

# REFORMED FAITH & PRACTICE

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**REFORMED FAITH & PRACTICE**  
**THE JOURNAL OF REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

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— **Introducing *Reformed Faith & Practice*** —

With this issue Reformed Theological Seminary presents *Reformed Faith & Practice: The Journal of Reformed Theological Seminary* to the Reformed and evangelical community. We are pleased to inaugurate this online journal during the school's fiftieth anniversary. The RTS faculty has grown to a size, now spread across several campuses, which we believe is capable of producing a quality journal, and we are eager, in this jubilee year, to exercise our continuing stewardship of the convictions that led to the founding of the Seminary in 1966.

The history of American Presbyterianism is a reminder that seminary journals can be very influential – for good or for ill. The “majestic testimony” of Princeton Theological Seminary would not have had nearly the effect it did without the publishing organs that disseminated its teaching, establishing it as a leading voice of international Calvinism. Beginning with the *Biblical Repertory* in 1825 and continuing through many name changes, Princeton used the printed word to uphold and propagate the Reformed understanding of the faith for over a century. Conversely, Sean Michael Lucas (in his recent history of the founding of the Presbyterian Church in America) notes that the erosion of Calvinistic orthodoxy in the Southern Presbyterian Church caught many conservatives unaware, because it took place largely through “a musty theological journal,” in this case, the *Union Seminary Review*. This history underscores the importance of stating our goals and objectives.

We write from convictions that comport with the mission of RTS, which is “to serve the church by preparing its leaders, through a program of graduate theological education, based upon the authority of the inerrant Word of God, and committed to the Reformed faith.” An ecclesial focus will, we hope, be especially prominent in these pages as we seek (in the language of the RTS vision statement) to serve Christ's church “in all branches of evangelical Christianity, especially Presbyterian and Reformed churches.” Thus our pledge is that we will commend the Reformed faith with a particular view toward the well-being of Reformed churches. While we aim to maintain high levels of scholarship, we write as servants of the church. Even more specifically, we seek to reach alumni of Reformed Theological Seminary with hope that *RF&P* will be an ongoing source of wisdom and continuing education in the work of pastoral ministry. As our title suggests, we plan to give particular attention to

the relationship between doctrine and life. Our faith should inform the practice of the Christian life, and that practice must, in turn, reinforce our doctrinal commitments.

In launching this journal we recognize that we join a crowded field in publishing, print and electronic, that vies for the interest of readers. We publish with respect for other journals, to many of which our faculty regularly contribute, and we strive for cordial conversation with these other voices. We hope that humility will characterize the tone of our offerings. But we also write with confidence, firmly persuaded that the Word of God and the Reformed confessions have answers to the biblical and theological questions and the cultural challenges of our age.

*RF&P* is edited by members of the faculty on behalf of the entire body, and most of the contributions will come from faculty of the several RTS campuses. Our voice will be united but not uniform. The faculty of the Seminary manifests the diversity of Reformed confessionalism in our day and we expect the pages of this journal to do the same.

*RF&P* will publish three times a year, and each issue will contain several sections: articles and book reviews, a few discoveries from our Reformed past, and occasional tastes of campus community life – excerpts from classroom lectures, chapel presentations, and lunchtime conversations.

We welcome feedback from our readers. Comments can be emailed to [editor@journal.rts.edu](mailto:editor@journal.rts.edu).

**John R. Muether, editor**  
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## **Divine Fullness: A Dogmatic Sketch**

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Theologians have lots of words. Specifically when speaking of God, the scope and mystery of the Godhead demand that we have many words at hand to attest his transcendent goodness and might. The reader will remember the words at the end of the Gospel according to John: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn. 21:25). Attesting the breadth of the Savior’s light requires many words, indeed too many for any one book to bear. How much more true must this be when we speak of the glory of the whole Godhead? While we speak of God being simple, one, and unified, the corollary of that claim is that we can only know him by rather complex and rich catenas of words meant to brim over and point to his excess.

Hence confessions and catechisms regularly make use of many attributes or character traits to insist that we keep our eyes upon the full breadth of God’s goodness. For instance, the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks and answers: “What is God? God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth” (WSC 4). While longer lists appear in Larger Catechism 7 and in the Confession of Faith chapter 2, even this short answer resorts to almost a dozen terms to attest the bare minimum which must be said of the divine character. These and other terms have been confessed and debated throughout the centuries. Interestingly, however, one divine attribute has not achieved the prominence it deserves: divine fullness. It does not appear overtly, for example, in any of the Westminster Standards, and that silence is by no means unique to that strain of Reformed theology or even to Protestantism more broadly. When one looks for fullness in the brilliant riches of Christian doctrine, ironically one typically finds only void and want.

We might seek to account for this modern reticence regarding the riches of the divine glory. Since John and Paul speak of God’s fullness, why did it cease to capture our imagination? Why has the language of fullness fallen out of favor in recent

Christian theology? Does this follow from a reaction to supposedly Hellenistic thought (and the purported Hellenization of the early church)? Does this silence somehow relate to modern rationalism which seeks to think by means of quantifiable elements rather than mysterious principles? Are particular exegetical trends related to the Greco-Roman backgrounds of Pauline and Johannine teaching to account for this trend? Such anatomies of the modern silence would be no doubt significant, but they are beyond the bounds of this study. In this brief essay, we will offer a sketch of divine fullness, seeking to note its biblical roots, taking in its relation to other elements of the doctrine of God, tracing its effects into the works of God in election, creation, incarnation, and beyond, and finally asking what practical uses the doctrine bears, that is, what ethical entailments follow from this particular divine reality. In so doing, we are attempting to reorient theological reflection with regard to a biblical theme that has been forgotten. Given the modern forgetfulness, perhaps a broad sketch can help reframe our imagination in a useful manner.

### **1. Introduction: A Dogmatic Sketch of Divine Fullness**

Fullness is not a Christian word. We must go a step further than this even, admitting that divine fullness is not a Christian idea. In saying this, we do not deny the presence of such claims within the Christian tradition or even the Holy Scriptures. Rather, we note that the language is not exclusively or even originally Christian. It is common jargon and borrowed terminology. Fullness (the *pleroma*) regularly appears in pagan Greek literature prior to and contemporaneous with the New Testament writings. Taken from elsewhere, it becomes Christian.<sup>1</sup> Here we plunder the Egyptians (Exod. 12:36) by taking up language from the wider world and put it to the use of pointing to the incomparable one and his gospel.

Any time such common language, charged with metaphysical and moral entailments in a non-Christian manner, appears in holy writ, we do well to be vigilant in observing how it is used. Words do not carry meaning in and of themselves, but they mean things within contexts. While fullness would no doubt sound familiar to hearers or readers of the New Testament writings (which, of course, is part of its power), what is said there would be markedly unfamiliar in key respects. Thus we are

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<sup>1</sup> We could argue that it is ontologically Christian and that other versions are degenerations of that principal designation; this ordering is both true in reality and yet backwards in historical and epistemological experience.

reminded that we need to be alert to the Christian difference that situating language in the economy of the gospel has upon words like fullness (or other terms that are shared with pagan thought on God: infinity, omnipotence, eternity, goodness, and the like).

Dogmatic theology provides intellectual discipline by returning the mind again and again to the testimonies of the prophets and apostles. Dogmatics reminds us of the need to have our thought sanctified; with false presuppositions and assumptions confronted and mortified, and with new categories and concepts enlisted and vivified. Dogmatics prompts us to follow the Bible's teaching all along its way, never narrowing our focus and in so doing losing its breadth and wholeness. Given our propensity as individuals and groups to focus in on hobby-horses, this canonical contextualization is no small matter. Dogmatics also compels us to have our priorities and emphases shaped by those marked by Holy Scripture itself: in so doing, its repetitions, its logical connections, and its literary emphases reconfigure our hierarchy of values. When we so frequently misidentify first and second things, such schooling proves essential. Finally, dogmatics hones our approach to any single theme by showing the lineaments that connect it to other biblical doctrines. Dogmatics always returns us, sooner or later, to the God "from whom, through whom, and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36).

As we seek to think biblically about divine fullness, then, we do well to have our thoughts ordered by the whole Bible. We will consider the topic in four movements: the fullness in God (wherein life and bounty are his own in and of himself), the fullness from God (whereby he shares that life and bounty with his children), the fullness by God (whence comes all that is needed to share that life and bounty with his children), and the fullness before God (which traces the ways in which human faithfulness bears the marks of divine fullness). Good theology must lead eventually to ethics, prayer, and praise, but it may do so only in such a way that the graciousness of those human actions has been described by means of contemplating God and his works on our behalf, through Christ and the Spirit.

## **2. Fullness in God: Life and Bounty In and Of Himself**

Divine fullness is first and foremost a reality within the divine life. God is rich and full with life, light, and all bounty. He possesses these realities in and of himself as the triune God, such that his fullness is that of the eternal triune relations and of the

distinctly Trinitarian unity. His riches are owned by he who is without beginning or end and thus who is characterized by aseity. Yet his bounteous bliss goes beyond mere self-existence or self-sufficiency to also require that we attest his excess, wealth, and fullness. All that he has, he is, and he has all and more.

The doctrine of the Trinity not only identifies God by his singular name, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19), but also depicts the relational character of God's life. The persons share perfect bounty and life in and of themselves; for instance, the way in which the Son shares that self-sufficiency and fullness in and of himself with the Father is attested by Jesus: "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (Jn. 5:26). While Bonaventure speaks of the Father as "fullness as source," the Son and Spirit possess fullness as generated and spirated, each in their own personal mode of subsistence.<sup>2</sup> God is full, not only of power or knowledge but also of love within the triune communion. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have shared perfect charity with one another for all eternity, such that their actions toward us do not begin their life of love but only express the public overflow of what has marked their own unity from everlasting unto everlasting. Only with such an understanding can we confess not simply that God acted lovingly or that God took upon himself a loving posture but that "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8; see also 1 Jn. 4:16). John presses home the eternal nature of God's love in that the divine demonstration of love in sending his Son is immediately described as an occasion for "making manifest among us" that love, rather than initiating or beginning that love (1 Jn. 4:9).

The divine fullness has also been expressed in part by the doctrine of divine aseity. This confession of the self-existence of God speaks to the fact, negatively, that God does not receive being from another and, positively, that God possesses life in and of himself. Aseity is not equivalent to the well-intentioned but logically-mangled notion of being *causa sui* or cause of one's own being. Aseity speaks, rather, to existing apart from any cause and, thus, it removes God's existence from the same sort of category as that of every other being. While God has being, his being, then, is not of a type or sort to be likened unto or related nearly to human or creaturely being. Traditionally, language of the *analogia entis* has been intended to emphasize both the shared fellowship but also the marked and qualitative distinction between God's way or

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<sup>2</sup> Bonaventure, *Commentary on Sentences*, 1.27.1.



mode of existing and that of all creatures.<sup>3</sup> We do not share existence univocally, though we do both exist (and hence equivocation regarding being cannot be appropriate). The realm of analogy means to acknowledge being with a difference. While the notion took on a very different sort of meaning in late modern theology and, thus, received brutal responses from some in the Protestant world (such as Karl Barth), we can appreciate its classical concern to express the very biblical principle of the Creator-creature distinction (signaled by texts such as Exod. 3:14 and others) alongside the equally scriptural reality of fellowship in being.

Aseity gestures toward fullness, though it does not comprehend the doctrine. Aseity specifically signals the fullness or self-sufficiency of God's existence.<sup>4</sup> Fullness moves beyond that claim to make a still further one. God has "life in himself" (Jn. 5:26), but he is also blessed "from everlasting unto everlasting" (Neh. 9:5). God not only possesses mercy but is "rich in mercy" (Eph. 2:4) and has "riches of his glory" (Rom. 9:24). Whereas aseity is necessary to fullness, touting the self-possession of God's existence, aseity is not itself sufficient to signal the overflow that is the divine fullness. God is not only without beginning or end as *a se*, that is, the "first and the last," but also the "living one" who is replete and filled to overflowing with vitality (Rev. 1:17-18). Indeed, he is not only "Alpha and Omega," but also the one "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8; see also Rev. 4:8).<sup>5</sup> This fullness marks God out to be the one known by the high priest as "the Blessed One" (Mk.

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<sup>3</sup> For helpful analysis of classical Reformed endorsement of the *analogia entis*, albeit in the vein of Thomas Aquinas rather than his later interpreter Cajetan, see Richard A. Muller, "Not Scotist: Understandings of Being, Univocity, and Analogy in Early-Modern Reformed Thought," *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 14 (2012), 127-150. Muller finds affirmation in Maccovius, Junius, Zanchi, Voetius, and others, at several points disagreeing with the argument presented by J. Martin Bac, *Perfect Will Theology: Divine Agency in Reformed Scholasticism as Against Suarez, Episcopius, Descartes, and Spinoza* (Leiden: Brill, 2012). Unlike some later renderings of the *analogia entis* (especially after modifications to the doctrine at the hands of Cajetan and Suarez), the key focus in classical Reformed renderings was on proportionality. For a nuanced reflection on late modern declensions and their Protestant rebuttal by Barth, see Keith L. Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* (T & T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology; London: T & T Clark, 2010), esp. ch. 2.

<sup>4</sup> On a positive account of aseity, see John Webster, "Life In and Of Himself," in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, volume one: *God and the Works of God* (London: T & T Clark, 2015), 13-28; and especially Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 11-27* (Fathers of the Church 79; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), tract. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. 1:17 and 4:8 surely seek to render an amplification of Exod. 3:14, expanding on that text's temporal under-determination and amplifying it in all three tenses.

14:61),<sup>6</sup> the “blessed God” (1 Tim. 1:11), and “God, the blessed and only ruler, the king of kings and lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15). When we attest the blessedness and richness of God in and of himself, we indicate his reality as the one who possesses all fullness and whose own character is rich. He not only has what he has by himself – rather than from another – but he has it excessively.

### **3. Fullness from God: Sharing that Life and Bounty with Others through Election, Creation, and Incarnation**

God’s fullness does not leave God locked up in himself. The logic of the gospel’s God runs in just the opposite direction. Precisely out of his fullness, God overflows in grace and free favor unto others, and he gives lavishly without thereby giving himself away. Indeed, one of the most significant features in tracing out the divine fullness is the new perception we may now possess of grace, for the bestowal of a blessing to another can only truly be called grace (undeserved favor of one sort or another) when the one bestowing the gift has all that they need and needs nothing from the object of that gift. We can see how his rich possession of all blessings in and of himself shapes and marks the manner of his election, creation, and incarnation.

First, divine fullness marks the election of God’s children not for anything foreseen in them but by God’s mysterious will alone. “He chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:3-4). And this divine predestination in Christ Jesus flows from the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” who is himself “blessed” (Eph. 1:3-4).<sup>7</sup> The unconditional nature of divine election flows not from arbitrariness as if election is randomness, but we speak of unconditional election as coming from or arising out of nothing in and of the human object of election. This reality was relayed powerfully by Moses (Deut. 7:6-8) and later by Paul (Rom. 9:6-29). Election does come from somewhere, though, and it does express wisdom. It comes not from a wisdom or logic based on reciprocity and of the blessing of those who

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<sup>6</sup> Some translations (e.g. ESV) simply render “the Blessed” here.

<sup>7</sup> On Eph. 1:3-4 and election, see Wesley Hill, “The Text of Ephesians and the Theology of Bucer,” in *Reformation Readings of Paul: Explorations in History and Exegesis* (ed. Michael Allen and Jonathan Linebaugh; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 143-164; on election in Romans 9, see also David Gibson, *Reading the Decree: Exegesis, Election, and Christology in Calvin and Barth* (T & T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology; London: T & T Clark, 2009); Ben Dunson, *Individual and Community in Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (WUNT 2:332; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

merit, deserve, or will make best use of a gift. Rather it comes to the dead, and it expresses the wisdom and logic of divine generosity. We can refer to this as a logic and not mere arbitrariness, because it flows from God's self-possession of the fullness of life and bounty. Should God need supplementation or fulfillment, it would make all the sense in the world for him to elect those with potential. In light of his fullness, however, his electing love flows seamlessly to seek out the small, insignificant, and even sin-drenched.

Second, divine fullness shapes the very character of creation itself, wherein nothing is needed or utilized other than the divine voice. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* speaks not only of the distinction between uncreated being and created being but goes a step further to attest that the creative activity of the uncreated one does not find its origination, supplementation, or coordination in any input from the created order. It is not for nothing that the prologue of John states that "all things were made through him [the Logos, who is with God and is God], and without him was not anything made that was made," and then it immediately shifts to say that "in him was life" (Jn. 1:3,4).<sup>8</sup> The vitality – and possession of not only his own life but that of all – leads to the creation. The text makes this plain then by saying further that "the life was the light of men" (Jn. 1:4). In other words, God's own life – his full life within the triune being of God – illumines and spreads. The metaphor of light is apt because the sun's rays spread without in any way diminishing the luminosity of the sun itself. God's spreading and sharing – specifically here, his act of creating all things with the input or help of no other – does not in any way diminish God.

Third, divine fullness comes within the realm of the creaturely in the person of the Son. The chosen vessel of God's care for his elect people is the Messiah, "who is God over all, blessed forever" (Rom. 9:5). "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19); indeed, Paul presses further to emphasize the human frame of his divine condescension, "for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9). Donald Carson has argued that this incarnational fullness of deity within human being through personal union marks out a greater grace than that known through the law in his interpretation of the Johannine teaching that "from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (Jn. 1:16). Carson suggests that "grace upon grace" be read in terms of an antithesis that highlights the still greater mercy shown in the

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<sup>8</sup> Cyril makes a similar point in interpreting Jn. 3:36 relating this text to Jn. 1:4; see Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, volume 1 (ed. Joel Elowsky; trans. David Maxwell; Ancient Christian Texts; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 115.

incarnation.<sup>9</sup> While the law was a prior grace, it has been replaced by Christ as the means of experiencing the presence of God, which can now be known in a much greater display of grace precisely because Christ possesses the divine fullness. His fullness has been accented already in the famous claim that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). The incarnate Son’s glory marks out his character as overflowing rich with the very characteristics of YHWH (for grace and truth are terms which render the divine attributes of Exod. 34:6-7). Cyril of Alexandria speaks of how, possessed of the fullness, the Son’s grace is one which then “gushes forth to each soul” such that the “creature receives” this gift “as from an ever-flowing spring.”<sup>10</sup> The gospel of the Son speaks not only of the righting of wrongs but the glorifying of the ordinary through the mediation of the incarnate Son, himself full to the brim with the Father’s glory and quick to make common those riches for his brothers and sisters.

#### **4. Fullness by God: Doing All Needful for Sharing that Life and Bounty with Others through Applying Salvation and Extending His Mission**

God’s fullness comes to action for the sake of creaturely renewal in salvation through Christ Jesus. In doing so God offers all to the creature without receiving any benefit or recompense from the creature. Paul attests to this divine weightiness in his remarks at the Areopagus: “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:24-25). God is full to the brim; no closeness or communion with us, whether in creation or temple or any other fellowship, serves to fill him up. “Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘in him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:28, likely citing Epimenides of Crete). To the divine fullness in himself there is also divine fullness for others, and in that divine fullness for others there is a sufficient provision enacted by God.

First, God goes still further in applying that work of Christ, fulfilling the needful task of working out salvation by including or enfolding others into his life and death.

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<sup>9</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 132.

<sup>10</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, volume 1, 67 (on Jn. 1:16).

The goal of knowing God in Christ is such that “you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19). Regularly, we read of the work done for us by Christ as “bestowing his riches on all who call on him” (Rom. 10:12) or as “the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us” (Eph. 1:7-8). We can see the fullness of God expressed in the human bearing found in the person and life of Jesus, for we are to “all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). The salvific work of Christ not only meets the bare minimum of our needs, but offers an excessive largesse. For this reason Hebrews can speak of “so great a salvation,” not only in its cause and cost (in terms of incarnation and sacrificial atonement) but also in terms of its conferral (Heb. 2:3). Ultimately, the sufficiency or fullness of God’s work flows from the character of his mercy in his very being, for “our God is full of compassion” (Ps. 116:5) and “rich in mercy” (Eph. 2:4).

Second, God’s fullness presses beyond these two prior graces to still wider provision in enabling Christian mission and actualizing his kingdom here upon earth. Paul tells the Corinthians that “in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift” (1 Cor. 1:5-7). The provision of God’s enrichment enables attestation or testimony; Christian witness flows from God’s continuing provision. Divine gifts are not only the origin of mission and the content of its proclamation; the overflowing fullness of God is the very context for and energy unto Christian witness. Indeed, for this reason the church can be likened as “his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23). The head works through the body – the church – such that it expresses and extends his fullness to the world in mission.<sup>11</sup> The church does not become Christ, nor does the church fill him; just the opposite, he “fills all in all.” But the church does become identified with him and even with his “fullness.”

Think of the remarkable grace shown to men and women that God not only gives us reconciliation in Christ but even enlists us as ambassadors or instruments of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17-20) and goes a step further to speak of us as those “working together with him” (2 Cor. 6:1). We might consider this a remarkable risk; when a

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<sup>11</sup> Maintaining the distinction between head and members is no doubt pivotal and attested even in the immediate context here, wherein Paul has just said “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church”(Eph. 1:22). “All things under his feet” surely includes the church itself. Indeed, we can speak of the lordship of Christ over the church as a preparatory microcosm of his wider reign over all creation, which will eventually bow the knee as his *ecclesia* has done so already.

project matters, we tend to make sure we do not place its results in the hands of the weak. Yet Paul has noted that these Corinthians who are fellow workers with God are not wise or fitting (1 Cor. 1:20-21). God can enlist weak disciples because God lacks nothing; his mission flows out of his very vitality. God's fullness enables the frail and fallen to be employed in kingdom work, as his abundance proves to be more than enough to ensure the accomplishment of his intended goals. The blessing pronounced by Paul in Romans 15:13 invokes the filling of God: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing." It leads to personal transformation that can only be characterized as abundance: "so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." But God's abundant filling spills over immediately into service and ministry: "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another" (15:14). God fills by his Spirit, abundantly enriching our hope, filling us with goodness, that we may be filled with knowledge so as to teach and instruct others. The recipient of God's filling, then, is brought into his centrifugal movement which ever always reaches out to bring more into its blessed possession of all good riches.

##### **5. Fullness before God: The Resulting Character of Creaturely Holiness as Faithful Prayer and Praise**

The fullness of God shapes the faithfulness of human creatures in Christ. Because God's character is displayed in the gospel, human knowledge and service to God are re-shaped accordingly. To the nature of God corresponds the life and behavior of his creaturely subjects. How does our following the way of Jesus bear the marks of divine fullness? What elements of our covenantal devotion demonstrate the effects of this divine attribute?

First, divine fullness reminds us that we always depend upon God and never out-run our need for his provision. We have received grace and count our lives to be his own (Rom. 14:8-9; Phil. 1:21). Yet when we ask: "what shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me?" we answer "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD" (Ps. 116:12,13). Indeed the Psalmist identifies this action as paying his "vows" to the LORD (Ps. 116:14,18). We see, however, that these vows are not made good on by doing something other than calling for more generosity from God and,

thereby, going more deeply into one's dependence upon him.<sup>12</sup> The image of lifting up the cup of salvation is one like Oliver Twist asking "More?" Because God is a Deity of fullness, not lacking but possessing all within himself, we never shift into the mode of returning discrete goods to God. Even our thanksgiving takes the form of calling upon him for still more deliverance (Ps. 116:17).<sup>13</sup> Divine blessedness and its expression through blessing others cultivate the Christian ethic of prayerful dependence and a life always marked by faithful trust in the triune God.

Second, divine fullness prompts us to reduce all things ultimately to God and, correspondingly, to return all things to him in praise. The art of reduction is an intellectual exercise of tracing things back to their deepest cause or principle. We reduce a bodily malady not by forgetting or overlooking it, but by appreciating its deeper roots in a virus or other illness. Similarly, we do not negate, minimize, or disrespect creaturely realities in reducing them to God, but we do accurately assess them in light of his fullness. In this drama of human blight and glory, there is genuine integrity and blissful good within the creaturely realm. These graces are spread far and wide. But we cannot envision these graces separated from the wider orbit of gospel truths, for we see them flowing forth from him; we appreciate them as suspended through him; we see them as purposed unto return to him. "For from him and through him and to him are all things"; Paul hereby locates all reality within the movement of God's fullness. Thus, he voices an ethical implication: "To him be glory forever" (Rom. 11:36). The blessed abundance of God's being leads to the wide extent of God's provision which leads in turn to all glory, laud, and honor being his own. Divine fullness – and its overflow into the gracious economy of his works – shapes the ethic of Christian praise.

## **6. Conclusion: Confessing the Fullness of God Yesterday and Today**

Let us return to where we began: Is fullness truly absent from recent theology? While the dominant strands of contemporary theology in the wider academy have

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<sup>12</sup> For further reflection on how sanctification is always by faith alone, though not of faith alone, see John Owen, *Pneumatologia* (Works of John Owen 3; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), esp. 413-416; G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification* (Studies in Dogmatics; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), ch. 2; Michael Allen, *Sanctification* (New Studies in Dogmatics; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, forthcoming), ch. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Calling upon God's name involves a cry for his rescue, as can be seen earlier in Ps. 116:4.

tilted toward either some form of process theology or to what may be termed evangelical historicism, which is an over-identification to or reduction of God's being to that action in the economy of the gospel, we can observe some retrievals of the fullness of God. John Webster has sought to refocus attention upon the perfection of God and to think all other realities of the divine or the divine economy always relative to that preponderant beauty.<sup>14</sup> My colleague Scott Swain has sought to reorient contemporary approaches to the trinity (specifically countering those of the Lutheran Robert Jenson and the Presbyterian Bruce McCormack, advocates of leading versions of evangelical historicism) in a similar manner by beginning with the riches that are God's own:

The triune God is inherently rich, "the everlasting well of all good things which is never drawn dry." To the gospel's "blessed God" (1 Tim. 1:11) belong the immeasurable fullness of greatness, power, glory, victory, and majesty, an immeasurable fullness that God enjoys in and of himself (1 Chron. 29:11; Ps. 145:3; Jn. 5:26; Rom. 11:33-35). The divine works *ad extra* are consequently the free and generous overflow of God's fontal plenitude (Ps. 36:8-9; Jn. 1:4; 5:21-25; Rom. 11:33-36; Jas. 1:17).<sup>15</sup>

Swain has turned a discussion about divine aseity and self-sufficiency, more restrictive jargon, to the deeper font of divine fullness, biblical and classical language which speaks not only of sufficiency but of excess and resplendence. And he has turned away from history and the dramas of redemption's story and creational engagement to the deep sublime of God's eternal repose. Still further, as with Webster's arguments, he has then tried to show how this divine richness does not undermine the economy or the covenant, but helps show its singular nature: unlike other relations, here is one of grace, true and free.

If there are some voices reminding us of the riches of divine fullness today, we might ask if fullness is really missing from the Westminster Standards? While the specific terms "fullness" and "full" are not to be found on the surface of the text, it is

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<sup>14</sup> While present in numerous works now, see most recently the essays published in John Webster, *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, volume one: *God and the Works of God* (London: T & T Clark, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Scott R. Swain, *The God of the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Theology* (Strategic Initiatives in Evangelical Theology; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 152-153.



perhaps appropriate to see the judgment present implicitly in the structure of the argument. Westminster Shorter Catechism 4 identifies God as “a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” Notice that three terms – “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable” – qualify the way in which we hear the final seven terms. God’s being, for example, is one that is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. Here we see the doctrine of divine simplicity put to grammatical usage, in that the structure of the sentence exemplifies that tenet’s affirmation that God’s attributes are unified in reality.<sup>16</sup>

How do we read Westminster’s litany of divine attributes in light of divine simplicity? Each of the attributes of God is his own infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably; this provides a matrix for interpreting each attribute as interpenetrating the others. They are simple in themselves; for us, knowing them requires dialectical thought to appreciate their oneness. The profusion of terms and their substantive inter-relations, however, point to the weighty fullness of the divine being. God has excessive or rich possession of all his characteristics, such that neither time, space, or anything else might limit or diminish them. The combination of terms found therein – “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable” – intermingle together and attest to the notion of fullness. Each of God’s qualities or attributes bears the fullness or richness which exceeds any single place (infinity) or time (eternity) or any episode or circumstance which might ebb or flow (immutability or unchangeableness). Taken together, then, these terms speak to the self-sufficient blessedness of God. God brims over in excess with each and every one of his many-splendored attributes.

It is worth making explicit that implicit logic, for divine fullness provides a remarkable lens for seeing the movement of Christian theology as a whole. Fullness speaks directly of God and then, secondarily, of other beings from God, in God, and unto God. Fullness bespeaks the reality of Christ by nature and of the body of Christ by grace. Fullness points back to the Alpha of God’s eternal self-sufficiency while also gesturing forward to the Omega of God’s limitless provision for his glorified saints. Fullness reminds us that the triune God of creation is rich and enriching, that the

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<sup>16</sup> For defense and analysis of divine simplicity, see Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (T & T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology; London: T & T Clark, 2015). A number of criticisms have been launched regarding this doctrine, the most significant of which include Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The End of Metaphysics and the Idea of God* (trans. Philip Clayton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 11-12; and T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 246-250. Analytic theologians and philosophers of religion have also protested, most notably Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 1-9; and Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Absolute Simplicity,” *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), 353-382.

lordly king of our salvation is blessed from everlasting to everlasting and blesses his saints forevermore. Fullness reorients us to one who, in the gospel, gives without giving himself away. Not surprisingly, then, language of fullness appears (under the idiom of blessedness, riches, or fullness) regularly alongside calls to and demonstrations of prayer and praise. Such a God as this – this one summons forth our songs, our prayers, our very selves and all we have.

## The Life-Giving Spirit

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.

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*On March 10-11, 2015, the Rev. Dr. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, delivered the annual Kistemaker Lectures at the Orlando campus of Reformed Theological Seminary. The topic of his four lectures was “Life-Giving Spirit: The Exaltation of Christ and Salvation in the Theology of Paul.” Gaffin’s presentation was an opportunity for the campus to hear one of the finest biblical theologians of our day speak in summary fashion on what has been a life-long professional focus: the exaltation of Jesus Christ in the theology of Paul. These lectures are now available in iTunes, and Dr. Gaffin has graciously allowed us to use an excerpt from these lectures, slightly edited, in Reformed Faith & Practice. (One more excerpt is planned for a future issue of the journal.)*

We turn our attention now to the re-creative or renovative side of the benefits of salvation in Christ and to take note of their dependence on what took place for and in Christ and his resurrection. That comes to light in a most decisive way in what we can fairly say is a statement that is at the heart of both Paul’s Christology and his pneumatology, the statement that we find in the latter half of 1 Corinthians 15:45, where Paul says that in his resurrection, Christ, the last Adam, became life-giving Spirit.

“The last Adam became life-giving Spirit.” The meaning of this statement continues to be disputed. In particular the dispute is whether the reference of the Greek noun *pneuma* is to the Spirit with a capital “S,” or to a lower case “s” spirit in some sense. I could have well spent at least a full lecture with you addressing this issue and reflecting on it, but will forego that and content myself here with asserting that detailed exegesis leaves little doubt, if any, on two points. First, *pneuma* here refers to the person of the Holy Spirit, and secondly, Christ’s resurrection is the time of the “becoming” in view. Notice that Paul doesn’t say that the last Adam *is* the life-giving Spirit; he *became* the life-giving Spirit. Moreover, in the context of the chapter that “becoming” took place in his resurrection.

On the interpretation of this statement, there is a consensus on the conclusion that I just expressed across a broad spectrum of current commentaries, monographs, and other works on Paul's theology. Among Reformed interpreters, this is the view of Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, and John Murray (in his Romans commentary and commenting on 1 Cor 15:45). In contrast – and this continues to be a disappointment for me – most English translations have “spirit,” lowercase, apparently for the reason that to capitalize it (as a reference to the Holy Spirit) would seem to translators to lend credence to an anti-Trinitarian reading. (I would not commend the New Living Translation overall as a translation, but it alone among current English translations I've seen capitalizes Spirit in 1 Cor 15:45; so credit where credit is due).

It is not only unnecessary but entirely unwarranted to read “Spirit” as a denial of the personal distinction between Christ and the Spirit and as irreconcilable with later church formulation of Trinitarian doctrine. Paul is clear about that personal distinction elsewhere (as in the so-called apostolic benediction with its Triune structure at the end of 2 Corinthians). What needs to be kept in view here is the scope of Paul's argument, its salvation-historical focus. The point is not who Christ is essentially, eternally, and unchangeably, but what he *became* in history, particularly what he became in history as the last Adam, or as Paul will say in 15:47, “the second man.” In view here is what has happened to Christ in history as incarnate, in terms of his true humanity.

We may note further the undeniable reference to the Spirit in 2 Corinthians 3:17, where Paul says “the Lord is the Spirit.” In this context I would argue “the Lord” is almost certainly the exalted Christ (although this is disputed by some). So it seems fair to say, as we compare these two statements, the “is” in 2 Cor 3:17 is based on and is the result of the “became” in 1 Cor 15:45.

So, 1 Cor 15:45 expresses the momentous and epochal significance of the resurrection for Christ personally. What Paul brings into view is Christ's own climatic transformation by the Spirit in his resurrection, a transformation that results in a new and permanent relationship between Christ and the Spirit. The result is a functional unity, a unity in their conjoint activity of such intimacy and inseparability that it is captured most adequately, as the apostle sees it, by saying that in being raised from the dead Christ has become and so now is and remains in his activity the life-giving Spirit. What we are being brought to see, then, is that for Paul, Christ and the Spirit are united in the activity of giving resurrection life, correlatively, life in the Spirit or

eschatological life. Resurrection life, life in the Spirit, eschatological life are alternative descriptions of the same reality.

This prompts some further observations on 1 Cor 15:45. First, within the immediate context (vv. 42–49), the last Adam, as resurrected, is also in view as ascended. As the last Adam he is the “second man ... from heaven” (v. 47) and in that sense he is the “man of heaven” (v. 48). Note that, given the sustained emphasis on the resurrection in the immediate context, “from heaven” or “of heaven” is almost certainly an *exaltation* predicate. It refers to what is true of Christ because of where he is *now*. It is not, as some commentators have taken it, a reference to Christ’s origin, say, out of preexistence at the incarnation.

Second, while in chapter 15 Paul has in view Christ’s future life-giving action by the Spirit in the bodily resurrection of believers (cf. vv. 22, 49), his present activity, as the life-giving Spirit is surely intimated as well. Christ’s resurrection is not an isolated event in the past. Rather, as a genuine historical occurrence, a stupendous miracle that took place in the past, it is also the inaugurating “firstfruits” of the eschatological resurrection-harvest (vv. 20, 23). And Paul is clear: the believer’s place in that *one* harvest is present as well as future. Christ as resurrected and ascended is already active in the church as the life-giving Spirit, which is to say again, in the resurrection power of the Spirit. In their present union with Christ by faith, believers have already been raised with Christ; for them resurrection life is not only a future hope but a present reality (Gal 2:20; Col 3:3–4; 1:27). As they “belong to Christ” [= are “in Christ”] and “Christ is in them,” “the body is dead because of sin, but the [Holy] Spirit is life because of [Christ’s] righteousness (Rom 8:9–10).

In terms of the categorical anthropological distinction that Paul draws in 2 Cor 4:16, while the outer self or body is undergoing decay, the inner self or elsewhere in Paul, “heart,” who we are at the core of our being, is being renewed daily. While outwardly, bodily they are not yet resurrected, believers are already resurrected inwardly. That carries with it this important implication that we need to think through: as Paul sees it, at the core of their being, in the deepest recesses of who they are, believers in Jesus Christ, will never be more resurrected than they already are.

Third, turning now to an important overall issue for New Testament theology, an issue that also continues to be debated across the face of worldwide Christianity, I want to propose that the latter part of 1 Cor 15:45 is, in effect, a one-sentence commentary by Paul on Pentecost and its significance. To see that we’re going to have to refer to an intertextual connection and look very briefly back in Acts 2 at Peter’s

Pentecost sermon. Towards its conclusion with its focus on the earthly activity, the death and then especially the resurrection of Jesus, we come to this culminating statement in Acts 2:32-33, where Peter draws together the threads of what he has been saying. “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out that which you are both seeing and hearing.” Here in a summary sequence we have four elements: resurrection, ascension, reception of the Spirit in the ascension, and, finally, outpouring of the Spirit. The last of these, Pentecost, is linked with the other three. It belongs together with the resurrection, the ascension, and Jesus’ reception of the Spirit in his ascension.

We must appreciate from this statement of Peter that Pentecost is climactic and final on the order that the other events are also climactic and final, and as such is in no more need of being repeated than are these other events. Resurrection, ascension, Pentecost though temporally distinct, constitute a unified complex of events, a once-for-all unified series in redemptive history that is indivisible. The one is given with the others, and none of them exists without the others. In 1 Cor 15:45 this unified event complex is compressed and given its central focus by saying, “the last Adam became the life-giving Spirit.”

If the sequence in Acts speaks of Jesus having received the Spirit following his ascension and that is implied, as we’ve seen, in 1 Cor 15:45, how then is this reception to be understood? That question is raised considering that Luke previously reported that Jesus received the Spirit at the Jordan when he was baptized by John (Luke 3:22), and even before that he was conceived by the Spirit (1:35). Also, throughout his ministry prior to his resurrection he was filled with and empowered by the Spirit (e.g., 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21).

The answer to that question lies in appreciating the analogy between the Jordan event and Pentecost: in the former, Jesus being baptized by John and in the latter, Jesus baptizing the church with the Spirit. This analogy is particularly significant for both the accomplishment and application of salvation. On the one hand, at the Jordan the Messiah-Son receives the Spirit from the Father as endowment and equipping that is absolutely essential for the impending kingdom conflict facing him—the battle between the messianic kingdom and the kingdom of Satan that will take him through the path of obedience and suffering that ends on the cross where he dies for the sins of his people (cf. 2 Cor 5:20; Phil 2:6–8).

On the other hand, in his ascension the resurrected Christ receives the Spirit from the Father as the reward deserved for the kingdom task now completed. Further, we must note that he does not keep this climactic reward for himself. As Calvin says (*Institutes* 3.1.1), “not for his own private use”! Rather, this deserved reward becomes, in turn, the consummate gift that Christ shares with the church. Pentecost reveals Christ as the exalted receiver-giver of the Spirit, or in other terms, the life-giving Spirit.

So to draw things to a conclusion here, essential for Christ’s role in applying salvation in his state of exaltation is 1) his own climactic transformation by the Holy Spirit and 2) his new and consummate possession of the Holy Spirit resulting from the resurrection. What Christ now does rests in part on what was done to him and what he has become in his exaltation. By his resurrection he was “justified in the Spirit” and became “the life-giving Spirit.”

The single action of the Spirit in raising Christ from the dead constitutes him as the source, now exalted, of both the forensic and renovative aspects of salvation. His resurrection-justification grounds the removal of condemnation and entitlement to eschatological, resurrection life. Furthermore, that resurrection life, life in the Spirit, also eradicates the power and corruption of sin and death.

These two aspects are plainly inseparable. Yet the judicial aspect has an essential and decisive priority in the accomplishment of salvation that grounds its application. Because Christ’s obedience unto death is the requisite judicial ground for his resurrection and being highly exalted (Phil 2:9), his becoming the life-giving Spirit presupposes his being justified in the Spirit, not the reverse. Seen in terms of this climactic relationship between the exalted Christ and the Spirit, expressed in other categories, the outpouring-giving of the Spirit at Pentecost is an integral event in the *historia salutis*, not an aspect in the *ordo salutis*. Pentecost has its primary place in the once-for-all, completed accomplishment of redemption. It is not to serve as a model for individual Christian experience.

It does not overstate it to say this: *without Christ himself being constituted the justified, life-giving Spirit, and his correlative outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, there is no salvation. Without Pentecost, the definitive, unrepeatable work of Christ is incomplete.* In no respect is Pentecost a model for an additional, “second” blessing that makes for a “full gospel.” It is a first order, primary blessing apart from which there is simply no gospel.

The task set before Christ as the last Adam was not only to secure the remission of sin, as important and absolutely necessary as that is, but also, and even more

ultimately, as the grand outcome of his lifetime of obedience and atoning death, it was to obtain life eternal – eschatological life, resurrection life; that is, life in the Spirit.

Without that life, “salvation” is not only truncated, but also meaningless, as 1 Cor 15:17, for one, makes clear. And it is just that life, that salvation now completed in his exaltation, and Christ as now qualified to be its giver that is openly revealed in the giving of the Spirit by Christ, the life-giving Spirit on Pentecost.



## **Owning Our Past: The Spirituality of the Church in History, Failure, and Hope<sup>1</sup>**

**Sean Michael Lucas**  
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At the 43rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), there was an attempt to have our denomination own its past. Ligon Duncan and I brought a personal resolution that called on the church to “recognize and confess our church’s covenantal and generational involvement in and complicity with racial injustice inside and outside of our churches during the Civil Rights period.” While the PCA had previously in 2002 confessed its covenantal and generational involvement in the sins of 1861—its generational involvement with race-based chattel slavery—it had never owned the sins of 1961; in fact, it has shown a general unwillingness to admit directly that many of our conservative churches and leaders from that period stood against racial integration in church and society. Even the 2004 PCA Pastoral Letter on the Gospel and Race vaguely referenced “the Southern Presbyterian tradition and its publicly promulgated views on race,” but missed the opportunity to detail the ways our leaders failed to promote biblical positions on race and racial justice. And so, the personal resolution—originating out of Mississippi which has served as the ecclesial seedbed of the PCA and as the central stage of the battle over Civil Rights—was meant as a vehicle for our church finally to own its past, to grieve for and hate the sins found there, and to turn to God and each other, purposing and endeavoring after new ways of obedience (LC76).<sup>2</sup>

As it happened, the PCA General Assembly decided not to act on the resolution this year, but rather referred it to the 44th General Assembly that will meet in Mobile, Alabama, in June 2016. While there were multiple reasons why various elders argued

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was a keynote address at the Leadership Development Resource weekend, hosted at Covenant Theological Seminary on 6 September 2015. The author expresses gratitude to historians Peter Slade and Otis Pickett for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> <http://byfaithonline.com/personal-resolution-on-civil-rights-remembrance/> (accessed 15 June 2015).

for and supported this action, one undoubtedly was a lack of willingness to understand and own the past.<sup>3</sup>

One of the significant barriers to doing that, and so to confessing and repenting in the present as well as engaging our culture in love and justice both now and in the future, is the long-standing, “distinctive” conservative Presbyterian commitment to the so-called “spirituality of the church” doctrine.<sup>4</sup> Stated in its most classic form by the nineteenth-century southern Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell, the spirituality of the church doctrine means that the church “has no commission to construct society afresh...to change the forms of its political constitutions....The problems, which the anomalies of our fallen state are continually forcing on philanthropy, the Church has no right to solve. She must leave them to the Providence of God, and to human wisdom sanctified and guided by the spiritual influences which it is her glory to foster and to cherish. The Church...has a fixed and unalterable Constitution; and that Constitution is the Word of God...She can announce what it teaches, enjoin what it commands, prohibit what it condemns...Beyond the Bible she can never go, and apart from the Bible she can never speak.”<sup>5</sup>

For Thornwell and other proponents of this doctrine, the root of the spirituality of the church doctrine was the separation of church and state. The church has no commission to change the form of political constitutions; she was not to solve the problems of our fallen state; and she was not to involve herself in dealing with specific policies contemplated by the state. Rather, her authority and role “is only ministerial and declarative since the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice.” Such

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<sup>3</sup> There were other reasons as well, which I touch on in “Grace, Race, and the PCA,” *ByFaith Magazine* (Fall 2015): 19-21.

<sup>4</sup> The spirituality of the church doctrine is often said to be a “distinctive” doctrine of the southern Presbyterian tradition (e.g., E. T. Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* [Richmond: John Knox, 1961]). However, the same kind of arguments—that the church should restrict itself to “spiritual” matters and avoid engaging in “social or political” matters—can be found in every southern mainstream Protestant denomination in the twentieth century. For examples, see Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 82-115, and Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 168-190.

<sup>5</sup> James Henley Thornwell, “Relation of the Church to Slavery,” in *Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, ed. B. M. Palmer and J. B. Adger, 4 vols. (reprint, Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1974), 4:382-4, as quoted in Thompson, *Spirituality of the Church*, 25.

a position demanded silence on matters of political and social policy except when they touched on issues of morality. Only then might the church comment on the moral imperatives found in Scripture. Beyond that, she could not and ought not to go.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, that was always the rub with the spirituality of the church doctrine: the Bible certainly addresses issues that involve social, economic, and political realities and directly impact matters of public policy. As nineteenth-century southern Presbyterian theologian Francis Beattie recognized, this was one of the things that made the spirituality of the church doctrine so difficult to apply: “These difficulties appear in connection with certain questions which are partly civil and partly religious in their nature. Such questions as education, marriage, the Sabbath, and temperance are illustrations of what is here meant.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, other questions such as slavery and racial relationships also involved civil and religious issues—the Bible speaks to every area of “faith and practice” at some level. And so, a major difficulty with the spirituality of the church idea as it has developed was the selective way it was deployed: historically, it was invoked to prevent conversations on race while it was ignored with education, temperance, or sexual morality.

It is for these reasons that many historians have viewed the spirituality of the church doctrine simply as a “protective gesture,” mainly used to shield or prevent southerners from acting with justice toward African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jack Maddex suggested that race-based slavery forced southern Presbyterians to move from asserting theocratic ideals—with Jesus Christ as King and the Bible as the rule of the state—to promoting the “spirituality doctrine” as a means to preserve the status quo. Writing about twentieth-century Presbyterianism in Mississippi, Peter Slade observed that “the spirituality of the church is in fact the time tested political strategy of powerful men to perpetuate an unjust *status quo* free from moral censure...[It] is a sophisticated theological resistance to systemic change: it is not an innocent doctrine misused.” Likewise, Carolyn Dupont observed that PCA founders identified the spirituality of the church doctrine as one of its primary commitments; yet this was problematic because the spirituality of the church was the

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<sup>6</sup> “Preliminary Principles,” *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America* (2014); Sean Michael Lucas, “Hold Fast That Which is Good: The Public Theology of Robert Lewis Dabney,” (PhD diss: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2002), 66-8, 99-142 (for a comparison between Dabney and Thornwell on spirituality of the church), 174.

<sup>7</sup> Francis R. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* ([1898] Greenville, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1997), 362.

main support for “conservative Presbyterians who condemned the Christian supporters of black equality.” It was a theological commitment that “formed an essential foundation for their racial ideology.”<sup>8</sup>

What do we make of this? How do we go about owning our past—especially the white majority’s failure to recognize its cultural captivity and maintenance of a system of injustice that has prevented genuine truth and reconciliation between blacks and whites? How should we understand this “spirituality of the church” doctrine—is it a white protective gesture or even a racial ideology? Is there any reason that we might want to preserve some vestige of the idea that the church’s mission is “spiritual”? Is it possible that white southern Presbyterians misunderstood what their confessional documents taught and allowed that to excuse their failures on issues of racial justice in our church and society?

I want to attempt the seemingly impossible: to rehabilitate the idea of the “spirituality of the church” in such a way as to make it a vehicle for the church to speak to social and political issues as part of a full-orbed Gospel mission. In order to do this, I’m going to make the claim that southern Presbyterians have misunderstood what the Westminster Confession of Faith—and the Bible itself—demands when it comes to preserving the spiritual mission of the church. Far from encouraging a quietist posture to social, political, or cultural issues, rightly understood we discover that the confessional teaching actually provides both the basis for speaking prophetically to our generation and allows us to instruct our congregations about their responsibilities as Christ’s disciples in his world. At the same time, read with other sections of Presbyterian confessional documents, we recognize that the church’s

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<sup>8</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), 154; Jack P. Maddex, “From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (1976): 438-457; Peter Slade, *Open Friendship in a Closed Society: Mission Mississippi and a Theology of Friendship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 119, 120; Carolyn Renee Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University, 2013), 219.

It is notable that antebellum black Presbyterians do not appear to have developed a similar commitment to the “spirituality of the church” idea. Samuel Cornish, for example, published the first black newspaper in America and was prophetic in his denunciation of white racism; James W. C. Pennington was a leader in promoting temperance among blacks; Henry Highland Garnet issued scathing indictments of slavery. The historical question is: why did whites develop such an understanding of WCF 31:4 when blacks did not, even as they shared the same commitment to the confession? See David E. Swift, *Black Prophets of Justice: Activist Clergy Before the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

primary means for social change has always remained the same: Word, sacraments, and prayer, which God uses to transform people as they are instructed in their duties toward their neighbors and move to seek peace and justice for their communities. With this corrected understanding of what the “spirituality of the church” means—and does not mean—we can see better the ways that our Presbyterian forefathers (and we ourselves) have failed to pursue justice and love mercy and so own the past for the “healing of remembering” and the beginning of hope.<sup>9</sup>

### **Not to Intermeddle with Civil Affairs**

The Presbyterian commitment to the spirituality of the church doctrine is rooted in Westminster Confession of Faith 31:4: “Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.” This chapter dealing with synods and councils—and by implication, all church courts—appears to limit those church courts to speak only on ecclesiastical matters. In fact, the language here is fairly strong: they “are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth.” It seems from a surface reading that this is meant to separate church from state: synod and councils have authority for the ecclesiastical realm; civil magistrates (who are addressed in WCF 23) have authority for the civil realm. The biblical proof texts for this section are drawn from Luke 12 and John 18, both of which emphasize that Jesus rules over a “kingdom not of this world.” Hence, Jesus does not interfere with the state’s operation, but rather establishes a separate realm to rule called the church with his own laws and for his own purposes.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, this raises all sorts of questions for us. Perhaps we can start with what the Confession means by “not intermeddling with civil affairs.” Are we to understand this in the broadest sense possible? Or is a more narrow restrictive understanding a better approach?

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<sup>9</sup> Slade, *Open Friendship in a Closed Society*, 133.

<sup>10</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2014), 419-22. Van Dixhoorn represents the vast majority of opinion on this section of the WCF.

Historically, southern Presbyterians read “not to intermeddle with civil affairs” in the broadest possible sense. For example, in the early 1930s, when PCUS progressives successfully formed a denominational-level committee to guide the church on matters of social, economic, and political welfare, conservatives pushed back using this aspect of the spirituality of the church idea. Judge Samuel Wilson, a ruling elder from Lexington, Kentucky, argued, “Nothing should be done by the Presbyterian branch of [the Christian] church to obscure or subordinate the spiritual nature of Christ’s Kingdom, the preeminently spiritual nature of his life and work and teachings. The Christian church received no commission from its divine Founder to occupy itself with social, moral, economic, or political questions as such.” Likewise, S. K. Dodson, minister of the Citronelle, Alabama, church, held that “the Church should not through her courts endorse any specific social program, and that if any declaration is made by these higher courts as to the Church’s social duty, it should be done very carefully in the broadest terms possible.” To intermeddle with civil affairs was to undo the unique testimony of the southern Presbyterian church, Columbia Seminary professor William Childs Robinson argued. “Is it quite right to turn a Church away from the very principle that gave it life and independent being? The non-secular character of the Southern Presbyterian Church is her ‘raison d’etre.’” Any involvement by the church as church in the social, economic, or political questions of the day was “to intermeddle with civil affairs.”<sup>11</sup>

However, such a boundary is difficult to maintain because it necessarily cuts off the “spiritual” from the rest of life. And southern Presbyterians had a difficult time knowing where the line was between spiritual and secular realms. One example of this was the church’s long-standing support and advocacy of abstinence from alcohol. From 1862 on, the southern Presbyterian General Assembly repeatedly advocated teetotalism, reprobated the sale of beverage alcohol, and urged people to “use all legitimate means for its banishment from the land.” Finally, in 1914, as the political process began that would produce the Volstead Act, the General Assembly declared, “We are in hearty favor of National Constitutional Prohibition, and will do all properly within our power to secure the adoption of an amendment to the Constitution forever prohibiting the sale, manufacture for sale, transportation for

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel M. Wilson, “The Proposed Assembly’s Committee on Social and Moral Questions Is Inexpedient, Unwise and Unconstitutional,” *Union Seminary Review* 45 (1934): 191-2; S. K. Dodson, “The Church and Social Service,” *Christian Observer* (22 August 1934): 10; William Childs Robinson, “Questions Which Divide Us as Citizens,” *Christian Observer* (26 December 1934): 15.

sale, importation for sale, and exportation for sale of intoxicating liquors for beverage purposes in the United States.” Notably, there was no hue and cry in the Presbyterian papers by conservatives about this action as a violation of the spiritual mission of the church.<sup>12</sup>

Another example of blurring the lines between the so-called spiritual and secular realms occurred in the 1920s over the teaching of evolution in the public schools. In North Carolina, the key leaders who opposed evolution both in the public schools and at the University of North Carolina were Presbyterian ministers, Albert Sidney Johnson and William P. McCorkle. In 1925, the Synod of North Carolina adopted resolutions that called for “a closer supervision to prevent teaching anything [in the public schools]...[that contradicted] Christian truths as revealed in the Word of God.” They also “demanded the removal of teachers found guilty of teaching evolution ‘as a fact.’” Again, beyond the rightness or wrongness of the action, the main point here is that the spirituality of the church doctrine did not prevent these Presbyterians from intermeddling in civil affairs outside the “spiritual” realm of the church.<sup>13</sup>

The difficulty discerning the line between the spiritual and secular realms in the matters of alcohol and evolution should have clued southern Presbyterians to the fact they might have misunderstood what the authors of the confession intended. As historian Chad Van Dixhoorn’s work on the Westminster Assembly minutes has demonstrated, the focus of the Westminster divines as they worked on chapter 31, which deals with “synods and councils,” was on whether Presbyterian church government was biblically correct (or *jure divino* “divine right”). The paragraph that we now know as WCF 31:4 was added “by some brethren [who] entered their dissents.” These brethren were William Greenhill, Sidrach Simpson, and Francis Woodcocke, all Independents (Congregationalists) who were determined to preserve some measure of separation between church and state over against the Erastians and Presbyterians, who firmly believed both in Establishment and in ecclesial influence upon the civic realm. That this suggested paragraph—along with the admission that “all synods and councils since the Apostles time, whether general or particular, may err and many have

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<sup>12</sup> *MGAPCUS* (1886): 60; *MGAPCUS* (1914): 71, both quoted in *A Digest of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1861-1965* (Atlanta: Office of the General Assembly, 1966), 143-44.

<sup>13</sup> Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., *Preachers, Pedagogues, and Politicians: The Evolution Controversy in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 165-66.

erred,” also suggested by the Congregationalists—was included seems to suggest a compromise by the Presbyterians, the majority at the Westminster Assembly.<sup>14</sup>

What was the compromise? Because the Congregationalists were outgunned on the matter of Presbyterian government, the Presbyterians agreed to ensure that all understood the necessity of church-state separation and the fallibility of higher church courts. And yet, the divines had to walk carefully. After all, the English Parliament brought Westminster Assembly into existence in 1643 *for the purpose of setting national religious policy*. Their work, while biblical and theological (and so, “spiritual”), was profoundly civil and political, and they clearly understood it to be such. With all of this in view, then, I want to suggest that the original intention of the divines with that phrase, “not to intermeddle with civil affairs,” was far more limited, tracing out the different responsibilities of church and state *when the church is established and funded by the state*. The church is not to usurp the legislative role of the state, to interfere with the state’s processes, or to involve itself needlessly or incessantly in political conniving (as those Protestants saw Roman Catholics doing). The church as church has a different mission: to make disciples through its means of grace and to instruct them in the duties of the moral law. However, this would not prevent the church from speaking truth to political power or from involving itself in matters of clear social importance.<sup>15</sup>

### **Petitioning and Advising the Authorities**

This understanding of “not intermeddling with civil affairs” fits much better with the rest of the confessional paragraph. After all, the second part of the paragraph provided ground for the church through its church courts to offer a prophetic witness to the state on a range of issues: “Unless by way of humble petition in cases

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<sup>14</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, ed., *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly: 1643-1652*, 5 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4:246-47; John R. DeWitt, *Jus Divinum: The Westminster Assembly and the Divine Right of Church Government* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1969), 27; Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord: Politics and Religion in the Westminster Assembly and ‘the Great Debate’* (London: T&T Clark, 1997), 522-45.

<sup>15</sup> For the political self-understanding of the Westminster divines, see Paul, *Assembly of the Lord*. Likewise, the idea that ministers and churches were not to intermeddle in civil affairs would have been news to John Knox: see Jane Dawson, *John Knox* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). For the suggestion that this section had Roman Catholics in view, see Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 421.



extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.”

This second part gives two ways for interaction between church and state. The first way is for the church to act: “by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary.” The second way is for the state to act: “if they be required by the civil magistrate, by way of advice.” Both of these serve to nuance confessional “reluctance” to interfere in legislative processes. If the state is considering something that is unbiblical and would plunge society into great spiritual and moral danger, then the church may act to involve itself in the civil processes. As we have already noticed, in the early decades of the twentieth century, southern Presbyterians clearly felt that beverage alcohol and evolution were “cases extraordinary” that compelled them to speak prophetically to the powers that be. In the PCA’s own history, the homosexual movement and the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision that legalized on-demand abortion also were viewed this way—in both instances, the church rightly raised her voice.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, if the national, state, or local government asks the church for its advice on some matter, the church may certainly comply with that request. Again, within the PCA’s own history, at the 38<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, we voted to approve a letter to the President of the United States through the head of our chaplains’ commission on the matter of homosexuals in the military, urging the powers that be to maintain the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. It was in response to a request from the federal government for just such advice and was given as a matter of conscience.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the confession provides avenues to speak prophetically on social, moral, economic or political issues in “cases extraordinary” or when asked by the state. Of course, the question then becomes, “What are cases extraordinary?” As Francis Beattie noted, “It is not easy to decide what are extraordinary cases justifying petition; and then where is the arbiter who is to decide upon such cases.” That may be true. For the purposes of my argument here, we can say this: if state-supported abortion and homosexuality rise to the level of extraordinary cases, then surely the state-supported oppression and injustice of the Civil Rights era did as well. Surely, the basic human rights violations and indignities represented by Jim Crow—“separate, but equal” schools and facilities; poll tests and taxes that disenfranchised; preventing mixed-race

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<sup>16</sup> See the PCA position paper on abortion (1978): <http://www.pcahistory.org/pca/2-015.pdf>; and its declaration of conscience on homosexuality (1992): <http://www.pcahistory.org/pca/2-399.pdf> (accessed 17 June 2015).

<sup>17</sup> *MPCAGA* (2010): 229-31, 648, 667-70.

worship and other social interactions; the violence perpetrated against those who sought such basic human rights—should have brought protest and petition from every Presbyterian who had the parable of the Good Samaritan in their Bibles.<sup>18</sup>

### **Moral Imperatives for Faith and Practice**

But there is one last piece to all of this. Every southern Presbyterian theologian of the nineteenth and twentieth century recognized that there were places where the Bible obviously spoke to conflicted issues in American culture. Since these men believed the Bible but also believed that the church as church was prohibited from intermeddling in civil affairs, they held that “the best thing is for the same members and officers of the church to act as citizens, and to seek thereby to bring their moral influence to bear” upon political and social questions. In order to ensure that Christian citizens knew best how to do this, ministers needed to instruct their people on the moral imperatives involved in various social issues.<sup>19</sup>

Such instruction was why both James Henley Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney attempted to make extensive biblical arguments on slavery. Not only did they want to demonstrate the legitimacy of “southern slavery as it was” to salve the consciences of southern masters, but they also wanted to inculcate the “duties growing out of this relation—duties of the masters and duties of the slave.” Of course, such defenses created problems because the Bible itself never legitimized race-based slavery as practiced in the American South; the Bible also provided alternative readings that held out freedom as the preferable state for humankind. But these proslavery defenses also created issues because even as “private citizens,” Thornwell and Dabney had public authority to teach and advocate on these issues—not just from Presbyterian pulpits, but in Presbyterian newspapers and books published by Presbyterian

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<sup>18</sup> Beattie, *Presbyterian Standards*, 363. It is notable that the 1970 PCUS General Assembly did debate the issue of “cases extraordinary” in relationship to petitioning governments. They concluded that the standards of the church made provision for the church to petition civil governments “where the church’s mission to tell and demonstrate the love of God in Jesus Christ *requires more than* individual efforts alone.” See “Day by Day in Memphis” *Presbyterian Outlook* (29 June 1970): 12.

<sup>19</sup> Beattie, *Presbyterian Standards*, 362.

publishers—in their roles as Presbyterian ministers. As such, they represented the church in what that they said and did, even as “private citizens.”<sup>20</sup>

In the twentieth century, the waters became even murkier. As southern Presbyterian ministers and elders involved themselves in “biblical” defenses of segregation in church and society, they found themselves bumping up against their flawed understanding of the spirituality of the church. On the one hand, the insistence that “the Bible, and the Bible alone, is her rule of faith and practice” meant that southern Presbyterians felt the need to attempt craft a biblical defense for segregation. And they would do so repeatedly and at great length in the pages of the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* through the 1940s and 1950s. On the other hand, even though they spoke to the issue as “private citizens,” they did so as Presbyterian leaders in Presbyterian magazines meant to influence the Presbyterian church. While it was true that church courts were “not intermeddling with civil affairs,” Presbyterian leaders surely were.<sup>21</sup>

And southern Presbyterians were quick to recognize how such connections between leaders and churches existed when the shoe was on the other foot. For example, when northern Presbyterian ministers came to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in 1964 to support African Americans who desired the right to vote, the local newspaper wondered, “We know of no Biblical warrant for ministers marching in picket lines...Many God-fearing people are being given cause to wonder just what is happening to the Presbyterian church in the North. What is the source of this sinister pattern of law defiance in the name of morality?” On the surface, these northern ministers were simply exercising their rights as private citizens to support blacks in a civic cause, which was certainly allowable under the southern spirituality of the church logic. However, they were viewed both as illegitimately active *and* as representatives of the northern Presbyterian church. But surely under southern Presbyterian spirituality of the church teaching, they were well within their rights to be in Hattiesburg as private citizens? The objections signaled a problem in the

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<sup>20</sup> Thornwell, “Relation of the Church to Slavery,” 386; Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2005), 117-28, 143-50.

<sup>21</sup> On southern Presbyterian “biblical” defenses of segregation, see Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg, P&R, 2015), 112-26; David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Strikingly, Nelson Bell felt the need to defend himself against claims that he violated the spirituality of the church when he attacked Communism in the pages of the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*: see Lucas, *Continuing Church*, 104-5.

teaching itself—ministers and elders especially, but all Presbyterians generally, represent the church whether the church as church is doing or saying something or not.<sup>22</sup>

Even further, the Bible itself presents a much different picture on the issues in play during the 1950s and 1960s, one that should have led conservative, Bible-believing Presbyterians to work for racial justice, not against it. Justice for the poor and oppressed is a major biblical theme that continues to have relevance for Christians in this New Testament era. In Isaiah, God’s people are repeatedly arraigned for their failure to seek justice for the poor and oppressed among them (Isa 1:23; 10:1-2; 59:8-9, 15); in Jeremiah, God’s people did not judge with justice or care for the rights of the needy (Jer 5:28); in Ezekiel, God’s people oppressed the poor and needy and did not give them justice (Ezek 22:29); and the other prophets the same. While not all African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s were poor, they *were* needy and oppressed; the power structures, maintained and guarded by whites, prevented them from receiving justice and basic human rights. And these biblical texts spoke both to the problem (injustice) and the solution (seek justice).

Further, racial reconciliation within the church as God’s people is a biblical issue. Our 2004 PCA Pastoral Letter on the Gospel and Race dealt with this at length. Ephesians 2; Galatians 2-3; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Romans 9-11 all deal with the dividing walls between Jew and Gentile within the context of the church. These “ethnic” divisions—the Jews v. everyone else—serve as a way of talking about our racial divisions today. And of course, Revelation 7 pictures a multi-racial, multi-ethnic church that is true already globally and must be increasingly true locally. These texts demand that we live out that reality now in a church that includes whites and blacks, Asians and Hispanics, and others. Beyond that, essential human rights find their common grace basis in the reality that all human beings are created in God’s image. Everyone is our neighbor; there really is not “them,” but only “us.”<sup>23</sup>

All of this suggests that that southern Presbyterians—the forefathers of the PCA—misunderstood and misapplied what the WCF taught. What originally was meant as a way of keeping the spheres of church and state separate—not the spiritual and “secular,” not faith and politics, not love and justice—evolved to create all sorts of

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<sup>22</sup> *Hattiesburg American*, 25 January 1964 and 4 February 1964, quoted in Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 190-91. Notably, the editor of the *Hattiesburg American* was an elder in the PCUS.

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Justice* (New York: Dutton, 2010).

complications. For conservative southern Presbyterians, it became an excuse not to involve themselves in the righting of social wrongs for African Americans both within and outside the church as well as a powerful tool to shut down opposition to the racial status quo. However, rightly understood, I believe that the spirituality of the church would not have prohibited, and actually provided the ground for, speaking prophetically on the issues of racial justice during the Civil Rights era and in our present hour as well as to a range of other social, economic, and political issues.

### **Full Circle: Owning the Past**

This all brings us full circle. I suggested at the beginning that one of the reasons that the PCA 43<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly failed to own the past was its commitment to a flawed understanding of the spirituality of the church doctrine. But it is more than that: as conservative Presbyterians, we have used this flawed understanding of the spirituality of the church as an excuse not to do what is right toward African Americans and we have used it as a tool of power to maintain a system of white privilege. We have demonstrated in times past and present that, when we want to do so, we will forget our commitment to the spirituality of the church and speak truth prophetically to our culture. We have been hypocrites.

In addition, we did not and have not raised our voices when we could have and should have. Conservative southern Presbyterians—the ones who formed the PCA—could have joined the rest of the PCUS in petitioning the authorities on behalf of basic civil rights for southern blacks. They could have joined in support of *Brown v. Board of Education*, worked within structures to advance toward racial justice, or demonstrated the unity of Christ's people by integrating their services. A few actually did these kinds of things—Bill Hill and the Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship sought to host integrated evangelistic meetings as they followed Billy Graham's example; John Neville, when he pastored in Prattville, Alabama, co-chaired a committee that sought racial justice in a town dominated by the Klan; Newton Wilson, when he pastored the Presbyterian church in Ellisville, Mississippi, worked beside John Perkins to seek justice; Larry Mills, the first coordinator of the PCA's Mission to the United States, partnered with Dan Iverson and others to plant mixed-race churches in the South. I am sure there were others, but they were too few. When the PCA formed, though we said we wanted to be an inclusive church, we did not work hard enough to make that a reality; we tolerated and honored too many who defended

segregation and the old Southern way of life; and we have not sought with consistency and determination to listen well and work for our African American brothers and sisters. We were wrong; we must own that past, confess it and repent from it, and purpose to do new practices of obedience.

But we also have to say that the way forward for all of us will be our common commitment to what the church as church should be and should be doing. Central to that life together will be the ministry of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and prayer. And as we use these effectual means of our salvation, what we will find is that the grace that comes to us through them will transform us. It will drive us out into our world to share the Good News of Jesus, but also to live that transforming Gospel in tangible ways, as we love justice and mercy, as we extend ourselves in risky ways into the lives of our neighbors. This Gospel will not leave us alone and cannot leave us the same. After all, King Jesus is making his world new now through you and me—his grace transforms everything.

**“It Was Made to Appear Like that to Them:”  
Islam’s Denial of the Resurrection<sup>1</sup>**

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“The report of my death was an exaggeration.”  
—Mark Twain<sup>2</sup>

**1. Introduction**

Of the major theological divides that separate Islam and Christianity, one of the most difficult to pin down is the denial of the crucifixion of Jesus in Muslim tradition. Though the assertion that Jesus did not die on the cross appears in only part of one difficult verse in the Qur’an (Q4:157, see below), scholars agree that the majority view within Islam is that this verse “affirms categorically that Christ did not die on the cross and that God raised him to Godself.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, the rejection of the crucifixion has “become a sort of shibboleth of orthodoxy,”<sup>4</sup> thus presenting a significant challenge for Muslim-Christian engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a revised version of a course assignment for the inaugural *Christian Encounter with Islam* course at RTS. I extend my thanks to Dr. James Anderson (RTS-Charlotte) for his constructive feedback and to the other faculty members of RTS who are engaged in teaching this important curriculum throughout the seminary. I hope this piece reflects the important role this initiative will play in ensuring RTS graduates are equipped with both a heart for the Muslim community and a mind that understands Islam at a level that is more than cursory—both of which are increasingly needed in the current cultural, political, and religious climate.

<sup>2</sup> From a note to a friend in 1897; often misquoted, “Rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

<sup>3</sup> Michael F. Fonner, “Jesus’ Death by Crucifixion in the Qur’an: An Issue of Interpretation and Muslim-Christian Relations,” *JES* 29 (1992), 442. This view is held not only within popular Islam but among mainstream Islamic scholars; e.g., “Most people familiar with the topic understand that the Qur’an denies Jesus’ crucifixion” (W. Richard Oakes, “Review of *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought*,” *The Muslim World* 101 [2011], 119). While we want to avoid painting all Islam(s) with a broad brush—there is, of course, much diversity among the major branches as well as among individual clerics and believers—the standard view is widespread enough that it has its own Wikipedia page!

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Said Reynolds, “The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?” *Bulletin of SOAS* 72/2 (2009), 237; he further notes, “most critical scholars accept that this is indeed the Quran’s teaching. ... The prevalent Islamic teaching [is] that Jesus escaped death on the cross, that instead God raised him body and soul to heaven,

This dogma is not, however, without its difficulties: it requires rejection of the broad scholarly consensus that the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth outside Jerusalem under the oversight of Pontius Pilate is an indisputable historical fact; it strains exegesis of other parts of the Qur’an and appears to rely on strained exegesis of one verse; and it has spawned a wide range of often speculative and contradictory explanations.<sup>5</sup> But does the Qur’an itself actually deny the resurrection? Such is the question this article attempts to answer. By analyzing the textual data and interpretive history, it will be argued that the belief that Jesus was not crucified actually stems from an anti-Jewish polemical passage that was misinterpreted along both Shi’a and Sunni lines and cemented by medieval orthodoxy. *In other words, it is not the Qur’an itself that indisputably denies the crucifixion, but the scholars defending Islamic orthodoxy.*

We will proceed in three steps: examining the Qur’an’s view of Jesus’ death in itself; outlining three options within Islamic tradition that attempt to explain why the denial of the crucifixion became dogma; and proposing an alternate explanation for the long-standing durability of this denial within Islamic thought. This third step will identify the root cause of the debate—scriptural exegesis versus dogmatic tradition—which in turn will prompt reflections on Christian-Muslim engagement as well as similar “in-house” tensions within our own Christian traditions.

## 2. The Qur’an’s Teaching on Jesus’ Death

Given the primacy of place given to the Qur’an in all Islamic schools, the logical starting point is to examine the textual data within the Qur’an that has led to this denial of the crucifixion.<sup>6</sup> Two aspects of the question should be distinguished but

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and that God will send him back to earth in the end times. ... This teaching is standard in classical Muslim literature.”

<sup>5</sup> Reynolds comments, “[The theories of classical commentators] are inconsistent and often contradictory. They have all of the tell-tale signs of speculative exegesis” (“Muslim Jesus,” 258).

<sup>6</sup> Two objections might be raised at this point. First, why privilege the Qur’an’s interpretation of history over biblical and extrabiblical sources (e.g. Josephus, Tacitus) that, in the hands of modern scholarship, have rendered the Jesus’ “death by crucifixion ... so high on the ‘almost impossible to doubt or deny’ scale of historical ‘facts’” (James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003], 339)? Second, why privilege the Qur’an over, say, the Hadiths, Sunna, or other popular and authoritative Islamic literature? The simple answer to both is that, if we are to allow Islam to speak for



not separated: what does the Qur'an say about Jesus' death in general, and what does it say about the crucifixion in particular?

### **2.1. Can Jesus, as a Messenger of Allah, Actually Die in Principle?**

The antecedent question to that of the crucifixion is whether the Jesus presented in the Qur'an could actually die a normal human death to begin with. Within Islamic interpretation, there are two competing lines of thought: (i) given Jesus' elevated status as Prophet, Messenger, and Messiah (which, incidentally, the Qur'an does not quite define clearly), he could not actually die but instead "was raised body and soul to heaven,"<sup>7</sup> where he met Muhammad during his Night Ascent;<sup>8</sup> or (ii) Jesus, just like Muhammad and other prophets, will—or already did—die from natural causes.<sup>9</sup> Most scholars agree that four verses deal with the possibility of Jesus' death<sup>10</sup>:

Q3:55—God said, 'Jesus, I will take you back and raise you up to Me: I will purify you of the disbelievers. To the Day of Resurrection I will make those who follow you superior to those who disbelieved. Then you will all return to Me and I will judge between you regarding your differences.

Q3:144—Muhammad is only a messenger before whom many messengers have been and gone.

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itself, we must recognize "the particular importance of the Muslim belief that *the Qur'an* conveys God's *definitive word on all subjects*, including Christianity" and any historical events that the Qur'an addresses (Fonner, "Jesus' Death," 433; emphasis added). Much like how many Christians (particularly those within the Reformed tradition) take the OT and NT to be normative (in some sense, which is, of course, debated) on our interpretation of historical data, so also Muslims.

<sup>7</sup> Reynolds, "Muslim Jesus," 245.

<sup>8</sup> Khaleel Muhammad, "The Case of the Overlooked Fatwa," *JES* 46/3 (2011), 381-382. The basic premise of this view is that Jesus, by virtue of the special status given to him by the Qur'an (which, of course, still falls short of divinity) cannot be allowed to die by Allah.

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad, "Overlooked Fatwa," 384.

<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the Qur'an translations are taken from *The Qur'an* (Trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Another key data point for the possibility of Jesus' death is 4:159, which will be covered below in our treatment of 4:157.

Q5:117—[Jesus said,] I was a witness over them during my time among them. Ever since You took my soul, You alone have been the watcher over them: You are witness to all things.

Q19:33—[Jesus said,] Peace was on me the day I was born, and will be on me the day I die and the day I am raised to life again.’

A few observations may be made about this selection of verses. First, Q3:144 indicates that not only is it possible for Messengers of Allah to “pass away”<sup>11</sup> but, in fact, some have done so.<sup>12</sup> Second, Jesus appears well aware of the possibility that his time on earth will cease. In Q5:117, he speaks of a distinction between the time he was among humans and the time when Allah took his soul; likewise, Q3:55 speaks of Allah’s removal of Jesus to heaven. Scholars are divided over the interpretation of these verses, however, due to the difficulty of the verb *tawaffa* in each. It can be taken four ways: “cause to die,” given its typical use in the Qur’an;<sup>13</sup> Allah’s act of raising Jesus, body and soul, to heaven while bypassing death; some sort of soul-sleep that was not death; or the termination of Jesus’ time on earth without reference to physical death at all.<sup>14</sup> Third, verse 19:33 perhaps resolves the conundrum by indicating that Jesus expected a literal, physical death.<sup>15</sup> Taking stock of the exegetical options, the most natural answer to the question posed is “Yes”: on the whole the Qur’an does not explicitly deny the possibility of Jesus’ death in principle (regardless of his special

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<sup>11</sup> Other translations render the verse more clearly as referring to death or passing away than that of Haleem: e.g., “many were the messenger[s] that passed away before him” (Yusuf Ali).

<sup>12</sup> “There is little doubt that the Qur’an affirms that prophets die. ... Moreover, the Qur’an also asserts that prophets have been slain” (Fonner, “Jesus’ Death,” 441).

<sup>13</sup> E.g., the Shakir translation of 5:117 reads, “but when Thou didst cause me to die...” Muhammad concludes, “Since this verse [5:117], in its affirmation of the end of Jesus among his people, comes without any conditioner, there is no justification for saying that Jesus is alive and did not die” (“Overlooked Fatwa,” 381).

<sup>14</sup> See summary of views in Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 245.

<sup>15</sup> “Here Jesus – speaking miraculously as an infant – implies that his death will be like that of any other human” (Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 239). Even with this verse, a minority of scholars hold that the death envisaged by Jesus has not happened in the past but refers to a future event.

status) but, rather, strongly implies “that he can die a ‘normal biological death’” just like any other Messenger.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.2. Was Jesus Crucified on the Cross?

If Jesus could in principle die, the focal question becomes whether crucifixion—as attested in the Gospels and affirmed by historical scholars—was the cause. The locus classicus of the debate is Q4:157, for which various translations are provided below:

*Haleem*—[Jews] said, ‘We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God.’ (They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them; those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him.)

*Sabih International*—And for their saying, ‘Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.’ And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but another was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain.

*Yusuf Ali*—That they said (in boast), ‘We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah’; – but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not.

This notoriously difficult verse is the only reference to the crucifixion in the Qur’an, and the apparent denial of the crucifixion is, as is clear in Haleem’s and Ali’s renderings, a parenthetical statement modifying the primary clause speaking of the Jew’s claim of killing Jesus. The underlined portion represents the fundamental exegetical challenge of the verse. The passive verbal phrase *shubbihā lahum* (“caused to appear”) is a *hapax legomenon* (appearing only once in the Qur’an) that has generated

<sup>16</sup> Mustafa Shah, “Review of *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought*,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 12 (2010), 193.

numerous interpretations which can be grouped along two basic understandings of the verb.<sup>17</sup>

The most common interpretation, often called the “substitution theory,” takes the implied object of the verb to be Jesus himself: namely, it was not Jesus who was crucified, but someone who “appeared” like him to the Jews and was killed in his place (e.g., the Sahih International rendering). This theory maintains that the Jews intended to crucify Jesus, and a historical crucifixion indeed happened, but Allah controverted the Jews by placing Jesus’ visage on another person who, subsequently, took his place on the cross. Islamic exegetes have generated a plethora of possible identities of the person who bore Jesus’ image and replaced him on the cross: a passing Jew, a Roman soldier, Judas Iscariot, Simon of Cyrene, or one of the apostles such as Tatanus, Sergius, or Peter.<sup>18</sup> In short, the substitutionist reading, which is the most popular among Muslims today, is “that someone was, in fact, crucified, but it was not Jesus.”<sup>19</sup>

A less common but exegetically valid theory holds that the verbal phrase “is applied not to Jesus, but to the event of the Crucifixion.”<sup>20</sup> That is to say, the implied object of the verb is the act of crucifixion itself, suggesting that no one actually died on the cross, but rather it only “appeared” to take place, thus fooling the Jews into thinking they had successfully killed Jesus (e.g., the Haleem and Yusuf Ali translations). Proponents of this reading shift the emphasis in the direction of vindicating Allah’s protection of Jesus from suffering an unnatural, violent death at the hands of his enemies, the Jews.<sup>21</sup> The event of the crucifixion was a mirage.

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<sup>17</sup> Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 238; Shah, “Review of *The Crucifixion*,” 193.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony McRoy, “The Christ of Shia Islam,” *ERT* 30/4 (2006), 341; Oakes, “Review of *The Crucifixion*,” 121; Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 241-242. Reynolds elaborates, “Their [classical scholars] principal disagreement is only whether God cast the image of Jesus on a number of people, from whom the Jews chose one to crucify, or whether God cast the image of Jesus only on one specific person.” The identities of Tatanus and Sergius are unknown.

<sup>19</sup> Fonner, “Jesus’ Death,” 443. “The common belief among Muslims that the crucifixion was an illusion, or that someone else was substituted for Jesus” (“Jesus, Son of Mary,” *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* [ed. Cyril Glassé; New York: AltaMira Press, 2002], 239); “the dominant opinion among Muslims is that another person was substituted in Jesus’ place” (Muhammad, “Overlooked Fatwa,” 378).

<sup>20</sup> Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 238.

<sup>21</sup> “This is what the verses encapsulate ... as well as that Jesus would complete his term without being killed or crucified, but instead expire through natural death” (Muhammad, “Overlooked Fatwa, 383).

Notably, both of these exegetical options allow room for difference of opinion regarding whether Jesus could (in theory) or actually did die a physical death; where they agree, of course, is denying the possibility that, even if Jesus as Messenger and Messiah could die, he certainly did not die through crucifixion at the hands of the Jews.

### 3. Three Explanatory Frameworks for the Denial of the Crucifixion

The preceding cursory summary captures the orthodox position within both Sunni and Shi'a traditions, which interpret the Qur'an as rejecting Jesus' crucifixion at Calvary outright (at least in some form).<sup>22</sup> We will see below that some voices within Islam in recent years have begun to question this dogma. But before doing so, let us explore why this mainstream Islamic creed has been so persistent. How has the doctrine been so "sticky" over time? Three frameworks may provide part of the explanation for the doctrine's entrenched status.

#### 3.1. Docetism and the Person of Jesus

A common explanation offered by outside observers (not necessarily Islamic "insiders") focuses in the impact of Christian heresies on Muhammad and his contemporaries. It is often observed that Q4:157 has a noticeable Docetic feel to it, whereby "Jesus' suffering only 'seemed' (*dokein*) to be physical but had, in fact, more of an apparitional quality."<sup>23</sup> Some scholars detect similar notions elsewhere in the Qur'an, and many argue that various Christian sects holding unorthodox christological views were active in the Arabian peninsula during Muhammad's day and likely influenced him, including Monophysites, Julianists, Gnostic Basilideans,

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<sup>22</sup> The Sunni view is encapsulated in the following Saudi fatwa: "The Second Advent of Jesus is so important to majoritarian Islamic creed that the Permanent Committee for Research and Fatwa, of Saudi Arabia ... proclaimed: It has been established by proofs from the Scripture and the authentic traditions that Jesus, son of Mary, was not killed and did not die. ... Whoever says that Jesus son of Mary died ... is to be ruled as a disbeliever" (Muhammad, "Overlooked Fatwa," 379). In other words, like the Trinity (which violates *tawhid* and results in *shirk*), so also does belief in the crucifixion of Jesus result in *shirk*. With regard to Shi'ism, "the Shi'ite Hadith [e.g., Abu 'Abd Allah], unlike its Sunni equivalent, explicitly denies that Jesus was crucified" (McRoy, "Christ of Shia," 349).

<sup>23</sup> Fonner, "Jesus' Death," 444. Space does not permit engaging in a summary of the Docetism heresy of early Christianity.

Nestorians, and other groups.<sup>24</sup> If true, the influence of such group (or groups) upon early Islam might explain the Docetic/Gnostic tenor of Q4:157, whereby Muhammad and his followers may have believed that such an *apparitional* crucifixion was, in fact, “perfectly in line with the early and apparently widespread Christian perspective” they had encountered.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Muhammad thought his teaching on the crucifixion was the Christian teaching as well—unaware that it was a version of “Christianity” deemed heretical. There is a *prima facie* appeal to this explanation. However, the main problem with the Docetism theory, as many scholars have observed, is that Docetism and other Gnostic strands emphasize Jesus’ absolute divinity and deny his real humanity (Jesus only “seemed” human), while the bulk of the teaching of the Qur’an and Hadiths—even if Muhammad was in some way influenced by such groups—emphasizes precisely the opposite, namely, denying Jesus’ divinity and affirming his humanness.<sup>26</sup>

### ***3.2. The Relationship of Allah to Jesus as Prophet***

A second explanation focuses on the Qur’an’s teaching about Jesus’ position with respect to Allah. There is a “notable selectivity with which the Qur’an describes and approves of Jesus Christ.”<sup>27</sup> Jesus is mentioned in 15 Suras and 93 verses; while this is not trivial, Abraham is mentioned over 240 times and Moses over 500 times. The Qur’an affirms some basic facts about Jesus’ life, such as his virgin birth, moral righteousness, reception of the Injil (gospel), and various miracles. However, even in the presentation of supernatural events surrounding Jesus, the Qur’an takes a fairly subdued position that assigns little if any theological significance to them.<sup>28</sup> Islam places the emphasis not on the special nature of Jesus but on the working of Allah; various literary devices in the Qur’an are used repeatedly to “minimize the role of

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<sup>24</sup> Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 252; McRoy, “Christ of Shia,” 349.

<sup>25</sup> Shah, “Review of *The Crucifixion*,” 192.

<sup>26</sup> “The Qur’an presents a Christology of the human Christ ... The Qur’anic Jesus is not only fully and only human but ... also exemplarily human” (Fonner, “Jesus’ Death,” 438, 444.

<sup>27</sup> Fonner, “Jesus’ Death,” 432.

<sup>28</sup> McRoy, “Christ of Shia,” 340. “These miracles are reported in the Qur’an in a perfunctory way and are presented as simple demonstrations of God’s power” (Kate Zebri, “Contemporary Muslim Understanding of the Miracles of Jesus,” *The Muslim World* 90 [2000], 71).

Jesus in initiating and carrying out the miracles” and onto the power and permission of Allah.<sup>29</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is argued that Muslim interpreters have maintained the denial of the crucifixion out of a combination of a disinterest in reconstructing the historical Jesus (negative aspect) and a strong desire to make a theological statement about Allah (positive aspect).<sup>30</sup> The statement is simply this: Allah will not let his enemies vanquish his chosen Messenger. The denial of the crucifixion is a denial of the power of mankind to overturn Allah’s will; the Jews cannot kill Jesus because Allah is the ultimate responsible actor who will determine when and whether his anointed Messenger will die.<sup>31</sup> In short, if anyone will put Jesus to death, it is Allah—not the Jews—for he has promised to vindicate his prophets; if Jesus were crucified, Allah would be contradicted.<sup>32</sup> While this construction rightly draws upon key themes pertaining to the Qur’anic conception of Jesus, it tends to downplay the high status placed on Jesus<sup>33</sup> and the bare fact that many Messengers, including Muhammad, have indeed died—and often brutally.

### ***3.3. Islamic Conception of Salvation***

A third approach locates Islam’s trenchant denial of the crucifixion in its attempt at “undermining the construct of redemption.”<sup>34</sup> On this view, by calling into question whether Jesus actually died on the cross at all, Islamic scholars have severed the link between the crucifixion and the redemptive importance assigned to it by Christianity. Given the Qur’an’s denial of Jesus’ divinity as well as its generally

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<sup>29</sup> Zebri, “Miracles of Jesus,” 75.

<sup>30</sup> “The emphasis [in 4:157] is in looking at the passage not as relating historical fact but, rather, as asserting theological truth” (Fonner, “Jesus’ Death,” 444).

<sup>31</sup> Oakes, “Review of *The Crucifixion*,” 120; Fonner, “Jesus’ Death,” 445.

<sup>32</sup> “The Quran’s denial of Jesus’ death reflects instead Muhammad’s particular idea that Prophets are always vindicated” (Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 253).

<sup>33</sup> Fathi Osman, Zalman Schachter, Gerard S. Sloyan, and Dermot A. Lane, “Jesus in Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” *JES* 14/3 (1977), 451: “The Qur’an refers clearly to a special place of Jesus in his relation to God, which is different from the place of any other prophet, even if the Qur’an rejects the notion that Jesus may be called ‘Son of God.’”

<sup>34</sup> Shah, “Review of *The Crucifixion*,” 197.

negative stance towards the biblical idea of human depravity or original sin,<sup>35</sup> Islam does not teach a concept of atonement, which is obviously tied up in the event of the cross for Christians. Thus, not only is the crucifixion of a Messenger of Allah (even a special one like Jesus) soteriologically unnecessary in Islam, it would actually contradict the general teaching of Islam regarding the nature of salvation; “since Islam has no such doctrine [of redemption], such a death never would take place.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, the denial of the crucifixion is a kind of doctrinal Occam’s Razor: it serves no purpose, so it is rejected.<sup>37</sup> Though it is generally the most compelling option, the problem facing this explanatory framework is that it assumes the Qur’an has soteriology in view in 4:157, which may not, in fact, be the case.

#### 4. Constructing a Possible Explanation

If the preceding explanatory frameworks are inadequate to account for why traditional Islamic teaching so strongly clings to the denial of the crucifixion, what may account for it? As some Islamic scholars have begun to acknowledge, the starting point may lie in “exegetical atomism,” that is, “studying quranic verses in isolation.”<sup>38</sup> This method has dominated Islamic scholarship from its earliest days, and generations of interpreters have accordingly built a doctrine denying the crucifixion based solely on the exegesis of a single part of a debated verse, without paying attention to its context.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the crucifixion has become heresy in Islam

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<sup>35</sup> McRoy, “Christ of Shia,” 340.

<sup>36</sup> Fonner, “Jesus’ Death,” 443. Chedid provides an example of this view: “Since Islam rejects the whole concept of a fallen human nature and the principle of vicarious atonement for sin, it follows naturally that the denial of the meaning of the cross becomes a condition for their theology” (Bassam M. Chedid, *Islam: What Every Christian Should Know* [New York: EP Books, 2004], 199).

<sup>37</sup> “The crucifixion of Jesus does not play a role in the Islamic perspective any more than does his superhuman origin, for salvation in Islam results from the recognition of the Absoluteness of God and not from a sacrificial mystery. Since Islam believes that Jesus will return at the end of time, his death was no more than apparent and did not, as in Christian belief, involve a resurrection after the event” (*New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 239).

<sup>38</sup> Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 252.

<sup>39</sup> Westerners often run into this problem when engaging with Islamic scholarship, which approaches the Qur’an in a “literalist fashion; that is, each sentence or passage is interpreted for what the words say, quite apart from their historical and literary context” (Fonner, “Jesus’ Crucifixion,” 435).



due to inadequate hermeneutics. A more nuanced approach to Q4:157 shows that the single text that appears to reject the crucifixion actually may not actually do so at all, but through non-contextual interpretation it has been appropriated by Shi'a and Sunni traditions to serve competing doctrinal agendas.

#### 4.1. Exegetical Context of Surah 4: Jewish Polemic

The broader context of the key passage indicates that the most sound reading of Q4:157 is that it functions as a polemic against the Jews, not as a denial of a historical fact about Jesus or doctrine of Christianity. If the exegetical window of 4:157 is expanded, one finds that the surrounding verses strongly accuse the Jews—who, as is well known, are treated by the Qur'an quite harshly in some cases, and with some mutual respect as “People of the Book” in others—of various forms infidelity:

- 4:153 *Worshipping the golden calf*—“Even after clear revelations had come down to them, they took the calf as an object of worship”
- 4:155a *Breaking the covenant*—“for breaking their pledge”
- 4:155b *Rejecting revelation*—“for rejecting God’s revelations ... for saying ‘Our minds are closed’”
- 4:155c *Murdering prophets*—“for unjustly killing their prophets”
- 4:156 *Slandering Mary*—“they disbelieved and uttered a terrible slander against Mary”
- 4:160 *Various wrongdoings*—“for the wrongdoings done by the Jews, We forbade them certain good things”
- 4:161 *Financial abuse*—“for taking usury when they had been forbidden to do so ... for wrongfully devouring other people’s property”

The entire passage is a sharply-pointed rhetorical onslaught against the faithlessness of the Jews, concluding thus: “those of them that reject the truth [Allah] has prepared an agonizing torment” (4:161b). The verse about the crucifixion, then, forms a key part of broader attack on the multitude of sinful acts committed by Jews, culminating in their rejection of Jesus himself, which was forbidden: “there is none of the People of the Book *but must believe in him* before his death” (4:159).<sup>40</sup> In other

<sup>40</sup> Yusuf Ali translation; emphasis added.

words, 4:157 indicts of the Jews for their attempt to crucify Jesus, to gain victory over him, and to repudiate him as *their* specific Messenger from Allah.<sup>41</sup>

If this is true, how should the key verb *shubbiha lahum* (“caused to appear”) be taken? Verse 4:142, which introduces this series of condemnations of hypocrites who disobey God (including the Jews), provides the exegetical key: “The hypocrites try to deceive God, but it is He who causes them to be deceived.” In light of the surrounding verses, a straightforward reading of 4:157 becomes evident: the Jews have claimed to controvert Allah by crucifying Jesus, but Allah has *deceived* them into thinking they have won, when in fact they stand condemned.<sup>42</sup> In other words, given the focus of the entire passage, “the Crucifixion [is] one example of Israelite infidelity. ... The Quran intends to defend Jesus from the claims of the Jews. ... Whether or not Jesus died is simply not the matter at hand.”<sup>43</sup> Put differently: the issue in Q4:157 is not the *historicity* or *non-historicity* of the crucifixion at all. That is simply not the point of the passage. Rather, the crucifixion episode is yet another way in which Jews (according to the Qur’an) have rebelled against God; they thought they won, but they were deceived. Whether or not the crucifixion actually happened in Jerusalem is not the focus of the passage at all.

Such a re-reading does justice to the context of the Surah and resolves a nagging historical question: if Muhammad did in fact make the astounding *historical* claim that Jesus was not, in fact, crucified on the cross (which, recall, is widely accepted among secular historians and which was the source of long-standing conflict between Christians and Jews for six centuries before Muhammad), “such a revolutionary account—if any—would be well remembered and well preserved.”<sup>44</sup> But in fact the

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<sup>41</sup> “[The Qur’an] presents a Jesus who has an ethically/geographically restricted ministry, since Islam holds that only Muhammad was chosen to be the Messenger to the whole world. [Imams teach that] ‘Allah sent Jesus especially to the children of Israel’” (McRoy, “Christ of Shia,” 345).

<sup>42</sup> “Since [the reference to the Crucifixion] exists only in the context of responding to the Jewish claim, the discourse structure suggests it was denying the capability of the Jews to have done this depending on their own power” (Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 253). This “deception” need not be taken in an overly negative sense, given that Islam also affirms the truthfulness and uprightness of Allah. It is, perhaps, akin to the use of deception in military tactics.

<sup>43</sup> Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 252.

<sup>44</sup> Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 258.

opposite is the case; Muhammad left behind only part of one ambiguous verse to that effect.

In fact, as scholars have begun increasingly to recognize the pitfalls of traditional Islamic “atomistic” hermeneutics, some have argued that the Qur’an is ultimately silent or, at least, ambivalent regarding the actual *historicity* of the crucifixion. Consider three scholarly samples:

Over the last thirty years, scholars have found that the Qur’an does not clearly reject the idea that Jesus was placed on the cross and died there.<sup>45</sup>

The meaning of verse 157 is best understood not as a statement of historical fact about Jesus but, rather, as a rebuke of the Jews. The operating hermeneutic here is to situate the denial of crucifixion within the Qur’an’s negative attitude toward the Jews; this allows an interpretation that shifts our attention away from what happened to Jesus in the direction of what the Qur’an says about the Jews.<sup>46</sup>

The underlying theme of the set of *ayas* in which the reference to the crucifixion verse is situated relates specifically to the condemnation of disbelief (*kufir*) and has little bearing on the discussion of the historicity of the crucifixion.<sup>47</sup>

These observations fit quite logically with the Qur’an’s general lack of interest in presenting the “historical Jesus” and its pervasive treatment of Jesus as primarily an argumentative prop for elevating Muhammad (among other things).<sup>48</sup> Thus, the Islamic dogma that emphasizes the denial of the crucifixion may have arisen from the overly narrow hermeneutical approach used by the majority of traditional Islamic commentators—an approach which becomes particularly problematic when dealing

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<sup>45</sup> Mohammad, “Overlooked Fatwa,” 378.

<sup>46</sup> Fonner, “Jesus’ Death,” 440.

<sup>47</sup> Shah, “Review of *The Crucifixion*,” 193.

<sup>48</sup> “We note that the Qur’an is not interested in *reconstructing the historical Jesus*. ... Rather than attempting to reconstruct historical persons and events, the Qur’an recollects them in order to inspire piety. ... For the Qur’an, Jesus belongs within the framework of God’s sending of prophets and books (Fonner, “Jesus’ Death,” 436; emphasis added).

with a verse that hinges on an ambiguous *hapax legomenon*.<sup>49</sup> A more contextually sensitive reading of the key verse makes clear that what is in play is not a denial of a historical crucifixion but a polemical attack on those who sought it. What, then, has given such an interpretation its staying power?

#### **4.2. Sectarian Conflict: Shi’a vs. Sunni Eschatology**

I suggest that the primary reason the denial of the crucifixion attained creedal status relates to eschatological conflicts “connected to the sectarian milieu in which Islamic doctrine developed.”<sup>50</sup> While the Sunni Hadith never actually mentions the issue of the crucifixion at all, the Shi’ite Hadith “explicitly denies that Jesus was crucified.”<sup>51</sup> The reason on the Shi’a side is fairly apparent. As Shi’a doctrine developed (particularly the Twelver strand), Jesus quickly became associated with the Twelfth Imam (*Madhi*), and both men will play prominent roles in their return at the end of the world. The denial of the crucifixion, and the related view that Jesus did not die at all but was raised directly to heaven, became a perfect fit with the Shi’a concept of occultation: both Jesus and the Twelfth Imam have remained alive in a state of hiding, awaiting the second coming.<sup>52</sup> Sunni eschatology, however, insists that there would be no other *Madhi*, that the Twelfth Imam is a myth, and that Jesus himself is this single eschatological figure: “Jesus became the Sunni answer to the Shii ... and his preservation from death was accordingly emphasized.”<sup>53</sup> In short, both main divisions of Islam have made use of the denial of the crucifixion to support their competing

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<sup>49</sup> “The problem with most of the suggestions about how to read and understand puzzling phrases in the Qur’an ... is that *the interpretive focus has often been too narrow*, confining attention to the immediate context of the troubling words and phrases and imagining a solution, either grammatical, lexical or historical, without taking a wider Qur’anic context into account” (Mohammed, “Overlooked Fatwa,” 384).

<sup>50</sup> Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 250.

<sup>51</sup> McRoy, “Christ of Shia,” 349. See note 21 above.

<sup>52</sup> Shah writes, “In Twelver Shi’a commentaries the denial of the crucifixion is upheld. ... The substitute legend in Islamic exegesis probably had its origins in a Shi’a milieu as it fits in exactly with the doctrine of a Hidden Imam who resides in the unseen realm, although it is recognised that the idea of substitution was [also] adopted quite early by Sunni exegetes” (“Review of *The Crucifixion*,” 195).

<sup>53</sup> Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus,” 251.

eschatological doctrines which, somewhat ironically, ultimately rely on the same essential tenet: Jesus, as an eschatological redeemer figure, could not undergo the humiliation of death by crucifixion.

#### **4.3. Fortress Mentality of Orthodoxy**

Once the atomistic reading of Q4:157 was firmly integrated into the eschatological framework of either division of Islam—regardless of the flawed underlying exegesis—it became nearly impossible in practice to question. Though only a single quranic verse mentions the crucifixion, and though any further references in the accepted Hadith and Sunna are quite rare (and absent altogether on the Sunni side), the interpretive tradition of commentators (*tafsir*) from the Middle Ages onward has been an imposing force in shaping how Muslims read the Qur’an. One could describe it as interpretive inertia: “over successive centuries the discussion of the crucifixion within the Islamic tradition ... evolved to accommodate the doctrine of denial in a way which obscured the neutrality of the original Qur’anic position.”<sup>54</sup> Even as alternative approaches have been voiced, they have had little impact on either mainstream (conservative) scholarship or the average Muslim, for the “majority of traditional scholars in all sects of Islam are not willing to question medievalist constructs.”<sup>55</sup> Given the inherent priority Islam places on upholding the accepted traditions, accepted tenets are rather difficult to change; medieval exegesis, however flawed, has a conditioning effect on all subsequent scholarship. There are dangers in assaulting the fortress of orthodoxy. Consequently, “the point is that *tafsir*, not the Qur’an, denies the Crucifixion.”<sup>56</sup>

### **5. Conclusion and Reflections**

Factoring in all the data, the denial of the crucifixion within Islam ultimately seems to have developed as follows: competing opinions existed about the possibility of Jesus’ earthly, physical death; a single Qur’anic text ambiguously describes how Allah would confound the Jews into thinking they had succeeded in crucifying Jesus,

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<sup>54</sup> Shah, “Review of *The Crucifixion*,” 191.

<sup>55</sup> Muhammad, “Overlooked Fatwa,” 387. Oakes also comments on the pervasive “influence that medieval *tafsir* still have on today’s average Muslim” (“Review of *The Crucifixion*,” 121).

<sup>56</sup> Reynolds, “Muslim Jesus, 252.

as part of a larger polemical attack against Jewish unbelief; Shi’a and Sunni scholars in the Middle Ages appropriated this verse to support their own views of Jesus’ role in the eschaton; and this medieval rejection of the crucifixion has proven difficult to dislodge.<sup>57</sup>

This evaluation of a stronghold doctrine within Islam raises a few important questions pertaining to how Christians should engage with the Qur’an and Muslims. Whose version of Islam should be considered normative? How should a Christian interact with a subject if the Qur’an leans in one direction, while orthodox dogma is calcified in another? Does one side with the Qur’an or with the scholars? How should Christians sensitively navigate the tension between what seems to be the teaching of a given Qur’anic verse and a cherished position that a Muslim friend might have been taught for years? How might Christians best seek inroads into the Muslim worldview by examining the Qur’an with fresh eyes and respectfully asking questions that might lead a Muslim friend to do the same?

Moreover, the juxtaposition of scriptural teaching with dogmatic tradition outlined here should prompt all Christians to pause and reflect on areas within our own theological system (Reformed or otherwise) where such tensions may be at play. In essence, the Qur’an says one thing, but through a series of interpretive maneuvers made by folks who were attempting to defend a certain position *and maintain that position at all costs*, an erroneous interpretation became the overwhelmingly accepted orthodoxy. This can happen in Christian circles, too. We can learn at least three things from this discussion.

First, with respect to the doctrinal “fortress mentality”: we should be ever-willing to examine our own thinking (or that of our church, seminary, favorite theologians, etc.) to determine if there are any areas where we have developed a view that may not be exegetically bulletproof (and may, on close inspection, be simply unfaithful to Scripture), but which we implicitly treat as the “litmus test of orthodoxy” against which everyone else is measured. Are there any doctrines, particularly secondary ones,

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<sup>57</sup> Shah summarizes it well: “The hermeneutic culture out of which the doctrine of denial emerged was shaped by a complex array of dogmatic exigencies and ... the distinction between scripture and its interpretation tends to be inappropriately overlooked by those who speak of the Qur’an denying the crucifixion” (“Review of *The Crucifixion*,” 191).

for which more charity is needed towards those who sincerely interpret things differently?

Second, with respect to “atomistic” exegesis: we should strive as best we can to interpret any given biblical text in a way that is faithful to its local context (the surrounding verses of the passage) and its broader context (the message of Scripture as a whole). If our exegesis of a single verse militates against the plain sense of other passages—as with Q4:157 versus other passages on Jesus’ death in the Qur’an—we should perhaps rethink our exegesis.

Third, with respect to “scripture” versus “dogma”: we need to work very hard faithfully and soberly to ensure our exegesis and doctrinal formulations mutually inform one another in a healthy, balanced way. Within the Reformed tradition we reject the view that scriptural exegesis and systematic theology are somehow polarized. We strive, rather, to ground our systematic theology in sound exegetical work, while simultaneously admitting that a central feature of “sound exegetical work” is the shaping influence that theology (church fathers, confessions, Reformed covenantal theology, etc.) has on the very endeavor of interpreting scriptural texts.

**The Redeemer City Ministry Program  
as a Model of Ministry Preparation for the City**

**A Brief Homily based on Mark 3:13-15<sup>1</sup>**

**Timothy J. Keller**

And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.

When I went to seminary a very long time ago, A. B. Bruce's book on the *Training of the Twelve* was the book to read.<sup>2</sup> Our Mark 3 text was central to that book, especially verse 14: "he appointed twelve that they might be with him, and that he might send them out to preach." James Edwards's commentary on Mark says this about the text: "the simple prepositional phrase, 'to be with him,' has atomic significance in the Gospel of Mark. Discipleship is a relationship before it is a task. It is a 'who' before a 'what'."<sup>3</sup>

The essence is this: you become like those with whom you hang out the most, those to whom you relate most intensely. You are a product of a family, and you will only be changed with relationships at least that intense with others. That means that no one can be "sent out" unless they have been brought in to "be with" in a radical, intense way.

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<sup>1</sup> An address delivered by Dr. Keller at the inaugural convocation of Reformed Theological Seminary – New York City and the Redeemer City Ministry program, September 10, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce, A. B. *The Training of the Twelve; Or, Passages Out of the Gospels, Exhibiting the Twelve Disciples of Jesus under Discipline for the Apostleship* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1877).

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 113.



Be with whom? With Jesus, first of all. Which means that if you are trained to go out to minister, your training *does* have to teach you how to pray. It does have to deepen your spiritual life enormously. These things cannot be “sidebars” – optional one day seminars – in your ministry training. You are supposed to be with Jesus during those three years. But it also means to be *with* (in intensely relational ways) your mentors, your trainers, and with other students– your colleagues. It is only through some radical communal experience of spiritual formation that you become someone who can be sent out.

Everybody talks about this around seminaries these days, and we talked about it when I was a seminary student. At Westminster Seminary, I was both a professor for a number of years and later a member of the Board. We constantly discussed “spiritual formation” and “character formation” under many names. Everybody says, “That’s it! That’s what seminary ought to be – intensely communal, lots of time together, teaching us how to pray, looking at each other’s souls.” So you talk about somehow “incorporating it into the curriculum.” But at the faculty level, it’s hard to find room for it (what will you drop or cut out?), and at the Board level, you realize that you can’t afford it.

Over the summer, I read a book by Paul House of Beeson Divinity School, *Bonhoeffer’s Seminary Vision*.<sup>4</sup> House looked at Bonhoeffer’s role in the German Confessing Church’s illegal, underground seminaries in 1930’s Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer took students who were being prepared for ministry, and they lived together for six months or so. There were lectures and discussion, but no papers and no grades. The groups were small – generally 8 to 20 students at a time with a teacher/mentor. House does a good job recounting the fascinating history, and then he draws some applications for today. He concludes that today’s seminaries need small classes, that professors should have mentoring relationships with their students, and that there should be no distance education at all.

It is a great read, and it certainly would be good if seminary classes were smaller and if professors were more involved with their students. Yet I sensed there was something obvious that House seemed to miss completely. Let’s give an overview of how ministerial training worked in that time.

In Europe, then and even today, there was no Master of Divinity. Theological training was conducted in the university, and practical ministry training was done as

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<sup>4</sup> Paul R. House. *Bonhoeffer’s Seminary Vision: A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

an apprenticeship. Theological training was an accredited university degree. The subjects were biblical languages, exegesis, biblical studies, church history, theology, and philosophy. The intellectual standards were high. The pedagogical vehicles for the training were reading, lecture, and classroom work. The products to be evaluated were exams and papers. The goal was academic excellence and the mastery of a body of knowledge.

Ministry training, however, was not part of the degree program. It was a non-credit sequence, with small cohorts and much more personal interaction between students and instructors and between students and students. The education was a deliberate mixture of non- formal, informal, and formal elements. This was because the goal was to take the more academic knowledge attained and to learn how to use it – use it in one’s own spiritual life, use it in one’s own growth and self-knowledge and character change, use it in the lives of others through preaching, pastoring, leading, and evangelizing. There were more formal subjects but they all had a practical cast: reading the entire Bible together in the original languages with an eye to preaching it, expositing the biblical texts that had the most to do with ministry, the doctrine of the church, worship and sacraments, doing pastoral care, how to disciple other people. It was also in your practical training time that you mastered the confessional standards of your church with an eye to catechesis.

The main pedagogical instrument for all this was intensive and extensive discussion – both in class time and just as much at meals and within a host of other planned and encouraged times of life together. The pedagogy also made heavy use of worship and prayer together, with periods of solitude and meditation. The products to be evaluated also differed from the university courses. Students were involved in actual ministry in local churches and settings, so their preaching, evangelism, pastoring, and other ministry work was constantly evaluated – by instructors, other students, and by themselves.

The students lived in community in the same location with one another and with their instructor. The day would begin with the Psalms and worship, followed by a time of silence, prayer, and meditation where they learned to practice what they had been taught. They had classes all day, meals together, and evening worship. On the weekends they ministered in local churches. For about six months it was totally communal and all about “with” – with Jesus, with your trainers, with your fellow students.

In our country, and only in our country, these two aspects—the theological training and ministry training – have been fused into the single, three-year MDiv program. The positive benefits (which outweigh the negative aspects) have been these. The American seminary institutions, particularly the evangelical and confessional ones, have rescued academically excellent theological education from the liberalism of the modern research university in the West. It saved theological education from heterodoxy, and that is an enormous accomplishment.

So our seminaries, unlike Bonhoeffer’s seminaries, took over the academic part of theological education from the universities and “saved” it. But the problem is that now when you load all the ministry part of seminary education into the MDiv, an academic degree, you also lose a lot. Here are just three parts to the problem.

First, the pedagogy used for the academic subjects (languages, exegesis, theology, history) tends to be used on the practical subjects (preaching, shepherding, leading, evangelism) when the two ways of learning should be fairly different. No offense to any biblical language instructors who might be listening, but students don’t need to talk over a meal with their instructors about optative and subjunctive moods. They don’t have to process the content they need that way. They can get that online or in a lecture. They can master that in truly academic settings and ways.

But you can’t learn to pray that way. I probably could come up with a set of edifying and informative lectures on prayer. But that will not teach students how to pray. It will take much more than that. In fact – as I look at this room – I could not teach this many people at once how to pray. Teaching people how to pray – how to bring their joys and sorrows before God, how to watch their own heart in his presence – can’t be done just through lectures and tests. That has to be done in community, in relationship. So the MDiv tends to merge very different pedagogies.

Secondly, the admission standards for the two programs – academic and practical – are quite different. To be admitted to the academic classes you mainly need to be academically qualified. You may not know yet whether you want to do ministry or what you want to do with your life. That’s fine. You can still take theses courses and master the material and learn. But for ministry training, you need to know where you are going in life. You need to have some sense of call to the ministry. You need to be willing to suffer for your faith and for the people you are trying to reach. Those who get into academic training and ministry training are sometimes two different groups of people. If you are going to do ministry, you need the academic training, but lots of people who would profit from the academic

training should not be in the ministry sequence. You need to screen and admit candidates not once but twice—once for the theological, and once more for the ministry.

Thirdly, you really cannot cover enough of the needed practical topics within the MDiv. If I remember, Reformed Theological Seminary made an effort in the 1980s to put more practical material inside the MDiv – more classes on preaching and so on. But the effect was to strain the academic. Students were not coming out theologically and Biblically knowledgeable enough, and RTS adjusted back to a more classical curriculum.

This is another reason why, in the Redeemer City Ministry program, we believe that practical ministry training needs to be given its own, dedicated curriculum. Most experienced ministers learn quickly that there are too many subjects that are not even alluded to in seminary. The first time you face a financial crisis in your church, you say, “just what seminary prepared me for.” Right? And I should add that for our New York City program, the list of practical topics gets even longer. There are at least five things you need to learn here, in the city: You need to learn cross-cultural communication, non-western Christianity, urban anthropology, urban sociology and social systems, and how to exegete a neighborhood. Those are all subjects that are every bit as important as the other subjects in a traditional practical theology curriculum. If you try to load all of that into an MDiv program, you shortchange the amount of stuff you can actually do for ministry training.

As you know, here in New York City we will not be offering the MDiv at this time. But now you can see that I don’t think that this two-phase program – the M.A. (Biblical Studies) degree followed by a “City Ministry Year” of non-credit, mentored practical ministry – is “second-best.” It is not “the only thing we can do under the circumstances.” It is a way to make ministry education in our country even better. Actually, there are four ways in which what we are planning to do here in the city may be unique:

1. It will be the only Reformed, evangelical education with a classical theological curriculum offered in New York City.
2. It will be a unique blend of online education with a residential learning community. We think we can merge these to get the best of both worlds.
3. We are training people in the city for ministry to the city. This is extraordinarily rare, not to say unique, among evangelical seminaries today.

4. We are recognizing the distinction between theological training and ministry training, but we are not pitting them against each other. We are doing them in tandem, with each side having an eye for the other.

I really do think that we will not only produce ministers for the cities of the world, but also advance theological education in the country. We'll see.

To the students gathered here this afternoon, remember that you are here to be with each other, to be with your instructors, to be with Jesus. We are here to say at this convocation, "this is not what we are, but this is what we want to be." Thank you for being willing to be the first through our doors.

**From the Archives:  
Calvinism – The Five Points**

**Roger R. Nicole**

*Editor's note: The 2015-16 academic year began a series of observances at Reformed Theological Seminary in commemoration of its jubilee. We would be remiss if we failed also to note that 2015 is the centennial of the birth of Roger Nicole, who joined the faculty at RTS Orlando in 1989 and served faithfully for two decades. This essay originated as an address delivered at the 1974 Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology and was subsequently published in Tenth: A Journal of Tenth Presbyterian Church.*

The five points of Calvinism come to us today in a form that is quite traditional: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints. But we are not to think that this is the only form the doctrines of grace can take or that the phrases themselves are unalterable. The advantage of this particular formulation is that when you take the first letter of each of those points and read it from top to bottom you find the word “tulip,” and so have an acrostic. The tulip is a beautiful flower marvelously cultivated in the Netherlands, and since there are many Calvinists in the Netherlands and many flower-loving people, it seems to be a delightful arrangement to organize these doctrines in terms of the letters of this word. However, I would like to consider the nature of the points and suggest certain rewordings which, in my judgment, may prevent misunderstandings.

**Pervasive Evil**

The first point is “total depravity.” The purpose of this point is to emphasize that no expectation can be entertained from man with respect to ability to please God or even to come to him in salvation unless God moves him to it. Thus, the purpose is to turn away the eyes from man in his action and ability and instead direct the eyes to God and his sovereign action. The advantage of expressing this truth in this way is that we emphasize the fundamental and pervasive character of the evil in man.

However, the terms that are used are somewhat misleading. I find that invariably, after having said “total depravity,” the staunchest Calvinists find it important to qualify precisely what they mean. They add, “But we don’t mean to say by this that man is quite as bad as he could be.” Practically everybody who says “total depravity” or “total inability” has to qualify this at once. Obviously, people who seek to know what Calvinism is ought to make it their business, not only to go by certain titles, but also to examine what is being said under those titles. But since those words are used repeatedly we cannot blame them too much for having taken them at face value. Nor can we blame them when, thinking that somehow Calvinists believe that every man is as evil as he can be, and finding situations where men seem praiseworthy, these people point to certain virtues and say, “How can you hold to your Calvinism in the presence of this?” Perhaps it would be wiser to use another form of language that would be calculated to emphasize the indispensable character of this divine grace and that would not need so quickly to have a qualification.

May I suggest that what the Calvinist wishes to say when he speaks of total depravity is that evil is at the very heart and root of man. It is at the very foundation, at the deepest level of human life. This evil does not corrupt merely one or two particular avenues of the life of man but is pervasive in that it spreads into all aspects of the life of man. It darkens his mind, corrupts his feelings, warps his will, moves his affections in wrong directions, blinds his conscience, burdens his subconscious, and afflicts his body. There is hardly any way in which man is called upon to express himself in which, in some way, the damaging character of evil does not manifest itself. Evil is like a root cancer that extends in all directions within the organism to cause its dastardly effects.

How shall we express this? Well, I am not too happy about my substitutions, but I would like to suggest that the term be “radical depravity” or “pervasive depravity” or, if you want to have a somewhat longer approach, to say “radical and pervasive depravity.” This is a little less sweeping than “total” and, in that sense, a little closer to what we really want to assert.

### **Divine Initiative**

The second point is “unconditional election.” The emphasis here is upon the fact that it is God who takes the initiative. There is no previous merit or condition in the creature, either present or foreseen, which determines the divine choice. This is the key

to what is in view. The disadvantage to this formulation is twofold. In the first place, it is not sufficiently comprehensive, for it suggests that the only thing that God does is to elect people to be saved and that, therefore, there is no relationship of God to those who are lost. But election involves not only the taking of some to be saved; it also involves the bypassing of the remainder of mankind and the just reprobation of them in view of their sins. So just to talk of election is not enough. We should also recognize preterition, the bypassing of those who are not to be saved. Moreover, the term “unconditional” might be misconstrued to suggest that God has no interest in the condition of those whom he chooses to make his redeemed people. It suggests that God is not concerned about what we are, what we become, and how we relate ourselves to his will. If the point is that God does not ground his choice in the fact that those who are elected are better or worse than others, it is correct. But if it suggests that God does not care about the condition of those whom he has chosen to save, it is wholly incorrect. For the Scripture makes it very specific that we are elected “unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

What we need to recognize here is that the sovereign initiative in salvation is with God. It is not with man. It is not by virtue of something that God has foreseen in a man – some preexisting condition which is the source or root of the elective purpose of God – that God saves him. God in his own sovereign wisdom chooses, for reasons that are sufficient unto himself, those who shall be saved. We may, therefore, much better speak of “sovereign election” or the “preterition of God.”

### **Particular Redemption**

Then comes the third point, which is sometimes called “limited atonement.” This, I think, is a complete misnomer. The other points I can live with, but “limited atonement” I cannot live with, for this is a total misrepresentation of what we mean to say.

The purpose of using this expression is to say that the atonement is not universal (in the sense of Christ having died for every member of the race in the same sense in which he died for those who will be redeemed). Therefore, the purpose of the atonement is restricted to the elect and is not spread to the universality of mankind.

Some limit it in breadth; that is, they say the Lord Jesus Christ died for the redeemed and that he sees to it that the redeemed are therefore saved. For them there



is a certain group of mankind, a particular group, which is the special object of the redemptive love and substitutionary work of Jesus Christ and toward which Christ sees to it that his work is effective. While the remainder of mankind may gain some benefits from the work of Christ, they are, however, not encompassed in the same way in his design as were those whom the Father gave him. This is one way of limiting it. Other people say that Christ died for everybody in the same way, but they must acknowledge that some of the people for whom Christ died are at the end lost. So for these the death of Christ does not, in fact, ensure the salvation of those for whom he died. The effect is to limit the atonement in depth. The atonement is ineffective. It does not secure the salvation of the people for whom it is intended. For these, the will of God and the redemptive love of Jesus Christ are frustrated by the resistance and wicked will of men who resist him and do not accept his grace. In addition, salvation really consists of the work of Christ, plus the acceptance or non-resistance of some ingredient of one kind or another that some people add, and it is *this* ingredient which really constitutes the difference between being saved and being lost. No one who says that at the end there will be some people saved and other people lost can really in honesty speak of an unlimited atonement.

For these reasons I, for one, am not happy to go under the banner of a limited atonement, as though Calvinists and myself were ones who wickedly emasculate and mutilate the great scope and beauty of the love and redemption of Jesus Christ. For it is not really a question of limits. It is a question of purpose. How should we phrase it therefore? We ought rather to talk about “definite atonement.” We ought to say that there was a definite purpose of Christ in offering himself. The substitution was not a blanket substitution. It was a substitution that was oriented specifically to the purpose for which he came into this world, namely, to save and redeem those whom the Father has given him. Another term that is appropriate, although perhaps it is less precise than “definite atonement,” is “particular redemption.” For, the redemption of Christ is a particular one which accomplished what it purposed. The only alternative is that Christ redeemed no one in particular.

If we change the language in this way I think we put ourselves away from being the ones who seem to be in the business of restricting the scope of the love of Christ. If I say that my position is that of limited atonement, my opponent will say, “You believe in limited atonement, but I believe in unlimited atonement.” He seems to be the one who exalts the grace of God. But see what happens when we use my words. I say, “I believe in a definite atonement.” What can my opponent say? “I believe in an

indefinite atonement”? If I use the old language, I have no opportunity to do anything except protest. If I use the new language, I do not put myself at a psychological disadvantage from the start. Incidentally, the term “definite atonement” you will find in writers such as John Owen and William Cunningham of Scotland. So let us abandon the expression “limited atonement,” which disfigures the Calvinistic doctrine of grace in the work of Christ.

### **Effectual Grace**

The fourth point is “irresistible grace.” The emphasis here is upon the fact that God accomplishes his designs, so that the saving grace of God cannot be resisted unto perdition. But a misunderstanding may also arise from this phrase; for it may suggest that a man may resist to the very end and that God will nevertheless press him willy-nilly, kicking and screaming, into the Kingdom. This is not the case. The grace of God does not function against our wills but is rather a grace which overcomes the resistance of our wills. God the Holy Spirit is able to accomplish this.

You say, “How can God the Holy Spirit accomplish this without violating free will and making us into puppets?” I don’t know how he can do it but that is what he does. I am not concerned about God’s modes of operation, and I am quite ready to see that he may well have a good number that I do not know about and that I am not able to explore. What I do know is that when there is resistance God comes in with his mighty grace and subdues that resistance. He makes no one come against his will, but he makes them willing to come. He does not do violence to the will of the creature, but he gently subdues and overcomes human resistance so men will gladly respond to him and come in repentance and faith. We ought not to give the impression that somehow God forces himself upon his creatures so that the gospel is crammed down their throats, as it were. In the case of adults (those who have reached the age of accountability) it is always in keeping with the willingness of the individual that the response to grace comes forth. This is surely apparent in the case of the Apostle Paul, for whom God had perhaps made what might be called the maximum effort to bring him in. He resisted, but God overcame his resistance. The result is that Paul was brought willingly and happily into the fold of the grace of God.

What we mean here is not “irresistible”—it gives the impression that man continues to resist—but “effectual.” That is, the grace of God actually accomplishes what he intends it to accomplish.

### Perseverance with His Saints

The last point is called “the perseverance of the saints,” and the emphasis is upon the truth that those who have been won by the grace of God will not lose out but will be preserved by God’s grace to *ultimate* salvation. It means that it is not possible for one who is truly regenerate so to fall out of the reach of divine grace as to lose salvation altogether and finally be lost.

The advantage of this formulation is that there is, indeed, a human activity in this process. The saints are active. They are not just passive. In a true sense they are called upon to persevere. But there is a devastating weakness in this formulation in that it suggests that the key to this perseverance is the activity of the saints. It suggests that they persevere because they are strong, that they are finally saved because they show that kind of stability and consistency which prevents them from turning back into their original wickedness. This is never the case. The key to perseverance is the preservation by God of his saints, that is, the stability of his purpose and the fixity of his design. What is to be in view here is not so much the perseverance of those who are saved but the perseverance of God with the sinners whom he has gloriously transformed and whom he assists to the end. We ought to talk about “God’s perseverance with his saints.” That is the thing that we need to emphasize.

### A New Acrostic?

We now need to review our terms—“radical depravity,” “sovereign election and preterition,” “definite atonement,” “effectual grace,” and “the perseverance of God with his saints.” Those are the terms I suggested. Unfortunately, the terms do not provide acrostics in English, French, German, Latin, or any other language I know of. So we have lost our “tulip,” that beautiful mnemonic device to remember these five points in a simple manner. Well, I think it may be worthwhile to lose it, if those other terms mislead people as to what it is we actually hold. We certainly don’t want to sell our birthright, which is the truth, for a mess of pottage, which is an acrostic. If that is what has to be done, let it be done.

On the other hand, I do not want to finish altogether on this note. So I would like to suggest to you that there is a way in which we ought to unite the five points; for in a very special sense we ought to recognize that the five points of Calvinism are, in

reality, not five separate doctrines that we assert almost as disjointed elements, but rather the articulation of one point which is the grace of God. Total depravity we may call “indispensable grace.” It is the truth that without God’s grace we can do nothing because we are so evil. Election, called in Scripture the election of grace, may well be called “differentiating grace” or “sovereign grace.” Definite atonement is “providing grace,” for it refers to that grace by which God has established a basis for salvation. The fourth point is “effectual” or “efficacious grace.” Perseverance of the saints may be called “indefectible grace,” grace that will never fail us. In this way we can see how the points simply formulate what Scripture presents to us concerning God’s grace.

If you want to, you can make an acrostic that will read “gospel.” The *g* would be “grace”; the *o*, total depravity, would be “obligatory grace”; the *s* would be “sovereign grace”; the *p*, corresponding to definite atonement, would be “provision-making grace”; the *e* is “effectual grace”; finally, the *l* would be “lasting grace.” I do not like this as well as I like my other terms, so I present it with some diffidence. But if you are hung up on an acrostic, use it. At any rate, get something that has more meaning than “tulip.”

Even better, let us go to the heart of the gospel and say, “Calvinism is the gospel,” and then spell it out. This is what the Reformed position was all about, after all. *Sola gratia!* By grace alone! That is what we are talking about. The five points of Calvinism merely conjoin to this. Moreover, we do not even have to go to the Reformation, we can go directly to the Scripture.

Here is a text: Jonah 2:9. It reads, “Salvation is of the Lord.” And, in the New Scofield Bible, which I will even venture to quote for once, there is a beautiful little note at that place which says, “The theme of the Scripture.” That is exactly it. Salvation is of the Lord! That is the theme of the Scripture, and the five points of Calvinism.

### Conversation: Q & A with J. Todd Billings

In November, 2015, Dr. J. Todd Billings, Gordon H. Girod Research Professor of Reformed Theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, visited the Orlando campus of Reformed Theological Seminary to discuss his recent book, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Baker, 2015). A question and answer session at a campus lunch included the following exchanges:

*You mention ways in which the culture of death is different in recent years, especially in evangelical Christianity. One thing that is certainly missing is anything like classical Christian concern to talk about and focus on martyr accounts and to be moved by that. Can you reflect on the place that focus has played in the tradition in the past and how that might prepare and sustain folks – to think about those who have died well, who have borne suffering well, and how that has been lost in many ways?*

“The gap you are pointing to is a true area of need. One trend I have noticed in funerals is that the word, death, is not often mentioned. Sometimes it becomes a hero-making service for the one who has died – with slides and contemporary Christian music. There may be a place for some of this. But the central story is not the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and our participation in that. And of course that is the central story of martyrdom accounts. What looks like a terrible defeat can actually be a victory.

“Martyrdoms are very ambiguous deaths. Usually martyrdoms are not deaths where the person stands up and says, ‘Here I stand!’ They often seem rather senseless. But when Jesus Christ is the central actor, and our lives are hidden with Christ in God, then there can be a celebration of what it means to live into and testify to Christ’s death and resurrection.

“There are so many in the Christian community today who believe that even preparing for death is an act of unfaithfulness. Recently I researched Christians and extreme medical measures at the end of life. One study by the Dana Farber Institute showed that those late-stage cancer patients who self-identified as very religious were over four times as likely to ask for extreme measures at the end of life as those who

were less religious. Of course, they didn't live any longer. This is just a medical fact: extreme measures do not statistically make you live any longer. But it does take you away from your family. There is no chance for the congregation to walk by that person. There is no chance for final words of confession and the sharing of wisdom before death.

“Somehow we have gotten this idea that Christian hope means doing everything that is conceivably possible to extend life as long as possible, even if we are in a state when we cannot communicate with other people. We need to rethink that. If there is role for preparing for death for Christians, we need to draw upon medicine as a servant and not as a master.”

*In my discipleship as a believer, I was formed in celebration, but not really in lamentation. For us who are future disciple-makers, counselors, and pastors, what should it look like to disciple people in lamenting?*

“I like the term, ‘celebration,’ because we have to keep forming people in a way that celebrates God’s gifts and God’s promise, and the psalms do this again and again. Somehow we need to make this link so that the same promise that we celebrate we also bring before God when we have grief and anger as well, precisely because we value God’s promise.

“Concretely, some of the ways we can do this as a community of believers, when you have someone going through hardship, doing your best to come alongside the person and not just pray for them but be with them and seek to bear one another’s burdens. Don’t always assume that what they want to do at that particular moment is just to have grief. After my diagnosis I had grief and fear, but also tremendous joy and gratitude – all of it at once. It was kind of a mess! But that’s what the psalms are, too – it’s a ‘holy mess’ there.

“Some congregations may have a ‘blue Christmas’ service for those who have lost a loved one during holiday season. That can be helpful, but it needs to be incorporated more into the regular rhythms of the Christian life. If we become convinced that we haven’t properly apprehended the gospel of Jesus Christ, unless we are both rejoicing and lamenting, then we may have a case. That is part of the case that I seek to make in my book, and that I saw with new eyes. Lament is not this antique, Old Testament thing, while the New Testament is all about joy. Jesus is praying psalms of lament. In

Revelation 21, the souls of the martyrs are lamenting. The most frequently cited psalms in the New Testament are psalms of lament – Psalm 22 and Psalm 69.

“If we really want to understand the context of the good news in a world where it seems that death is reigning and that sin is having the final word, we have to recover lament, and not just in a once-a-year service.”

— Book Reviews —

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**Richard Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and The Fourfold Gospel Witness*. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014). 240 pp. \$34.95, cloth.**

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*Reading Backwards* is the fruit of the Hulsean Lectures at Cambridge University and part of a larger project that Professor Hays intends to release in the future. The aim of the book is clear: to “offer an account of the narrative representation of Jesus in the canonical Gospels, with particular attention to the ways in which the four Evangelists reread Israel’s Scripture, as well as the ways in which Israel’s Scriptures prefigures and illuminates the central character in the Gospel stories” (p. x). Though obviously the “historical Jesus” cannot be divorced from the testimony of the four Gospels, Hays focuses his attention on the narratives.

*Reading Backwards* is divided into six chapters, the first of which introduces the reader to the larger hermeneutical issues and how the Gospels compel us to understand the Old Testament in light of Christ. Since Hays chooses his words carefully and many of the issues are delicate, I will cite him more freely. Early in the first chapter, Hays defines what he means by “figural interpretation” or a “figural reading,” a concept indebted to Erich Auerbach. He says, “Figural reading need not presume that the OT authors—or the characters they narrate—were conscious of predicting or anticipating Christ. Rather, the discernment of a *figural correspondence is necessarily retrospective rather than prospective*” (emphasis mine; p. 2). But once the second event or pattern is determined, one can go back and reread the first event or pattern with greater insight. In other words, the four Evangelists retrospectively read the Old Testament and find the person Jesus squarely in the middle of Israel’s Scriptures. Once the Old Testament is understood in light of Jesus, the Evangelists can go back and reread the Old Testament in its original context in a fresh way, obtaining deeper insight into the original meaning. Hays succinctly states, “We learn to read the OT by *reading backwards* from the Gospels, and—at the same time—we learn to read the Gospels by *reading forwards* from the OT” (p. 4). At the end of chapter, Hays once again



comes back to this hermeneutical concept, giving us a bit clearer understanding of how “prefiguration” works: “The literal historical sense of the OT is not denied or negated; rather, it becomes the vehicle for latent figural meanings  *unsuspected by the original author and readers*” (emphasis mine; p. 15). Some meaning in the Old Testament, therefore, is “latent” or hidden from its original authors, awaiting the day when a second, final revelation of meaning will be disclosed.

Since Hays holds to Markan priority (that is, Matthew and Luke depend on Mark), he begins his journey into the gospel accounts with Mark. As Hays selects a few Old Testament quotations and allusions, he attempts to trace Mark’s enigmatic depiction of Jesus in light of the Old Testament. He deftly probes Old Testament quotations/allusions, such as Daniel 7:13-14 (Mark 14:61-62), Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1 (Mark 1:2-3), Psalm 107 (Mark 4:35-41), and Job 9:8 (Mark 6:45-52). The result of his investigation is that “Jesus is the mysteriously embodied presence of Israel’s God” (p. 26). Though Jesus is indeed Yahweh incarnate, Mark appears to “distinguish Jesus from Israel’s God” (p. 27; see Mark 13:32). Chapter one concludes with a creative section on how the person of Jesus, as depicted in Mark’s gospel, is deemed a “mystery.” Jesus, like the parables in Mark 4, is veiled or hidden to outsiders. But those who “have ears to hear” understand how Jesus fits admirably into the Old Testament story. The person of Jesus, his identity and message, are revealed at the moment of his death.

Chapter 3 examines Jesus in Matthew’s narrative, particularly how Jesus fulfils Old Testament patterns and eminent persons, such as “Moses, David, and Isaiah’s Servant figure” (p. 38). Central to Matthew’s narrative lies the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 (“They shall name him Emmanuel”) in the person of Jesus. “This motif of Jesus as the manifestation of God’s presence establishes the structural framework on which the [Matthew’s] story is built” (p. 38). Hays then tackles the notoriously difficult Hosea 11:1 quotation in 2:15 and surmises that Jesus “recapitulates” the nation of Israel. He proceeds to examine the larger context of Hosea 11, focusing on 11:9, where it reads, “the Holy One in your midst.” This is a remarkable connection, one that is often overlooked. Several OT quotations/allusions are evaluated in light of the “Emmanuel” theme—Jeremiah 31:15-17 (Matt 2:17-18), Deuteronomy 6:13 LXX (Matt 4:9-10), Isaiah 40:7-8 (Matt 24:35), and Genesis 28:12-17 (Matt 28:20). The upshot of these rich quotations/allusions in Matthew is that “Jesus *is* the embodied presence of God and that to worship him *is* to worship YHWH” (p. 53; italics original).

Falling in line with his approach to the Mark and Matthew, Hays evaluates Luke's gospel by listening closely to his portrayal of Jesus, particularly as it relates to the Old Testament's expectation of Israel's "redemption." Luke clusters Old Testament quotations/allusions in his opening and closing, desiring that the reader read the entire narrative forwards and "backwards" (p. 58). In the introductory portion of the chapter, Hays discloses a bit more how he connects the Old Testament with Jesus: "The [Luke's] story keeps moving and leaves us with a powerful but indistinct sense of *analogy* between God's saving acts for Israel in the past and the new liberating events coming to fulfillment in the story of Jesus. Thus, many of the OT echoes in Luke *do not function as direct typological prefigurations* of events in the life of Jesus" (p. 59; emphasis mine). We will deal more with this connection between the two Testaments a bit later, but it's important to note that, for Hays' understanding of Luke's gospel, Jesus' actions do not operate on a promise-fulfillment plane but on an analogical one. The meat of the chapter on Luke entails several expositions of Old Testament quotations/allusions that point unambiguously to Jesus' identity as Israel's God (e.g., Luke 1:32, 76; 3:22; 9:35). Of particular interest is Luke's citation of Isaiah 40:3-5 in 3:4-6. Where Isaiah anticipates Yahweh's redemption of Israel from Babylon, Luke identifies the person of Jesus with Yahweh or "Lord" (p. 63-64), who has begun to redeem true Israel from spiritual captivity in a new exodus of sorts. At the end of the chapter, Hays suggests that Luke may have removed some of Mark's "non-divine-identity material," thus heightening the Christology (p. 72-73).

According to chapter five, the Fourth Gospel, like the other three gospels, encourages the audience to reread the Old Testament in a new light, with a particular focus on the person of Jesus (p. 77). Hays helpfully observes that John's gospel contains fewer Old Testament quotations than his predecessors, but weaves the Old Testament story into the very fabric of his narrative through his depiction of several "*images and figures* from Israel's Scripture" (p. 78). In other words, rather than citing the Old Testament explicitly at every point, John makes use of Old Testament symbols and imagery. Hays also notes a change in John's gospel. Once Jesus withdraws from his public ministry, John begins to use the key word "fulfill" in his narrative (e.g., 12:37-40 [Isa 53:1; 6:10]; 13:18 [Ps. 41:9]; 15:24-25 [Pss 35:19; 69:5]; 17:12 [Ps 41:9?]). The upshot of this shift is that "the Evangelist is explaining that the suffering and rejection experienced by Jesus in the passion story was not some unforeseen disaster; rather, it was foreordained and played out in fulfillment of God's will, with Jesus' full knowledge and participation" (p. 80). After Hays connects the Old Testament

conception of the “preexistent figure of Wisdom” (Prov 8:22-31) and the creation narrative of Genesis 1 with John’s prologue, which he deems a midrash of sorts (p. 84), he once again probes the connection between the Testaments. Hays surmises that the Fourth Gospel, more than the other three, advances a “reading backwards” strategy for understanding the Old Testament in light of Jesus.

Chapter 6, the final chapter of the project, Professor Hays synthesizes his findings and offers some advice on how we, as the church, can and should read the Old Testament in light of Christ. He defines with some clarity as to what “prefiguration” means—“the discernment of unexpected patterns of correspondence between earlier and later events or persons within a continuous temporal stream” (p. 93). The Evangelists reread the Old Testament in light of the person of Christ and discovered new meaning of these Old Testament passages. The Evangelists then reevaluated Christ and his ministry in accordance with their rereading of the Old Testament and grasped even more about Christ. Importantly, Hays admits that a “figural christological reading of the OT is possible only retrospectively in light of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Thus...it would be a hermeneutical blunder to read the Law and the Prophets as deliberately *predicting* events in the life of Jesus” (p. 94; italics original).

The second half of the concluding chapter is devoted to “Gospel-Shaped Hermeneutics.” That is, reading the Old Testament like the four Evangelists. Above all, Hays claims, the church must possess a robust understanding of the Old Testament and “get these texts into our blood and bones” (p. 103). Hays lists ten ways in which the Gospels instruct us on how to read the Old Testament. For our purposes, I will only list a few of the more prominent ones.

His first point returns once more to prefiguration. The church must detect Old Testament patterns or prefigurations and connect them to Christ. Hays then claims that “the ‘meaning’ of the OT texts was *not confined to the human author’s original historical setting or to the meaning that could have been grasped by the original readers*” (emphasis mine). Instead, he argues, the Old Testament contains “multiple senses,” and “some of these senses are hidden, so that they come into focus only *retrospectively*” (p. 104; emphasis original). Point number four focuses on how we ought to read the Old Testament holistically and not piecemeal with a focus on select oracles or prooftexts. The ninth point is really the thrust of the project. Once we understand the Old Testament and Jewish background of the Gospels, we will identify Jesus “as the embodiment of the God of Israel” (p. 107). His tenth and final point continues this

theme. The God of the Old Testament, the God of the Patriarchs, and Israel is the same God of the New Testament. This same God has become incarnate in the person of Jesus.

Richard Hays is to be highly commended for this project. *Reading Backwards* is one of the more creative and refreshing books I've read in some time. His writing is crisp, even entertaining at times. Professor Hays is one of the pioneers in the broad field of the use of the Old Testament in the New. His early work, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, continues to serve as a methodological guide for students and scholars. Hays has spent much of his career in Paul, so it's encouraging to see him apply his method to other portions of the New Testament.

*Reading Backwards* successfully demonstrates that Jesus is indeed Israel's Lord incarnate. The genius of this short volume lies in Hays' deft appropriation of Old Testament texts in the Gospels. He pays attention to often overlooked details in specific Old Testament texts, teasing out some of the nooks and crannies, and then weaves these insights into the Gospels. The book not only demonstrates how the Evangelists read the Old Testament, it also serves as a model for us to do the same.

Evangelicals often disagree on how the New Testament authors quoted the Old Testament. Does the New Testament quote the Old Testament contextually? Should we, as the church, imitate apostolic hermeneutics? While many evangelicals answer both questions in the negative, Hays would generally answer in the affirmative. I appreciate how Hays, in his final chapter, argues that the church can and should imitate the four Evangelists' reading of the Old Testament.

I have a few areas of concern, however. Practically, the book, weighing in at 109 pages (excluding endnotes, indices, and bibliography), lists for about \$35. It's enough to make a potential reader pause before purchasing. Secondly, while I'm thankful that the book is geared for a wide audience, I always prefer footnotes over endnotes. Regarding the content of the book, I'd like to see Hays deal more with Jesus as the Last Adam and true Israel. He has only one reference to Genesis 1 in the entire project (p. 78). He spends a bit of time on Jesus as Israel in his section of Matthew, but there isn't much development. The project is not an attempt to evaluate all aspects of the person of Jesus in the four Gospels, but I'd like to see more attention given to this often neglected area. It is just as crucial to understand Jesus as Adam/Israel as it is to understand his identity as Yahweh incarnate.

My main issue with the book lies in Hays' broader understanding of how the two Testaments connect at a fundamental level. Hays advances a "dialectic" in reading the

Old and New Testaments. Each informs the other. I have no problem with this in theory, but I'm a bit concerned with how Hays works this out.

He advocates a "rereading" or a "retrospective reading" of the Old Testament, where the Evangelists (and the church) reexamine Old Testament passages in light of Christ and discover new or "latent" or "unsuspected" meaning (p. 15). This conviction comes to the fore at the end of the book when he claims that "the 'meaning' of the OT texts was *not confined to the human author's original historical setting or to the meaning that could have been grasped by the original readers*" (p. 104; emphasis mine). It appears that Hays advances a hermeneutical theory that denies the authorial awareness of how a particular Old Testament passage would be later used in the New Testament. For Hays and others, meaning thus tends to be *retrospective*. To be fair, he claims that once the Old Testament has been "reread," it can then inform the meaning of the New Testament—a prospective reading of sorts. But it's precisely at this point, where Hays is vague. He is unconformable with "typology" at times and, in the case of Luke, he prefers "analogy." It's therefore unclear how a rereading of Old Testament passages informs the New Testament.

This general theory of reading retrospectively is widely held, even within evangelical circles. But could it be that Old Testament authors, though not knowing *fully* how their words, depiction of events, and experiences, possessed some inclination in how their writings would be used in a subsequent manner? In other words, would the prophet Isaiah be shocked beyond belief that Israel's God would be incarnate when he pens, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (7:14)? Recall that two chapters later, Isaiah goes on to write: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6). Though I doubt that Isaiah understood the full meaning of his oracles, I suppose that he indeed had some inclination. When the New Testament indicates a fresh reading of Old Testament passages or concepts, it uses the key word "mystery." A "mystery" signals the hidden but now revealed wisdom of God, particularly, as it relates to eschatology. But even at these junctures, the New Testament writers, while highlighting discontinuity or the "unexpectedness" of the Old Testament, affirm some continuity (e.g., Rom 11:25; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 3:3; 5:32). In the end, I'm unconvinced that the meaning of any Old Testament passage in the New Testament is completely severed.

Though we somewhat disagree on aspects of hermeneutics, I commend *Reading Backwards*, as it encourages the church to read the Testaments as a whole and elicit faith in Christ.

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**Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. 480 pp. \$34.99, paper.**

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It really should not surprise us that every locus of Christian theology should be dominated by considering the person and work of Jesus Christ. Yet somehow, it does. The very riches of God's eschatological plan, now realized in him, are unsearchable. So the theologian must continue to search the Scriptures, so that our speech about God might more adequately reflect these unsearchable riches. The doctrine of "union with Christ" is central to biblical teaching on "the application of redemption" (cf. the distinction between the work of Christ, and the application of that work to the elect, made in John Murray's classic book, *Redemption – Accomplished and Applied*, based on the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, questions 29-37). Constantine Campbell helps us to see that for Paul, being "in Christ" is central to *much* besides: election, knowledge of God as Trinity, many aspects of the Christian life, and the life of the Church. In other words, to understand these areas of theology, we must reckon with union with Christ.

Campbell's book is a massive study of Paul's ideas about union with Christ. He presents rigorous (methodically self-conscious) exegesis of every text in Paul that uses the prepositional phrases "in Christ," "into Christ," "with Christ," "through Christ" (and virtually every variation of these). He includes Paul's use of the metaphors "body," "temple/building," "marriage," and "new clothing." In the lengthy section that follows, the author works out a Pauline theology of union with Christ and,

successively, “the work of Christ,” “the Trinity,” “Christian Living,” and “Justification.”

Here is Campbell’s summary statement:

...union with Christ is the webbing that connects the ideas of Paul’s web-shaped theological framework. It is for this reason that we can say that every blessing we receive from God is through our union with Christ. It is by being united with him in faith by the Spirit, dying, suffering, rising, and glorying with him, having been predestined and redeemed in him, being identified with his realm, and being incorporated into his people, that believers enjoy the manifold grace of God. (p. 442)

What is this union, as Campbell finds it in Paul? It is more than a figure of speech. He sums it up as “union, participation, identification, and incorporation” (p. 420). Faith brings us into relation with the resurrected/exalted Christ, and into fellowship with Father, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (“union”). We also “partake” in the events of Christ’s narrative: his death, resurrection, and exaltation.

“Identification” means we are located “in his realm,” and “under his Lordship.” “Incorporation” means that this union brings the believer into relationship with the body of Christ, the church. (There is no union with Christ that does not include union with his people.) This is a fair summary of the biblical texts, I think. It is a bit unclear, however, to use the word “union” to define “union with Christ.”

It is refreshing to see an exegetical work that interacts with doctrine. Campbell helps us to sort out false antitheses: justification in Paul, including the imputation of Christ’s (alien) righteousness, should not be set in opposition to union with Christ. Rather, it is a function of being “in Christ,” which is the prior reality (p. 400). Justification is forensic and eschatological (final), but does not denote “covenant faithfulness” (New Perspective), nor ethical transformation.

Campbell does not give us a chapter on sanctification, but he does help us to straighten out current confusions about whether the believer’s sanctification includes his own activity (and whether this activity compromises “grace”). Christ is the one “through whom” the Christian does many of the most basic things in the Christian life. Believers’ life “in Christ” explicitly includes activity, virtues and identity. For example, activities include: “speaking, boasting, welcoming others, working, testifying, obeying, rejoicing, standing firm, agreeing with one another, submitting to Christ,

encouraging each other, leading, suffering, praising God, maintaining sexual purity, sharing, building God's people, and putting on his armour" (p. 374). Characteristics of those in Christ include, "faith, boldness, joy, compassion," and identifying terms include "child, servant, slave, co-worker," and "prisoner." Activity, character and description, all flow from the union believers have with Christ. It is the substructure of both justification and a vigorous, active and visible sanctification. This is thoroughly thrilling because it brings consolation and assurance in some of the most mundane matters of Christian living.

I would fault the book for its failure to relate union to covenant. (But perhaps the size of the study simply prohibited it.) Campbell sees the antecedents of Paul's ideas in contemporary Judaism and in Jesus' statements in the Gospel of John. Old Testament antecedents are metaphors Paul uses: bride, temple, and priestly garments (p. 416). It seems obvious to me that the covenant relationship, which spans Old and New Testaments, is the biblical category that provides precedent for much of Paul's union language. For example, Campbell rightly argues that when we consider mediation, the work of Christ in reconciling us to God, "representation" and "participation" are not mutually exclusive categories. So, in 2 Cor 5:21, Christ is clearly a substitute. God made him sin "for us." Yet, Paul, and all believers, Campbell argues, share in "the righteousness of God" accomplished by Christ on the cross. Paul is not the Lord, and he does not atone, but he is included in Christ by the grace of God. He receives the benefits of Christ's work. Thus substitution and participation do not exclude one another. Instead, "...participation in the representative and substitutionary acts of Christ brings forth resurrection life" (p. 352). This is excellent reasoning. But on what basis were we included in Christ when God made him sin? The obvious answer is that he represented us by virtue of election. In the Old Testament, God redeeming his people, and their sharing his fellowship and "inheritance," are both found in the covenants, a form of election. But Campbell makes no mention of this.

Similarly, he finds no imputation in Romans 5:12-21. Assuming that "corporate personality" is the necessary assumption of imputation, Campbell can find no theological reason that Adam should "encompass" all humanity (pp. 344-45). Instead, Adam and Christ individually represent the *aeon*, or dominion of either sin/death, or righteousness/life. Rather than "representatives," they are "entry points," who, as he writes, "hold the door open" to these realms. "He is not suggesting that Adam's sin is imputed to all humanity, but that the domain of sin and death claims the many" (p.



345). But we are left asking, why is that so? As Richard Gaffin has noted, in the passage, “trespass” leads to “death” through the judgment of “condemnation” (vv. 16, 18). Likewise, “obedience” leads to “life” by way of “justification.” In other words, the representation of Adam and Christ is a matter of God’s forensic judgment. This is why Adam was the entrance for sin and death for the rest of the race. Further, why does Paul stress the *one* trespass of the one man, repeating the idea five times in vv. 15-19, not the countless sins of countless people, if this one sin was not in itself decisive for the “condemnation” of “the many”? Representation should not be set over against the dominion of sin, as though they were opposite.

That Campbell does this is all the more ironic in that he critiques Daniel Powers for making the same mistake in rejecting substitution with regard to the atonement. As noted earlier, Campbell does not polarize substitution and participation. This protects Paul from semi-Pelagianism, says Campbell (pp. 349-52). His own view of Adam as “door opener” is subject to exactly the same danger. Sin, for Paul, is not found only in the actions of the many.

In sum, this big book is a wealth of careful exegesis and reflection. Pastors can make good use of it for reference in preaching Paul. Theologians will need to consult it in future expositions of the doctrine of union with Christ.

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**Charles Lee Irons, *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation*. WUNT II/386. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015. xxiv + 444 pp. \$134, cloth.**

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To state the obvious, the doctrine of justification is important to a Reformed understanding of faith and practice. Proponents of the New Perspective on Paul (hereafter, NPP) have significantly modified this grand Reformational doctrine and

have proposed their own view(s) of what Paul means by the “righteousness of God” and “justification by faith.”

Lee Irons, a graduate of Westminster Seminary California, sets out in *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation* to demolish a major portion of the NPP argument and simultaneously defend the traditional Reformational view. Which portion? Briefly, the Pauline phrase “righteousness of God,” which NPP defines as: God’s faithfulness to his covenant when in (initial) justification he declares that a believer is in relationship with him and is a member of the covenant (“covenant-faithfulness interpretation”). This is the view of James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright.<sup>1</sup>

This book is important, detailed, scholarly, and well-researched. It is a revised version of Irons’s 2011 PhD dissertation from Fuller Theological Seminary and published in a prestigious series (*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*). NPP authors will now have to defend themselves against Irons’s arguments. The following review will be fairly technical, but even if readers become lost in the details, I trust they will see the big-picture argument and importance of this book.

### **The Three Pillars of NPP**

In Irons’s view, the NPP rests on “three pillars” (p. 2). He disagrees with all three, but his book concentrates on the third pillar. The first is Sanders’s covenantal nomism, which asserts that no groups in Second Temple Judaism were works-righteousness oriented. If Second Temple Judaism was not works-righteousness oriented, then Paul was not arguing against it in phrases such as “works of the law” or “justification by works.” So what was Paul arguing against if not works-righteousness? The second pillar is Dunn/Wright’s view that “works of the law” were primarily Jewish boundary markers and not a works-righteousness soteriology. Therefore, when Paul contrasted justification by works and justification by faith (e.g., Gal 2:16), he was not contrasting two competing soteriologies. Rather, it was “a contrast between two ways

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning discussions of “righteousness of God,” see James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 340-46; and “The New Perspective: whence, what and whither?” in *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1-97, esp. 2-3, 3 n. 7; N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 95-111; and *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 40, 795-804, 836-60.

of being identified with the covenant people of God, namely by the badge of boundary markers and by the badge of faith in Christ” (p. 3). The third pillar is the concern of Irons’s book. It “is connected to the second, and consists of the lexical claim that Paul’s DIK-language is to be interpreted against a Jewish background and hence in covenantal categories” (p. 3). Irons critically evaluates the third pillar as the other two “have been sufficiently addressed” (p. 5), in his judgment.<sup>2</sup>

More specifically, within the DIK-language group, Irons concentrates on the Pauline phrase “righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ), which is found in Rom 1:17, 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26, 10:3 (*bis*), 2 Cor 5:21, and Phil 3:9 (τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην). He opposes the relational/covenantal view of “righteousness of God” and the additional move by NPP that sees justification as the declaration that one is a member of the covenantal community.

### Δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ Options

Before getting into the details of the book, a quick review of the current grammatical/theological options for “righteousness of God” may be helpful. Below is my categorization, and I would assume that most would agree to it. Be aware that some authors use different options for different verses. Also I am *not* dealing here with the verb “to justify” (δικαιῶ), the adjective “righteous” (δικαιός), the result-noun (δικαίωμα), nor the action-noun “justification” (δικαίωσις), although there are implications for these from one’s view of the “righteousness of God.” We can identify three basic options.

- (1) An attribute of God: possessive genitive.
  - (1a) God is just according to his law. The attribute by which God punishes evil and rewards good. Also called *iustitia distributiva* (“distributed justice”). This is an historic view. Reformers see this primarily for Rom 3:5, 25, 26.

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<sup>2</sup> From my perspective, the best two precursors to Irons’s emphasis on “righteousness of God” language are Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 261-96; and Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism,” in *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, vol. 1 of *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 415-42.

- (1b) God is faithful to his *covenant*. The attribute by which God fulfills his promises to his covenant people. Wright and Dunn are proponents, very close to option 3c.
- (2) A divinely-approved righteous status before God: origin, or source, or *auctoris* genitive.
- (2a) A divinely-approved status that is *infused* by God. Roman Catholic view.
- (2b) A divinely-approved status that is a gift and *imputed* by God. More specifically, the imputed righteousness is the work of Christ. The righteousness of God *is* the righteousness by faith (e.g., Rom 10:3 = Rom 10:6). Traditional Reformational, Ridderbos, Cranfield, and Bultmann view. Relates to Rom 1:17, 3:21, 22, 10:3, 2 Cor 5:21, Phil 3:9.
- (3) The saving power and activity of God: subjective genitive. This view is also called *iustitia salutifera* (“saving righteousness”), and it is often combined with one or more of the views above.
- (3a) God’s saving activity that consists in the giving to believers the status of righteousness as a gift by imputation (option 2a). View of Moo.
- (3b) God’s saving activity that consists in the giving to believers both a status of righteousness and a “transforming” aspect that makes them existentially righteous. View of Schlatter (?), Käsemann, Stuhlmacher, Jüngel, and Fitzmyer.
- (3c) God’s saving and vindicating of his people with an emphasis on relationship/*covenant*. View of Cremer (see below), Bird, Ziesler, some NPP authors. Relates to option 1b.

Irons will argue against option 3, or more specifically, 3c. Arguing against the covenantal aspect of 3c then effectively eliminates option 1b, which is the explicit NPP option. That is, if “covenant” is not tied to “righteousness of God” language, then justification cannot be a declaration that one is in the covenant. Irons will argue for the traditional Reformational view, which is option 2b for most occurrences of “righteousness of God” and option 1a for Rom 3:5, 25, 26.

It may further help the reader to explain why “covenant” and “relational” are linked for some. In the traditional Reformational view, “righteousness” is connected to a norm or a moral law or legal stipulations (including in a covenant); hence, God’s attribute of justice, his punitive and saving activity, his declarations about humans’

being righteous or unrighteous all fits together. How is God both just and justifier of our salvation (Rom 3:26)? He was just in punishing sins, but instead of punishing believers' sins, he punished his Son and imputed his righteousness to them. Thus, he could righteously declare them righteous! In the NPP view, "righteousness" is connected to faithfulness in a relationship and it is positive. God's righteousness is his faithfulness to his covenant promises that results in his declaring that believers are in relationship with him and part of the covenant community. The covenant here is primarily thought of as a relationship; and so, justification is conceived as being declared in a relationship and not measured against a norm.

Irons begins by contrasting the NPP with the traditional view. NPP authors Dunn and Wright argue that Paul uses "righteousness of God" to mean "*God's covenantal faithfulness*" (option 1b). It is a relational/covenantal/ecclesiastical term. It describes God's character (and actions) as righteous; it is not something imputed to the believer. With this understanding of "righteousness of God," (initial) justification by faith refers to a believer in relationship with God and reckoned to be a member of the covenant. To put the two together, God is faithful to his covenantal/relational obligations to declare a believer a member of the covenant/church based on his faith. (Final justification will be based partially on works done in the power of the Holy Spirit. Irons does not deal with this aspect of Dunn/Wright's view.)

Irons summarizes the traditional Protestant view of "righteousness of God" as the "*status of divinely-approved righteousness that comes from God as a gift*" (p. 317, emphasis mine). It is a soteriological term. With this view, the righteousness by faith *is* the righteousness of God (e.g., Rom 10:6 = Rom 10:3). To be justified is, for a believer, to have a righteous status that is a gift from God, and more specifically, that righteousness is the work of Christ imputed, not human righteousness.

How will Irons make his case? Although he includes Pauline exegesis, the primary focus of this detailed study is philological/lexical. Before coming to Paul, Irons does an extensive evaluation of the noun "righteousness" (whether or not it is found in context of God's righteousness). Of course, he does pay special attention when the context is related to God's righteousness. He looks at both the Hebrew and Greek usage of "righteousness" (תְּרָוּהָ [fem], תְּרָוָה [masc], δικαιοσύνη). His linguistic analysis covers extra-biblical non-Jewish Greek, the OT (Hebrew Bible and LXX), the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha/OT Pseudepigrapha, and the NT outside of Paul.

Why is Irons engaged in such exhaustive lexical study? He is countering the claim by NPP that δικαιοσύνη itself has as part of its semantic range a relational/covenantal

meaning. NPP argues that this portion of the semantic range for δικαιοσύνη is based on its Hebrew background, especially in Isa 40-55, various biblical psalms, and DSS documents. Yes, the NPP continues, there is a forensic aspect due to the covenant idea. But primarily the term is relational, and *the relationship is the norm*. To be declared righteous is *not* to be measured against some type of normative forensic standard. For the NPP, this Hebrew relational background is contrasted with a Greco-Roman background for δικαιοσύνη that all agree clearly has a forensic usage based on a norm (*iustitia distributiva*). This positive relational/covenantal portion of the semantic range is what Paul used in his expression δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ.

Irons's first chapter gives a history of the lexical understanding of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ. The church fathers, historic Roman Catholicism, and the Reformers all agreed that δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ was a righteous status before God; however, Catholics and the Reformers disagreed on whether in justification believers were *infused* with righteousness or *declared* righteous.

To show the background of the NPP interpretation, Irons concentrates on Hermann Cremer (1834-1903).<sup>3</sup> Cremer is acknowledged as the catalyst for OT righteousness-language being considered a relational/covenant concept in the 20th century. There is no abstract norm outside the relationship; as Cremer says, "the relationship is the norm" (p. 34). God's righteousness is his covenantal faithfulness in saving and vindicating activity for his people. It is not a negative term and does not include condemnation for covenant people. Cremer called this righteousness *iustitia salutifera* ("saving righteousness," options 3 and 3c) to purposely contrast it with the traditional *iustitia distributiva* ("distributed justice," option 1a). Important OT scholars such as Gerhard von Rad and Walther Eichrodt agreed with Cremer's view of righteousness in the OT. NT scholars Adolf Schlatter and Ernst Käsemann applied this to Paul and interpreted δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ as God's righteous activity. Dunn and Wright also use this relational/covenant concept for δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, or more accurately, the moral attribute of covenant faithfulness (option 1b), and then add that justification means covenant membership.

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<sup>3</sup> Hermann Cremer was German and Professor of Dogmatics at the University of Greifswald. The book that Irons interacts with is *Die paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre im Zusammenhange ihrer geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen*, 2d ed. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1900); translated as "The Pauline Doctrine of Justification in the Context of its Historical Presuppositions."

### Three Old Testament Semantic Categories for $\text{הקִדְּוָה}$ , $\text{קִדְּוָה}$ , $\text{Δικαιοσύνη}$

Chapters two through five are the background lexical work, including significant methodological considerations. Instead of going in order through these chapters, I will try and present them to the reader in my own order. Also, I will not include Irons's analysis of extra-biblical non-Jewish Greek and NT usage outside of Paul due to length.

Irons categorizes semantically all 276 occurrences of the *noun* “righteousness” in the Hebrew Bible/LXX.<sup>4</sup> He includes a 43-page appendix that includes these occurrences, giving the English and appropriate Hebrew/Greek so that the reader can judge whether he agrees with Irons's categorizations. Excepting a few “difficult cases” (4.7%), he has three large categories that have numerous sub-categories (p. 111). His three large categories are “legal righteousness” (44.6%), “ethical righteousness” (41.3%) and “correctness” (9.4%).

#### *Legal Righteousness*

The “legal righteousness” category “pertains to the realm of a judicial court, whether it is a human king or judge, Messianic figure, or God himself who is depicted as judging, administering justice, executing judgment, or vindicating someone who has been falsely accused or oppressed” (p. 112). Irons wants to stress that this category does include many instances of God's acting, but this is a legal category, not a relational one. For example:

1. And you shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns . . . and they shall judge the people with *righteous* judgment. (Deut 16:18)
2. [The Lord] will judge the world in *righteousness*, and the peoples in his faithfulness. (Ps 96:13)
3. The Lord was pleased, for his *righteousness*' sake, to magnify his law and make it glorious. (Isa 42:21)

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<sup>4</sup> Most scholars do not see any difference between  $\text{הקִדְּוָה}$  [fem],  $\text{קִדְּוָה}$ , [masc]. Both are primarily translated as “righteousness.” Irons occasionally sees a subtle distinction. “The masculine form tends to be more abstract or generic (‘justice, righteousness’), where the feminine is used more often with reference to discrete acts of righteousness; this may explain why only the feminine occurs in the plural” (p. 110).

Within this “legal righteousness” category, Irons includes the 41 occurrences that the OT refers to the “righteousness of God” (see table on pp. 178-81). Irons summarizes these 41 occurrences as “God’s justice in . . . [either] (a) the act of punishing Israel’s enemies or (b) the deliverance that results when Israel’s enemies are thus extinguished and Israel is vindicated” (p. 178). Again, Irons sees these in the context of legal conflict, either God’s justice as a king or a lawgiver, or in a legal conflict.

### *Ethical Righteousness*

Irons’s “ethical righteousness category” concerns “moral uprightness associated with those who are considered the ‘righteous’ as opposed to ‘the wicked’” (pp. 117-18). It also includes righteous laws. For example:

1. He who walks blamelessly and does what is *righteous*. (Ps 15:2)
2. Do not say in your heart, after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, ‘It is because of my *righteousness* that the Lord has brought me to possess the land.’ (Deut 9:4)
3. I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your *righteous* rules. (Ps 119:7)

Irons notes that in some verses the ethical and legal righteousness categories overlap (pp. 118-19, 272). For one who is ethically righteous, one is legally declared so (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:32). He further notes that sometimes one is not ethically righteous, but still God legally declares the person righteous (e.g., Gen 15:6). This foreshadows Rom 4:3-5.

### *Correctness*

The third category of “correctness” is much smaller than the two above. “It is used to refer to speaking the truth, to just weights and balances, or doing something correctly” (p. 119). One example: “Let me be weighed in a *righteous* [fair] balance, and let God know my integrity” (Job 31:6).



*Righteousness and Covenant*

Finally, Irons notes that “righteousness” in the OT is often in the context of the words “to judge” (שָׁפֵט) and “judgment” (מִשְׁפָּט), *but rarely in the lexical context of the word “covenant”* (בְּרִית). In fact, “covenant” occurs 283 times and *צדק*-related words occur 524 times in the OT. However, only in seven instances do they “come into any significant semantic contact”!<sup>5</sup> This confirms that, linguistically speaking, for *צדק*, *צדקה*, “the metaphorical or social setting presupposed . . . is that of the judicial court rather than that of covenant-making and covenant-keeping” (p. 126).

To review: I have presented Irons’s lexical analysis of OT “righteousness,” and more specifically, the “righteousness of God.” Two key related points: first, Irons admits that there are texts that include God as acting righteously for his people (*iustitia salutifera*, option 3), but they are found in a legal context/motivation, not a relational/covenantal one. Secondly, the 41 occurrences of God’s righteousness are always in a legal context. The overarching point is that Irons does not see relational/covenantal as any part of the semantic domain for “righteousness.” This brings us to the next section, where Irons counters Cremer’s relational/covenantal view.

**Arguments Against Cremer’s Old Testament Relational/Covenantal View**

One of the strengths of Irons book is a thorough explanation and refutation of Cremer’s arguments for the relational/covenantal view. Irons’s intention is to show that modern scholars are unwittingly relying on methodologies and conclusions that are out of date. I will only briefly mention three of these.

*Righteousness Always Positive?*

Cremer claims that God is not a God of distributive justice (option 1a) (p. 134) because distributive justice is not proper for a loving and relational God. According to Cremer, God’s righteousness is only related to *salvation* within the covenant and not to

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<sup>5</sup> Irons (p. 126 n. 28) gets these statistics from Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism,” 423. The seven passages are Isa 42:6, 61:8-11, Hos 2:16-20, Ps 50:1-6, Ps 111:1-10, Dan 9:4-7, and Neh 9:32-33. I found an eighth passage, Ps 103:17-18. (The quote is from Seifrid on p. 423.)

judicial concerns. Irons refutes this by citing numerous passages where God's *judgment* and righteousness/righteous are in the same context (pp. 135-39, e.g., Ps 7:11-12, Neh 9:33).

### *Hebrew Parallelism*

Irons charges Cremer with the hermeneutical error of assuming that poetic Hebrew parallelism always entails semantically equal parallel terms. Using my own example, consider the following: "The nations shall see your [Zion's] righteousness, and all the kings your [Zion's] glory" (Isa 62:2)

Obviously, "nations" are related to "kings," but it is not an exact equivalent. Similarly, Zion's "righteousness" is related to "glory," but "glory" is obviously not simply defined as "righteousness." Seeing the connection between glory and righteousness helps us better understand each word, but they are not lexical equivalents.

Irons complains that Cremer's "wooden approach" to Hebrew parallelism leads him to assume that God's righteousness *is* God's salvation as in the following (pp. 142-43): "For soon my salvation will come; and my righteousness be revealed". (Isa 56:1).

Irons argues that salvation is a *subset* of God's judicial righteousness, not an equivalent. Sometimes God's punishment is God's righteousness also. Similarly, for the few texts that connect "covenant" and "righteousness," God's faithfulness to his covenant promises is righteous behavior, but not all righteous behavior is related to covenant keeping.

### *Hebrew / Greek Mindset*

Finally, Irons observes that Cremer (and Dunn/Wright) operates with a false dichotomy between the Hebrew and Greek mindsets. Among other things, so the argument goes, the Hebrew mind was relational, and the Greek was logical/law oriented (pp. 57, 77, 84.) Irons reminds us that James Barr famously attacked this fallacy in his *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961).

## Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS)

There are 226 useful occurrences of  $\text{הקדף}$ ,  $\text{קדף}$  in the DSS. (74 additional occurrences are found in manuscripts that are significantly blemished.) Irons categorizes these uses and concludes that they fall into the same three categories of the OT with more-or-less the same frequency (table on p. 200). 35 are some form of the “righteousness of God,” and Irons provides their location and English translation (pp. 198-200).

Irons finds examples of God’s righteousness being used in judgment (e.g., 1QH VI, 15-16). He deals with the oft quoted passage in 1QS XI, 2-17 that connects God’s righteousness and  $\text{משפט}$ , which is variously translated as “justification/judgment/vindication.” For example, “If I stagger because of the sin of flesh, my justification ( $\text{משפט}$ ) shall be by the righteousness of God which endures forever” (1QS XI, 12, Vermes translation). Irons interprets this as “the saving righteousness of God, that is, his judicial activity that results in the vindication of his servants” (p. 205). That is, he sees *iustitia salutifera* in the DSS as a subset of *iustitia distributiva* (p. 207).

## Apocrypha, Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Hellenistic Jewish Writings

Irons separates the various documents in the Apocrypha, OT Pseudepigrapha, and Hellenistic Jewish writings (e.g., Josephus) into (1) those originally composed in Hebrew/Aramaic (and many are now only extant in other languages) and (2) those originally composed in Greek. Why is he doing this? Irons admits that  $\text{קדף}$  in the OT and its LXX translation of  $\text{δικαιοσύνη}$  can mean *iustitia salutifera* (God’s saving activity within a legal context). However, Irons wants to examine whether this aspect of  $\text{δικαιοσύνη}$ , which is certainly in the LXX, is only included in translation Greek, or does “this salvific usage [pass] over into the mental furniture and parlance of Greek-speaking Jews” (pp. 82-83). That is, perhaps  $\text{δικαιοσύνη}$  only includes the *iustitia salutifera* in Jewish writings that were originally in Hebrew/Aramaic and then translated to Greek, but not elsewhere in Jewish-Greek literature that was originally composed in Greek.

After a detailed analysis of these writings, Irons concludes that for both groups of writings there are the categories of ethical and judicial righteousness matching to the OT. The category of *iustitia salutifera* does exist in the writings originally composed in

Hebrew/Aramaic similar to the DSS, but Irons is quick to point out these are best understood “in terms of God’s delivering/vindicating righteousness as a subset of God’s *iustitia distributiva*” (p. 232). In the Jewish writings originally composed in Greek, Irons only found two instances of *iustitia salutifera*, and he concludes that “there is a strong emphasis on God’s distributive and even punitive justice” (p. 262).

In sum, for Jewish literature originally composed in Greek, Irons does see *iustitia salutifera*, although with an emphasis on the punitive aspect of God’s activity. This is as opposed to Cremer’s positive activity. Irons will then take this conclusion of a more punitive sense of *iustitia salutifera* and consider it as a part of the possible semantic domain of the NT. He will not consider the positive aspect as part of the NT semantic domain. From my perspective, this is the most debatable point of Irons’s overall thesis. More on this below.

### **Righteousness of God in Paul**

Chapter six is Irons’s exegesis of the Pauline “righteousness of God” passages. He begins by summarizing his lexical conclusions for the semantic range available to Paul. He considers the NT in the same category as any Jewish document originally composed in Greek. His three main categories are “(1) God’s distributive justice; (2) his punitive judicial activity which results in the deliverance of his people from their oppressors (*iustitia salutifera* in the proper sense); and (3) the status of divinely-approved righteousness before/from God” (p. 272).

To Irons’s credit, he notes that Paul is not necessarily bound by these three. The exegete “must allow for the possibility that [Paul] transformed the linguistic usage with his own theological insights” (p. 272) and thus expand the available semantic range.

In this chapter, Irons will evaluate three major views: (1) “God’s Covenant Faithfulness,” option 1b (views of Dunn and Wright); (2) “God’s Saving Activity or Power,” option 3; and (3) “Gift of Righteousness from God,” option 2b.

Concerning the covenant-faithfulness interpretation, Irons does not see “covenant faithfulness” as part of the OT-and-Jewish-literature semantic domain; however, he notes that those who favor this view do not only appeal to background usage, but also to the exegesis of Paul. Hence, he presents and then rebuts the various exegetical arguments of Dunn and Wright relative to a covenantal-faithfulness interpretation.

Next, Irons evaluates the “saving activity” interpretation of “righteousness of God.” He interacts primarily with Richard Hays and some of his intertextuality arguments from the Psalms. Irons concludes that the standard *iustitia salutifera* interpretation is wrong. However, he muses that if one has previously concluded on exegetical grounds that the gift interpretation is correct, then one can see the ultimate theological harmony of concluding that the *iustitia salutifera* in some OT passages is the giving of the gift of the righteousness from God (option 3a).

Finally, Irons presents his exegesis for the gift interpretation. He concludes that “righteousness of God” in Rom 1:17, 3:21, 22, 10:3, 2 Cor 5:21, and Phil 3:9 refers to the gift, which is the imputed righteousness of Christ (option 2b). He also concludes that Rom 3:5, 25, and 26 refer to God’s distributive justice (option 1a). These are traditional Reformational conclusions.

One particular methodological/exegetical argument that is especially helpful in his rebuttal of the covenant-faithfulness interpretation involves his use of the German term *Näherbestimmungen*. *Näherbestimmungen* are “near-definers:” a word (or words) in the immediate context (as opposed to a broader context) that sometimes absolutely defines the other word in question. For example, consider the word “key.” Imagine a meeting of musicians that are discussing various musical keys for a particular song. During the meeting, one of the musicians mentions that she lost her “car keys.” The word “car” is the *Näherbestimmungen* that immediately defines “keys,” and the broader context of musical keys becomes irrelevant.

Irons considers “faith” as an *Näherbestimmungen* in the context of “righteousness of God.” He writes: “When Paul speaks of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ as something that is either offered to or received by faith, it is clear that the ‘gift of God’ meaning is selected, whereas other possibilities, such as God’s distributive justice or his saving activity are thereby deselected or at least pushed into the background” (p. 320).<sup>6</sup>

## Evaluation

I find myself in great agreement with this book. As to the exegesis of “righteousness of God” in the Pauline texts, I agree in every case.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, this then brings up the πίστις Χριστοῦ/ arguments. If this phrase means “Christ’s faithfulness” (subjective genitive) to fulfill the covenant obligations, then Irons’s argument would not hold. Virtually all NPP authors hold this view, with Dunn being a notable exception. If instead it means the traditional “faith in Christ” (objective genitive), Irons’s argument does hold (pp. 329-34).

What are the strengths of this book? I begin with two low-level strengths. First, this book is an exhaustive (and exhausting!) evaluation of “righteousness” texts. Even if one disagrees with Irons, the many citations and tables of “righteousness” verses is very convenient for one’s own evaluation. Second, a detailed explanation and analysis of Cremer’s views is helpful as he is often referenced in scholarly literature.<sup>7</sup>

The primary strength of Irons’s work is his consistent explanation of how the lexical evidence fits together within the primary setting of a judge (and/or a king acting as a judge) that is judging against a norm. Pulling together all of the righteousness language demonstrates the various aspects of the semantic range that include righteous judging (positive and negative), righteous judgments, righteous behavior, and correctness (e.g., righteous weights). This in turn explains how the “righteousness of God” in Paul can include both *iustitia distributiva* (attribute of a righteous judge) in Rom 3:5, 25, 26 and the gift of righteousness (forensic righteousness based on the imputed righteous “behavior” of Christ) in the remainder of verses. Irons also provides answers to why God’s righteousness is often paralleled to God’s salvation in the OT and DSS. God’s salvation (*iustitia salutifera*) in these contexts is a subset of God’s attribute of justice (*iustitia distributiva*). Irons is not saying anything new with this view, but it is the comprehensiveness of the data covered and the rebuttals of the relational/covenantal view that makes this book stand out.

Does the traditional view demand that covenant has nothing to do with Paul’s theology of justification? No: ultimately, God’s covenants and union with Christ are connected to justification and provide relational aspects; but that is not part of the *lexical* meaning of “righteousness.” One must distinguish between a lower-level exegetical conclusion, connections within a biblical book, and significantly broader theological connections that include the whole Bible. Yes, they all must cohere in the end. In fact, the traditional Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace scheme dovetails well with the traditional forensic conclusions about “righteousness.”

Typically in a classroom discussion of justification, I tend to begin with the verb “to justify” (δικαιόω, δικαιώω). It is clear, that this verb predominantly means “to declare forensically righteous” and does not mean “to infuse righteousness” nor “to declare one as a member in the covenant.” I then move to other righteousness-related words.

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to his righteousness book, Cremer’s *Biblico-theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, 3d ed. (Edinburgh, 1886) is also well-known. It is the forerunner of Kittel’s *TWNT*. See James Barr’s critique of the Cremer-Kittel “illegitimate totality transfer” method (*The Semantics of Biblical Language* [London: SCM, 1983 {1961}], 218, 238-46).

To Irons's credit, he took the harder road. He concentrates on the noun "righteousness" (הַקְּדוּשָׁה, קְדוּשָׁה, δικαιοσύνη) as it is part of the phrase "righteousness of God." In this way, he more directly confronts one of the primary NPP arguments for a relational/covenantal interpretation.

Similarly, in a discussion of NPP, I start with the NPP's assumption that "no one" in Second Temple Judaism had a works-righteousness soteriology. Then I move to problems with interpreting "works of the law" as primarily Jewish boundary markers. Again, to Irons's credit, he takes the less travelled road. We are indebted to his scholarly labors in the case against NPP.

Given all the positives, allow me to mention two areas where Irons's arguments are weaker. The first concerns his analysis of non-biblical Jewish literature. One of his primary emphases is to see if there is a difference in the semantic range of δικαιοσύνη in literature that was translated from a Hebrew/Aramaic original versus literature originally written in Greek. While I appreciate the theoretical possibility of this, it is hard for me to image that the LXX usage is not at least a semantic-range possibility for a biblical writer. In addition, various choices as to which writings in the Apocrypha and OT Pseudepigrapha were originally written in which language are too tenuous to make any firm conclusions. Hence, I would want to add to Paul's semantic-range possibility for "righteousness of God" a positive-salvific activity of God (although I agree with Irons that this would be a subset of God's attribute of justice).

My second issue is an omission in the DSS section, where he does not discuss whether "covenant" and righteousness-language are common together. This is an intriguing question because in the OT they are rarely together. From my reading of the DSS, I often find the two in the same context (e.g., 1QSb III, 23-24; CD I, 15-20; 1QS X, 10-12). However, I have not done an exhaustive study. It would help to know what Irons thinks of this and whether my sense of the DSS is correct. No matter the answer, Irons's point that semantically speaking, God's attribute of justice would be the main category and covenant a subcategory still stands.

In sum, this is an important book that makes a contribution to scholarship concerning the "righteousness of God" in Paul. Yes, Irons's conclusions support the traditional Reformational view. But he has added to the discussion (1) a comprehensive presentation of the lexical data for "righteousness" and (2) an historical explanation of and various rebuttals to the relational/covenantal view. Due to the price of this book, I imagine that not many of the readers of this journal will be going directly to Amazon after reading this review. However, given the importance of

justification, readers ought to be aware of its value. As is obvious by now, I have a “whole lotta love” for this book!

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**John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason*. London: T & T Clark, 2012. 240pp. \$39.95, paper.**

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With the surge of interest in Reformational theology in recent years, the five great *solas* have garnered a good bit of attention. We can also expect still further attention to such principles in 2017, given the significance of that year in Protestant history. There is much to be grateful for in both respects. Too often, however, claims like *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, or *solus Christus* are viewed as discrete pieces of teaching and not seen as synthetically related. Too frequently, talk of grace and Christ in salvation can have little effect upon people’s thinking about, well, thinking as Christians about the Bible and theology. John Webster’s book, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason*, helps remedy this problem and deepen our understanding of Reformational teaching about grace and Scripture, by showing the rich links between Christ, grace, and the theological task of sitting underneath scripture’s authority.

John Webster serves as Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of St. Andrews. He has published numerous books over the years, whether on major figures in theology or on key topics like Holy Scripture or holiness. He serves as founding editor of the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*. For those of us in the guild of evangelical systematic theology, he is one of its leading English-speaking practitioners. Yet he remains too little read by American pastors, largely because he has published mostly with British publishing houses and his books have tended to be geared toward academic audiences and have sold at higher prices. Given that he is one



of the most significant Reformed theologians working today, one hopes that this lack of familiarity can be overcome in years to come.

*The Domain of the Word* is not only the title of the book but the matrix within which its chapters do their work. “The Bible, its readers and their work of interpretation have their place in the domain of the Word of God, the sphere of reality in which Christ glorified is present and speaks with unrivalled clarity” (viii). Scripture and theological reason are, in this volume, occasions for the risen Christ’s presence and agency. The title chapter, “The Domain of the Word,” lays out the territory for the two parts of the doctrine of Scripture: its nature and its interpretation, arguing that Christ has primacy in respect to both (ch. 1). In “Resurrection and Scripture,” Professor Webster expounds on the prophetic office exercised by the risen Christ (ch. 2). Here he teases out how Christ’s communicative presence comes through real historical texts in the biblical canon: “In – not despite – their natural properties, the biblical texts are signs in the renewed order of creation; by them, in the Spirit’s power, the risen one loves creatures by speech” (40). In “Illumination,” he addresses its effects within the regenerated Christian, who is brought to life by the life-giving words of the Risen One (ch. 3). These theological reflections on Scripture are followed by two case studies, wherein Professor Webster reflects critically upon the teaching on Scripture found in the writings of Karl Barth (ch. 4) and T. F. Torrance (ch. 5).

Webster has notably shifted gears in certain respects from his earlier work, *Holy Scripture*, wherein he had shared a concern with Barth and Torrance that the text of the Bible cannot itself bear divine properties and had concerns about not only subjectification but also objectification of the text as such (*HS*, 35). Here, at the end of ch. 5 (e.g., pp. 110-112), he clearly shows that a creaturely reality can, in fact, bear the marks of divine characteristics through God’s sanctifying providence (in so doing he is now aligning his project with that of post-Reformation Reformed bibliology, which is another shift in his approach). This development has been furthered yet more in another recent essay (“ὕπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι: On the inspiration of Holy Scripture,” in J. G. McConville, L. K. Pietersen, ed., *Conception, Reception and the Spirit: Essays in Honor of Andrew T. Lincoln* [Eugene: Cascade, 2015], pp. 236-50), wherein he takes up the accounts of the Reformed scholastics and demonstrates why Barth’s worries about them were misplaced and owing to his dependence on the rather flawed account of Heinrich Heppe (see fn. 3-5).

Christology and grace come first in Professor Webster’s account, but they really do generate human response. In this case, the risen Christ’s presence and speech generate

illumination, hearing, reading, and theological reasoning. So the second part of *The Domain of the Word* involves analysis of biblical reasoning (ch. 6), systematic theology (ch. 7), the practice of churchly controversy by ecclesial authorities (ch. 8), theological engagement with wider intellectual discourses (ch. 9), and, finally, the faithful exercise of genuine academic curiosity (ch. 10). Webster sketches a path whereby Christ is the one in whom all truth holds together, and his grace the *sine qua non* of all creaturely knowledge. Yet Christ is Lord of all, and, thus, he sheds abroad his truth in various arenas of knowledge and sustains a vibrant journey of intellectual growth. “In short: reason is renewed after its self-alienation and treachery against God, because God loves creatures and desires to fulfil their natures, including their rational natures. This is why reason is a grace and a gift of love” (126). The second part of the book involves a theological anatomy of reason’s sanctification and an analysis of how this plays out in the study of systematic theology, the judgments of church authorities, and the discursive reflections of Christian intellectuals.

Engaging this volume cannot be commended highly enough. Admittedly, there are many areas of bibliology and methodology left untouched, particularly regarding hermeneutical matters and specific exegetical principles. But such practical matters require a theological orientation to be engaged in a distinctively Christian manner, and Webster is operating in the realm of giving a theology of Scripture and of reason rather than offering a practical ethics of either. And as in his earlier collections of essays, *Word and Church* and *Confessing God*, Webster here reorients our approach to a major area of concern by viewing it from the angle of Christ’s singular, life-giving work. Because we turn wholly to Christ (*solus Christus*) and live fully by grace (*sola gratia*), we must turn intellectually and ecclesially to his communicative presence in Scripture as our only final authority for faith and practice (*sola Scriptura*). Grace really goes all the way down, even into the depths of theological debate and scriptural study, and Webster has helped point us to celebrate its fullness.

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**Beeke, Joel R. and Paul M. Smalley. *Prepared by Grace, for Grace: The Puritans on God's Ordinary Way of Leading Sinners to Christ*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013. 297 pp. \$25.00, paper.**

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A mention of the term 'preparation' when discussing Reformed soteriology is liable to set off all manner of alarm bells for those who adhere to a monergistic view of salvation by grace. Such alarm is likely due to a dearth of familiarity with the usage of such language in historical theology, particularly in Puritan writings. That is why this book from Dr. Beeke and his teaching assistant, Paul Smalley, is an important contribution. There truly are few writings on this topic, at least in any comprehensive form. There are works which deal with the soteriology of various individual Puritan authors, but none that I am aware of seek to give a broad overview of many Puritans on this topic.

Preparation for salvation, or the more pejorative (at least in Reformed circles) preparationism, is a topic which highlights a common challenge for theologians through the centuries in writing about the process of salvation. Does one write primarily from the perspective of God's activity, seeking to map out an iron clad *ordo salutis*, or can we also benefit from considering the experience of humanity as they encounter the Gospel and are saved by God's grace? Most Reformed theologians focus on the former. Thus when anyone discusses salvation from the less tidy view of human experience, some grow nervous that the Pelagian camel's nose has crept under the tent flap.

The introduction states that "this book addresses the question of how God ordinarily brings sinners to the point of trusting in Christ alone for salvation. Specifically, is conversion an event or a process? If a process, how does the work of conversion begin?" (1) Specifically, the discussion focuses on "preparation for saving faith in Christ," (3) mainly as it concerns the inward preparation of the heart. They authors rightly say, "Prejudice and preconceptions about preparationism have often hindered people from making objective judgments about the Puritan doctrine of preparation for grace" (4). In the process, they examine the difference (or lack thereof) between preparation and repentance in the various authors considered.

Aside from the benefits the historical survey provides, perhaps another reason this book matters right now is that one issue underlying preparation is how we understand the first use of the law. Much confusion abounds in Reformed and Evangelical circles over what constitutes Biblical sanctification, and that because there is firstly much confusion over justification. To understand justification is to also grasp the role of the law of God in regeneration and repentance. Even if one has only a passing interest in Puritan views of preparation, they would still benefit from reading this book.

Chapter 1 discusses preparation and modern scholarship, but only focuses on three scholars who have written about the Puritans: Perry Miller, Norman Pettit, and R.T. Kendall. While it makes some sense to deal with modern critics of Puritan preparationism, at times it muddies their goal of introducing the Puritan writers themselves, even to the point of a seeming obsession to discredit those scholars. In a book of fewer than three-hundred pages, it may have been better to merely acknowledge other viewpoints in the introduction but then move on and simply explain the views of the Puritan authors and let them stand or fall on their own merits.

The second chapter gives a summary of the views of Augustine and John Calvin on preparation. The authors claim that Calvin has been misrepresented in regard to his strong language against any preparing work in the wills of the unregenerate. They assert that he was reacting to the strain of Roman Catholic preparationism from medieval scholars like William of Ockham. They draw on Calvin's differentiation between the "repentance of the law" and "repentance of the gospel" as part of their case.

We already see in the analysis of Calvin the difficulty of language – when Calvin spoke of regeneration, was he including the effects of the law prior to new life or not? The authors continue in the succeeding chapters to parse the language used by the various Puritan authors, which they rightly identify as causing much of the confusion by scholars over whether views on preparation are orthodox or not. At times this attempted apologetic for each Puritan can seem strained even if correct. There are ample footnotes to demonstrate their research, but the brevity with which each Puritan author is treated could leave readers unconvinced of the conclusions.

The book proceeds to deal with, in order: William Perkins, Richard Sibbes, John Preston, William Ames, Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, William Premble, John Cotton, the Westminster Assembly, Jeremiah Burroughs, William Guthrie, John

Norton, Thomas Goodwin, Giles Fermin, John Flavel, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, Ulrich Zwingli, and Herman Witsius (why the last two are not dealt with earlier is curious). I intentionally list all of these to show how much they try to accomplish in this one book. While the scope is certainly commendable, it seemed to be biting off too much for the length of the book. If fewer authors had been treated, the text could have delved into more detail with each one, perhaps presenting a more convincing case with each individual. Otherwise a larger volume would be needed to more adequately deal with so many of the Puritans. In addition, Dr. Beeke's *Puritan reformed spirituality* (Reformation Heritage, 2004) or his *A Puritan theology* (with Mark Jones, Reformation Heritage, 2012) could be consulted for more general information.

Some aspects of the Puritan views may seem foreign to those who are unfamiliar with their writings on this topic. Several of the Puritans examined listed anywhere from a handful to a lengthy list of steps in the preparation process. In some cases, those steps were divided between the pre-conversion and post-conversion experience. Beeke and Smalley rightly show both the helpfulness and problems of such lists as well as how subsequent writers reacted.

Thomas Hooker easily had the most problematic views on preparation as they indicate both in the chapter specifically about Hooker and in later chapters as other Puritans differed from him. Hooker's writings show how difficult it is at times to pinpoint when the act of regeneration occurs in sinners. He proposed a degree of contrition and humiliation prior to regeneration that went too far for most of the other Puritans cited. A more curious idea from Hooker described part of humiliation as when a sinner "not only submits to [God's] justice but is content to be damned. (82)" Thomas Shepard had similar troubling views in regard to the pre-regenerate soul.

Beeke and Smalley are correct in disputing the assessment of other Puritan views of preparation due to a confusion between discussing God's actions in the process of salvation and the interactions between the Holy Spirit and the will of unregenerate people. Acknowledging how much of the process remains hidden in the human heart adds a degree of Christian humility that ought to be present in such discussions. Certainly the Puritans as much as anyone understood and detailed the revelation of Scripture as it pertains to soteriology. Yet many of them would also admit a degree of mystery which remains.

In sum, in aiming for breadth of coverage the book may have sacrificed some as far as depth of treatment. Some readers will come to differing conclusions about the

views of some of these Puritans on preparation, in part due to the brevity with which they are treated, but also given the complexity of the issues. But this is certainly a valuable book on a seldom discussed aspect of Puritan theology. Perhaps others will take up and expand upon what Beeke and Smalley began in this volume.

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**J. Todd Billings. *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015. 224 pp. \$18.99, paper.**

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No one wants to hear the “C” word from their doctor. Especially if you’re in your thirties, have a promising academic career ahead of you, and hold a great position as a full professor of theology at an American seminary. That was Todd Billings, until during a recent sabbatical he visited his doctor and learned that he has incurable blood cancer—multiple myeloma—a fatal disease. Imagine his shock and disorientation.

Billings’s diagnosis prompted deep reflection, which gave birth to his new book, *Rejoicing in Lament*. One of the great virtues of this book is the way Billings reflects biblically and theologically on issues that we will all have in a time of loss. These are not detached reflections; he wrote parts of this book while he was in the hospital.

*Rejoicing in Lament* tackles questions such as: How can God allow fatal illness (the problem of evil); what is God doing (the mystery of divine providence); why don’t I get to live out the years of my life (the issue of entitlement); is God punishing me (retribution theology); how does my experience relate to abundant life in Christ (the role of suffering); how should we pray in the face of a terminal disease (the question of healing); and in what way does God know my suffering (the impassibility of God). Along the way Billings challenges many of the half-truths we are tempted to believe,

such as: God just wants me to be happy (moralistic therapeutic deism); God always wants us to be healed now (health and wealth theology); God is not in control (open theism); or God can't do anything to prevent this (fatalism).

As the title suggests, Billings introduces us to the biblical importance of lament. The American church seems to have little place for lament in worship or as a vital part of the Christian life. Many Christians do not expect to suffer, and we attend worship services that only express victory. We prefer messages that are “positive and encouraging,” unaware that there is a significant place for lament in Scripture, including a book called Lamentations and many psalms of lament.

“In my own experience,” writes Billings, “full psalms of lament have rarely been used in corporate worship. ...Particularly since my diagnosis, I feel this as a stinging loss. While psalms of thanksgiving are wonderful, they are rarer in the book of Psalms than psalms of lament. Cherry-picking only the praises from the Psalms tends to shape a church culture in which only positive emotions can be expressed before God in faith. Since my diagnosis with cancer, I've found that my fellow Christians know how to rejoice about answered prayer and also how to petition God for help, but many do not know what to do when I express sorrow and loss or talk about death” (pp. 40-41).

Billings found strength by immersing himself in these lament psalms, which gave voice to his grief, anger, doubt, and questions. He notes that biblical lament properly voices protest before the Lord, but in a believing way. Psalms of lament signal that it is proper for us to bring our deepest hurts and anxieties to the Lord as we groan and wait for the consummation of his kingdom.

Another prominent theme in this book which brings hope to Billings is our union with Christ (the subject of a previous work by the author). If we are truly in Christ, he is in us and we are in him; we are never alone. We are united to him at all points of his work on our behalf. We share in the reality and benefits of his death, resurrection, and ascension. We will share in his glorious future at his return.

Billings explains how his treatment for cancer involved chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant. To fight the cancer his body needed “strong medicine.” In a similar way, he writes, Christians “find our medicine in union—union with Christ. ... For as ones who have been united to Christ, the Great Physician and the strong medicine himself, we receive ‘a new birth into a living hope,’ an ‘inheritance’ as God’s adopted children, “that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1 Peter 1.3-4) (p. 148).

Union with Christ, Billings reminds us, also means that our lives are not our own (he explores the rich question and answer one of the Heidelberg Catechism to drive this point home.) Our stories have been incorporated into the great drama of God's gracious work in the world in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

In times of suffering and uncertainty we are tempted to sink in our own stories. They dominate our thoughts. But in Christ, we have a bigger, weightier story to look to. God is bigger than cancer, he says, which also means God is bigger than his own cancer story. God doesn't annihilate his cancer story, but he envelops and redefines it, and folds it into the story of the dying and rising Christ. This is what brings hope and why it is possible to rejoice in lament.

This book is a helpful resource for anyone who is on a similar unexpected journey, especially with cancer. It's for those asking hard questions who want to find strength and wisdom from Scripture. It is also a valuable guide for caregivers—pastors, counselors, and those involved in shepherding people through crisis. Churches will benefit by reading this book *before* they confront those crises.

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