserts, 'it is a desire that should increase over time' (2018, p.69). The desire begins before ordination, as 1 Timothy 3.1 indicates, but continues into and throughout the pastoral office, growing in strength into a 'holy obsession' (Martin, 1.57). Spurgeon describes this progressive aspect when claiming the desire

> continues with us, a passion which bears the test of trial, a longing from which it is quite impossible for us to escape, though we may have tried to do so; a desire, in fact, which grows more intense by the passing of years, until it becomes a yearning, a pining, a famishing to proclaim the Word (1.25).

J W Alexander expresses concern for young ministers, once eager for ministry, who after graduation and ordination lose their strong desire, 'holy glow', to fulfil the duties of the pastoral office (1988, p.104). So, one attribute of the strength of the desire for the PO is progressiveness.

A second attribute of the strength of the desire for the PO is variety. The strength of the desire is connected to the godliness of the subject and so can be variable. Fairbairn makes this connection when he considers the desire for the PO to be strongest when a man is godliest. He writes,

> when he is most spiritual and serious, when he is most under the impressions of holiness, and he is nearest to God in communion with him, then are the desires after the serving of Jesus Christ in the ministry most powerful (1875, p.74).

Spurgeon also considers the strength of the desire for ministry to be linked to piety claiming the desire is 'the outgrowth of our heart in its best moments' (1.24). Thus, the strength of the desire for ministry is connected to the character of the man.

A third attribute of the strength of the desire for the PO is prevalence. The desire overcomes other desires in a man's heart and any obstacles to ministry. Harman defines this attribute of prevalence as an 'overriding awareness that there is no other course of action for you to take. God must so work in your life that you feel constrained to give yourself to one vocation alone' (2015, p.5). Hoppin describes this attribute as, 'this awakened desire of the soul takes the form of a ruling motive, which seeks to bend all things to the accomplishment of its end' (1884, p.89). Fairbairn (1875, p.34) expresses the attribute of prevalence in the expression, 'the heart is filled with a single desire'. Spurgeon famously enlarges on prevalence of desire when he writes:

> if any student in this room could be content to be a newspaper editor, or a grocer, or a farmer, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a senator, or a king, in the name of heaven and earth let him go his way; he is not the man in whom dwells the Spirit of God in its fulness, for a man so filled with God would utterly weary of any pursuit but that for which his inmost soul pants (1.23).

Croft (2018) and Lloyd-Jones (1982) cite Spurgeon approvingly. Lloyd-Jones describes the attribute of prevalence in commenting,

> you have the feeling that you can do nothing else, you are not satisfied with anything else. Unable to keep back and resist it. You do your utmost to push it back and to rid yourself of this disturbance in your spirit which comes in these various ways. But you reach the point when you cannot do so any longer it almost becomes an obsession and in the end you say, I can do nothing else. I cannot resist any longer (1982, p.105,106).

Such prevalence of desire for the PO trumps desires for other occupations. Alexander expresses this dominant desire as, 'they could not be contented in any other occupation, unless the door to this was entirely shut' (2005, p.42). Prevalence also surmounts obstacles to the PO. Plumer writes,

> this desire must possess such permanence and vehemence as to enable one with the help of God continually sought to surmount obstacles as they present themselves; to submit to all the delays and labours necessary to prepare for the work; and to make him willing to take the office and work of a minister and that only, for life (1874, p.29).

However, a balancing emphasis in the literature to this portrayal of the desire as abiding and strong is the recognition that the strong and abiding desire for the PO in a man's heart is often accompanied by emotions of weakness, unworthiness and diffidence (Plumer,1874, p.28; Lloyd-Jones, 1982, p.106).

Tension in the literature in this area is around the strength of the desire. Dabney (2.33) minimises the role of desire in the inward call to the PO. He argues that just as piety is required of all believers, so too is a desire for the glory of God required of all believers. Then he states,

> how foolish and mischievous is the perversion of this scriptural truth to argue, as some have seemed to do, that therefore if a young Christian does not feel an *abiding and strong desire* for this special work, he ought to conclude that he is not called (2.34).

By using the very language of Plumer and Paxton, 'abiding and strong', language reflected by many other authors, Dabney challenges the view of a strong and prevalent desire for the PO. He argues that it is wrong to claim that if a man does not have this strong desire, he should not enter the ministry. He acknowledges that a man may have the capability and opportunity to enter the Christian ministry but because of 'cowardly fear of its toils, self-denials, ambition, or covetousness' he might choose another calling (2.33). In that instance lack of desire is critical to entering the PO. However, he claims Moses, Jeremiah, and Jonah did not have the desire to serve the Lord but did serve him.

The position of Bridges counters Dabney. Bridges maintains that the strength of desire in a man called to the PO should surpass the desire of all believers to serve the Lord. He writes, 'something far beyond the general Christian desire to promote the glory of God-a special kindling within' (2009, p.94) is an essential element of the inward call. He finds an illustration of this strong desire in the builders of the tabernacle; 'everyone whose heart stirred him up to do the work' (Exodus 35.21;36.2). He claims the words in 1 Timothy 3.1 'aspire' and 'desire' describe a unique earnest desire, 'the lusting of the spirit' (2009, p.94). He explains this strong desire for the PO,

> this constraint rises above all difficulties, takes pleasure in sacrifices for the work's sake, and quickens to a readiness of mind, that would savour presumption. The work seems more desirable than the highest earthly honours; so that even under the most desponding anticipations it cannot be relinquished (2009, p.95).

Alexander (2005, p.42,43) also counters the position of Dabney when mentioning the uniqueness of this desire in men called to the PO. He comments that in all Christians there is the desire to witness, glorify God, and serve other believers. However, he argues that the inclination to the PO is a more powerful desire, which prevents men from entering other professions or drawing them from them after they have entered them.

Dabney's claim that desire and piety should be present in the lives of all believers is legitimate. However, the desire and qualifications for the PO in 1 Timothy 3 indicate strong desire for office and the piety described are already present in mature form in the lives of those called by God to that office.

2. ORIGIN OF DESIRING THE PASTORAL OFFICE

A second aspect of the desire for the PO discussed in the literature is the origin of the desire. Many writers claim the origin of the abiding and strong desire for the PO is God. Turretin (18.23) describes the origin of the desire as a man being 'excited by God'. He describes the origin as, 'that by which the heart itself is excited by God to consecrate itself to the work of the ministry (of which Paul speaks in 1 Timothy 3.1)'. Recognising this divine activity in the origin of the desire, Plumer (1874, p.23) observes that while there is now no supernatural call to the ministry, in the sense that Isaiah and the twelve apostles were called, there is still a supernatural element to that call. Bannerman enlarges on that point when he claims that on the one hand, 'there is now no supernatural call, and none is

necessary'. However, the suitable graces, gifts and longing for the PO, are all 'bestowed by Christ' (1.429,430). Such bestowal indicates the ongoing divine involvement in a call to the ministry. Support for this understanding of the divine origin of the desire is found by some writers in the language of ordination vows. Bridges cites the ordination question which claims the Holy Spirit is the origin of the desire for the PO: 'Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Spirit to take upon you this office?' (2009, p.93).

Tension in the literature in this area of the desire for the PO, is around the assurance of the divine origin of the desire by a man. Some writers emphasise the importance of the other two elements of the inward call, gifts and graces, as being more certain evidences of the divine origin of a call. They argue that any desire for the PO is to be tested and confirmed by the presence of these other elements of the inward call. Alexander comments that the desire for the PO 'by itself furnishes no strong argument in favour of a call' (2005, p.41). Failing to consider other elements of the inward call, and giving sole focus to desire, leads to rash decisions (Hoppin, 1884, p.93). Even though Hoppin, and Croft (2018), maintain the inward call to the PO consists primarily in the element of desire, they acknowledge that other elements of the inward call must be discovered. Hoppin writes,

> the true call consists chiefly in the loving purpose or desire to enter into this work above all others as the work which God has appointed one to do. But external proofs of the intent of Providence render it not only possible to be carried out but point in some measure directly to the necessity of its being carried out (1884, p.92).

Vinet calls the desire for the PO an 'equivocal sign' which must be tested because the desire may be 'superficial, carnal or erroneous' (1853, p.80). Spurgeon also warns against an over reliance on desire because 'the fascination of the preacher's office is very great to weak minds, and hence I earnestly caution all young men not to mistake whim for inspiration, and a childish preference for a call of the Holy Spirit' (1.25). Clowney explains the divine origin of the desire in terms of the Spirit operating in conjunction with the other elements of the inward call in a man's heart. He unpacks the process when he writes,

> Most often the presence of such gifts of the Spirit creates a desire for their exercise, by them a man is drawn to the Word, to Christ, to men. For this reason a deep and sincere desire to enter the ministry is the commonest evidence of the Lord's calling. It is no sure criterion, however, for gifts and desire are not always joined (1964, p.81).

While acknowledging God calls men to the ministry and is the origin of the desire for the PO, some authors are reluctant to allow that any man can be completely sure God is the origin of his desire for the PO. John Murray (1.188) represents that position. He writes, 'as the Holy Spirit is operative in us doing God's will, we shall have feelings, impressions, convictions, urges, inhibitions, impulses, burdens, resolutions'. However, he claims, if we 'think that a state of our consciousness is the effect of a direct intimation to us of the Holy Spirit's will...we have given way to the notion of special, direct, detached, communication from the Holy Spirit, the same category as special revelation' (1.188). He considers that claim to be an error. Our focus, he argues, should be on the principles of Scripture for guidance. However, Scripture does include desiring the PO as an element and evidence of a divine call to the PO in 1 Timothy 3.1.

3. OBJECT OF DESIRING THE PASTORAL OFFICE

A third aspect of the desire for the PO is the object of the desire. In considering the object most writers promote the triple objects of; promoting the glory of God, love for the lost, and building up believers in the church (Alexander, 2005, p.107; Bannerman, 1.430). Croft develops this trilogy into: preach God's word, shepherd God's people, evangelize the lost, disciple the spiritually immature, serve the local church (2018, p.68). Martin (1.68) adds to the objects the discharge of our God given stewardship.

Other writers mention some of these objects. Turretin (18.23), following Calvin, cites love of God and a desire to build up the church. Harman (2015, p.6) offers, reaching the lost and church ministry. Hoppin suggests 'love for God and man' (1884, p.90). Spurgeon mentions 'the glory of God and the good of souls' (1.24). Dabney identifies the objects of desire to be, 'souls snatched from hell fire, truth upheld, sin curbed, happiness of true religion diffused, God glorified in the redemption of transgressors' (2.33).

The principal object of the desire for the PO is the promotion of the glory of God. Vinet (1853, p.80) argues that love to our fellow man is not a sufficient object, we must love God and desire that he is glorified. Fairbairn (1875, p.74) describes the glory of God as the great end of the Christian ministry. Paxton inserts affection into this object in his phrase, 'love for the glory of God' (in PCM, 2020, 2.370). The object of glorifying God is attained in part through the salvation of sinners (Dabney, Fairbairn).

A second object of the desire for the PO is building up the Church. Calvin (4.3.11) identifies 'desire to build up the church' as part of the inward call. Bucer claims the object of desire is, 'to be faithful shepherds of Christ's sheep' (2017, p.41). Plumer (1878. p.28) mentions that in achieving this object there are joys and sorrows, pains and pleasures, labours and comforts.

A third object of desire is the salvation of unbelievers. George (1.21), Spurgeon (1.24) and Fairbairn (1875, p.28) are some of the writers who mention this aspect. Hoppin emphasises that only the PO can facilitate the fulfilment of these objects. He writes, 'it is not that a man may not save men's souls and be a true servant of Christ out of the ministry, but that he is willing with his whole soul to devote his life to this high work' (1884, p.91)

The tension in the literature in this area comes in the suggestion of a fourth object of desire, benefits to Self. Vinet (1853, p.83) identifies three objects of the desire for the PO in terms of love: love of God's glory, love of man, and love of our own spiritual welfare. In his identification of the objects, he concurs with other writers who promote the triple objects but also goes beyond them in suggesting, 'our own spiritual welfare'. He explains this fourth object as 'a spiritual asylum', an occupation in which by study, reading and prayer, spiritual growth occurs. However, he advises this object should be a 'secondary consideration, not our determining motive' (1853, p.84). Hoppin, while not mentioning this fourth object, allows for other secondary objects of desire. He writes,

> we do not say that a candidate for the ministry can keep out of his mind all prudential considerations, or should do so; but if these are uppermost, or come most frequently to his mind, let him, ere it be too late, give up a profession which demands a true man, and not a hireling (1884, p.92).

The emphasis of Vinet and the allowance of Hoppin are important to give balance to our understanding of the object of desire for the PO. Numerous warnings appear throughout the literature against making benefits to self an object of desiring the ministry. Vinet (1853, p.82) mentions honour and exercise of talents. Bridges comments, 'our entering the PO should not be for the love of literature, or the

opportunities of indulgent recreation, or desires of professional elevation, selfish motives of esteem, respectability, or worldly comfort' (2009, p.96). Plumer (1874, p.29) cautions against desiring learning, leisure, fame, influence, ease of office, or emoluments. Fairbairn (1875, p.74) considers 'riches, honour, ease, applause of men' to be wrong objects. George (1.20) warns against the desiring love of ease, social distinction, or literary culture. Hoppin mentions aspiration for 'money, to gain a living, a smooth path through life, selfish ambition, or to satisfy opinions of parents or friends' (1884, p.95). Calvin warns against 'ambition, avarice or any other selfish desire' (4.3.11). Thus, the positive allowance of benefits to self which Vinet mentions, is important to give balance in this area. Though not the main object, desiring the PO for personal spiritual development must be considered a permissible object and indeed should be diligently pursued by all in the office.

4. NECESSITY OF DESIRING THE PASTORAL OFFICE

A fourth aspect of the desire for the PO is the necessity of the desire. In the literature the necessity of the desire for the PO is recognised, omitted, and questioned.

Many writers consider the desire for the PO to be necessary. Spurgeon encapsulates this position when he writes,

> I have such a profound respect for this 'fire in the bones' that if I did not feel it myself, I must leave the ministry at once. If you do not feel the consecrated glow, I beseech you return to your homes and serve God in your proper spheres (1.25).

Martin also argues that 'a sanctified desire is an essential element' in a call to the PO (1.61). For Bridges (2009, p.40) fitness for ministry by gift and graces, coupled with a desire, constitute the essential parts of an inward call. Vinet (1853, p.80) agrees with Bridges that desire, as well as fitness are a necessary part of the inward call. After discussing fitness for ministry in terms of graces and gifts Vinet wonders if such fitness is sufficient. He concludes, 'fitness does not exist when the desire does not'. He explains,

> when the desire is wanting, there is not that harmony of the man with his duties, that intimate understanding of the matter, that undivided heart, which are so essential to the success of the work (1853, p.80).

Vinet considers the response of Isaiah, 'Here I am, send me', to be an essential desire all men entering the PO should possess (1853, p.81). He considers the absence of desire to mean the presence of a greater desire for another object. He writes, 'the absence of taste is not repugnance, or disgust for the ministry, which cannot exist in a Christian-it is often but a taste for something else' (1853, p.81). While defending the necessity of the desire, Martin does not consider the desire to be an oppressive experience. He writes, 'the man called by God does not regard himself as one who has been drafted or conscripted against his will. He has eagerly and joyfully volunteered for the task' (1.58). Writers who argue for the necessity of desire offer various arguments.

First, Scripture. Plumer (1874, p.27) considers that 1 Timothy 3.1 establishes the necessity of the desire for the PO. He writes, 'that this desire is necessary is very evident from scripture 1 Timothy 3.1'. Martin (1.58) also argues this verse indicates desire for the PO must precede and attend the PO. He maintains 1 Peter 5.2, 'shepherd the flock of God, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you', confirms the necessity of desire.

Second, common sense. Plumer appeals to common sense to defend the necessity of desire. He writes, 'common sense also revolts at the thought of a man engaging in a work, in which his heart is not; especially where in the ministry far more harm than good will be done to all concerned, if the heart be wanting' (1874, p.29).

Thirdly, trials in ministry. Plumer argues for the necessity of desire for the PO because of the many trials faced in the office. He writes, 'if the desire for the ministry is faint, the trials to be endured will soon overcome it' (1874, p.28). Croft also argues for an unquenchable longing for the pastorate because of the challenges of ministry. He writes,

> it is a work fraught with struggles, challenges, discouragements, pressures, and spiritual battles that can cripple the strongest men who have an 'ordinary' desire for the work. It should instead be a desire that remains when your brother betrays you; a desire that is undiminished when job threats arise; a desire that endures when physical, mental, and emotional fatigue firmly take root (2018, p.69).

Fourth, confirmation of call. Croft states this desire is 'a primary evidence of the divine call, of a pastoral awakening' (2018, p.69).

Fifth, divine approval. Calvin emphasises the purity of the desire, 'must be sincere' and claims such a desire is necessary for a successful ministry. He writes, 'that is indeed necessary for each one of us if we would have our ministry approved by God' (4.3.11).

Sixth, the example of Jesus. Bridges (2009, p.24) and Paxton (in Garretson, *PCM*, 2020, 2.369) root the necessity of desire in Jesus, claiming he had a desire to serve God before he came to earth and when he was on earth. Spurgeon summarises the necessity of desire when he observes, 'such a desire will provide happiness, enable us to bear self-denials, and be of service to others' (Spurgeon, 1.23,24).

Tension in the literature in this area is around the necessity of the desire. Some writers deny the necessity of the desire for the PO by not mentioning desire in their discussion of a call to the ministry. For example, Nederhood (2011, p.33-61) in his treatment of the minister's call does not mention desiring the PO. Other writers consider a sense of duty to be sufficient. Gregory (2016, p.9) discusses desire and duty. He contrasts the case of Isaiah who desired to serve God and Jeremiah who served out of duty. He argues that a sense of duty may legitimately be the influence for service in some cases rather than desire. So desire is not necessary. Dabney (2.33) cites the cases of Moses, Jeremiah, and Jonah as instances of men who obeyed the call to serve rather than desired the service of God. Obedience rather than desire motivated their service. However, these cases of duty and obedience are not to be considered as examples to be followed but rather examples to be avoided. Alexander considers the lack of desire in such men to be a failing when he writes,

> if we read the early history of the church, we find that many who afterwards became very eminent in the ministry, instead of seeking the sacred office, with great solicitude avoided it, on account of the danger which surrounded it, and the responsibility attached to it. In this however, there appears to me to be something wrong. Something too much like the spirit which Jonah exhibited when called to preach at Nineveh (2005, p.42).

CONCLUSION

In this paper the desire for the PO has been considered. The nature, origin, object and necessity of the desire has been explored. Tensions within each area have been discussed. It has been argued and concluded that the desire for the PO is abiding, strong, God given, directed to God, believers, unbelievers and self and is necessary.

APPLICATIONS

1. One application of the nature of the desire for the PO is that the desire should grow. The desire for the PO is not restricted to the pre-ordination period but continues throughout the duration of the pastorate. Alexander challenged new pastors to have a stronger desire for the PO. A challenge from this attribute of progression also comes to senior and experienced pastors to continue to develop their preaching and pastoral care.

2. One application of the origin of the desire for the PO is prayer to God to create that strong and abiding desire for the PO in the hearts of men. In Matthew 9.38 'pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest', Jesus directs the church to pray to God to provide pastors. The apostle Paul in Romans 10.15 'and how are they to preach unless they are sent?' reminds the Church of the involvement of God in the call to the ministry. Our prayer then must be to God who gives pastoral gifts, graces, and desire.

3. One application of the object of desiring the PO is to utilise every opportunity for self-development. The pastoral office provides time, finance, opportunity, incentives, motivation, expectation, and encouragement for pastors to grow strong in spiritual graces and disciplines. Pastors must make spiritual development an object of desire to be earnestly pursued by them.

4. One application of the necessity of the desire is a recognition that God calls men in different ways. While insisting on the necessity of a desire for the PO, care should be shown not to discourage young men from the ministry unnecessarily. Each person is different and the desire for the PO, though originating from the same Lord, will be expressed differently by different people. Hoppin makes this point,

> yet we would not like to describe the nature of this inward call in such a way as to dishearten any true candidate for the Christian ministry, for it is a serious matter to make an error here, one way or the other; and often men, young men, are not in the habit of analysing their motives carefully (1884, p.91).

Mistakes can be made. Good men may enter the PO without a true call and be unhappy and unfruitful. Good men may resist a true call and experience the anger of the Lord (Isaiah 45.9).

So, what should you do if you think you are desiring the PO, experiencing that 'consecrated glow' (Spurgeon, 1.23)? You should disclose the desire. Disclosure to God, wife, pastor, close friends (Martin, 1.60).

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ISAAC – THE NEGLECTED PATRIARCH

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In their generally helpful *Encountering the Old Testament*, Bill Arnold and Bryan Bauer pass over the life of Isaac in almost total silence:

> Though Isaac was the son of the covenant, he soon fades as a leading character after his twin sons are born (25:24-26).[1]

We want to take a little space here to redress the balance regarding this rather neglected patriarch. It is true that Abraham, Jacob and Joseph all have ten or eleven chapters of Genesis where they figure centrally, while only one chapter (Genesis 26) does the same for Isaac. In a sermon, the retired American Baptist preacher Steven Cole says the most exciting part of Isaac's life is 'some squabbles over some wells.'[2] . Alexander Maclaren (the 19th century Scottish Baptist preacher who ministered mostly in England), underlining the mediocrity of this patriarch, begins a sermon on Isaac, 'The salient feature of Isaac's life is that it has no salient features.'[3]

Although Isaac is the longest lived patriarch at 180 years (Genesis 35:28) (Abraham, Jacob and Joseph live 175 (25:7), 147 (47:28), and 110 (50:26) years respectively), he is a somewhat enigmatic character who may have suffered from having a famous parent. To say that Isaac is both the rather ordinary son of a famous father (Abraham), and the ordinary father of a famous son (Jacob) sounds a poignant note. However, in the economy of God, and in the development of your character, you may find yourself where Isaac is. To resort to a cricketing analogy, you can learn from Isaac that God uses the journeymen fielders in his service just as much as the strike bowlers and the swashbuckling batsmen. After all, we do find Isaac holding his own in esteemed company when the LORD reveals himself to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:6, and when Jesus responds to the centurion's faith in Capernaum, indicating that Isaac is one who reclines at table in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 8:11).

His son Jacob uses a strange phrase (Genesis 31:42, repeated in 31:53), 'the Fear of Isaac' when talking about God, which may be a reference to how his father schooled both himself and Esau. Throughout his long life, Isaac does learn to fear God because he does not act predictably, but he always has Isaac's best interests, and his covenant purposes, at heart. Isaac's birth is a great high for his parents, with his name either referring to the laughter Abraham and Sarah know when they consider how faithful God has been to an impossible promise, or referring to the happy disposition of the boy himself. In light of the rather *un*happy life Isaac seems to have, it may well be the former. Let us use four different words to mark out the various elements of the life of this rather complex and somewhat elusive figure.

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[1] Arnold and Bauer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, Baker, 1999, p.97.
[2] Cole, sermon on Genesis 26, 'How God Uses Ordinary People', opening paragraph
[3] Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Baker, 1:202.

Resentment

What we probably remember Isaac for most is as a subject for sacrifice on Mount Moriah. It is hard to fathom the horror that God's words strike into Abraham's soul when he commands:

> Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you (Genesis 22:2).

Andrew Steinmann notes that this is the first use of the word *love* in the Bible.[4] This is the child of promise, whom Abraham loves dearly, the child through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3). The indications are that this painful revelation comes to Abraham at night. There is no pleading from Abraham for God to change his mind, as over Lot and Sodom. There is no delay on Abraham's part, since early in the morning he sets about this heart-breaking task. There is no obvious informing of the boy's mother (Isaac is her only child, where Abraham is also the father of Ishmael). There is here, surely, an early entering into what salvation will cost the Godhead, since Jesus is also called the beloved son at his baptism (Matthew 3:17), whom the Father did not spare from sacrificial death (Romans 8:32). A Christian guide to the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem many years ago pointed out the connection between Mount Moriah and the site of Calvary above a present Arab bus station (see also 2 Chronicles 3:1). But let us consider the matter from Isaac's point of view. The word *na'ar*, translated as 'boy' in verses 3 and 12, is also used of Ishmael when he is a teenager (Genesis 21:12,17,20). Isaac is certainly strong enough to carry the wood for the burnt offering (Genesis 22:6). This experience is one he will not quickly forget. Bruce Waltke brings out the dramatic irony:

> This is a moment of tremendous tension – Isaac carries the wood for his own destruction.[5]

Isaac's natural question about the lamb for the sacrifice and Abraham's evasive reply show that his son is in the dark about the central truth of their excursion till the very last moment. As is often his wont, in two sentences Derek Kidner pithily sums up Isaac's position:

> Here, it seems, is his role, undistinguished though he may be in himself. Others will do exploits; it is left to this quiet victim, in a single episode, to demonstrate God's pattern for the chosen 'seed': to be a servant sacrificed[6].

In those pregnant comments, Kidner is deliberately connecting the first and greatest promise about the coming Saviour with the role throughout the Old Testament for the 'seed of the woman' (Genesis 3:15).

It must have shaken Isaac to his core to feel his father's baleful gaze set on him, and the tightness of the ropes binding him to the altar, and to see his father's hand raised to strike. Can we say that God knew the character of Isaac when he gave his father that testing command? No other in the history of the Old Testament occupies such a place. When One who is perfect cried out to his Father from a sense of abandonment, it is not hard to imagine what an effect this event had on a submissive but shocked Isaac. At the very least it would have turned him thoughtful, if not actually resentful. After

[4] Steinmann, Genesis, TOTC, IVP (revised), 2019, p.219.
[5] Waltke, *Genesis, a Commentary*, Zondervan, 2001, p.307.
[6] Kidner, *Genesis*, TOTC, IVP, 1967, p.143.

all, elsewhere God speaks out so vehemently against child sacrifice (see, for example, Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5, 32:35).

Isaac can go one better even than the first-born Israelites in Egypt, who may have been among the first readers of the account about him, in understanding the dynamics of substitutionary atonement. He had actually been laid on the altar, and expected to die. They only had the death of the first-born Egyptians all around them. What's more, Isaac may have resented the fact that God told Abraham what to do with him, without revealing anything to him. Jonathan Stephen, in his thought-provoking study of theophany (which he defines as 'an appearance of God to human eyes' (p.6)) in Genesis, tries to plumb the depths of Isaac's reaction:

> Just imagine how it must have felt to have that burden upon him, to realise that, humanly speaking, the whole future redemption of the human race depended upon him.[7]

Isaac is certainly special, but the force of that special rank may actually choke him. An almost throw-away comment at the end of Genesis 24, "So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (v.67b), shows how Sarah's passing has affected her only son. Again, Stephen provides insightful comment:

> It takes a long time to get over the death of a mother, especially when a son is as sensitive a soul as Isaac. It was three years before he was 'comforted'.[8]

It seems Isaac has already moved out of the family home before marrying Rebekah, further south to Beer Lahai Roi (see 24:62), the same place where God had appeared to Hagar, in her outcast state, where, perhaps Isaac can breathe more easily.

However, his marriage to Rebekah, superintended by God throughout the longest chapter in Genesis (ch.24), is a blessing. Rebekah is something of a desirable combination – willing to give a stranger a drink and to water his camels (v.18-20), attractive (v.16), knowing her own mind regarding marrying a man she has never met, and being allowed to express it (v.57-58). It is a very simple record of marital concord when we read:

Then Isaac brought her [Rebekah] into the tent of Sarah his mother, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her (Genesis :67a).

It is not the accepted order of things today, to have a wife chosen, and to have the wedding ceremony take place, before love arrives. However, it must be recognised that Isaac, uniquely among Abraham, himself, and Jacob, is faithful to one woman for his whole life, in other words, faithful to God's design for marriage. What's more, this verse, in a guileless way, shows how family dynamics work. Rebekah physically takes the place of Isaac's mother. In this situation it's not so difficult, because Sarah is no longer there, physically. But even if your mother is still alive, and full of information and good advice, once you take a wife, she, and no-one else, becomes the most important human being to you.

Nevertheless, at least for the first while, no children arrive. This situation spins out into years, one decade, approaching two. It is unlikely, especially in light of Isaac's place as the son of the promise, that Rebekah has not been praying for a family. Finally, it seems, Isaac takes his obligations seriously and prays for Rebekah in her childlessness. God responds by enabling her to become pregnant not

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[7] Stephen, *Theophany: Close Encounters with the Son of God*, Day One, Epsom, 1998, pp.105-106.
[8] Stephen, *op.cit.*, p.106.

with just one child, but with two. Jonathan Stephen declares, 'How patient God is with us and how gracious when at last we bend our stubborn wills to his.'[9]

Rebekah is aware of more than unusual movement in her womb, and she doesn't just tell her husband about it; she prays about it too. And God answers *her*, telling her of two nations inside her, with the older child serving the younger (35:23). There is a different dynamic operating here than in the great original promise of a Saviour in Genesis 3:15. There the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman are diametrically opposed. But here, we know in hindsight, both seeds are struggling within Rebekah's womb. Isaac misses this, and the form of communication must increase his resentment. Again, it seems, he has been bypassed. God has spoken directly to his wife, and not to him. Perhaps, in his present state of mind, he would not have heard gladly what God had to say. It is, perhaps, a sign of that, and of remaining stubbornness, that Isaac favours the firstborn, when Rebekah, who has heard God's word first-hand, favours the younger child, Jacob, the heel-holder (25:28). Is there a muted connection there to the One whose heel, in the economy of God, will be struck? For another fifteen years Isaac allows the resentment to fester, by which time the twins have passed through the formative stage of their life. At that point God steps in by taking Abraham out of the picture. Isaac is now the patriarch, the head of the family. Stephen says, disparagingly:

> His [Isaac's] utter unpreparedness for spiritual leadership is perfectly conveyed by the blatant favouritism he shows towards his first-born Esau, despite the infinitely greater spiritual tastes of Jacob, the son of God's choice.[10]

Esau sells his birthright for a bowl of red stew. Satisfying his present needs means more than cherishing the promise of a Redeemer given to his father and grandfather. Jacob does believe in the promise, but, as Simon Gerrit de Graaf says, 'he tried to buy it [the promise] – as though the grace of God were for sale!'[11]. Foolishly, Isaac has been encouraging the force of Esau and not the faith of Jacob. We too can allow resentment to grow when something we expected doesn't happen; when someone we didn't rate as highly does better than we do; when someone in our family is preferred over us. These can all remove us from effectiveness in God's kingdom. Thankfully, in Isaac's case, (and often in ours too), God sets about dealing with this resentment.

Restoration

God's handling of this situation is unique to him. The life of Isaac does appear more mundane than the significant situations both Abraham and Jacob are called to confront – either pleading with God regarding the destruction of cities (ch.18:22-33), or wrestling with God as with a man regarding his own will and blessing (ch.32:22-32). Isaac deals with matters of, perhaps, lesser import, but there is no question that Genesis 26, Isaac's chapter, if we may call it that, does show Isaac in a more prominent position and does reveal restoration on God's part, and growth on Isaac's.

Ironically, the chapter opens with another famine. Back in chapter 12, Abraham has already gone down to Egypt, 'the grain house of the whole region'[12] when faced with a severe famine, with the problems that produced. At least partially induced by another famine, Jacob will bring the whole family down to Egypt in chapter 46, at Joseph's invitation. In fact, it is Isaac's intention to do the same, but God chooses this moment to appear to Isaac personally for the first time – in that way addressing Isaac's resentment from hearing about God's plans only indirectly – and forbid him from

[9] Stephen, *op.cit.*, p.107.
[10] Stephen, *op.cit.*, p.108.
[11] de Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, vol.1, Paideia, St Catharines, Ontario, 1977, p.177.
[12] Stephen, *op.cit.*, p.109.

leaving the land. As Jonathan Stephen observes, astutely, 'These famines provided an ideal way for the Lord to try the faith and refine the graces of his chosen ones.'[13]

If you are suffering a spiritual famine presently, don't be looking for the equivalent of Egypt, which you may find easily enough in the world around us, and even in the Christian world. Instead, be ready to listen directly to God and to obey his Word. The solutions to our problems are most often found in all the old, familiar places.

It is wise to reproduce the words God speaks to Isaac in his first theophany:

> [2] Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. [3] Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. [4] I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, [5] because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws (Genesis 26:2-5).

These words should sound very familiar to us, if we have been reading and thinking from the beginning of Genesis. We have heard the LORD promise much the same to Abraham, repeatedly, in Genesis 12:1-3; 15:4-6, 18-21; 17:4-10; 18:18-19; 22:15-18. Indeed, Abraham's name appears twice here, showing that his obedience was whole-hearted, and that Isaac shouldn't be wanting to move out of his father's shadow. Indeed, that shadow does seem to precede Isaac in much of what happens even in Isaac's chapter. It is not enough to quote, for example, the opening verses of Genesis 12 which contain what look like unconditional promises. A response is also required, as seen especially in the verses referred to from Genesis 18. It is not as though God's commandments, laws and statutes have been fully written down yet, nor as though Abraham can perfectly obey them. But there is to be that response of obedience which is the mark, indeed the fruit, of God's grace. As James Smith outlines:

> The land promise [v.3], the seed promise [v.4a], and the blessing promise [v.4b] [which the passages above also contain] were reiterated.[14]

It's quite clear this arrangement with Isaac piggy-backs on what God has already promised Abraham. So it's not such a big jump to connect each Old Testament covenant administration with the one that precedes it, developing and expanding on it. As David McKay says, the idea of covenant is 'a single thread running right through the Bible, tying all its parts together'.[15] Covenant tends to bind the Bible together, whereas dispensations tend to slice it up. God could easily say that Isaac's faith and obedience have not been as remarkable as his father's, but the spark of faith is burning, and the offspring[16] is coming. In this case it is not God's intention that Isaac leave the land. As Stephen wisely states, backing up his comments by referring to Isaiah 43:2-3, 'It is not always his [God's] intention that we escape from 'bad' situations. We often learn most in adversity'.[17]

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[13] Stephen, *idem.*
[14] Smith, *The Pentateuch*, College Press, Joplin, MO, 1992, p.177.
[15] McKay, *The Bond of Love*, Christian Focus, Fearn, 2001, p.9
[16] This is an ambiguous word. It is a singular term, both here and in Genesis 3:15, and it can mean 'descendants', plural. But in the term there is surely also a reference to the singular 'seed of the woman', in whose family tree Isaac, just as much as Abraham and Jacob, will appear (Matthew 1:2).
[17] Stephen, *op.cit.*, p.111.

Isaac stays in Gerar, as the only patriarch never to leave the Promised Land, and God restores him there. God's promise is detailed and personal, but, as Kent Hughes observes, involved Abraham giving himself to obey five 'My's' (v.5b)[18].

Sadly though, after God's welcome revelation, Isaac's immediate life follows exactly the same pattern as his father, pretending Rebekah is his sister, not his wife.[19] It's unlikely that Abimelech, in verse 8, is the same man as back in chapter 20 – Keil and Delitzsch observe that 80 years have elapsed since the previous situation [20] (although they prefer the possibility that this *is* the same Abimelech). This Abimelech may be a son, since such a name (meaning 'my father is king') was common at the time. Some have tried to suggest that the events of Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18 and 26:6-11 are all variations of the one original, but this has been ably refuted. Andrew Steinmann says that 'the second account [that in Genesis 20] presumes knowledge of the first one' [21] and that this third account, of Isaac this time, is the only one that tells us of the men of the neighbourhood asking about the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah. What's more, in a stimulating article comparing the three accounts, and also bringing in a couple of similar situations where David is involved and where reputations are on the line, Peter Miscall tells the three accounts apart like this:

> Variant in the three is the manner in which the king discovers the truth…: divine intervention in history (Genesis 12), dreams/prophetic revelation (20) and human observation (26) (Miscall, 'Literary Unity in Old Testament Narrative', in Semeia 15 (1979), p.34).[22]

Steinmann does draw attention to this worrying pattern of trickery developing in Isaac's family, indicating that it will rebound on Isaac's head in chapter 27.[23] While Abraham's economy with the truth had some validity, Isaac's is a 'downright lie' [24]. Rebekah is a relative, but not a close one. When it comes to the tell-tale sign, the *ESV* translates Genesis 26:8 accurately – Isaac is laughing with his wife, and Moses there uses the verb (*ṣāḥaq*) linked to Isaac's upbeat name (*yiṣḥāq*). The *ESV Study Bible* comments succinctly 'Abimelech sees Isaac 'being himself' with Rebekah and draws the obvious conclusion that they are married'.[25]

John Calvin registers the kind forbearance of God' behind Abimelech's observation and accurate surmise, thereby preventing Rebekah, whom he calls 'the only mother of the Church' at that time, from being dishonoured,[26] and even from being taken from her husband.

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[18] Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2004, p.341.
[19] Duane Garrett makes a positive connection between Abraham and Isaac by pointing out a series of five parallels between the Abraham and Isaac narratives – the receiving of a call and promise from God; deception regarding the patriarch's wife; the arising of quarrels either among Abraham's circle or from further afield; reassurance from God and a sacrifice; a treaty with Abimelech at Beersheba (Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1991, p.136). This further underlines the continuity between the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac.
[20] Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol.1, The Pentateuch, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, reprinted 1986, p.271.
[21] Steinmann, *op.cit.*, p.257.
[22] In his article Miscall is using the three Genesis accounts of a man and his wife where a third person and danger are involved to point up, in a similar situation, the even greater guilt of David, as another elect of God, when, as the third person, he selfishly breaks up a marriage, takes Bathsheba and does to her husband what Isaac fears may happen to him. However, by the very act of making the connection from Genesis to 2 Samuel 11-12, Miscall is surely highlighting the seriousness of Isaac's lie which threatens the mother of the child from whom the promised deliverer will come.
[23] Steinmann, *op.cit.*, p.258.
[24] Currid, *Genesis*, vol.2, Evangelical Press, Darlington, 2003, p.27.
[25] *ESV Study Bible*, Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois, 2008, p.95.
[26] Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses*, vol. 2nd, Baker, Grand Rapids, p.61.

It is clear that Abimelech, an uncircumcised Philistine[27], has a very vigorous 'no adultery' policy. To raise an impregnable fence around Isaac and Rebekah, as Abimelech proposes (v.11), is surely more than the patriarch deserves. Andrew Steinmann draws on God's reiterated promise to Isaac and underlines the irony: 'Isaac was to be God's instrument to bring blessing to all nations (v.4), but here he almost brought a curse on the Philistines'.[28]

This also illustrates what the apostle Paul will say later in Romans 1:19-20 about what all humanity knows of God. Not only can people not say on judgment day that they did not know God. God's eternal power and divine nature, and even some of the behaviour he requires from us in response, have been clearly perceived. The people of the world are not as far from the people of God as we might imagine. There is, as Miscall puts it, 'a high degree of moral sensitivity'[29] about Abimelech which does check Isaac's narrow self-preservation at this point. What is more, Abimelech's question in verse 10 echoes the LORD God's interrogation of Eve in Genesis 3:13, 'What is this you have done?', calling Isaac back to his senses and, in that way restoring his soul.

Isaac has had to exercise faith to remain in the land. The LORD has rewarded that faith by revealing himself specially, comprehensively to Isaac. Isaac has appeared faith-less when denying his marriage to Rebekah, a marriage created and nurtured by God himself. Will Rebekah seek redress for this day by later conspiring against her husband with her younger son? However, now, whether through revelation or reproach, Isaac's rather unstable faith returns. As a wandering cattle man, it takes some faith for Isaac, in famine conditions, to sow 'in that land [presumably a hired plot] and reap 'in the same year a hundredfold' (26:12). We know from Jesus's later reference to a hundredfold as the highest possible yield (Matthew 13:8) that this is little less than miraculous. This shows that Isaac means business with God, in a similar way to Jeremiah, much, much later, when he buys a field in difficult circumstances in Anathoth (Jer.32:6ff.). Isaac is finally giving God free course in his life, and as a result he becomes so wealthy that he has to move into the valley, although we must be careful not to equate God's kindness with a reward for Isaac's goodness. As Steinmann helpfully directs us:

> Genesis is not engaged in presenting the patriarchal families as ideal clans who merited God's favour. On the contrary, God's favour is given *despite* [emphasis in original] the dreadful misbehaviour of these people in order to teach that God's grace is freely given to sinners.[30]

God blesses Isaac conspicuously and covenantally so that the Philistines envy his success. In a rather short-sighted act of sabotage they ignore the earlier agreement made with Abraham (Genesis 21:22-24) and fill in the old wells with earth. Water is at such a premium in such places and co-operation needs to trump conflict. However, believers can expect such treatment from those who resent what they may perceive as God's blessing – in that Isaac is a pattern for the later Daniel, and even for Jesus himself. Abimelech advises Isaac's departure (v.16), which sounds a little like the Gerasenes asking Jesus, who has made the demon-possessed Legion well, to leave their area (Mark 5:17-18). In both

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[27] As far as we know, the Philistines were not living on the coastal plain of Canaan (where there is so much unrest today) in the days of the patriarchs. However, John Currid has two suggestions to resolve this: 'One is that Moses is writing for the people of his day, a time when the Philistines are firmly entrenched in Canaan (see Ex.13:17); or, secondly, perhaps there was an early wave of Aegean invaders who settled in the land of Gerar, and Moses applies the generic name 'Philistines' to them' (Currid, *Genesis*, vol.1., Evangelical Press, Darlington, 2003, p.385).

[28] Steinmann, *op.cit.*, p.259.

[29] Miscall, *op.cit.*, p.32.

[30] Steinmann, *op.cit.*, p.258.

cases the request is followed, but, thankfully, we haven't heard the last of Abimelech. Stephen comments astutely:

> We cannot love the Lord and the world at the same time, and once we show we love the Lord, the world will soon show it does not love us.[31]

This is precisely the lesson of James 4:4, which speaks of friendship with the world constituting enmity with God.

It is not a very glamorous exercise to dig out wells earlier excavated by someone else. But Philip Eveson points out the wisdom of the exercise, in Isaac digging where he knows there has been water before. He also seeks a spiritual lesson in this action:

> While we are warned against following our parents' sins [which Isaac has not avoided], we can be encouraged to follow their strengths… The world would seek to blot out the true significance of the faith of our forefathers. Dig where the Reformers, the Puritans and the preachers of the 18th century spiritual Awakening dug. Go to the fountain of life yourself and taste and see that the Lord is good.[32]

While this digging is not glamorous, it is important work, maintaining a witness in the land. In the Second World War those who sought to keep peace at home and those who ran rubber drives and metal drives contributed to the war effort just as those who fought in the front line. Isaac moves rather than planting his heels in the ground and causing a dispute, although, by the names he uses on the first two wells ('Esek' v.20, meaning 'contention' and 'Sitnah' v.21, meaning 'enmity') he *is* recognising the conflict rather than pretending it's not there. Sometimes in the church, possibly from an excessive desire not to defame those whose motives are questionable, there can be an unnecessary papering over of the cracks. Finally, in the providence of God, Isaac has 'room' (the meaning of 'Rehoboth') to dig, to spread and to flourish. Again Stephen brings out the spiritual truth: 'He who was a type of Christ on Mount Moriah becomes a type of Christ again.'.[33]

He quotes that gem of a verse from 1 Peter 2:23, about Jesus's forbearance: 'When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly' (*NIV 1984*).

Isaac, like his much more prestigious successor, does not stand on his dignity. He knows that justice will be done, but, like Jesus, he is prepared to wait for God's timing. When the cause or the name of Jesus may suffer damage, we do need to take a stand. When the matter is more about personal reputation we may need to stand with Isaac. In this way the LORD is restoring Isaac to fruitfulness (v.22).

We're told that Isaac then moves to Beersheba (v.23), his old home, where Abraham had lived some time before. This must bring memories flooding back, not least when they returned to Beersheba after the Moriah marvel or mystery. Again the LORD appears to Isaac, if anything in a more personal way than before. Earlier God had said, "I *will be* with you" (v.3). Here, accurately, the different Hebrew construction is translated "I *am* with you" (v.24). No matter what Isaac faces, he is not alone. This is the very centre of the covenant, the promise Jesus makes to his disciples from now to the ending of the

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[31] Stephen, *op.cit.*, p.114.
[32] Eveson, *The Book of Origins*, Evangelical Press, Darlington, 2001, p.393.
[33] Stephen, *op.cit.*, p.115.

world (Matthew 28:20). Kent Hughes focusses on that verse, in the *Authorised Version*, and relates a touching instance of its truth. It concerns a young Chinese man named Lo who had just been converted. That version reads, '[A]nd, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world'. You can see how the Chinese would take that as a personal message straight from Jesus![34] This is not just a promise of something that will happen in the future. This is a very real indication of the LORD's unbroken presence for every day.

Isaac's problems are not over, indicated by the LORD's 'Fear not!' (v.24). He, the 'Fear of Isaac' (31:42,53), never speaks those words unless their recipient is suffering genuine fear. But Isaac shows how God's presence has stabilised him by building an altar for public worship and sacrifice (v.25), as his father did before him (Gen.12:8); by calling on the name of the LORD, again as Abraham did, and those at the end of the turbulent Genesis chapter 4; by pitching his tent in Beersheba, where he will stay and witness to God's grace; and by superintending another outflow of life-giving water to preserve his community. The 'Shibah' v.33 may refer to this as the 'seventh' and final well. These seem simple actions, but real, down-to-earth, practical faith is behind them. How we act when the spotlight is off us reveals whom we trust.

And, as if to confirm Isaac's restored status, Abimelech arrives seeking peace. He brings with him Phicol, the commander of the army, possibly to enforce arrangements if Isaac is not amenable, and an adviser called Ahuzzath. In an article where Jonathan Safren unfortunately wants to conflate this passage with the Abraham treaty in chapter 21, he does make some helpful suggestions. He goes beyond the term 'adviser' in the text (v.26) and states, through comparison with another Ancient Near Eastern official, that Ahuzzath is 'the supervisor of the pasturages'.[35] He tries to explain away the more private nature of the exchange in chapter 21 (in second person singulars) and the absence of Ahuzzath. However, the first person plurals of Genesis 26:28-29, as Abimelech, Phicol and Ahuzzath speak together, surely indicate a broader meeting, a different meeting. The participation of Phicol and Ahuzzath in Genesis 26, although couched in diplomatic language playing down the earlier unpleasantness, which Isaac honestly counters (v.27) with his talk of them having 'hated' (*śānē*) and expelled him) bears testimony in their very opening words to their recognition of Yahweh's presence with Isaac.

There are two theophanies for Isaac in this chapter, making both future and present promises. It is Kent Hughes who draws our attention to this third occurrence of what we can call the Immanuel principle, God with Isaac, in what he names 'the pinnacle' of the chapter with these pagan men.[36] It is one thing (or perhaps two, actually) for God to promise and then to guarantee his presence. It is something on an altogether different level for heathen men, albeit sensitive to the laws of God, to perceive the hand of God in Isaac's life. This is a treaty on a horizontal level only, although both a feast (v.30) and the taking of oaths (v.31) solemnise it. Isaac, having learned of the undeserved grace of God and having matured in that grace throughout the chapter, must surely take the opportunity to challenge the Philistine (and his two companions) regarding his renewed relationship with God. Is this not an example of God's promise spoken in verse 4 already coming true? A pagan nation is being blessed not in Isaac's offspring, but through Isaac himself. Do we take such opportunities to share with our neighbours the unsearchable riches of faith in and forgiveness through Isaac's ultimate offspring? In his Old Testament survey, William Dumbrell homes in on this second incident with Abimelech:

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[34] Related in Hughes, *op.cit.,* p.344.
[35] Safren, 'Ahuzzath and the Pact of Beer-Sheba', in *ZAW* 101 (1989), p.196.
[36] Hughes, *op.cit.*, p.345.

> Isaac, to judge from the degree of attention paid to him in the narrative, is somewhat of a lesser figure, though his neighbours in the wider world notice that the blessing of God is with him.[37]

Isaac's restoration is through hardship and through persecution, but it is worth it. Gordon Wenham's assessment of Isaac, in light of what is yet to come, is not too unkind. He places the emphasis, properly, on Isaac's God:

> [T]his somewhat ineffectual man receives yet greater promises and experiences their fulfillment in fuller measure than even his father Abraham did. This narrative thus demonstrates that the power of God can work even through those who by human standards are most unlikely material.[38]

John Calvin, pausing to record Isaac's 'singular forbearance' (p.67) in not pursuing revenge for the Philistines' sabotage of his wells, and his 'invincible patience' (p.68) in finally finding room and peace to flourish, commends Abimelech for seeking this final reconciliation with Isaac:
'[Abimelech] sought for peace and alliance with a man who was neither covetous, nor warlike, nor furnished with a great army. Thus we may learn, that the minds of men are in the hand of God.'[39]

We may, sinfully, be quick to anger and ready to defend our rights, which the world may commend, but Isaac's growing dependence upon God in this chapter, and his refusal to be ruffled is a more eloquent testimony among unbelievers to the loving-kindness and dependability of God in Christ.

Repentance

However, there is a discordant note at the end of Genesis 26. When Isaac reaches the age of 100 (Esau is 40, v.34), it is not tinkling laughter and the patter of tiny feet he experiences, as his mother and father did in their old age. Rather it is the pagan customs and possibly even the idol worship by Hittite women which Isaac's first-born introduces into his circle. This situation will be partially addressed as the result of Genesis 27 (see 28:8-9). James Smith neatly sums up the four human participants in this chapter as:

> Isaac, 'a declining father' (v.1-4), 137 years old at this time, and, thinking he is on his deathbed, seeking, clandestinely, to bless his favourite; Rebekah, 'a doubting mother' (v.5-17), scheming and plotting instead of continuing to pray as she had done before (25:22); Jacob, 'a deceitful son' (v.18-29), obeying his mother when he should resist, and lying to his father to acquire the blessing when he should refuse; and Esau, 'a despairing brother' (v.30-40), who, Hebrews tells us, seeks the blessing too late with tears (12:7).[40]

It is another of those chapters, like Genesis chapters 3 and 16, where none of the family members emerges with any credit. But two worthwhile things, at least, do surface. Firstly, as at other times, and, supremely, in the cross of his Son, the Father shows that he can strike straight blows with curved sticks. He was the One who spoke the words of prophecy to Rebekah (25:23), and he is the One who fulfils that prophecy, albeit through the sinful deception and subterfuge of Rebekah and Jacob. His will and his Word cannot be resisted. Secondly, we do have a spiritual awakening with Isaac, a

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[37] Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, Apollos, Leicester, 1988, p.25.
[38] Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word, Waco, Texas, 1994, p.194.
[39] Calvin, *op.cit.*, p.73.
[40] Smith, *op.cit.*, pp.179-181.

repentance from his earlier destructive position. We cannot exonerate Isaac from the chief blame for this sorry episode. Flying full in the face of God's own word, he is persistent in his favouritism towards the earthly-minded Esau. There is not a little of gratifying his own physical desires here too. What's more, by speaking to Esau privately, he is encouraging the division within the family which becomes evident and is turning the bestowing of a blessing, something public and praiseworthy, into something secret and sordid. Thinking he is speaking to Esau, his language of blessing is fulsome indeed (v.27-29). As James Smith points out:

> The blessing is couched in the language of petition, but patriarchal blessings were in reality predictions… With the exception of a few brief periods in the parallel history of the two peoples, the Israelites were able to completely dominate the Edomites.[41]

However, when Isaac realises he has unwittingly blessed the wrong son, he trembles as he recognises what God has done (27:33), and, even at his elder son's tears, remains firm (27:37,39-40). Jacob will be blessed, for that was God's design, not Isaac's, and Isaac will not act to change what God has decreed. We have here some of the firmness of otherwise vacillating Pilate when pushed to change the royal inscription above Jesus on the cross (John 19:22). It has taken this upheaval to break through to Isaac, and it seems that, after this, he and Rebekah are acting in concert (27:46-28:5), perhaps for the first time in years, instead of against each other. Sometimes, if we seriously defy God's will, it may take such a cataclysmic incident (although she's not thinking this, and is contemplating a brief separation (27:44), Rebekah will never see her 'favourite' again) to bring us to repentance. God's action here, though, shows that he cares about Isaac, and that he cannot allow him to continue to be so stubbornly wrong about such an important matter.

Reflection

At the time of Isaac's family's worst day, Isaac is 137 years old. With two mentions of his name in chapter 28, as he has to send Jacob away, with confirmation of a bountiful blessing (28:3-4), he basically disappears from view. There is some similarity between this situation, where the family life of four people living together is suddenly reduced to two, and what happens in Genesis 4, when Adam and Eve lose two sons on the one day, Abel to murder at his brother's hand, and Cain to banishment. The parallel between the two chapters illustrates just how sin has been running rampant in Isaac's household. However, Isaac reappears once more in chapter 35 where his death is recorded closer to its chronological place, not long after the tragic death of Jacob's Rachel. We're told that Esau lives 180 years in total, longer than any of the other patriarchs. So he lives a further 43 years after Jacob's deception and departure. How does he spend those last 43 years? The Bible is silent, so we shouldn't speculate too much. But a few suggestions can be made to bring his story to an end. At least, Isaac has this period at the end of his life – although for 20 years Jacob is away from home, and Esau for longer than that – to make amends to Rebekah, to speak to his grand-children about his God, and to explain to them what glorious substitution, and appropriate servanthood, are all about.

Isaac has two name checks in the great roll of faith, and one mention:

By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau (Hebrews 11:20).

Perhaps Esau is mentioned to show where Isaac, for so many years, went wrong. In its opening words, Isaac's blessing on Esau (spoken in Genesis 27:39-40) sounds quite similar to that summoned upon Jacob (in Genesis 27:28-29). There is talk of physical blessings to do with the dew of heaven and the

[41] Smith, *op.cit.*, p.180.

fatness of the earth. But then Esau's blessing follows a different path, referring to weapons and subjugation and rebellion. To Jacob, Isaac has promised in God's name the rightful headship of the family and the covenant privilege descending from Abraham of being a worldwide catalyst towards blessing or cursing – God's deliverer will arise from his line.

In a fascinating article, Cheryl Exum and William Whedbee investigate the tragic and the comic within the pages of the Old Testament, comparing and contrasting Isaac, Samson and Saul. Isaac's choice as victim for sacrifice could have been tragic but for the intervention of God to turn it upwards. They even suggest a comic rather than a tragic thrust for the book of Job, since, again, God steps in to end Job's suffering. With the meaning of Isaac's name as 'laughter', and with happy and even ironic laughter surrounding him, they propose that Isaac's life is really, at bottom, 'a joke as profound as it is whimsical, as serious as it is playful, for it contains all the mysterious rhythms of laughter and life both human and divine'.[42]

Isaac has had significant challenges to confront for much of his life, starting on the top of Mount Moriah. His faith at times has gone underground, from fear and through earthy folly. But his presence in the roll-call of faith in Hebrews is surely God's rubber-stamp upon his life – his life did amount to something for God in the end. He was living by faith in the Messiah, and, perhaps more painfully than any other, he is a type of that Messiah. As we have traced the periods of Isaac's life from resentment through restoration and repentance to reflection, it is the faithfulness of God and the doggedness of his covenant promises and intention to do Isaac good that shines through.

One other note, which Exum and Whedbee don't sound, bears listening to – the future of Esau is an altogether darker story, and could easily be compared with the tragedy of Saul. Even Jesus's disciple band contained one charlatan – should we not make sure that we are not too tied to this world, and that, with Abraham (and his son of the promise, who, too, always lived in tents) we are 'looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God' (Hebrews 11:10)?

[42] Exum & Whedbee, 'Isaac, Samson and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions' in *Semeia* 32 (1984), p.13.

TEMPLES, JARS AND WEAPONS

New Testament images of embodied discipleship

Andrew Collins

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The body is a significant topic in church and culture. From our understanding of mental health struggles, such as anxiety, trauma, and neurodiversity, to our theological response to today's sexual identity maze, biblically understanding the place and role of the body in our personhood is critical. It will shape our pastoral approach. Increasingly too, a theology of the body is relevant to questions of church worship and Christian discipleship. Traditions that offer services with more ritual and liturgical practices are reportedly seeing a migration of younger evangelicals, whilst embodied spiritual disciplines are seen as significant to our formation in Christ.

This article will take a brief look at some of the cultural views of embodiment before taking three New Testament images of the body and considering implications for Christian discipleship.

Cultural misunderstandings of the body

Whether we realise it or not, our understanding of the body will be shaped by the voices and influences of our time and place. We are inevitably discipled by the age we live in and need to have our eyes and ears opened to its ways and thinking. What are the prominent messages in Western culture regarding the body? Let's take a look at some of the prevailing cultural messages.

My body is a trophy to display. This is seen in the health and wellness movement, for example, where the slim, fit and healthy body is a prevalent aspiration. This leads to an emphasis on fitness culture, diets and advice on eating habits. Similar standards for physical appearance are seen in the beauty industry. Adding youth to slimness, physical differences become a matter of superiority or inferiority and are commodified in the worlds of fashion, modelling and social media. But the 'trophy' isn't one size fits all. Body positivity is a social movement that advocates for the acceptance and appreciation of all body types, regardless of size, shape, skin tone, gender, or physical abilities[1]. My body is still a trophy, but I can brandish it aloft with pride no matter its appearance.

My body is a canvas on which to express myself. This might be reflected in everyday ways, with clothing, tattoos, piercings and other physical modifications becoming a platform for self-expression. 'I'll present my body as best represents me.' Related to this is the question of sexual orientation and the individual's felt experience of gender. When gender is taken to be a social construct governed by the roles, behaviours and attributes that society considers appropriate, based on perceived sex, rather than biblical truth and anatomical reality, then the canvas can be awash with colourful confusion.

My body can be enhanced. Furthermore, the body can be subject to enhancement to serve my desires. At the less invasive end this is seen in diet and exercise. But at the more invasive end, it includes cosmetic surgery and so-called gender-affirming procedures.

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[1] Kendra Cherry MSEd, "What is Body Positivity?" Updated on May 13 2024. https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-body-positivity-4773402#:~:text=Part%20of%20the%20reason%20it,Feeling%20confident%20about%20your%20body.

My body is determinative. As we move along these approaches to the body, we begin to see something of the role and priority we attribute to it. The body is seen as determinative of who I am in many respects. Genes are thought to determine sexuality and even many forms of mental health struggle. Western mental healthcare continues to have a strong biological focus in terms of its understanding and treatment of mental suffering. Yet not all agree. Ann Harrington, in her book *Mind Fixers*, writes, 'Among the very many people who present to a general practitioner or a psychiatrist with a mental affliction, some are (almost certainly) suffering from a real illness, one that is understandable (in principle) like any other medical complaint. By the same token, others are (almost certainly) not. Mental suffering takes many forms and has many causes, only some of which have roots in disease. The suffering of those who are not really ill in any meaningful medical sense can still be acute. I have only to look at the struggling students I teach and advise to know how true this is. If there is to be a future biological psychiatry, more effective than those that have come before, how will it deal with this fact?[2]

Most mental suffering, contends Harrington, is not truly medical even if it is real and acute. And yet a move towards medicalising mental suffering is seen in strong trends towards prescribing medications for all levels of anxiety, depression, addiction, and developmental disorders like Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

My body serves me and identifies me. We are beginning to notice that whether is it expressing ourselves, healing ourselves, understanding ourselves, or improving ourselves, my body is there to serve me. In addition, my body is a projection of me: my body is my identity. It signals something of who I am.

In summary, our society places value on various aspects of bodily existence and our hearts will over or undervalue those aspects of physical life. But why? What has led to this cultural understanding of the body?

Personhood Theory

In her book *Love Thy Body*, apologetics professor Nancey Pearcey helpfully draws on work by Francis Schaeffer that casts light on these cultural voices. She probes beneath the cultural assumptions and seeks to understand how they have arisen. Pearcey hypothesises that there is a deep division that runs through all Western thought and culture which Schaeffer likened to two storeys in a building.

So, imagine a two-storey building. The lower storey of the building is empirical science: this is held to be objectively true and testable. It is the realm of facts. The upper storey represents morality and theology which are treated as private, subjective and relative. 'True for you, but not true for me.' This is the realm of values.

Pearcey then applies this analogy to the nature of man. The two storeys become

- Upper = the *person* defined by what we *value*
- Lower = the *body* defined by biological *fact*.

The problem with this idea, what Pearcey calls 'Personhood theory', is that it leads to a 'two-level dualism that sets the body against the person, as though they were two separate things stuck together. As a result it demeans the body as extrinsic to the person – something inferior that can only be used

[2] Ann Harrington, *Mind Fixers* (W. W. Norton and Company, 2019), 272

for purely pragmatic purposes.'[3] This negative view of the body, she asserts, has stemmed from the loss of belief in a Creator God and a creation which has purpose – to glorify him. If we remove God from the picture, the body loses its God-oriented purpose.

Do you see what Pearcey is saying? A materialistic culture, with no belief in a Creator God, loses belief also in the purpose of creation, *including our own bodies*. They then become inferior, useful only for pragmatic purposes, thus creating a divide within man, a divide between what we value and our bodies. Among many implications, this places an understanding of the body under the jurisdiction of science, and the treatment of the body under the rule of self – the lower storey under the rule of the upper storey. The body then becomes a canvas on which the person's beliefs and values are expressed, or a trophy to display a person's efforts towards health and wellness.

The root of the body-person split

Pearcey and Schaeffer's recognition of this body-person split may have earlier roots. As early as the first century the body was coming under attack. Gnosticism, whilst containing a range of beliefs, carried a central idea that only the nonmaterial or 'spirit' was good while anything material was evil, including the human body.

These erroneous beliefs extended to acceptance of Jesus's true incarnation leading the apostle John to warn,

> many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. (2 John 1:7).

This particular error, called Docetism, was at the time teaching that Jesus could not have had a physical body as it would have had to come into contact with the 'evil' material world. Docetism claimed that Jesus only 'appeared' to have a physical body (the Greek *dokeo* means 'to seem' or 'to have the appearance'). We see how a strong form of dualism - separating of the spiritual and the physical - leads to a fundamental undermining of the gospel, including the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ.[4]

In contrast, to truly understand the nature and purpose of embodiment we would have to give priority consideration to the incarnation of Christ. We will not deal with it in detail here but turn to the Westminster Confession of Faith to summarise how the divine and human natures are united and yet distinct:

> The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.[5]

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[3] Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body* (Baker Books, 2019)
[4] Donald McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, Second Edition, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).
[5] The Westminster Confession of Faith, (P Publishing, 2003).

The Word does become flesh (John 1:14). Donald Macleod, in his book *From Glory to Golgotha* captures the 'very man' nature of Jesus's enfleshment:

> …at the most basic level, the incarnation means that Christ took a true human body, the same in all essential respects as our own. It grew from zygote to foetus to infant to child to adolescent to man. It had the same nutritional and environmental needs. It had the same chemistry, the same anatomy, and the same physiology. It was not an illusion but was real and tangible. The incarnation was not a theophany – the temporary assumption by God of a human appearance. It was a genuine entering upon the possibility of all those experiences to which our bodies expose ourselves – hunger and thirst, weariness and pain, seeing and hearing, flogging, crucifixion, death and burial.[6]

Our Lord's divine nature is joined to our human nature and central to this is His incarnation. Jesus's embodiment is central to His person and work. What are the implications for how we understand our embodiment and embodied discipleship as those united to Christ? Is there a danger we have relegated the body and been counselled by the world's misleading voices? Three New Testament images help us to redeem the place of the body in the Christian life.

You are not your own – three NT images of embodied discipleship

1. The body as Temple

   The Word became flesh and 'tabernacled' among us (John 1:14), bringing God's presence into our midst. Immanuel would become a sanctuary, prophesied Isaiah some seven centuries prior (Isaiah 8:14). Jesus recognized his body as a temple, John 2:19-21, foreseeing that he would replace the physical temple as the locus of sacrifice, achieving a relationship with the Holy God which the law never could.

   Amazingly, in union with this Jesus, the people of God become God's temple. This is true of the corporate community but has implications also for how we use our physical bodies as members of that greater body, as Paul teaches the Corinthian church.

   > Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:18–20 (NIV 2011))

   The context for Paul's words is warning the Corinthian church against committing sexual immorality, and he corrects them through using this image of body-as-temple. As we've noted, the temple was a place of worship, a place of approach toward a holy God through sacrifice. Paul, in this pastoral context, applies this sacredness to the body. Your body is a place of worship, says Paul, a temple of the Holy Spirit, a dwelling place of the Spirit where heaven and earth meet. This temple was purchased at the cost of Jesus's blood. This temple belongs to another – you are not your own. Therefore, verse 20, glorify God with your body: bring him glory – point to and magnify him through your body. Worship him in and with your body. To use the body for sexual immorality is a profound contradiction of this.

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[6] Donald Macleod, *From Glory to Golgotha*, (Christian Focus Publication, 2002), Enfleshment.

There is a beautiful continuity of ideas here, with the temple imagery stretching back to Solomon's temple, then to the wilderness tabernacle, and even to Eden itself – to the place where God's presence dwelt in the midst of his people. And this place, says Paul, is your body.

And this temple is not an isolated structure. Just a few verses back Paul writes –

> By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! (1 Corinthians 6:14–15 (NIV 2011))

Do we see the significance of this? We are going to be raised bodily with Christ and the deep implication is that we are inextricably linked now to Christ, bodily. We are physical members of Christ's physical body. We are physically joined to Christ, body and spirit.

Gordon Fee in his commentary on 1 Corinthians says this:

> Here the concern is with one's relationship to the Lord himself. The body of the believer is for the Lord because through Christ's resurrection God has set in motion the reality of our own resurrection. This means that the believer's physical body is to be understood as "joined" to Christ's own "body" that was raised from the dead.'[7]

In other words, our bodies are now physically united to Christ and this originates in the resurrection and our own projected bodily resurrection in Christ. Do we think enough about that aspect of our union with Christ? Marcus Peter Johnston in his book *One with Christ* says this:

> The truly astonishing point for our purposes is this: Paul thinks that bodily union with a prostitute is shamefully unholy because believers are already in a union with Jesus Christ that includes their bodies. The fact that we become "one spirit" with the Lord affirms, rather than contradicts, the notion that through the Spirit our very bodies are involved in this union: "Paul does not intend to suggest that Christ unites only with the human spirit or soul. The Spirit creates the union with Christ and makes the body its temple." So intensely personal is this union that it incorporates our bodies as well.[8]

To summarise, all that you do with your body, says Paul, you do as an extension of Christ. It therefore desecrates the holiness of Christ that you would take your body, connected as it is to the Holy One, and become one flesh with a woman who is not your wife. From there Paul goes on to bring this image of the temple into focus.

Paying attention to what you do with your body is suddenly taking on a huge significance – what you do with and how you treat your body matters in deeply spiritually significant ways. Already the images of body as trophy and body as canvas are being overshadowed by the towering image of a temple. To consider that the body, far from being a mere vehicle to express 'me', is there to draw near to and reflect the holy majesty of a living God begins to elevate the status of the body to fresh heights.

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[7] Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Revised Edition, (Eerdmans, 2014).
[8] Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ*, (Crossway, 2013).

The image of body-as-temple also leads us to consider not only the removal of the body from immorality, but the engagement of the body in the worship of God – therefore glorify God in your bodies.

Let's consider gathering for public worship of God. Mike Emlet, author, counsellor and faculty member of the Christian Counselling and Educational Foundation, in his helpful article, 'A biblical rationale for embodied spiritual practices'[9], outlines specific ways the body was involved in worship. He notes seven practices that underscore the importance of the body in Old Testament worship:

- Circumcision – in Genesis 17:9-14, the cutting of flesh was the sign of belonging to God; a male carried in their body a sign of that covenant relationship.
- Passover – a meal that involved preparation, slaughter, feasting – all embodied activities that engaged energies and senses.
- Memorials – in Joshua 4 the setting up of stones in the midst of the Jordan was a visual reminder as waters were cut off, of God's power on behalf of his people.
- Sacrificial system – 'confessing sin and experiencing the blessing of forgiveness was a lengthy and multisensory process' writes Emlet. '…as an animal was slaughtered as your substitute, sight, hearing, touch and smell were all engaged.'
- Festivals and feasts included much embodied activity e.g. living outdoors during the feast of booths
- Music and singing of the Psalms
- Tabernacle and temple – these structures full of symbolism for the eyes and mind, garments and ceremonies engaging you as a whole person in the worship of God.

It is true that direct involvement in these worship practices varied among the people, for example the priesthood was responsible for the activities involved in sacrifice. Nevertheless, they illustrate the many ways in which faith was strengthened by the engagement of the body.

What about the New Testament? There are two sacraments:

- Baptism – a cleansing of the body with water as a sign of entrance into the body of Christ and of union with him
- Lord's Supper – eating of bread and drinking of wine with remembrance of the death of Christ.

Calvin says this of the sacraments, that they are 'an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith.'[10]

Do you hear what he's saying? They are an outward sign, so visible and tangible to our senses, that seals on our consciences the promises of his good will – the seal a means of assurance. So the sacraments are to help assure us of God's promises of good will toward us. As physical acts of worship to sustain the weakness of our faith – the sacraments are ordained to help and strengthen faith in God. Tim Chester puts it succinctly – 'all our senses are thus engaged so that our frail faith might be matured.'[11]

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[9] Michael Emlet, "A Biblical Rationale for Embodied Spiritual Practices," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 38:2 (2024): 6
[10] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter 14, Section 1 (4.14.1).
[11] Tim Chester, *Truth We Can Touch*, (Crossway, 2020).

In an article in the journal *Themelios* from 2021, Matthew Bingham, then of Oak Hill College, now of Phoenix Seminary in the United States, wrote an article entitled 'Brains, Bodies, and the Task of Discipleship: Re-Aligning Anthropology and Ministry'.[12] It's a response to a trend in spiritual formation – that is, our formation into the likeness of Christ - which is increasingly employing embodied rituals believing they can more effectively form the whole person.

The charge is made that a consequence of the Protestant Reformation was, quoting James Smith, 'a process of excarnation - of disembodying the Christian faith, turning it into a 'heady' affair that could be boiled down to a message and grasped with the mind'. Smith says that Christians from a Reformed tradition risk becoming 'brains on a stick'! In other words the paper is asking the question, has our faith become too intellectual, and are we neglecting engagement of the rest of our bodies? Bingham takes us in the direction of more intentional engagement with word ministry, but his thoughts raise the question of employing our bodies in worship.

How are we called to engage the various senses of the body in whole body worship? Or to put it in a way, when our hearts are aligned toward the Lord in faith and love, how does our heart employ the body? How is the worship of the heart expressed in the instrument of the body?

Gregg Allison notes a number of ways of engaging the body in worship found in Scripture[13]. For example:

- Bowing one's head or face to the ground: Nehemiah 8:6
- Raising hands for various reasons, for example for petition: Psalm 28:1-2 or as a blessing, Psalm 134
- Kneeling for various purposes: out of shame, Ezra 9; out of need, Daniel 6; as he prayed, Solomon at the dedication of the temple.
- Prostration: Revelation 4
- Clapping: Psalm 47

The point is not necessarily to emulate all but rather to note that engagement with God has been an embodied exercise and to ask, are there ways we can be more aware of embodied aspects of worship to strengthen our worship of God?

Dr Karl Hood of Biblical Counselling Australia invites us to consider the benefits of singing[14]. He writes,

> Compared to only reading words on a page, singing a Christian song or psalm aloud can provide additional ways of accessing the meaning. Tunes, rhythms, breaks, repetition, and emotional responses to music, all alter how we notice and interact with the words of a psalm as we stay focused through the spiritual and physical processes that singing requires.

The physical process of singing aids our heart engagement. Hood has a particular interest in the benefits of psalms sung as part of the process of responding to deep suffering, since much of the

[12] Matthew Bingham, "Brains, Bodies, and the Task of Discipleship: Re-Aligning Anthropology and Ministry," *Themelios* 46:1 (2021) 37
[13] Gregg Allison, *Embodied*, (Baker Books, 2021).
[14] Karl Hood, "The Benefits of Singing," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 38:2 (2024) 75

psalter sits in the territory of trauma. He notices parallels in singing with therapeutic approaches to trauma today:

> Singing inescapably requires breathing regulation and has God's clear and unambiguous approval as a daily practice for us in every emotional state. We could even say that in some sense God commands us to regulate our breathing often, not as an exercise in itself, nor with prayers synchronized to breathing in and out, nor in mindfulness meditation, but as a desirable, intrinsic element of singing words to him, to ourselves, and to others. I would suggest that the act of slowly exhaling needed for a stanza of sung words can have a similar beneficial effect to controlled breathing on a physiological level. And, just as feeling air moving through our nostrils is helpfully distracting and calming in breathing control exercises, the inhaling and exhaling, vibration, and melodies could be expected to have similar benefits.[15]

As we draw this first point to a close, where does the temple need some reinforcement in our lives? We love the Lord our God with heart, soul, mind and *strength*, as embodied souls. Where are our structural weak points of embodied worship and how can they be strengthened? Where might tiredness, lack of energy, distracted focus be helped by paying attention to the role of the body in either public or private worship? Might a new routine for devotions, or the introduction of singing or a different posture for prayer help?

2. The body as Jar

Let's move on to the second image – we are clay jars. Paul says this in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12:

> But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Paul is defending his integrity in ministry and seeks to demonstrate that weakness and suffering for the gospel are in keeping with new covenant gospel ministry. He calls the gospel of Christ a treasure, v7, but one housed in a clay jar. This refers to a utensil of clay or perishable earthenware, the baked clay denoting breakableness. These were certainly cheap, unattractive and expendable containers. However, it is tempting to think that Paul was emphasising the *value* of the jars because they seem to be contrasted with the obviously valuable treasure. But in the broader context of the passage, Paul seems to accent, not the low value, but the low *strength* of the container. Why put a treasure in something that, not only is so cheap, but is so likely to break? Because it's not about the power of the vessel, v7. It's about the extraordinary power of God. And from v8 he illustrates what he means: the clay jar for Paul is an object lesson that conveys suffering, weakness, and breakability, but displays the power of God. How does he go on to describe that vulnerability in the life of the New Testament minister? They are pressed, perplexed, persecuted and pummelled (v8). And Paul summarises that suffering with the phrase – 'carrying about Jesus' death in my body… death is at work in us' (v10).' Do you see what he's saying? The breakable clay jar is the body that carries Jesus's death. He confirms this by a further summary in v16: our outer man is

[15] Hood, "The Benefits of Singing"

wasting away while the inner man is being renewed. Paul is emphasising gospel weakness in our bodies.

But this is a gospel weakness that expresses our union with Christ. In verse 10 'the death of Jesus' is more accurately 'the dying of Jesus' and refers to the shadow of death over his life, sometimes in the life-threatening situations, sometimes in the kind of trials Paul mentioned of the apostles. It was the course of daily trials and hardships that eventually culminated in Jesus' death.[16] Do you see where Paul is taking us? To see that being pressured, perplexed, persecuted and pummelled is a uniting with Christ in that suffering, a very carrying of Jesus's death. Glory is appearing through the cracks of the jar.

But there is an even brighter glory shining through. As Paul persevered through pressures, life was persisting in the midst of dying. But it wasn't just Paul's resilience that shone through. This was the very resurrection of life of Jesus that was being manifested through the cracks as Paul, in much weakness, continued to preach, teach, pastor and love (v10-11).

What are the implications for seeing embodied life through this gospel lens?

We are limited people. We can't do everything. We accept a finitude that accepts I have limits to what I can do. We are also dependent. We need others because we are weak and vulnerable to breaking. We need support and help. We also groan and suffer. The clay jar will have cracks appearing as it is pressured, perplexed, persecuted and pummelled. We are not surprised at weakness, pain, tiredness, stress, injury, illness and ageing. We are earthen vessels.

It also leads us to consider how the jar can be strengthened. What are the implications for looking after our health? Our diet? For exercising? Where is the jar feeling vulnerable? Where are cracks appearing indicating the need for rest and replenishment for the body?

3. The body as Weapon

We move now to the third New Testament image to help us consider our embodied discipleship. Our bodies are weapons. Paul writes in Romans 6:

> In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace. (Romans 6:11–14 (NIV 2011))

Paul here is describing the implications of our union with Christ and he's using the metaphor of dying and rising with Christ in baptism. We are risen with Christ and so now Christ must reign in our lives. From there, Paul moves on to draw out implications for the use of our bodies in the fight against sin, the change process known as sanctification.

In this passage, it is as if there are two kings, God and sin. And Paul says, 'You are like a warrior and your body members like weapons or tools that you present for service before the ruler (v13).

[16] See for example, Ralph Martin et al., *2 Corinthians*, Volume 40, (Zondervan Academic, 2017).

In effect you are saying, 'My Lord, what would you have me do with this weapon or tool, I am in your service.' That's the kind of imagery here.

John Murray in his commentary on Romans says this:

> If "mortal body" means the physical organism, then the "members" referred to in this verse must mean the members of the body, such as eye, hand, and foot. Sin is conceived of as a master at whose disposal we place these members in order that they may be instruments to promote unrighteousness. The exhortation is to the effect that we are not to go on placing our physical organs at the disposal of sin for the furtherance of such an end. The positive counterpart is that we are to present ourselves to God as those alive from the dead and our members as instruments of righteousness to God…We are regarded as presenting ourselves and our members once for all to God for his service and the promotion of righteousness.'[17]

How are we employing our body members with their functions and capacities in the battle with sin? There's a battle! We are warriors in the midst of two warring kingdoms. Your hands, your eyes, your attention, your thinking, they are all weapons. Don't present them to sin as weapons to lead us to drift away from God. On the contrary, become aware of how you are using your body, awaken, turn and come before God as your king and say, 'Lord, these eyes, this mind, this attention, this focus, they are weapons to be used for your kingdom and your glory. How can I use them now in good, constructive and fruitful ways for your glory?'

In the words of Frances Ridley Havergal's hymn –

> Take my life, and let it be
> Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
>
> … Take my hands, and let them move
> At the impulse of Thy love;
> Take my feet and let them be
> Swift and beautiful for Thee,
>
> Take my voice, and let me sing
> Always, only, for my King;
> Take my lips, and let them be
> Filled with messages from Thee.

This image of the body helps us to think about growth and sanctification in concrete, bodily ways. Where does the weaponry in your life need reorientated toward the true King?

Conclusion

Let's consider some summary points as we draw the article to a close. As embodied souls we need to remember that we are all of these images at the same time. As temples, our worship needs effort because of our weakness and can be a battle because of sin. As jars, weakness is part of our worship, displays Christ, and involves battle. As weapons, war is part of our worshipping God as Lord but can be weakened by a body which is a clay jar.

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[17] John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Eerdmans, 2018).

Furthermore, it is imperative that we remember that whether we are reinforcing the temple, repairing the jar or reorienting the weaponry, that we do this by faith and through the Word. All works that help the body are undertaken with faith in the One who is our strength. We may take practical measures, but trust is in the Lord.

And faith has a future gaze. There is a future harvest ahead, a time of rich fruitful reaping toward a feast forevermore. Paul unwraps this future for us in 1 Corinthians 15 –

> So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

Christ's resurrection body is our first fruits. Paul elaborates and yet still we struggle to fully conceive of the new body we will receive. It will be imperishable – no more growing old, getting injured, become ill or wasting away! It will shine with a glory, splendour and majesty. It will have power, strength and ability – weakness will be gone, forever.

A final word to CS Lewis –

> Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body - which believes that matter is good, that God Himself once took on a human body, that some kind of body is going to be given to us even in Heaven and is going to be an essential part of our happiness, our beauty and our energy.[18]

[18] Quoted in Sam Allberry, *What God Has to Say about Our Bodies*, (Crossway, 2021).

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: THE QUEEN OF THE SCIENCES?[1]

Donald John Maclean

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It used to be common and uncontroversial to view theology as 'the queen of the sciences.'[2] Why? Because there was no higher or greater knowledge than the truth about God.[3] John Dick representatively said: 'To know this mighty Being, as far as he may be known, is the noblest aim of the human understanding.'[4] B.B. Warfield similarly commented, "theology is as far…above all other sciences as the eternal health and destiny of the soul are of more value than this fleeting life in this world.'[5] Indeed, all other sciences depend on acknowledging the existence of God, 'All science without God is mutilated science, and no account of a single branch of knowledge can ever be complete until it is pushed back to find its completion and ground in Him.'[6] As such, 'Theology, formally speaking, is…the apex of the pyramid of the sciences by which the structure is perfected.'[7]

However, even in the late nineteenth century it was said, 'Systematic Theology has fallen on evil days…Time was when she was the queen of all the sciences…Now it is the fashion of the time to heap contempt and scorn upon her'.[8] Or, as B.B. Warfield himself said,

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[1] This paper was originally an inaugural address as President and Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Westminster Seminary, UK.

[2] Muller notes it was the rise of 'rationalist philosophy' which 'demanded that it and not theology be considered queen of the sciences' that changed this. Richard Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:84.

[3] It is only in this sense that this article is concerned with theology as 'the queen of the sciences', that is, theology is the highest and most profound knowledge and wisdom.

[4] John Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (2 vols.; New York: M.W. Dodd, 1850), 1:8.

[5] Benjamin B. Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* Vol. 7 No. 26 (1896), p.258. He expands, 'whether we consider the topics which it treats, in their dignity, their excellence, their grandeur; or the certainty with which its data can be determined; or the completeness with which its principles have been ascertained and its details classified; or the usefulness and importance of its discoveries: it is as far out of all comparison above all other sciences as the eternal health and destiny of the soul are of more value than this fleeting life in this world.' Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.258. Aquinas makes a similar point, 'this science surpasses other speculative science…in point of greater certitude, because other sciences derive their certitude from the natural light of human reason, which can err, while this derives its certitude from the light of the divine knowledge, which cannot be deceived; in point of the higher worth of its subject-matter, because this science treats chiefly of those things which by their sublimity transcend human reason…the end of this science, in so far as it is practical, is eternal happiness, to which as to an ultimate end the purposes of every practical science are ordered. Hence it is clear that from every standpoint it is nobler than other sciences.' Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.1.5. Of course, it is not possible to read Aquinas's use of 'science' across into Warfield's definition of science.

[6] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.259. He continues, 'All speculation takes us back to Him; all inquiry presupposes Him; and every phase of science consciously or unconsciously rests at every step on the science that makes Him known. Theology, thus, as the science which treats of God, lies at the root of all sciences.' Warfield, 'Idea of Systematic Theology', p.260.

[7] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.260. Indeed, 'Without the knowledge of God it is not too much to say we know nothing rightly, so that the renunciation of the knowledge of God carries with it renunciation of all right knowledge.' Benjamin B. Warfield, 'The Task and Method of Systematic Theology' *The American Journal of Theology* Vol. 19 No. 2 (April 1910), p.197. For a thorough treatment of the topic of Princeton Seminary on theology as a science, see Paul Helseth, '"Right Reason" and the Science of Theology at Old Princeton Seminary: A New Perspective' *Confessional Presbyterian Journal* Vol. 8 (2012), p.74-90.

[8] Orr, 'Introduction' to Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), p.7.

> We are accustomed to regard theology as the queen of the sciences, and Systematic Theology as queen among the theological disciplines. But these are not days in which lofty claims are readily allowed.[9]

This dethroning of theology arose from various trends, almost too numerous to mention. It can be argued though that they all centre on the denial of fixed foundation from which to proclaim a systematic theology.[10] Warfield noted,

> I fancy that there is nothing more widely characteristic of 'recent theological reconstruction'… than a tendency to cut loose from all 'external authority'…'recent theological reconstruction' holds a crumbling bible in its hands.[11]

James Orr gives helpful examples, which include:

- Alleging Scripture had been rendered insecure or swept away by modern doubt and criticism.[12]
- Alleging that the nature of religion is centred not in knowledge or doctrine but in experience and emotion. Doctrine is therefore not significant, and it only the language through which religious emotions transiently clothe themselves.[13] Thus individuals argued, 'the product of the religious sentiment is Christianity'.[14]

The conclusion followed: 'theology has not a trustworthy foundation on which to build, and…in consequence, it is an illegitimate pretender to the name of science.'[15] So, Systematic Theology fell from its lofty position because the tides of Western thought shifted on 'the…question of the fact, nature, and verifiableness of the historical Christian revelation.'[16] The effect of was disastrous, for as Warfield said, 'To be indifferent to doctrine is…but another way of saying we are indifferent to Christianity.'[17]

What is Systematic Theology?

However, before proceeding further, it is important to define what systematic theology is. Many definitions could be given. One would simply flow from the etymology of the two words. Theology, or *theologia*, obviously derives from *theos* ('god') and *logia* ('utterances, sayings, oracles'). Systematic in a standard dictionary definition is 'according to a fixed plan or system; methodical'. A workable definition follows by combining these to view systematic theology as a methodical word or utterance about God.

A short survey of definitions provided by other theologians supports this being a helpful base definition:

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[9] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.15.
[10] Orr, 'Introduction' to Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.8.
[11] Benjamin B. Warfield, 'Recent Reconstructions of Theology' *The Homiletic Review* Vol. 35 No. 3 (March 1898), p.202.
[12] Orr, 'Introduction' to Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.8.
[13] Orr, 'Introduction' to Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.9.
[14] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.22.
[15] Orr, 'Introduction' to Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.8.
[16] Orr, 'Introduction' to Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.10.
[17] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.23.

- Thomas Aquinas: 'Sacred doctrine is a science...sacred doctrine is a science, because it proceeds from principles established by the light of a higher science, namely, the science of God and the blessed…sacred science believes the principles revealed to it by God'.[18]
- William Ames: 'Theology…is to us the ultimate and noblest of all exact teaching arts. It is a guide and master plan for our highest end, sent in a special manner from God, treating of divine things, tending towards God, and leading man to God'.[19]
- Johannes Wollebius: 'Christian theology is the doctrine concerning God, as he is known and worshiped for his glory and for our salvation'.[20]
- The *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*: 'we define theology as the knowledge (*scientiam*) or wisdom (*sapientiam*) of the divine matters that God has revealed'.[21]
- John Dick: 'Theology literally signifies, a discourse concerning God…It may be defined to be the science which treats of God, his nature, his attributes, his counsels, his works, and his dispensations towards the human race'.[22]
- William G.T. Shedd, 'Theology is the science of God. The supreme being is the object and theme of theological investigation'.[23]
- Benjamin B. Warfield: 'Theology, we say, is that science which treats of God in Himself and in His relations'.[24] Or, 'By "Systematic Theology" is meant that department or section of theological science which is concerned with setting forth systematically, that is to say, as a concatenated whole what is known concerning God'.[25]
- Herman Bavinck: 'Dogmatics is, and can only exist as, the scientific system of the knowledge of God. More precisely, and from a Christian viewpoint, dogmatics is the knowledge of God that he has revealed in his Word to the church concerning himself and all creatures as they stand in relation to him'.[26]
- Louis Berkhof: '[systematic theology] seeks to give a systematic presentation of all the doctrinal truths of the Christian religion'.[27]

Granting then that systematic theology is a methodical word or utterance about God, and therefore concerned with the greatest and ultimate truth, it is a small step to denote theology as the 'queen of the sciences'.[28]

But this approach to a definition of theology has been called rationalistic. Helseth noted this common criticism of Princeton's definition of theology as science:

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[18] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.1.2.
[19] William Ames, *Marrow of Theology*, John D. Eudsen, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), p.78.
[20] Johannes Wollebius, 'Compendium Theologiae Christianae' in John W. Beardslee, ed., *Reformed Dogmatics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.29.
[21] Dolf te Velde, ed., *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae / Synopsis of a Purer Theology: Latin Text and English Translation: Volume 1, Disputations 1-23*, Reimer A, Faber, trans. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 35 (1.9).
[22] Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 1:8.
[23] William G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology 3rd Edition*, Allan W. Gomes, ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003), p.52.
[24] B.B. Warfield, 'Theology a Science', *The Bible Student* Vol. 1 (New Series) No. 1 (January 1900), p.1.
[25] Warfield, 'The Task and Method of Systematic Theology', p.192.
[26] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 1: Prolegonema,* John Bolt, ed., John Vriend, trans. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), p.38.
[27] Louis Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932), p.58.
[28] Muller notes that for Reformed Orthodoxy, 'Theology…retains its status as 'queen of the sciences' and all other disciplines function as *ancillae*, 'handmaids,' that support and serve but never undermine theological conclusions.' Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:338.

> on its surface Hodge's discussion of theological method certainly *seems* rationalistic, particularly when it is abstracted from what is arguably the key to understanding his conception of theological science.[29]

The key Helseth refers to is Hodge's statement that in defining theology,

> The question is not first and mainly, What is true to the understanding, but what is true to the renewed heart? The effort is not to make the assertions of the Bible harmonize with the speculative reason, but to subject our feeble reason to the mind of God as revealed in his Word, and by his Spirit in our inner life."[30]

So, for Hodge, in considering how to define systematic theology, it is vital to note the role of faith. Thus, those who, like Hodge, regard theology as a science, and the queen of the sciences, do not deny theology is 'faith seeking understanding'.

Related to this, it is important to note, theology was not regarded as a science if science is viewed simply as a dispassionate testing of theories. Warfield notes the 'danger that "Scientific Theology" should be misunderstood as theology reduced to an empirical science, or dependent upon an "experimental method."'[31] More expansively, John Dick says:

> I have called theology a science, but I did not mean to insinuate, that like the other sciences, it should be regarded merely as a subject of cold speculation and philosophical inquiry…While the student of theology is assiduously labouring to store his mind with knowledge which is to be communicated to others, it should be his first care to convert it by faith and prayer to his own use, that he may be nourished with the heavenly food which he is preparing for the household of God.[32]

This is a vital point. In defining theology as a science, this includes, rather than excludes the practical nature of theology.[33] Related, calling theology a science (or knowledge, *scientia*) does deny theology is practical wisdom (*sapientia*).[34] Warfield comments,

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[29] Helseth, '"Right Reason" and the Science of Theology at Old Princeton Seminary', p.78. Particularly objected to is Hodge's statement, 'The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.' Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:10. For a full treatment of Hodge's views, see Ryan McGraw, 'Charles Hodge on Theology as Science: Shifting Patterns in the Nature and Genus of Theology' in Ryan M. McGraw, ed. *Charles Hodge: American Reformed Orthodox Theologian* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2023), p.69-109. McGraw is particular alert to the historical changes in the meaning of 'science', McGraw, 'Charles Hodge on Theology as Science', p.99-103.

[30] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner, 1872-4), 1:16. This, at least, adds context to McGraw's statement that 'Hodge appears to have accepted modern assumptions about science in his working understanding of theological science.' McGraw, 'Charles Hodge on Theology as a Science', p.100.

[31] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology,' p.243. Helseth rightly comments, 'When Old Princeton's "intellectualism" is interpreted within a context which affirms that the soul is a single unit that acts in all of its functions - its thinking, its feeling, and its willing - as a single substance, it becomes clear that the Princeton theologians were not cold, calculating rationalists whose confidence in the mind led them to ignore the import of the subjective and the centrality of experience in religious epistemology.' Paul Helseth, 'B.B. Warfield's Apologetic Appeal to "Right Reason": Evidence of a "Rather Bald Rationalism"?' *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* Vol. 16 No. 2 (Autumn 1998), p.157.

[32] Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 1:12.

[33] This is consistent with earlier Reformed Orthodoxy, 'theology for the Reformed was both theoretical and practical', Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:354.

[34] So, for example, theology is regarded as both knowledge and wisdom in *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae / Synopsis of a Purer Theology, Volume 2*, 37 (1.10). Turretin sees theology as including 'wisdom', 'intelligence', and 'knowledge', though 'if any genus of these habits must be attributed to theology, wisdom is most analogous to it', Francis Turretin,

> throughout all the ages every advance in the scientific statement of theological truth has been made in response to a practical demand, and has been made in a distinctly practical interest. We wholly misconceive the facts if we imagine that the development of systematic theology has been the work of cold, scholastic recluses, intent only upon intellectual subtleties.[35]

More extensively, he argues theology is not a 'mere science':

> the systematic theologian is pre-eminently a preacher of the Gospel; and the end of his work is obviously not merely the logical arrangement of the truths which come under his hand, but the moving of men, through their power, to love God with all their hearts and their neighbors as themselves; to choose their portion with the Saviour of their souls; to find and hold Him precious; and to recognize and yield to the sweet influences of the Holy Spirit whom He has sent. With such truth as this he will not dare to deal in a cold and merely scientific spirit, but will justly and necessarily permit its preciousness and its practical destination to determine the spirit in which he handles it, and to awaken the reverential love with which alone he should investigate its reciprocal relations.[36]

Flowing from this, Warfield believed that

> no single Christian doctrine has been revealed to men merely as a tenet in philosophy, to make them wise; each and every one is sent to them as a piece of glad tidings, that they may be made wise unto salvation.[37]

Given this,

> It is rooted in the very nature of Theology as a Science that it should involve and impinge on the religious life: and the function of 'Theology' is not completed as a Science until this practical end is subserved.[38]

Therefore, Warfield argues,

> As long as we remain in the region of the pure intellect we remain out of the proper region of Theology. Theology is the product of, appeals to, and impinges on the religious elements in man's nature, and nothing is 'Theology' which does not move in this sphere.[39]

Institutes of Elenctic Theology, James T. Dennison, ed.; George M. Giger, trans., 3 vols.; (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992-97), 1:19 (1.6.6-7).

[35] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', 267. See the discussion of the position of Reformed Orthodoxy in Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:324-340.

[36] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.271. So, Smith comments, 'The systematic theologian, then, was primarily a preacher of the gospel, not simply one who arranged truths for the sake of an academic purpose.' David P. Smith, 'B.B. Warfield, Systematic Theology, and the Preachers Task', *Presbyterion* 35/2 (Fall 2009), p.110.

[37] Warfield, 'The Right of Systematic Theology', p.64. Warfield also notes that 'The knowledge of God…which it is the end of Theology to produce, is that vital knowledge of God which engages the whole man; it can terminate only in distinctively religious knowledge', Warfield, 'Theology a Science', p.3.

[38] Warfield, 'Theology a Science', p.3.

[39] Warfield, 'Theology a Science', p.4.

This is how Warfield addresses 'an unwillingness…to recognize Theology as a Science' flowing from 'the ground that it is a practical discipline with its end outside itself.[40] Far from challenging the definition of theology as a methodical word about God, and therefore the 'queen of the sciences', the 'practical' nature of theology simply fleshes out what is meant by that phrase.

Why Systematic Theology?

If systematic theology is a methodical word about God, does Scripture encourage us in this task? Yes. Indeed the Scriptures compel and command us to systematise truth. 2 Timothy 1:13 exhorts, 'Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.' Timothy, as a gospel minister was to walk in the pattern of Paul's sound words to him. This wasn't simply to repeat the words of Scripture, but to hold to what Scripture *meant*, to keep the pattern that could be rightly *deduced* from Scripture. Or again, 2 Timothy 2:15, 'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.' Rightly handling has the idea of making straight, teaching truth directly and correctly. And this is the calling of systematic theology, to ensure that, in connection with all scriptural teaching, the truth is kept straight. This pattern of sound words, or right handling of the truth, led to Paul's own confession, Acts 20:27 'I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.' That is what the calling of systematic theology: the pursuit of the whole counsel of God. The church in pursuing this calling is being the 'pillar and buttress of the truth' she is called to be, 1 Timothy 3:15.

But not only is there direct scriptural warrant for systematic theology. It is quite simply impossible to read the Bible without doing systematic theology. What is the Bible? What is God like? Who is Jesus? What is sin? To answer any of these questions we require a methodical study of what God has revealed. The words of John Dick, a Scottish theologian (1764–1833), are appropriate at this point:

> No man…who (is in possession of his senses, and) understands what he is saying, will deny that religion is systematic. The word of God is not an assemblage of writings which have no other relation to each other but juxtaposition, or collocation in the same volume.[41]

He goes on:

> The study of the Scriptures is not recommended to us, that we may load our memories with a multitude of unconnected ideas, but that we may bring together and combine the truths which are scattered up and down in them, and thus 'understand what the will of the Lord is.' In the mind of every intelligent reader of the Scriptures, a system is formed, the parts of which, by their union, reflect a new light upon one another..[42]

Dick is right. It is impossible to avoid being systematic in theology.[43]

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[40] Warfield, 'Theology a Science', p.1-2. He also, naturally, noted the inconsistency of this, 'the theologian, were he a man of science, would and must be careless as to the outcome of his work; and theology, were it scientific, would have no concern with the practical value of the truths with which it deals', Warfield, 'Theology a Science', p.2.

[41] Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 1:10

[42] Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 1:10

[43] Warfield similarly comments, 'If we possess any knowledge of God at all, however, the attempt to systematize it is a necessity of the human spirit. If we know so much as two facts concerning God, the human mind is incapable of holding these facts apart; it must contemplate them in relation to one another…It may systematize well, or ill; but systematize it must whenever it holds together, in its unitary grasp, more facts than one', Warfield, 'The Task and Method of Systematic Theology', p.195.

But is Systematic Theology the Queen of the Theological Sciences?

Systematic theology, then, is both justified and necessary. Returning to its definition as science, Warfield makes 'the simple assertion' that systematic theology 'is in its essential nature a science'.[44] But what does he mean by this? He notes,

> to say that Systematic Theology is a science is…to affirm that it seeks to discover…absolute truth and aims at organizing into a concatenated system all the truth in its sphere.[45]

He expands:

> For the very existence of any science, three things are presupposed: (1) the reality of its subject-matter; (2) the capacity of the human mind to apprehend, receive into itself, and rationalize this subject-matter; and (3) some medium of communication by which the subject-matter is brought before the mind and presented to it for apprehension.[46]

So, in affirming that 'theology is a science' this entails affirming 'the reality of God's existence and our capacity so far to understand Him' and also that 'He has made Himself known to us – we affirm the objective reality of a revelation'.[47] So, because the three constituent elements of any science are present for the theological task: 'Theology is therefore that science which treats of God and of the relations between God and the universe.[48]

Regarding the third of these qualifications, objective revelation, systematic theology is based on, fundamentally, the revelation in Scripture. Turning to the words of John Murray,

> the Bible is the principal source of revelation and the Bible is the Word of God. [Therefore] systematics is the discipline which more than any other aims to confront us men with God's own witness.[49]

Of course, this is not to deny revelation in

> those visible things of nature whereby His invisible things are clearly seen, or…the constitution of the human mind with its causal judgment indelibly stamped upon it, or…that voice of God that we call conscience, which proclaims His moral law within us, or…His providence in which He makes bare His arm for the government of the

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[44] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.244. Or, 'Theology is the science of God', Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.13. For further on this, see Fred Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), p.80-93.

[45] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.245.

[46] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.246. Smith comments on the issues raised by Warfield's second point, 'No science is, therefore, simply an objective enterprise, but *ipso facto* a subjective one. Warfield's use of the term 'science' is not an Enlightenment view of it that considers the human knower as a neutrally objective observer and analyzer of facts', David Smith, 'The Scientifically Constructive Scholarship of B. B. Warfield', *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 15 (2004), p.106.

[47] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.248.

[48] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.248. Warfield draws from this definition that theology is 'Theo-centric' rather than 'Christo-centric', Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.249-50.

[49] John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (4 vols.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976-82), 4:21.

> nations, or through the exercises of His grace, our experience under the tutelage of the Holy Ghost.[50]

Nevertheless, the written word is 'the norm of interpretation for what is revealed so much more darkly through the other methods of manifestation', and indeed, 'the theologian must yet refuse to give these sources of knowledge a place alongside of the written Word, in any other sense than that he gladly admits that they, alike with it, but in unspeakably lower measure, do tell us of God.'[51] Hodge similarly stated, 'everything revealed in nature, and in the constitution of man concerning God and our relation to Him, is contained and authenticated in Scripture. It is in this sense that "the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the religion of Protestants."'[52] The primacy of scriptural revelation was also the position of Reformed orthodoxy, as exemplified by Wollebius, 'We therefore acknowledge no other basis for theology than the written word of God.'[53]

This is why the overturning of biblical authority was so destructive for systematic theology – its very foundation was overturned. So, Warfield says,

> The constitutive doctrines of the Christian system are growing more and more doubtful, more and more shadowy things…This is…the inevitable effect of the increasing disregard of the authority of the Scriptures. For, if we are not to trust the Scriptures, where are we to go for information as to what is true about these tremendous problems?[54]

But granting the objective revelation of Scripture, it is right to note that theology's understanding of God's revelation progresses and develops. In this is also bears the mark of science. Indeed, for Warfield, theology is progressive 'in exactly the same sense in which any other science is'.[55] As such,

> since the close of the canon of Scripture, the intellectual realization and definition of the doctrines revealed in it, in relation to one another, have been, as a mere matter of fact, a slow but ever-advancing process.[56]

This progress is not at the expense of truth already secured, as if the foundations of theology need rebuilt every generation, rather,

> if the temple of God's truth is ever to be completely built, we must not spend our efforts in digging at the foundations which have been securely laid in the distant past, but must rather give our best efforts to rounding the arches, carving the capitals, and fitting in the fretted roof.[57]

Scheiderer comments that for Warfield, the theologian,

> works as a scientist, drawing from the insights of earlier physicists, astronomers, and mathematicians for the articulation and establishment of a more complete, contained

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[50] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.250.
[51] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.252.
[52] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:11.
[53] Wollebius, 'Compendium Theologiae Christianae' in Beardslee, ed., *Reformed Dogmatics*, p.30.
[54] Warfield, 'Recent Reconstructions of Theology', p.204-5.
[55] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.262.
[56] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.263.
[57] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.265.

> theory of everything, which will subsequently be used for the further advancement of in-depth research and progress.[58]

Lints uses the analogy of nature, 'As a seed sprouts forth and gives birth to a tree, so theology grows from seed to tree until at the time of the closing of the ages the tree is perfected.'[59]

But if theology is a science, the greatest of all sciences, is systematic theology *itself* the queen of the *theological* sciences? Yes, because it takes the work of every other department of theology in understanding the Bible and shapes them into a systematic whole. So Warfield states, 'The scientific character of "Theology" culminates in "Systematic Theology;" which is, therefore, by eminence *the* scientific theological discipline.'[60] He gives the following image of the work of Systematic Theology:

> The immediate work of exegesis may be compared to the work of a recruiting officer: it draws out from the mass of mankind the men who are to constitute the army. Biblical Theology organizes these men into companies and regiments and corps, arranged in marching order and accoutred for service. Systematic Theology combines these companies and regiments and corps into an army - a single and unitary whole, determined by its own all-pervasive principle.[61]

Everything else in theology, builds up and into systematics. As such, compared to any other theological approach, be that apologetic, historical or biblical, systematics is 'the crown and head.'[62]

The Dethroning of Systematic Theology

Retuning now to where this paper began – the dethronement of Systematic Theology, Warfield says:

> The right of Systematic Theology to reign is not the only thing that is brought into question in these days, its very right to exist is widely challenged…impatience…is exhibited on every hand with the effort to define truth and to state with precision the doctrinal…contents of Christianity.[63]

What has driven this? Well, leaving objections to the trustworthiness of Scripture to the one side, there are other objections that merit attention.

One obvious criticism of Systematic Theology is that it is an alien imposition on Scripture. Charles Hodge posits that

> Theology…is the exhibition of the facts of Scripture in their proper order and relation, with the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.[64]

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[58] Daniel Scheiderer, 'Theology Is a Cathedral and a Science: B. B. Warfield's Use of Historical Theology in His Theological Method', *Puritan Reformed Journal* Volume 11 No. 1 (2019), p.91.
[59] Richard Lints, 'Two Theologies or One? Warfield and Vos on the Nature of Theology', *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (Fall 1992), p.246.
[60] Warfield, 'Theology a Science', p.2 . See also, Warfield, 'The Task and Method of Systematic Theology', p.193.
[61] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.257.
[62] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.254.
[63] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.15-16.
[64] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:19. It does not seem clear that Hodge is vulnerable to the charge levelled against him e.g. 'The relation between exegesis and systematic theology is far more complex than Hodge had realized (in large measure because of the birth of the new discipline of biblical theology)', Lints, 'Two Theologies or One?', p.239. Hodge the

Warfield has been rightly interpreted as holding a similar position:

> As science brings order and harmony to a part of observable nature, theology seeks to bring order and harmony to the whole of the biblical revelation…It is not that order and harmony are artificially supplied, but rather that the intrinsic order and harmony are disclosed by the imposition of certain theological categories.[65]

This can be challenged, for example, by John Frame, who notes, 'This sounds a bit as though the order and relation of the facts in Scripture itself are somehow improper, and that theology has to put them back where they belong.'[66] We see something of this spirit in the writings of Peter Enns, originally in *Inspiration and Incarnation* and developed since then.[67] Enns was then a Professor of Old Testament Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, but was espousing the very views that Westminster was founded to refute, that Scripture was 'messy' and that to impose a theological unity on scripture was to 'read past' how God had revealed himself i.e. in a mass of contradictions we are not meant to harmonise.[68] If in one passage of Scripture God appears surprised, or frustrated, or to learn something, well, that is the message of that passage. To say anything else is to downplay the revelation God has given us.

What can be said to this? Well, if the divine authorship of Scripture is accepted, it is not an imposition to think and expect that Scripture will have a coherent and consistent message. As John Murray has said,

> The Bible is an organism, its unity is organic. It is not a compilation of isolated and unrelated divine oracles…We must understand that the whole Bible stands together and that the fibres of organic connection run through the whole Bible connecting one part with every other part and every one truth with every other truth.[69]

All Systematic Theology is doing, then, is discovering the mind of the one divine author, not imposing a false unity. Nor is it imposing a false form on Scripture. God has given poetry, history, sermons, prayers, didactic passages in his word. This form, and not a systematic theology, had been given both so that the multiformity of Scripture speaks to the multiformity of our natures, and also to encourage the searching of all of Scripture, and intensive prayerful meditation on it, to draw all its theological riches out in harmony.

Indeed, returning to an earlier point, as Hodge himself notes, it is impossible for us not to construct a theology from the diverse forms of scriptural revelation we have:

> Such is the constitution of the human mind that it cannot help endeavoring to systematize and reconcile the facts which it admits to be true. In no department of knowledge have men been satisfied with the possession of a mass of undigested facts.

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commentator, for example on Romans and Ephesians, is a sensitive exegete. Aubret is correct to say, 'Far too little consideration has been paid to Hodge as a biblical theologian…Hodge's theology was informed by his biblical scholarship', Annette G. Aubret, 'Review Article: Old Princeton and Reformed Orthodoxy', *Westminster Theological Journal* 74:1 (Spring 2012), p.153.

[65] Lints, 'Two Theologies or One?', p.244-5.

[66] John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2010). Available at: https://www.perlego.com/book/2527146 (Accessed: 16 July 2025).

[67] Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

[68] Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, p.104.

[69] Murray, *Collected Writings*, 1:5.

> And the students of the Bible can as little be expected to be thus satisfied. There is a necessity, therefore, for the construction of systems of theology.[70]

Another criticism is that the religion is not concerned with doctrine. It is simply concerned with facts not dogmas, and with our life not our doctrine. Warfield comments that, 'The watchword of one of these schools of thought is that Christianity consists of facts, not dogmas: that of the other is that Christianity consists of life, not doctrine.'[71]

Regarding the former, Warfield noted that

> of late this stronger assertion has become exceedingly common. Christ, we are told, did not come to teach a doctrine…He came to found a religion…as faith and not dogma. Theology is killing religion, we are told; and the hope of the future rests on our killing theology first that religion may live.[72]

The idea here is, according to Warfield,

> What we rest upon for our salvation is not a body of theories, intellectual constructions, speculative ideas, but a series of mighty acts of God…It is not by any theory of the person of Christ that we are saved – it is by the great fact of the incarnation: it is not by any theory of the atonement that we are saved – it is by the great fact of Christ's death for us; it is not by any theory of His heavenly high-priesthood that we are saved, but by the great fact that He sits at the right hand of the Majesty on High and reigns over all things for His Church.[73]

Warfield responded:

> What Christianity consists in is facts that are doctrines, and doctrines that are facts. Just because it is a true religion…wrought out in history, its facts and doctrines entirely coalesce. All its facts are doctrines and all its doctrines are facts. The incarnation is a doctrine: no eye saw the Son of God descend from heaven and enter the virgin's womb: but if it be not a true fact as well, our faith is vain, we are yet in our sins. The resurrection of Christ is a fact: an occurrence in time level to the apprehension of men and witnessed by their adequate testimony: but it is at the same time the cardinal doctrine of Christianity.[74]

In other words, Warfield comments, 'It is what we call doctrine which gives all their significance to facts. A fact without doctrine is simply a fact not understood.'[75] Indeed,

> The whole Christianity of these facts resides in their meaning, in the ideas which are involved in them, but which are not independently gathered from them by each

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[70] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:2.
[71] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.28-29.
[72] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.26.
[73] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.29.
[74] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.34. 'It is to the historical Christ, and not to the Christ of theological construction, that we are to go the Christ that actually lived and died in Galilee, not the Christ of the Nicene Greeks or of the scholastics. And then this historical Christ Himself is calmly handed over to the tender mercies of unbelieving critics, with permission to do with Him what they list', Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.57.
[75] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.35.

> observer, but are attributed to them by those who interpret them to us – in a word, in the doctrines accompanying them.[76]

On the worst case of this objection, all facts were rejected apart from the so-called historical Christ. This was the position Warfield understood as Ritschlianism:

> Let historical criticism do its worst, let it evaporate into the mist of myth every fact on which men have been accustomed to found Christianity, Christianity will remain untouched: it is constituted by this one fact only – Jesus Christ. Such, then, is the Ritschlite position, in, at least, its most characteristic form.[77]

Here everything was reduced to 'the [fact of] "historical Christ", the Christ who lived and died in Galilee, and by His life of pure faith has left an indelible impression upon the world.'[78] This Christ, to be clear,

> is not the Christ who was born of a virgin, who was welcomed by angels, who wrought wonders, who, having died for our sins, rose again from the dead and ascended in bodily form into heaven – it is not this Christ who, according to them, is the one great constitutive fact of Christianity. It is the Christ of critical history: of whom we can say but this – that He lived and died and left behind Him the aroma of a life of faith. This is the one fact of which Christianity consists.[79]

Warfield noted the element of truth of this, but also the disastrous implications of the underlying meaning,

> Jesus Christ alone constitutes Christianity; in Him is included all that can be asked for, for the perfect religion. So be it. What Jesus Christ? The Jesus of the Gospels? Or the Jesus of Strauss? The Logos Jesus of John's Gospel? The heavenly Jesus of the Apocalypse? Or the purely earthly Jesus of Pfleiderer and Renan? Or even perchance the entirely imaginary Jesus of Pierson and Naber and Loman? It is an insult to our intelligence to tell us that it makes no difference to Christianity how these queries be answered. But the first beginnings of an answer to them introduce the dogmatic element. From which it follows at once that Christianity cannot exist without the dogma which it is the business of Systematic Theology to investigate and state.[80]

Warfield correctly observed,

> This man was the Son of God, we are told; He came in the flesh to save sinners; He gave Himself to death as a propitiation for their sins; and He rose again for their justification. Now, indeed, we have Christianity. But it is not constituted by the 'bare facts,' but by the facts as interpreted, and indeed by the facts as thus interpreted, and not otherwise.[81]

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[76] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.37.
[77] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.49. For a brief treatment of Ritschlianism, see Benjamin B. Warfield, 'The Ritschlian School' in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (ed. John E. Meeter; 2 vols.; Philipsburgh: P&R Publishing, 1970), 2:448-451.
[78] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.55.
[79] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.55-56.
[80] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.59-60.
[81] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.38.

If the theological was set aside for the mere 'facts' all that is left would be an 'eviscerated Christianity' which would 'no longer be worth the world's notice, and by…no longer worth the Christian's preservation'.[82]

So, doctrine, inseparable from facts, constitutes Christianity. What of the related objection: 'Christianity is a life, not a doctrine; he is a Christian man in whom this life is implanted; and the Bible itself is in the first instance a means of grace, not a text-book of theology.'[83]? Or again,

> Christian life is the mother of Christian doctrine. Life, then, is before doctrine, not merely in importance, but in time and doctrine is only a product of the Christian life. It follows, of course, at once that God does not reveal Himself except through and by means of the Christian life: there is and cannot be any such thing as an objective revelation…All Christian doctrine being thus but the manifestation of precedent Christian life, doctrine will, of course, vary as the Christian life varies.[84]

Berkhof similarly considers the teaching that, 'Christianity is not a doctrine but a life, and that it makes very little difference what we believe, if we but share the life of Christ.'[85] Lying behind current expressions like this is the shadow of Kant with his limiting of theoretical knowledge, scientific or otherwise, to the phenomenal world, rendering theology from the realm of science to faith[86] and the turn of systematics toward subjective experience in Schleiermacher.[87]

But to return to Warfield, he notes that, under this construction,

> doctrine fluctuates according to the life-movements of which it is only a reflection. And since life is movement, and vitality may be measured by richness of vital motion, it follows that changeableness in doctrine is not an evil, but a sign of abounding life. The more unstable a doctrine is, the more living it is: a really living Christianity, we are told, renders its doctrinal product peculiarly supple and malleable. In this, as it seems, we reach the very apotheosis of religious indifferentism.[88]

This raises unanswerable questions about the nature of Christianity itself, for 'what is to assure us that in the coming ages there may not spring out of her depths some consummate flower of religion as much surpassing Christianity as Christianity surpasses Fetishism?'[89] Or, even relating to the present,

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[82] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.57.
[83] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.62. Again, 'Christianity is ill-conceived if it is thought to consist in or to rest upon either facts or dogmas; it is a life, and for this life we depend solely on God, the ever- living Source of all life', Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.63.
[84] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.68.
[85] Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, p.26.
[86] Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, p.40.
[87] Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, p.40-41. Berkhof comments, 'There are, of course, serious objections to this conception of theology: (a) it divorces theology from its objective foundation in the Word of God, and bases it entirely on subjective experiences which have no normative value; (b) it robs theology of its positive character and reduces it to a purely descriptive science, describing historical and psychological phenomena instead of aiming at absolute truth; and (c) it involuntarily leads to a representation of the Christian religion as merely one of the many religions of the world, differing from them indeed in degree, but not in essence', Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, p.41.
[88] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.79.
[89] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.81.

> a religion independent of conceptions, 'dogmas,' would be confined to a religion of nature, and could possess nothing not common to all religions; and to proclaim Christianity independent of doctrine would be simply to cast off distinctive Christianity and revert to the fundamental natural religion.[90]

This manifests itself in the following reading of history,

> Thus as the religion of law succeeded the nature religions, the religion of love has succeeded the religion of law. But the stream still flows on…and our doctrines vary, age by age, in spite of ourselves...The river of the underlying spiritual life, and the river of intellectual concepts and doctrinal ideas dependent on the fluctuations of the spiritual life, inevitably flow on for ever.[91]

This is 'the formal renunciation of Christianity as anything else than one stage in the religious development of humanity'.[92]

There is, of course, again, some truth in the idea underlying this. So, Warfield notes,

> It is true that Christianity is a life, the life that is lived in communion with the Son of God, the life that is hid with Christ in God, the life of which it must be said that it is not we that live it, but Christ that lives it in us. The whole series of Christian facts, the whole body of Christian doctrines, do exist only in order to this life.[93]

However, Warfield explains that this is not the idea behind the championing of life over doctrine:

> What is meant by it is that the Christian life blooms and flourishes wholly independently of Christian conceptions, and that it is indifferent to the Christian life whether these conceptions – however fundamental – are known or not. Against this we protest with all the energy possible, and pronounce its proclamation a blow at distinctive Christianity itself.'[94]

Why does Warfield protest so much? Well, because he knows that the Bible places the weight on doctrine preceding and grounding life, not the other way round. So, he argues,

> the Epistles of Paul, for example…it is ever first the doctrine and then the life with him. The transition at the opening of the twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans is a typical example of his practice in this regard. Eleven chapters of doctrinal exposition had preceded; five chapters of precepts are to succeed: and he passes from the one to the other with what has been called his 'tremendous therefore': "I beseech you therefore, brethren" – "therefore" because all this is so. In these 'tremendous therefores' is revealed Paul's conception of the relation between truth and life.[95]

Warfield goes on to make the case,

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[90] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.83.
[91] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.69.
[92] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.69.
[93] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.64.
[94] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.85.
[95] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.87.

> We may think as we will; but it is very evident that the founders of Christianity earnestly believed, not that the so-called Word of God is the product of faith and its only use is to witness to the faith that lies behind it and gives it birth, but that the veritable Word of God is the seed of faith, that faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God, or, in other words, that behind the Christian life stands the doctrine of Christ, intelligently believed.[96]

Indeed, Warfield was adamant,

> In insisting, therefore, on the primacy of Christian doctrine…we have the consciousness of being imitators of Paul even as he was of Christ. How much the apostle made, not merely of the value of doctrine as the condition of life, but of the importance of sound doctrine! His boast, we will remember, is that he is not of the many who corrupt the truth, but that he, at least, has preached the whole counsel of God."[97]

In all of this Warfield is undoubtedly correct, and he captures his overall position well in saying, 'The character of our religion is, in a word, determined by the character of our theology.'[98]

He is also by no means unique in the case he made. Berkhof argues that

> Under the influence of Schleiermacher and Ritschl it has become quite customary in many circles to regard the Christian consciousness as the source of theology, the only source from which it derives its material.[99]

Thus, under this approach, 'Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech.'[100]

The fruits of this really dominate theological approaches today. Feelings, what is believed to be right dominates, not explicit scriptural teaching. Warfield also notes,

> It was Schleiermacher, of course, who gave this subjective twist to what he still spoke of as 'Dogmatics'. Dogmas to him were no longer authoritative propositions concerning God, but 'conceptions of the states of the Christian religious consciousness, set forth in formal statement'; and dogmatics was to him accordingly nothing more than the systematic presentation of the body of such dogmas in vogue in any given church at any given time.[101]

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[96] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.90.
[97] Warfield, *The Right of Systematic Theology*, p.91.
[98] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.253.
[99] Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, p.64. So, 'According to Schleiermacher, it is the task of Dogmatics to describe the feelings which the Church experiences in union with Jesus Christ, the Saviour. For him religion is neither knowledge nor moral action, but feeling, more specifically, a feeling of dependence on an ultimate reality, which arises only within the Christian community; and dogma is merely the intellectual expression or interpretation of the inner significance of this religious feeling. Experience rather than the Word of God is therefore the source of dogmas', Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, p.53.
[100] F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1956), p.76. Scripture does retain 'a certain normative significance…since it contains the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and describes the experiences of those who lived in immediate contact with Him. Because of their intimate association with Christ their experiences have normative significance for us,' Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, p.64-65.
[101] Warfield, 'The Task and Method of Systematic Theology', p.196-7.

What can be said against this quasi-mystical approach to theology? Berkhof lists six points, which are summarised below.[102] First, our hearts are not infallible guides. They themselves need to be guarded, 'Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life' (Proverbs 4:2). And that guard needs to be an external standard of right and wrong, Holy Scripture. Second, it is a truth that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor his ways our ways. So again, we need something external to us to rule our experience. Third, Christianity is a historical religion. Creation, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension are past events in history. These cannot be experienced as they were. Fourth, we are all impacted by the world around us. How can we be sure our consciousness is shaped by the Spirit, rather than by the spirit of the age? So Berkhof says, 'Absolute truth cannot be reached in that way, and yet this is the very thing at which dogmatic theology aims.'[103] Warfield himself notes,

> The interpretation of the data included in what we have learned to call 'the Christian consciousness,' whether of the individual or of the church at large, is a process so delicate, so liable to error, so inevitably swayed to this side or that by the currents that flow up and down in the soul, that probably few satisfactory inferences could be drawn from it, had we not the norm of Christian experience and its dogmatic implications recorded for us in the perspicuous pages of the written Word.[104]

Fifth, attempts to construct systematics this way, have simply not been successful. Sixth, no one really works this way…even those who profess to do so, place weight on Scripture.

A Systematic Theology that is Queen of the Sciences

Granting that these answers from Warfield, and others, are sufficient to meet the objections to Systematic Theology as 'queen of the sciences', it remains to offer some features of a theology which might justifiably be 'queen of the sciences'.

First, Systematic Theology is a Christian theology. That is, as a believing theology. In undertaking the theological task there is the need to 'Follow the pattern of the sound words…in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus' (2 Timothy 1:13). Theology is conducted in faith and love and in union with Christ Jesus. Theology is a task for believers. Theology is undertaken recognising that 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight' (Proverbs 9:10). All theological construction has at its heart the prayer, 'Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works (Psalm 119:27.)

John Murray rightly says,

> it is a travesty for a man not knowing the power of revelation to pose as an expositor of it…the Scriptures cannot be properly interpreted without the illumination of the Holy Spirit nor can they be properly studied as God's revelation apart from the sealing witness of the Spirit by whom alone we can be convinced that they are the Word of God.[105]

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[102] Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, p.66.
[103] Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, p.66.
[104] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.253.
[105] Murray, *Collected Writings*, 4:5. He continues, 'The person who addresses himself to the interpretation and formulation of the truth conveyed to us by revelation is destitute of the prime requisite if he is not imbued with the humility and enlightenment which the indwelling of the Holy Spirit imparts.'

Another Scottish theologian John Dick said,

> You ought therefore to begin, and to carry on your studies, with fervent prayer for the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ, who will lead you into all the truth, and fill you with joy and peace in believing. He who mingles humble and devout supplications with his studies, cannot fail to succeed.[106]

Warfield notes the theologian

> needs to be suffused at all times with a sense of the unspeakable worth of the revelation which lies before him as the source of his material, and with the personal bearings of its separate truths on his own heart and life; he needs to have had and to be having a full, rich and deep religious experience of the great doctrines with which he deals; he needs to be living close to his God, to be resting always on the bosom of his Redeemer, to be filled at all times with the manifest influences of the Holy Spirit.[107]

Second, Systematic Theology must also be, in the best sense, catholic. That is, theology is not to be undertaken in a spirit of partisan pride, but in the grand stream of the believing Christian tradition. No theologian invents Christianity, and no theologian exhausts Christianity. Where a Reformed systematician differs from brothers and sisters in Christ they must do so in love and humility.

Third, the 'queen of sciences' must be evangelical. That is, theology must be oriented towards the good news, and towards the one who is the good news, the Lord Jesus Christ. Theologians must be in the best sense of the word evangelicals, that is, gospel men. Systematic Theology must believe the centrality and vital importance of personal acceptance of the good news that Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Fourth, Systematic Theology must be covenantal. That is, Reformed theology places special importance on the idea of covenants in Scripture and takes redemptive history seriously. It gives great weight to the organic unity of the covenant of grace that flows through the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenant before coming into full flower in the New Testament revelation of Jesus Christ with the new covenant in his blood. So, representatively, Robert Rollock observes the importance of the covenant concept, 'all the word of God appertains to some covenant; for God speaks nothing to man without the covenant.'[108]

Fifth, theology worth the name is confessional. Reformed theology in its historical sense arose from the Reformation, where the old church was reformed, purified, cleansed. Whilst Reformed theology was, and is, radically biblical, it has from its inception been confessional.

What does this mean? It means that the Reformed tradition has taken on board the challenge of Scripture to be clear in what is taught, and to make that teaching clear to the world: 'What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2.). Creeds, ecclesiastical statements of the teaching of scripture, are a way of passing on the faith from one generation to another. Likewise, the church is called as follows: 'contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3). Creeds are one means of fulfilling that calling, of contending for the faith by displaying it to the world.

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[106] Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 1:12.
[107] Warfield, 'The Idea of Systematic Theology', p.271.
[108] Robert Rollock, *Select Works of Robert Rollock* (2 vols.; William M. Gunn, ed.; Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1844), 1:33.

Today the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Larger Catechism remain the richest of the Reformed Confessions, and embody the finest confessional theology.

Sixth, Systematic Theology must be ecclesial. Reformed theology is not carried out by individuals. It is only 'with all the saints' that any can 'comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge' (Ephesians 3:18-19). So, Richard Muller comments,

> The dogmatics of Post-Reformation Protestantism did not develop in a vacuum and was not formulated simply for the sake of classroom exercises in speculative thinking – it was churchly dogmatics.[109]

Practically that means current theologians look to the past contributions of other theologians as they undertake their own endeavours. John Murray says,

> There have been the periods of epochal contribution and advance. The reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is without question the most notable. It was then that the *opus magnum* of Christian theology was given to the church. It was then that creedal formulation reached its zenith. The architectonic theologies of the Protestant churches witness to the vigour and devotion with which the study of theology had been pursued. It was the golden age of precision and formulation. The theology that does not build upon these constructions or pretends to ignore them places a premium upon retrogression and dishonours the Holy Spirit by whose endowments and grace these epochal strides in understanding and presentation have been taken.[110]

Seventh, Systematic Theology must be God exalting. To return to Warfield:

> Read the great Reformed divines. The note of their work is exultation in God. How Calvin, for example, gloried and delighted in God! Every page rings with this note, the note of personal joy in the Almighty, known to be, not the all-wise merely, but the all-loving too.[111]

Eighth, Systematic Theology is progressive in a good sense. This has been considered already, but John Murray reminds us that 'The history of doctrine demonstrates the progressive development and we may never think that this progression has ever reached a finale. Systematic Theology is never a finished science nor is its task ever completed.'[112] He also states,

> We may not suppose that theological construction ever reaches definitive finality. There is the danger of a stagnant traditionalism and we must be alert to this danger, on the one hand, as to that of discarding our historical moorings, on the other.[113]

Perhaps Murray sums up his theological method best in stating

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[109] Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:31-32.
[110] Murray, *Collected Writings*, 4:7.
[111] Benjamin B. Warfield, 'The First Question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism', *The Princeton Theological Review* Vol. 6 No. 4 (October 1908), p.584.
[112] Murray, *Collected Writings*, 4:6.
[113] Murray, *Collected Writings*, 4:7-8.

> A theology that does not build upon the past ignores our debt to history and naively overlooks the fact that the present is conditioned by history. A theology that relies upon the past evades the demands of the present.[114]

This warning from Murray is needed. Theological formulation is not complete. Theologians are not mere curators of a theological museum. They must be marching forward, building on the past. And in this sentiment Murray is joined by Berkhof who argued the theologian 'should bend every effort to the advancement of the science of Dogmatics.'[115] He is also joined, as was seen earlier, by Warfield too,

> Systematic theology is therefore a progressive science. It will be perfected only in the minds and hearts of the perfected saints who at the end, being at last like God, shall see him as he is.[116]

Conclusion

The kind of Systematic Theology outlined above remains 'the queen of the sciences'. There is no higher or more noble pursuit in this world. So, it is fitting to close this article with a word from John Dick,

> To ascertain the character of God in its aspect towards us; to contemplate the display of his attributes in his works and dispensations; to discover his designs towards man in his original and his present state; to learn our duty to him, the means of enjoying his favour, the hopes which we are authorized to entertain, and the wonderful expedient by which our fallen race is restored to purity and happiness; these are the objects of theology, and entitle it to be pronounced the first of all the sciences in dignity and importance.[117]

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[114] Murray, *Collected Writings*, 4:9.

[115] Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, p.59. This is the balance Berkhof proposes: 'The dogmatician may not…proceed on the assumption that the doctrinal development of the past was one gigantic error, and that he must therefore begin his work de novo. This would reveal a lack of respect for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the past history of the Church, and give evidence of an undue amount of self-confidence. At the same time he must be severely critical of the system which he proposes, and allow for the possibility of a departure from the truth at some point or other. If he detects errors even in the dogmas of the Church, he must seek to remedy them in the proper way; and if he discovers lacunae, he should earnestly endeavor to supply what is lacking.'

[116] Warfield, 'The Task and Method of Systematic Theology', p.204.

[117] Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 1:8-9. Murray similarly comments, "systematic theology, of all sciences and disciplines, is seen to be the most noble, not one of cold, impassioned reflection but one that stirs adoring wonder and claims the most consecrated exercise of all our powers." Murray, *Collected Writings*, 4:4.

BOOK REVIEWS

Therefore the Truth I Speak. Scottish Theology 1500-1700, Donald Macleod, Mentor, 2020, hbk., 463 pages, £24.99.

From the Marrow Men to the Moderates. Scottish Theology 1700-1800, Donald Macleod, Mentor, 2023, hbk., 355 pages, £24.99.

In the history of Reformed theology Scotland has made numerous major contributions which are of abiding significance. These two volumes, the latter completed shortly before Donald Macleod's death in 2023, provide an up-to-date survey and analysis of Scottish theology over three centuries, beginning with the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Therefore the Truth I Speak begins with the early Reformers, Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart, who both paid for their faithful witness with their lives. Macleod then devotes two chapters to the life and theology of John Knox, giving an accurate survey of his work in its varied aspects, and offering robust replies to the many caricatures that have surrounded Knox for centuries. The following chapters consider in turn Andrew Melville, the Second Book of Discipline, Robert Bruce and Alexander Henderson, skilfully blending history and theology to highlight the contribution that each made to the development of Reformed theology in Scotland and further afield. The Scots were never isolationist in outlook, but were fully abreast of developments in theology in England and in Europe as well. Their influence also extended to Europe, where their standing was high among the Reformed.

Macleod next devotes two chapters to the towering figure of Samuel Rutherford. He surveys Rutherford's life and ministry, setting his weighty theological and pastoral works in their proper historical context. Included are his letters to his many correspondents and works such as the series of sermons published as *The Trail and Triumph of Faith* and *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself*. Once again familiar caricatures are addressed and refuted. The second of the two chapters deals with Rutherford's famous treatise on government entitled *Lex, Rex*. Rutherford is shown to stand within the mainstream of Reformed thought on government at that time. In assessing the influence of *Lex, Rex* Macleod notes the book's impact on events in Scotland and England, before assessing its influence on the American Revolution. It would not appear that the Founding Fathers were acquainted with Rutherford's work, and the main influence on events in America was in fact John Witherspoon.

The next Scot to be considered is David Dickson. The first of two chapters provides an enlightening study of the involvement of Dickson, along with others such as Welch and Livingstone, in the revivals experienced in Scotland in those days, and the focus is rightly kept on the sovereignty of God in revival. The second chapter on Dickson provides what, for this reviewer, is the highlight of the book, an examination of the roots and early development of Scottish Covenant Theology. It is both an instructive and also a heart-warming study, which will repay careful consideration. Particular attention is paid to the Covenant of Redemption, established within the Trinity, expounded in Dickson's 1656 work *Therapeutica Sacra*. The intricacies of Dickson's Bible-based arguments take the reader right into the heart of God's provision for the salvation of sinners before time began. In his penultimate chapter Macleod turns to the reaction to Covenant Theology which developed in Scotland, especially in the work of Tom and James Torrance. Their misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Covenant Theology are surgically dissected, and clear biblical responses are provided.

The final chapter looks at the curious figure of Presbyterian minister turned Anglican bishop, Robert Leighton. A man of contradictions, no doubt, Leighton was also the author of a most highly regarded

commentary on 1 Peter. The chapter is a fair and balanced assessment of a man who was able to live with compromises in church life which most of the others studied in this volume were totally unable to accept.

The last book written by Donald Macleod before his death was *From the Marrow Men to the Moderates*, which takes the history of Scottish theology up to 1800. The same thorough and scholarly approach to these significant events is evident in this volume. First we have two chapters on the great pastor and theologian Thomas Boston. The first chapter covers his life and ministry, whilst the second studies Boston's most famous theological publication, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* (1720). Macleod notes that 'unlike the treatises of the great doctors of Reformed Orthodoxy, [Boston's] approach is both directly exegetical and unashamedly homiletical' (p.39).

The following two chapters deal with what has become known as the 'Marrow Controversy'. The dispute in the General Assembly concerned a book published in 1645, entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* and written by Edward Fisher. It was rediscovered and brought to prominence by Thomas Boston, who published a volume of notes on the book in 1726. *The Marrow* became a centre of theological controversy that touched on issues such as grace, justification and the nature of God's covenant, including the difference (if any) between the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace. As Macleod notes of the controversy, 'It clarified the fulness, freeness and universality of the gospel offer' (p.111).

The first secession from the Church of Scotland, led by Ebenezer Erskine in 1633 is the next matter for consideration. Two chapters consider Erskine himself and then other theologians involved in the Secession. The following two chapters focus on James Fraser of Brae and his views on the extent of the atonement expounded in his *Treatise of Justifying Faith*, written between 1677 and 1679, but not published until 1728. The question 'For whom did Christ die?' is still a live one and there is much of interest in these chapters.

The remaining three chapters make sad reading as Macleod charts the influence of rationalistic philosophy which gave rise to the movement in Scottish theology and church life known as 'Moderatism'. There is much that resonates with contemporary circumstances as unbiblical confidence in human reason gradually came to dominate in the Church of Scotland, and there are warnings here that need to be heeded by the church in every age.

These two volumes are essential reading for anyone interested in the contribution of the Scottish church to theology in the three centuries covered. Macleod had a deep knowledge of the original sources and an acutely critical mind, both of which are abundantly evident in these pages. Engagement with his writing is always profitable, even if the conclusion is occasionally to disagree.

David McKay

The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary, Volume 1, Introduction: Christ and the Psalms, Christopher Ash, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2024, hbk., 464 pages, £29.99.

It cannot have escaped the attention of anyone interested in psalm exposition that in 2024 Christopher Ash, writer-in-residence at Tyndale House, Cambridge, published a major four-volume work on the Book of Psalms. Ash has devoted a considerable portion of his life to the study of the Psalms, and has previously published a two-volume work on the Psalms and a stand-alone book on Psalm 119 (both with the Proclamation Trust), and a single volume on the Psalter and a study guide (both with the Good Book Company). But his latest commentary, the fruit of two decades of study, and extending to more than two thousand five hundred pages, is surely his crowning achievement, his *magnum opus*. This review will be of Volume One, the introduction to the set, in which Ash explains his approach and defends the Christological reading of the Book of Psalms.

Ash's commitments are immediately evident in his Preface, Overview, and Introduction. He writes with two convictions - that the Psalms are central to the life of the Christian church and that Christ is central to the Psalms. 'I am persuaded,' he writes, 'that Christ is so integral and central to the meaning [of each psalm] (the original meaning) that exegesis cannot accurately be done without first considering how we should orient ourselves to the psalm in the light of Christ' (p. xxv). Christ meets us in the Psalms to sanctify us and lead us in worship - so '[i]f we do not reach the place where we can sing, pray, hear, and praise with the Psalter, all the hermeneutics in the world will have achieved nothing of value' (p. xxv). Although not committed to exclusive psalmody, Ash's study has led him to the correct conclusion that the Psalms must be appropriated not only in individual devotion but also corporate worship. Indeed, he makes a very compelling case that Ephesians 5:18–20 and Colossians 3:16 place the Psalms at the centre of the 'ministry of music' - 'the regular practice of thoughtful, heartfelt singing of psalms to one another is an instrument God uses to contribute to a rich fullness of the Holy Spirit in our lives and churches. It would be hard to think of a greater blessing' (p.15). Amen! But why, then, sing anything other than Psalms?

The remainder of the book comprises three parts in which Ash considers 'Christ and the Psalms,' 'Doctrine and the Psalms,' and 'Christian History and the Psalms.' The first of these is 'the kernel of the argument of this volume and of the thinking that undergirds the commentary' (p.27). Related to it are two important appendices that tabulate Psalm quotations and allusions in the New Testament. Ash's method is to work first from the Psalms to the New Testament, exploring the ways in which the Psalms indicate that they look for a future fulfilment, and then to work from the New Testament back to the Psalter, investigating how Christ and the apostles interpreted the Psalms.

A long chapter that summarises the results of this methodology is rich in helpful material. Ash shows that there are three ways of hearing and speaking the Psalms. First, we hear in them the 'upward' voice of Christ as a man engaged in prayer and praise; but we also hear the 'downward' voice of prophecy and wisdom in Christ, 'as the Holy Spirit rests on him in his human nature and shines out from him the light of his divine nature' (p.100); only then can *we* speak by 'the overflow from Christ our head to the church…It is as men and women in Christ, members of his body, that we appropriate the Psalms today' (p.101).

At this point Ash begins to reflect on Christ as both God and man, asking the important theological question whether 'in the Psalms we hear the echoes of his [the Word's] eternal speech' (p.101). He answers in the affirmative. Indeed, it is heartening that in Part Two of the volume Ash shows that he takes classical Christian theology seriously. For example, in Chapter 7, 'Incarnation and Christology: The Emotions of Jesus in His Human Nature,' Ash goes so far as to note the importance of the patristic terminology of *anhypostasis* and *enhypostasis* in the hypostatic union (p.138, fn.3). It is this classical

Christian theology that provides a stable interpretive foundation on which to build answers to questions such as, how can Christ pray the psalms of repentance (Chapter 9) and the psalms of imprecation (Chapter 10)?

The third part of the volume is a survey of how the Psalms have been interpreted in Christian history. Covering two thousand years in a mere hundred pages, this survey is necessarily 'cursory and shallow' (p. 75). The chapters on the patristic period ('Discerning the Whole Christ in the Psalter') and the medieval age ('Understanding the Fourfold Sense of Scripture') are particularly valuable. Ash alerts us to the wealth of interpretation and interpretive method that lies in the first thousand years or so of church history - wealth that the Reformers accessed, but of which we are, by and large, ignorant (as I look at my own collection of Psalm commentaries, I see that it is heavily biased towards works published after the late nineteenth century).

In the chapter on the post-Reformation period to the present day ('The Resilience of Christ-Centered Readings despite the Rise of Skepticism') Ash is prepared to call out the emperor of form and genre criticism for wearing no clothes. In contrast, Ash gives a qualified welcome to the turn towards the canonical interpretation of the Psalter. But insofar as this turn still partakes of the Enlightenment separation between theology and Biblical studies, it will fall short of its true potential to bear fruit. It is clear throughout this historical survey that Ash approves of interpretations of the Psalms that are robustly focused on Jesus Christ.

While obviously designed to be read as an introduction to the following three volumes that comprise the Psalm-commentary proper, the first volume is worthy of being read and re-read alone. It very well written, beautifully presented, and easy to read. More importantly, Ash unashamedly places Jesus Christ 'front and centre' - not a docetic Christ, nor a merely human Jesus, but the unique God-man who spoke by his Spirit through the psalmists about his sufferings and his subsequent glory. Ash urges us to attend more carefully to Christ singing in the Psalms, so that with more faith and understanding we and our congregations will sing the Psalms with Christ.

John Watterson

Perfect Priest for Weary Pilgrims: A Theology of Hebrews, Dennis E. Johnson, Crossway, 2024. pbk., 193pages, $24.99.

Hebrews is one of the most theologically rich and pastorally searching books of the New Testament, but although its overall thrust is clear, some of the details are demanding to the average reader. Dennis Johnson has done the church a great service by writing this overview of the theology of Hebrews, part of the excellent New Testament Theology series by Crossway. Although the book is relatively brief, it is hard to think of a major theological theme that Johnson doesn't deal with. The book is short enough not to be overwhelming, but long enough to genuinely introduce the key themes of the book and treat them in more than a superficial way. Johnson draws on decades of research and teaching the book of Hebrews and has a profound grasp of its language, structure, theology and secondary literature. He doesn't devote much time to discussing the authorship of the letter - just one paragraph and a footnote on p.5 - but this makes no difference to the usefulness of the book.

Johnson interprets Hebrews as a sermon to a particular congregation and shows how this affects our reading of it today. It requires us to listen to the voice of God as he presently speaks and then to respond to his voice. It is a 'word of exhortation' after all, which alerts us to the author's 'profoundly pastoral purpose' in all his biblical exposition and theological argument (p.9). Reading Hebrews is no mere academic exercise, so neither is Johnson's book. Both aim at transforming lives. 'Each step in this preacher's argument for Jesus's superiority lays the theological foundation for a direct exhortation to his congregation' (p.10).

Chapter 1 introduces us to the situation of the original readers, highlighting how their situation and ours, like the people of Moses's and David's day, can be understood as 'a band of pilgrims traversing a wilderness on the way to their heavenly homeland' (p.19). They were not the first generation to experience trials and temptations, but in Jesus Christ they have a surpassingly greater help than God's people had ever experienced before. Johnson expands on this in chapter 2, as he traces the historical trajectory of redemptive history and locates the first readers 'in the context of their privileged place in the outworking of God's redemptive plan.' (p.57). They live in the last days, heralded by the coming of Jesus Christ, in which the transition from old covenant to new covenant has escalated both the blessings and the penalties of the covenant.

The way in which Hebrews interprets the Old Testament is a fundamental issue for our reading of the book, since the author builds his case on a careful reading of biblical texts, especially a close reading of Psalm 110. His hermeneutical method can be surprising to modern readers, and so Johnson spends chapter 3 laying out the interpretive principles followed by Hebrews.

Chapters 4-6 bring us to the heart of Hebrews' theology: the priestly ministry of Jesus, by which he mediates the new covenant. Chapter 4 treats the Christology of the book, showing how 'the great Christological motifs revealed in the rest of the Scripture converge in Hebrews…' (p.98), namely the Son's eternal deity, true humanity and messianic sonship, making him such a perfect Saviour. Chapter 5 then turns to Jesus' priestly office 'in the order of Melchizedek', the main theme of the letter and its longest section (4.14 to 10.25). Johnson shows how Jesus's priestly qualifications far surpass those of Aaron and his descendants. 'Jesus has been perfected…not through external rites but through his own blameless fulfilment of God's will…' (p.122). Having dealt with the person and the office of Jesus Christ the perfect priest, chapter 6 then unpacks the work he does in his mediatorial ministry for his people. 'His once-for-all sacrifice is the basis for his ceaseless intercession, securing for his people access to the life-giving presence of God' (p.125).

Hebrews is a word of exhortation and so it is fitting that Johnson closes in chapter 7 by summarising the hortatory material throughout the letter. 'These hortatory sections return again and again to one specific response (expressed in a variety of ways) that the various dimensions of Jesus's superiority should evoke from the hearers: they must endure in faith, holding fast their shared confession by encouraging each other and drawing near to God in worship and prayer' (p.145). Here he deals particularly with the three passages warning against apostasy (2.1-4, 6.4-8, 10.26-31), making clear that they are genuine warnings to those in danger of falling away from the visible church, while in no way conflicting with the doctrine of the preservation of the saints.

Johnson's writing is, as always, exegetically precise, lucid and pastorally sensitive. Perhaps it is a little surprising, given that he emphasises practical exhortation as the whole point of the theological exposition in the letter, that there is not more explicit pastoral application in chapters 1-6 on the basis of the theology expounded, ('each theological theme leads into a hortatory section that applies the truth just presented…These hortatory passages, far from being sidebars or interruptions in the theological argument, express the objectives toward which the didactic discussions are driving' (p.145)).

This is a scholarly book but accessible to pastors and students, as well as any believer who wants to gain a deeper understanding of the theological flow of Hebrews and a stronger grasp of the comfort to be found in Christ's high priestly work for his people.

Warren Peel

Return from Exile and the Renewal of God's People, Nicholas G. Piotrowski, Crossway, 2025, pbk., 207 pages, £13.99.

At the Reformed Theological College in Belfast I have been privileged to teach a course on the Old Testament writing prophets. In preparation for that course, it dawned on me that *all* the prophets, not just some of them, are connected with the exile, from Israel or from Judah. For some, like Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah, the exile is still in the future. For others, such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, the exile is, or becomes, a present reality. For yet others, like Haggai and Zechariah, the exile is a horror to look back on. In this book Nicholas Piotrowski takes the concept of exile and seeks to apply it to the whole story of the Bible.

The story which Piotrowski tells us builds from the very first verse of Genesis and takes us to the end of Revelation. A book with that scope demands our attention. In the beginning God creates the heavens and the earth. These two realms of space and matter were originally in harmony with the LORD God coming to meet regularly with those he made on earth in Eden. Eden, therefore, was what the author calls 'a cosmic crossroads' (p.14), a form of heaven on earth, a nexus of both. God encouraged the couple to spread his heavenly glory across the world. However, sin, disobeying God's one prohibition, means exclusion from the tree of life. Adam and Eve are exiled eastwards from Eden, although the promise of a Saviour is made before they leave. There is a way back into Eden but cherubim with a flaming sword bar that way. Since exile away from life means death Piotrowski often repeats, 'Exile is a form of death, and death is a mark of being in exile' (p.20).

He is building up a number of keywords such as 'exile'; 'death'; 'glory'; 'life'; 'the way'; 'west/east'; and, as he moves out from Eden, 'wilderness' 'sacrifice' and 'resurrection', which are flexible enough to tell the whole Bible story. God calls Abram westward to a special land. Abram builds altars in different parts of the land to mark it as a holy place, a new Eden. Israel goes down to Egypt (effective exile), but through the sacrifice of the Passover lambs they move out of death, passing through the wilderness into life. The tabernacle is a portable Eden and the high priest represents a kingdom of priests, all humanity before their Maker. On approaching the land of promise, Joshua meets a man at the end of the way with a sword on the east side of holy ground – this is Genesis language and speaks of re-entering Eden. One from the line of Judah must build a permanent dwelling for God's name. However, because of the sinful hearts of God's people, beginning with the king, there is division and the biggest crisis in the Old Testament, physical exile for both northern and southern kingdoms takes place.

As Piotrowski says, 'Metaphors, images, and types of return from exile are simply everywhere in the Bible!' (p.68). He lets the seriousness of the physical exile sink in, but then shows how Jesus brings these themes together in Himself. In two different chapters Piotrowski has a refreshing view of the Psalms, linking all of the five books to exile. One connection he doesn't make is the distance from heaven to earth Jesus must travel in Psalm 103:11 in the exilic book 4 of the Psalms, in order to reconcile and resurrect believers by bearing our sins as far away as the east is from the west (Ps.103:12).

For those versed in biblical theology, the whole book is a treasure trove of rich, fruitful and compelling connections. Two added bonuses are, firstly, the series of charts which, stage by stage, builds up the full biblical picture of exile and return, and, secondly, literary references to such as C.S. Lewis's Narnia and Tolkien's Middle Earth. Piotrowski is also intent on pushing forward from tabernacle to temple to the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and on to the New Jerusalem. There is something provisional about the believer's life until all the images he handles coalesce, when, for all eternity, the dwelling place of God will be with man (Rev.21:3), when God's people will be fully and finally

renewed. Piotrowski makes a good case, generally in simple, jargon-free language. This reviewer did not find one instance where he thought a metaphor had been pushed too far. One little quibble though – something seems to have happened with the page numbers in the indices, but if you subtract 16 from each page reference everything will work. I challenge you to read this book and not be both stimulated and excited!

Stephen Neilly

The Nicene Creed, Kevin DeYoung, Crossway, 2025, pbk., 93 pages, £9.99.

As the Nicene Creed was first produced 1700 years ago, it is no surprise to find many books and articles on the subject appearing in this calendar year of 2025. This book by the prolific author, Kevin DeYoung, must rank among the most succinct of such publications. However, that imparts great value to it as an introduction to what the author suggests is, after the Bible, 'the most important Christian text ever written.'

Such an introduction is all the more necessary for at least two reasons. First of all, among the members of many Reformed and Evangelical churches the Nicene Creed is not at all well known, and this succinct overview may encourage believers to become more acquainted with it. Secondly, given the complicated historical background to the Creed, and the complex theological issues relating to it, the simplicity and clarity of DeYoung's book is to be welcomed.

The author delves into the historical origins, the theological meaning, and the modern relevance of the Creed in a most effective manner. The sixth chapter is of particular value in explaining the Creed's doctrine of the church. The author explains the four adjectives which the Creed uses to describe the church (One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic) in a way that will remove much misunderstanding and confusion.

Above all else, the author's perceptive observations in the concluding pages about the continuing relevance of the Creed are well worth reading. These six observations are as follows: the Creed stresses the importance of believing the right thing; that new statements of doctrine are often necessary to combat new errors; that the Creed models for us the central importance of the doctrine of the Trinity; that the Creed underscores the importance of religion (in the right sense of the word) for Christian life and worship; that the Creed is not embarrassed to view Christianity with a soteriological focus; and, lastly, that the Creed very appropriately ends on a note of expectation and hope.

DeYoung's book will not answer all the questions relating to the Nicene Creed, and experts in church history will seek a more detailed treatment of the issues. However, it does provide a very helpful introduction for the general reader who wishes to become better acquainted with one of the most important doctrinal formulations in the history of the Christian Church. And this book does help to prove that there is some truth in the old adage, 'The best things often come in small packages.'

Raymond Blair

The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes, Nancy R Pearcey, Baker Books, 2023, hbk, 344 pages, £17.99.

Nancy Pearcey has been described as 'America's pre-eminent evangelical Protestant intellectual'. This reviewer believes that this description is perfectly justified from the evidence of previous books she has written. For example, *Love Thy Body* is a must read for anyone attempting to navigate the perceived complexities that surround gender issues in our modern world.

This latest publication from the pen of this highly esteemed author is a biblically balanced defence of the respective roles of husband and wife in the divinely ordained institution of marriage. It is written, in some respects, against the background of a growing negativity that is appearing in the public domain about men and their role in modern society. For example, recent books bear the following titles, 'I Hate Men' and 'Are Men Necessary'.

The contrast which appears throughout this book is between what Pearcey calls 'the Good Man' and 'the Real Man'. The 'Good Man' has characteristics which are based on biblical ideals. The author cites a group of cadets at West Point who defined the characteristics of the 'Good Man' as: 'Honour, duty, integrity, sacrifice, do the right thing, stand up for the little guy, be a provider, be a protector'. In contrast they defined the 'Real Man' as: 'tough, strong, never shows weakness, wins at all costs, plays through the pain, be competitive, get rich, get laid'. These cadets, Nancy acknowledges, have inadvertently defined the tension that young men experience today, especially in our western culture. They face this dilemma, 'will I follow my biblical informed conscience and be a 'Good Man' or will I succumb to pervasive cultural pressure and be a 'Real Man'?' As the author points out, it is the so called 'Real Man' who hits the headlines and has tarnished the image of masculinity in the minds of many, especially women.

The Christian church, Pearcey recognizes, is certainly not immune from giving rise to this negative image. This is because some men, in positions of authority within the church, have been found guilty of sexual harassment and assault. This has been a major contributing factor to what Pearcey calls 'the toxic war on masculinity'.

The mistake that many in our culture make is to equate masculinity with men's bad behaviour. As a corrective Pearcey directs her readers to a biblical world view which 'tells us that men were originally created to live by the ideal of the 'Good Man', exercising traits such as honour, courage, fidelity and self-control'. Pearcey then informs her readers that 'a healthy society is one that teaches and encourages a God-centered [sic] view of masculinity'.

Throughout much of this book, the God-centred view of masculinity, is what the author sets out to achieve and does so very effectively. She handles the subject of male headship within marriage, and clearly shows how that biblical model has been taken and abused by self-centred, abusive husbands. She then takes us back to the pre-industrial revolution when most men worked on farms or at trades either at home or near home. This meant that they were closely involved in family life and were available to fulfil their domestic responsibilities. Boys grew up in close proximity to their father and learned, through working alongside him, from an early age, what it looked like to be a loving husband and good father.

The post-industrial revolution period, running into our modern era, has created a situation where husbands and fathers are often away from home for long periods. In fact, in many homes in the 21st century, fathers are no longer present and frequently when present, have abdicated headship responsibilities. This distortion, the author rightly believes, leaves children, especially boys, growing up with a grossly warped view of masculinity.

This reviewer believes that the Christian Church is indebted to Pearcey for the extensive research she has carried out in writing this book, and also for the challenging conclusions that she presents. She writes in a compelling, popular style, which makes the book accessible to a wide readership.

Others may want to develop the subject matter of this volume a stage further by taking a more theological and covenantal approach. As it stands this book is a must-read for the preacher in the pulpit and the member in the pew as a timely corrective to the distortions that have crept into the male/female gender debate in the 21st century.

Robert McCollum

BOOK NOTICES

The Shadow of Christ in the Book of Job, C. J. Williams, Crown and Covenant Publications, 2024, pbk., 111 pages, $11.00.

The Book of Job presents many challenges to readers and preachers. It is clear that the book conveys important instruction regarding the nature of suffering and the sovereignty of God, but C J Williams argues that there is a deeper and more significant dimension to understanding the book and drawing help from it. Williams, who is Professor of Old Testament Studies at the RP Seminary in Pittsburgh, contends that we must see that Christ and his work are central to God's revelation in this book. He begins by considering the nature of 'typology' by which older interpreters have generally approached the Old Testament. He then sets out what he calls the 'messianic trajectory' by which the presence of Christ is to be detected here. His central assertion is that Job is a type of Christ in humiliation and subsequent exaltation. Without denying the presence of teaching on, for example, suffering, Williams says, 'I believe that the greatest riches of this book are found in its prophetic testimony to the redemptive suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ' (p.xiv). Rather than working through the book consecutively, Williams examines key themes such as the poetry of suffering, the role of Job's friends, the Mediator foreseen and finally what the Book of Job means today. His concise, accessible, yet scholarly study is a valuable tool to enable us to see in the Book of Job the heart of the gospel and the hope that God's people have in Christ.

Reformed Systematic Theology. Volume 4 Church and Last Things, Joel R Beeke and Paul M Smalley, Crossway, 2024, hbk., 1360 pages, $65.00.

This fourth volume of *Reformed Systematic Theology* by Beeke and Smalley completes the massive survey of the entire field of Systematics undertaken by these two authors. Based on Beeke's class lecture notes, developed into fully written form by Smalley, these volumes are a major contribution to the field and will shape much Reformed instruction in future years. As was the case with previous volumes, we are presented here with a wide-ranging exposition of the Reformed understanding of biblical teaching on the areas in question, namely ecclesiology and eschatology. The Scriptures are handled with proper reverence as the supreme standard of truth, and insights are drawn from the history of theology, with a significant role given (as we would expect from these authors) to the Puritans and theologians of the Further Reformation in Europe. The section on ecclesiology covers all the main issues regarding the nature and life of the church. There is a wealth of helpful material here. We may note some issues on which we would disagree with the authors. They argue not for Presbyterianism as the divinely mandated form of church government, but for a strong connectionalism characteristic of the Dutch tradition. They advocate the singing of psalms extensively in public worship, without advocating their exclusive use, and they accept a limited use of instrumental accompaniment. The section on eschatology covers personal eschatology (death, the intermediate state, resurrection, final glorification) and also general eschatology (the return of Christ, the final judgment, heaven and hell). The reality of hell is clearly spelled out and the glories of heaven are faithfully expounded. On the issue of the millennium the authors argue against premillennialism, but avoid more definite commitment to one position (amillennial or postmillennial). This is a valuable addition to the ever-growing list of textbooks on systematic theology and will well repay careful and prayerful study.

The Elders of the People, Drew Gordon, Grassmarket Press, 2025, hbk., 156 pages, $10.00

The eldership in Christ's church is often poorly understood. In fact it is frequently misunderstood, with ideas about elders being the congregation's spokesmen to rein in the minister being far from rare. We need to have a well-grounded grasp of the biblical teaching on the subject of elders, so that our presbyterian church government is seen to be the God-given pattern (and not merely tradition) and also so that elders and people understand the role that these men exercise. Drew Gordon's contribution to the series of popular titles published by Grassmarket Press (an imprint of Crown and Covenant, the RPCNA publishing house) is very well suited to achieving both of these aims. Step by step Gordon takes readers through the basics of biblical eldership - the role of elders, the pattern for leadership (authoritative, serving, and, the main focus, shepherding), the process of becoming an elder, the qualifications for elders, the election and ordaining of elders (reflecting Gordon's RPCNA context), the practice of eldership, and the elder and his family. The book is full of biblical truth and also reflects Gordon's more than 30 years as an elder. The chapter on the qualifications for elders is particularly well done. It is an extremely practical study, with many examples of the principles being put into action. In keeping with the Grassmarket series, the writing is very accessible, and this will be a go-to volume for pastors, elders and congregations that will be of great value to Presbyterians and, perhaps, even some non-Presbyterians. Highly recommended.

Ezra and Nehemiah. The Quest for Restoration, Dale Ralph Davis, Christian Focus, 2025, pbk., 207 pages, £14.99.

Former pastor and Old Testament professor Dale Ralph Davis continues to provide profoundly helpful expositions of Scripture which are accessible to a wide range of readers. His latest volume covers two closely related OT books which are often undervalued, namely Ezra and Nehemiah. Set in the days of the return of many Israelites to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, both books trace how God acted to fulfil his promise of return made through the prophets many years earlier. The emphasis of the record is on the faithfulness of God, despite the failings of his people. Step by step the rebuilding is accomplished, beginning with the temple and concluding with the city walls. The record traces both the progress of the work and the obstacles encountered in the shortcomings of the Israelites and the vigorous opposition of their enemies. In his usual careful and scholarly way Davis works through the text of both books, untangling complexities and making clear the meaning of each chapter. This proper approach means, for example, that he soes not treat Nehemiah as a kind of textbook on leadership (a common approach), but draws lessons on leadership where appropriate. Each chapter is analysed and the study structured in ways that are an example to preachers and teachers – the temptation to be avoided being the easy way in which Davis' work can be taken over wholesale, leading to many sermons which sound remarkably (and recognisably!) like Davis. A resource to consult at the end of sermon preparation, not the beginning. Davis provides numerous illustrations, often from baseball or American Civil war history, which some find helpful and others infuriating. That aside, this volume is another great resource for deepening understanding and application of a neglected part of the Word of God.

Behold My Servant. Sermons on Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, John Calvin, translated from the French by Robert White, Banner of Truth Trust, 2025, hbk., 135 pages, £15.00.

Robert White, who formerly taught in the department of French Studies in the University of Sydney, Australia, has an outstanding record of making available the sermons of John Calvin preached in French in Geneva. His translations include the outstanding series on 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, published by the Banner of Truth Trust. His clear and vigorous translations, faithfully reflecting Calvin's preaching style, give readers as powerful an impression of the reformer's expositions as it is possible to have without access to the French originals. Between July 1556 and August 1559 (interrupted by a period of ill health) Calvin preached 343 sermons on Isaiah, recorded by his regular stenographer Denis Raguenier. Some of the manuscript sermons have sadly been lost, and of this large quantity only eleven were published during his lifetime. This makes the availability of the seven on Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12, translated in this volume, especially precious. This passage of Isaiah is full of Christ, in his humiliation and exaltation, and was crucial in Christ's self-understanding and in the New Testament explanation of his redemptive work. Calvin, as always, preaches through the text verse by verse and offers both exegetical insight and pastoral application. These sermons are not merely historical curiosities but offer ample food for the soul. White's translations make Calvin speak as a twenty-first century preacher, without anachronisms, and are to be highly recommended.

David McKay