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When the RTS Orlando library inherited the vast personal library of Roger Nicole, among its 20,000 volumes was a small Banner of Truth publication that was a gift to Dr. Nicole. A grateful student, having recently graduated from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, inscribed the following on November 10, 1982:

Dr. Nicole,

Thank you so much for the great help you have been in the formulation of my theological thinking and my outlook on the wonderful grace of God. Your insight into, love for, and extensive acquaintance with the history of theology and particularly Reformed theology have in many ways served to provide for me a model of a true theologian. How grateful to the Lord Jesus Christ I am for the tutelage in the doctrines of his grace!

This little book is nothing new, but it is a good articulation of the truth.

With warm appreciation in the fellowship of our Lord, Howard Griffith

Howard Griffith would soon become founding pastor of All Saints Reformed Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia. After a 23-year tenure, during which he earned a PhD from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, he joined the faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington. From both pulpit and lectern Howard was a model of a true theologian for countless parishioners and students, as well as his colleagues. He was a faithful tutor in the doctrines of grace, and we give thanks for his ministry at the Seminary even as we continue to mourn his death last March.

In one of the last emails I received from Howard, he asked that we consider publishing a piece he wrote originally for another beloved mentor of his, Dr. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., in a doctoral seminar at Westminster in 1995. We are delighted to include it in this issue.

JRM
Celebrating the First Testament

Philip Graham Ryken
Wheaton College

Editorial note: On November, 2018, Dr. Philip Ryken, President of Wheaton College, delivered the Hughes Preaching Lectures at Reformed Theological Seminary in Atlanta, on the theme of “Fully Evangelical, Totally Biblical, Maximally Practical Homiletics.” What follows is an edited transcript of his second of four addresses.

I invite you to turn in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 22. My purpose this afternoon is to get you excited all over again about the tremendous resources we have for ministry in the Old Testament, the First Testament, the Word of God to the people of God from Genesis to Malachi.

You will notice the context of our passage at the end of 1 Samuel 21. David in verse 12 was much afraid of Achish the King of Gath, during his on-again, off-again warfare with Saul. He was in exile among the Philistines. Being the resourceful warrior that he was, he changed his behavior before them, and pretended to be insane in their hands, and allowed spittle to run down his beard. Apparently, it was an effective performance. Maybe 1 Sam 21:15 is a useful reference to use when somebody brings you a substandard intern: “Do I lack mad men that you have brought this fellow to me?”

That is the context: David by his own wits but also by the grace of God is delivered from the Philistines. In chapter 22 we read:

David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam. And when his brothers and all his father’s house heard it, they went down there to him. And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him. And he became commander over them. And there were with him about four hundred men (1-2).

Here you have the Old Testament absolutely at its best. It’s a real historical account of what really happened, told with absolute vividness. The characters come to life even in just the few details you are given, not a detail of which is wasted, which is one of the characteristics of biblical writing. You have a real-life experience of something that really happened. As you read the story, with David as the anointed servant, suddenly there comes to you in a fresh way a vivid depiction of our Savior.
Because when you see David in his anointed role as king and see the people that are gathered to him, you see that it is people in distress, people who are in debt, people who are bitter in soul, you recognize your own heart in all of its need. You recognize all of the struggles of life in a fallen world, both our own sinfulness and indebtedness. But also, the areas that are broken in our lives and in need of healing, the distress of conflict and turmoil; everything that is part and parcel with life in a fallen world. You see in a fresh way, a savior to whom these people are drawn in all of their deeply human need.

For me, this is the kind of passage where I see David, but I also see my Savior. I understand his relationship to me because I recognize my own deeply human needs as a fallen person in a fallen world. I see in this passage what one of the hymn writers describes as “great David’s greater son,” thinking of Psalm 110, but also captivating something for us from the Old Testament, from the stories of David as the king that is a type and prototype of our Savior, Jesus Christ. It is the kind of passage that gets me excited about our salvation all over again and gets me excited about sharing the Scriptures with others so that they could see the Savior in this kind of vivid way.

I would’ve thought that coming to Reformed Theological Seminary of all places, this is a place where it is hardly needed to say that the Old Testament is an amazing resource for ministry. I would like to hope that hardly needs to be said anyways because to me it is so obvious, so much of my upbringing and a passion to me in ministry. Then I read Michael Kruger, from Reformed Theological Seminary, addressing this kind of concern in the contemporary church. He wrote an article on why we can’t unhitch from the Old Testament. It is a response to a recent and possibly popular book by a notable preacher. The argument in this preacher’s book is that modern Christianity relies too much on the Old Testament. Now, I would’ve said exactly the opposite of that. Modern Christianity relies too little on the Old Testament. There’s too little awareness and knowledge of the gospel as it is presented to us in the first covenant.

The argument in this particular book (that Dr. Kruger masterfully refutes) is that we have this habit of reaching back into Old Covenant concepts, teachings, sayings, and narratives and this has led to a lot of vices in the contemporary church, that it is quite a risk. The author says that if you look at the prosperity gospel, the Crusades, anti-Semitism, legalism, exclusivism, judgmentalism, all of this is because we are relying too much on the Old Testament. I thought anti-Semitism was an interesting item on the list. I haven’t read the book to see how that is argued, that focusing on what the Holy Spirit has said in the Scriptures of the Old Testament is
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anti-Semitic. Anyways, his argument is that when it comes to stumbling blocks to faith, the Old Testament is at the top of the list.

So, if that is an argument that people are making, and maybe an argument that will have some influence, maybe we do need to be reacquainted with the First Testament. There are reasons why it is so vitally important for us not simply to be aware of the Old Testament, but to immerse ourselves in the Old Testament. The teaching and preaching the Old Testament are an ordinary part of the healthy diet for daily Christianity and for the life of the local church. So, what I would like to do in our time together, as I celebrate the First Testament, is to give you maybe as many as 31 reasons to preach and teach the Old Testament.

Now, I’ll preface this by saying, we typically in Philadelphia, at Tenth Presbyterian Church, we have Sunday morning services on Thanksgiving Day, 11 o’clock worship service and I was sitting up there on the platform with James Montgomery Boice the Thanksgiving Day that he decided to do a 27-point sermon on Thanksgiving. It was really 3 points but each of the three points had 9 subpoints—he just really wanted to celebrate Thanksgiving! At the end of the sermon, after he had preached the sermon and prayed, he’s walking back to sit down next to me and he said to me, “that was too many points, wasn’t it?” Now what do you do when you’re an associate minister and your senior minister asks you to critique his sermon? I said, “well, they were all good points though.” I thought that was a pretty good answer!

There are not just one or two reasons why we have to proclaim the gospel in the context of the Old Testament. We have many, many reasons for doing so. The first is this: *The Old Testament is the Word of God.* That would be enough of a reason to preach and teach the Old Testament, it is the Word of God. We have this confirmed for us in many different ways and in many different places. I remind you of Paul’s words to Timothy, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God [the person of God] may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

When Paul says “all Scripture,” by extension we can find him referring, by good and necessary consequence, to the Gospels, to the Epistles of the New Testament, to the book of Revelation, but what he is mainly thinking about as he writes this is the Scriptures of the Old Testament. That is Holy Scripture. That is breathed out by God. And it’s useful for all of these things.

There’s an example of this, and it’s a small example, I like what B. B. Warfield says about the incarnation of the Son of God but I think it also applies to our doctrine of Scripture is that some of the most important things that are said about
these central doctrines are said incidentally. What is assumed in a passage, obviously Jesus would have to be both human and divine for this to be true, similarly the word of God would have to be both a human production and a divine production. A lot of these things happen almost incidentally. In 1 Timothy 5:17, where Paul is talking about elders who rule well, they are deserving of double honor. Paul says, “the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” As I understand this passage, he is quoting both from Deuteronomy 25 and Luke 10, saying Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, is the Word of God for us. We believe in the whole Scripture, both Testaments, being the Word of God. That all by itself would be reason enough to read, study, teach, and preach the Old Testament.

Number 2: The Old Testament is necessary background to the New Testament. The First Testament is necessary background for the Second Testament. By some estimates, 40% of the verses of the New Testament either quote from or directly allude to material in the Old Testament. I remember being surprised by that estimate when I heard it. The Old Testament is the crucial backstory to the New Testament. It is really more than the backstory. It is also the front story because of how often it’s quoted from or alluded to. You really can’t understand the New Testament, even if you thought you should focus on the New Testament, you wouldn’t be able to understand it without understanding the Old Testament. One of the things I have sometimes done with somebody who is new to Christianity or new to the Christian Faith and doesn’t know much Bible, I will recommend or give them a robust children’s story Bible and say, “read this, it won’t take you long, but read through all those stories because you will have so much of a head start in understanding all that you will read about in the New Testament just by understanding the stories of the Old Testament.”

Number 3: The Old Testament gives us a fuller understanding of Christ. Let me give you one notable example of that. The Old Testament helps you understand Jesus in His prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministry. Eusebius of Caesarea perhaps is the first to use this structure in his Ecclesiastical History. He’s wanting to tell the whole story of the Christian church, and he starts in the Old Testament. He starts with the anointing of the leadership figures in the Old Testament as connected to the anointing of Christ. He says, in the same way that you have these people who are anointed as prophets, priests, and kings, you now have a Messiah, an anointed one, who is prophet, priest, and king. He gives a kind of clue that then gets developed robustly through the whole history of the church through the Middle Ages and strongly in the Reformers and afterwards, even to the present day. And there is a lot in
the New Testament that shows Jesus exercising His prophetic, priestly, and kingly roles and fulfilling prophecies that relate to prophets, priests, and kings. You cannot understand what that is all about unless you read through the Old Testament page by page and on virtually every page you see something about a prophet, a priest, or a king. Sometimes positive examples, sometimes negative examples, but all of them illuminating the offices of Christ and His complete work. It is a very good way of understanding the Old Testament in a Christ-centered way, to think in terms of prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministry and that’s just one way in which the Old Testament gives us a fuller understanding of Christ.

Another way, of course, is the gospel story of humiliation and exaltation in places like Luke 24: 26-27, but then some verses later in the same chapter. Jesus is not just with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus but with His other disciples and He says to them in verse 46, “‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’” Yes, it’s a gospel paradigm for understanding the Old Testament: suffering and rising again on the third day. But it is also the implications of that gospel in terms of repentance and forgiveness as a proclamation to the nations. All of that is part of the Old Testament revelation of Jesus Christ. It is not just the sufferings and glory of Christ that are prefigured in the Old Testament; it is also the ongoing gospel work of proclaiming repentance and forgiveness in His name to the nations. All of that is rooted, Jesus says, in what is written in the Old Testament.

Number 4: The Old Testament gives us a fresher understanding of Christ. This is the point of 1 Samuel 22. When you read the New Testament Gospels, you are looking at Jesus directly. In the Old Testament, it’s almost as if you catch sight of Him reflected in a mirror. You are not looking directly at Him, but you are looking at something and you catch a sideways glance. It gives you a new perspective, you see Him in a fresh way, the way you sometimes do when you catch sight of somebody in a mirror. You see a different aspect or maybe it catches you by surprise a little bit. You didn’t expect to see that particular reflection. But just because it’s a sideways glance, it comes to you with new and fresh power. There are so many examples of this. I love John’s testimony in 12:41 with reference to Isaiah, “Isaiah said these things [referring to His call narrative] because he saw his glory and spoke of him.” That calls to mind for me Isaiah 6—Isaiah seeing the Lord high and lifted up—and I understand it is not just the Sovereign Lord God who is our Father, but it’s actually a vision of Jesus Christ that Isaiah beholds and that’s what he wants to communicate to us in his prophecy.
Or think, for example, how much richer our understanding of Christ is when we read Psalm 118, on the chief cornerstone, this stone that is cast aside in the building of God’s house but then is recovered and then becomes central to the entire building. It becomes marvelous in our eyes. There’s something marvelous about the revelation of Christ that you see in Psalm 118. You are seeing Him in a marvelous way, and this reappears in the New Testament. Here’s just another example. I’ve been preaching and teaching through some of the psalms recently and I was really struck by Psalm 109:31. Here’s a psalm of David when he is under duress, people are coming after him, they’re accusing him including in what seems to be legal context. Typically, in that ancient world, there’s an accuser on your right hand and he’s there to accuse you and bring you up on charges before the court. And what do you see in verse 31? It’s the Savior that stands at the right hand of the needy one to save him from those who condemn his soul to death. All of the sudden you’re in this courtroom scene and it’s your Savior that is standing at your right hand to bring deliverance! I just see my Savior in this verse and in this context of somebody under attack and under duress, in a fresh way that comes with fresh power.

Number 5: The Old Testament helps us understand our world today. Here I refer, specifically, to understanding the Middle East because the ancient conflicts that have a big influence on global politics in our world today draw fuel conflicts that are rooted in the Old Testament. Regardless of your particular view on how you connect Old Testament prophecy to Israel, to the church, or to what God is doing in the world, we would all have to agree that there are stories in the Old Testament that set the trajectory of conflicts that influence our world today and illuminate the nature of those conflicts. There are things that we are struggling with in our world today that go back to Isaac and Israel, that go all the way back to Israel and Syria. The Old Testament gives us an understanding and a perspective.

Number 6: The Old Testament gives us more of the promises of God. We get lots of promises from God in the New Testament but there are also many promises in the Old Testament, including promises in the Old Testament that are fulfilled in the New Testament but also promises in the Old Testament that won’t be fulfilled until the end of history. And I find in living out ordinary Christian life, I need more of the promises of God, not less of the promises of God. I need to think more of the promises of God. I need to hold unto the promises of God more rather than less. And I find that so many people that are struggling in the Christian life also need more of the promises of God. Also, in grasping hold of those promises of God, seeing the amazing track record that God has in fulfilling His promises again and again,
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strengthens me in my hope that God will fulfill the promises that He's made to me that He's not yet fulfilled. For ministry, for spiritual growth, and for the kind of pastoral care we are offering to others, the Old Testament is a tremendous resource for us in offering people more of the promises of God.

Number 7: The Old Testament shows us a fuller range of the human experience. This is one of the benefits of reading great literature of any kind that puts us into contact with human experience. But in the Bible, we’re put in contact with human experience in a way that makes a difference in our lives spiritually. The people that we meet in the Old Testament are people living their lives before God. All of these characters that become so memorable to us as we read the stories of the Old Testament are having a range of human experience that is much greater than the range of human experience that we encounter simply from reading the New Testament. All these stories of people fighting, dreaming, marrying, working, eating, drinking, living, and dying, living out all these things in their relationship with God. There is so much more of that that we encounter in the Old Testament than we would simply in the New Testament. It's a reminder that we are not alone in our spiritual experiences. There's an invitation for us to learn in the context of the communion of the saints and sisters and brothers who have gone before us who have experiences that can help us understand the work of God in connection with our own experiences.

Number 8: The Old Testament teaches us more of the law of God. I refer most specifically to the Torah, the law of God as given through the prophet Moses, maybe most specifically to the Ten Commandments. This is one of things Michael Kruger was up against with this book that he was reviewing. One of the statements in that book is “thou shalt not believe that the Ten Commandments apply to you.” That is part of the argument of the book! Actually, everything in the law of God, understood rightly, does apply to us. It's not just the law of God in Moses but the unpacking of the implications of the law in the prophets, for example. I think it is a good thing to have more of the law of God because it leads us more deeply into repentance. As I reflect on some years of preaching the gospel, I can’t think of anything that has made a bigger gospel impact on congregations that I have served than the clear, convicting preaching of the law of God that gets you to the point that you cannot deflect it. You know it’s referring to you. You know it’s exposing your own sins, and then you have to deal with it through repentance and a deeper understanding of the gospel. Few things are more effective for leading people to Christ than an understanding of the law of God. So it’s a good thing that the Old Testament teaches us more of the law of God.
It’s also good because the law helps guide us in our conduct as those now who have been redeemed by Christ and naturally want to please our Savior in the way we live.

Number 9: The Old Testament exposes us to more biblical poetry. That is a good thing! Poetry is a delight to the soul; it gives us a deeper and richer experience in our relationship with God. A big percentage, maybe 40%, of the Old Testament is in poetic form. Poetry touches the mind and heart in a different way than prose. It operates differently than law, history, gospel, or biblical narrative. Poetry touches some people more deeply who are particularly in tune to the way that poetry works through images. For some of us, we may connect more deeply to this part of the Bible than that part of the Bible, but there are people that strongly connect with poetry and God in His wisdom has given us a lot of that so that people can connect with Him spiritually through poetry. But I will also say that there is a poetic side to all of us. Each of us has a capacity to understand images, to appreciate the beauty of the natural world, which poetry sometimes does, so we become more complete people, more whole people, as the Word of God in its variety of genres and literary forms has its impact on us. Poetry is a very significant part of that. One thing that I point out to college students on my campus if I occasionally hear that they are having trouble connecting with poetry is that actually they listen to poetry every day. They listen to contemporary music and all the lyrics of that are poetic—not necessarily that they rhyme but that they have images; the way that they communicate is poetic. There’s a capacity in each one of us that is designed to respond to poetry.

Number 10: The Old Testament is Christ’s own method of preaching the gospel to Himself. Think, for example, of the way that Jesus handled temptation from the book of Deuteronomy. It’s not the first thing that most Christians would probably do. “I’m facing a temptation, let me turn to Deuteronomy; there’s probably something here that will help me resist that temptation.” But Jesus is so immersed in the Old Testament world that these weapons are ready to hand for Him. The devil comes at Him with a temptation and it’s blocked by this text from Deuteronomy. The counter measure to temptations comes from the Old Testament Scriptures, which helps us see how immersed the man Jesus was in the Scriptures of the First Testament. Think of how much meditation and reflection Jesus had done on the Psalms, which so quickly come to His mind and His utterance in His suffering on the cross. In those hours of betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus is going back to the Scriptures of the Old Testament and He is proclaiming for Himself and for others the message of the Psalms as it relates to His accomplishment of redemption.
Here’s another example. At the end of the Gospels—whether it’s Scribes or Sadducees or Pharisees—these teachers of the law come to Jesus with question after question. They go into their little huddle and they come up with a real stumper, come to Jesus and he totally deflects it, asks them a question in return, and shows them how mistaken they are in their premises. It’s masterful in every encounter. Then you sort of get to the end of it all and Jesus says, “you know you’ve asked me a lot of questions. I’ve got a riddle for you from Psalm 110: The LORD said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies my footstool. Who’s that about?” He puts the question out there and the Gospels say that after that no one asked him any more questions. In order to have that deep, rich understanding and to put it into play in pastoral and apologetic questions, it is evident how deeply rooted our Savior was in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. On the assumption that we are not wiser than our Lord, then it becomes imperative for us to understand the Old Testament Scriptures and to preach the gospel to ourselves from these Scriptures.

Number 11: *The Old Testament is the apostolic method of preaching the gospel to the world.* The preaching of the apostles is always gospel preaching. It’s always the risen Christ in the context of His having been crucified. That is the message again and again in the sermons of Paul, Peter, and Stephen as we read them in the book of Acts. That gospel preaching is rooted in the Old Testament. I used to wish that I had a recording of what Jesus said to His disciples in Luke 24, whether the ones on the road to Emmaus or the ones in the Upper Room, when He was “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets... [teaching what was said] in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” It became apparent to me that you don’t have the recording of that but you have the notes because what the apostles are doing in the rest of the New Testament is going back to some of the passages that Jesus taught to them that day and then for the next 40 days and they are teasing out the implications of all of these Old Testament Scriptures. This was probably not limited to the ones that Jesus specifically taught them because He taught them to view the whole Old Testament in a Christ-centered way and He gave them a very good start with the passages He drew out for them. So, when you see Peter in Acts 2 commenting on Joel and bringing in Psalm 16, or when you get to Acts 3 and Peter is quoting from Deuteronomy and Samuel, or Stephen in the book of Acts surveying the whole Old Testament history of Israel, or Philip in Acts 8 preaching from Isaiah 53, there are all kinds of references to the Old Testament. When the apostles were preaching the gospel, they were doing it by expounding the Old Testament Scriptures.
Number 12: The Old Testament opens up more than half the Bible for use in ministry. I’m starting to show you some of the benefits of preaching and teaching the Old Testament. If you don’t take advantage of those benefits, it’s almost as if you’re fighting with one arm tied behind your back—maybe even an arm and a half because such a big proportion of the Bible is the Old Testament. And it’s to be used for ministry in providing spiritual counsel, in proclaiming the gospel, in addressing temptation, in ministering to needs of broken families, and in helping people with their discouragement and depression. The Old Testament is a tremendous resource for all of this pastoral ministry, whether you’re in a preaching ministry or a counseling ministry. There are much greater resources for working with young people, for working in women’s ministry, for talking to seniors, for working with internationals—so many vistas open up for us when we unleash the Old Testament for ministry.

Number 13: Preaching the Old Testament gives honor to the Holy Spirit (who breathed out these words). I’ve already made the point that these words are breathed out by God, that’s where I started. This is a slightly different point. It has to do with our relationship particularly with the Third Person of the Trinity and the honor that we are able to give to the Third Person of the Trinity when we believe that the Old Testament is the Word of God and then put it into use in ministry, which is what the Holy Spirit wants to use to change people’s lives. Teaching, preaching, reading, studying the Old Testament honors the Holy Spirit who gave us these words, then opens up the church and the world to His influence through these parts of Scripture. I believe that everything in Scripture has its work to do in the world. I think every part of the Scripture has its gospel work to do in the world. There’s a way to understand everything in the Old Testament from a gospel perspective. One of the ways we honor the person and work of Holy Spirit is by allowing Him to do his work with the Scriptures of the Old Testament.

Number 14: The Old Testament gives us a clearer picture of our sin. This is maybe implicit with what I already said about the law of God but it goes beyond that because there are so many narratives in the Old Testament that give us an anatomy of sin and how it works, that have the power to give us an “aha” moment where we recognize ourselves. When you go to the garden with Adam and you see him say, “the woman you put here with me, she gave it to me and I ate,” you learn so much about blame shifting and your relationship to God. If you can’t see yourself in that passage, you need to look at yourself a little bit more seriously. Or think about Adonijah who exalts himself and says, “I will be king.” You look at what self-exaltation involves, how hard you have to work to get other people to exalt you if you want to exalt yourself,
what a contrast that is to the humility of the true king who waits for God to exalt him, you learn a lot about the impulse to self-exaltation from that kind of narrative. The Old Testament gives us a clearer picture of our sin, of how desperately wicked our hearts are, and there are aspects of sin that are more fully displayed in the sordid history of the Old Testament that they would be anywhere else.

Number 15: The Old Testament gives us more good stories to tell. Just think how many great narratives there are in the Old Testament and think how much people love to hear a story. I remember liturgical readings at a missions conference at College Church in Wheaton. Missionaries were giving testimonies of some of their work that they had seen God do, readings of Scripture were paired with those testimonies. There were a number of missionaries at the front of the church and some of them were telling their stories. Then one person would say, “tell us a story.” Then the whole group would say, “yes, tell us a story.” When they said, “yes, tell us a story,” you were anticipating the story that you were about to hear. There’s something about knowing that a story is coming that just pulls you a little closer to the edge of your seat. Even when you’re drifting off in a sermon, the story starts and you find yourself, almost in spite of yourself, listening to the story. That’s how powerful stories are. The Old Testament gives us a lot more good stories to tell, (including, by the way, stories that people in your church and context have never heard, or they haven’t heard in a long time and have forgotten, or they have heard but they didn’t actually notice some of the most important things in the story). I marvel at the wisdom of God in giving us such a variety of forms of literature in the Bible but you can’t help but notice His great love for stories and the way He’s designed us with a great love for stories.

Number 16: The Old Testament tells us the story of our own people, the one people of God. I find it very helpful to know the story of my people. I was, I’m sure, an unusual student at Wheaton College when I noticed that they had just published a big, semi-scholarly history of Wheaton College and I said, “oh that looks like fun to read, I’m going to read that as extra reading my freshman year just so I know the history of this place and it helps me understand what my calling is as a student.” I remember feeling the same way when I did a paper in seminary on the history of the community that my father grew up in Pella, Iowa. Those were Dutch exiles under religious persecution that came into the New World. I read their story, the kind of theology they liked to talk about, how clean they liked to make their homes. I said, “these are my people, I’m understanding myself better because I understand these stories.” Understand when you read the Old Testament, this is your story. You are part of the people of Exodus coming out of Egypt because if that never happened, the
promises to Abraham never would have been fulfilled, there never would’ve been a Savior. As you read through the stories of the Old Testament, your salvation is riding on these things. You’re connected with the very people that are part of these stories. We are reading to understand the beginning of our own narrative.

Number 17: The Old Testament gives us greater confidence in the truth of the gospel because it is rooted in history. There are many examples of this. I think of the Moabite Stele, for example, the way that it refuted those who try to claim from time to time that there was never a David that was king of Israel. No, there was a king David, we know that, and we could confirm that from other historical records. The more we understand the history of the Old Testament, the more it fits into the total historical picture. I find those kinds of confirmation to the history of the Bible giving me a stronger confidence in everything that God has said, including in the gospel.

Number 18: The Old Testament presents a fuller revelation of the character of God, who after all is the main character in almost every story. No one has ever dominated a narrative the way the Living God dominates the narrative of Scripture. You meet all these other, different characters, very vivid people, but in all of these stories they are interacting with the Living God. Even in the ones where He isn’t mentioned so explicitly, He is orchestrating the events of history and people are living their lives out with reference to Him. We live in an era where people do not know God and there’s an amazing opportunity to introduce them to God. What He loves, what He hates, how He rebukes, how He cherishes, what He seeks to rescue, how He redeems—all of these living actions of the Living God come to life in the Old Testament. We understand and get to know God better through its pages.

Number 19: The Old Testament gives us something new to learn and teach. Because even people who grew up in the church, maybe have a Sunday school understanding of the Bible. There are lots of stories they’ve never heard before and the Old Testament is big enough that by the time you get back around to certain things you don’t remember them so well yourselves sometimes. There’s always something fresh and something new to give people. A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to preach at a local church and I decided to preach from Jeremiah 45. It’s this little story of Baruch who gets grumpy with the Lord. He is the assistant and amanuensis to Jeremiah. He’s a little discouraged with God and grumpy because he thought he was going to get something better out of life. God speaks to him and says, “are you desiring great things for yourself? Seek them not.” Here’s this amazing little story that connects so well with the experience of so many of us. I had the opportunity to preach to a congregation with the title Attempt Small Things for God, knowing that this was
going to be new for most of the people in the congregation. I think it’s a good thing that people learn new things.

Number 20: The Old Testament is useful, ever so useful. The Old Testament is useful for training in righteousness, for correction and rebuke, referring again to 2 Timothy. Earlier, I made the point that the Old Testament is the Word of God but the real point that Paul wants to make there is that because it is the Word of God, it’s useful for those different things. It shows you the difference between correct theology and false theology. It shows you the right way to live over against the wrong way to live. Paul was referring primarily, though not exclusively, to the Old Testament. If you want something that’s really practical, useful for people spiritually, the apostle Paul says, “the Old Testament, that’s what’s really useful for people in all of these different kinds of ways.”

Here’s another just little example of an application of the Old Testament that is so simple but so powerful in its relevance. When Jesus says in Luke 17:32, one of the shortest verses in the Bible, “remember Lot’s wife.” Now, if you’re a wise person and you know the story, you’ll be able to think about “what is Jesus saying to me? He is saying to me not to love the things of this world. Not to get caught up in all the sexual temptations, the wealth and prosperity, the inhospitality of an urban community that’s turned its back on God, not to long for those things but to set my face squarely ahead for the future that God has for me, for the promises that He wants me to receive by faith.” It’s just this little verse, “remember Let’s wife,” but so useful for actually living out your life in the contemporary world.

Number 21: The Old Testament will stretch you and also stretch your people, helping you to grow. There are a lot of difficult parts of the Old Testament. There are a lot of tough parts in the Bible, but it becomes very rewarding because it’s the hard things that help you grow. I remember starting a long series in the book of Jeremiah. At least some people were asking, “this is a long book; is it really a good idea to go all the way through the book of Jeremiah?” How gratifying it was later to have somebody come up and say “you know, I feel like Jeremiah works where I work because the things that he notices about how people operate and what they truly need, that’s what I see in my context.” But to get to that point, you have to pay your dues, you have to be immersed in the biblical text, you have to work with the biblical text to get those rewards that come from really being stretched. I think preaching and teaching from the Old Testament brings maturity in the individual Christian life and in a congregation. Part of that maturity comes from some of the difficulties of working through it.
Number 22: Preaching the Old Testament is vindicated by the history of the church. Generally, you’ll find that when the Old Testament is alive for the people of God, those are times when the church is strong. It’s not just true of the apostles, it’s true of the Church Fathers, of the Reformers, of the Puritans—these worthies immersed themselves in the study of the Old Testament. Part of the strength of their theology and how they approached the Christian life came from that immersion. I won’t take any more time to give examples of that, but I think it is easily demonstrated.

Number 23: Preaching the Old Testament will give you a richer appreciation for the grace of God. It’s not just law that you encounter with the Old Testament; it’s also gospel that you encounter. Sometimes in the Old Testament, because of the strength of the teaching of the law, because of the disobedience of the people of God, some of those grace-filled moments seem a little fewer and farther between, but just for that reason come through particularly powerfully. Think, for example, of all of the judgment that Isaiah preaches in the first part of the book. By the time you get to “comfort, comfort ye my people,” you are really ready for a word of gospel comfort. If you have worked your way through Isaiah, it comes to you so much more powerfully, this experience of the grace of God.

Number 24: Teaching and preaching the Old Testament enables us to follow Paul’s example in preaching the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). I do not mean by this that when Paul said, “the whole counsel of God,” he necessarily was saying Genesis to Revelation. He may have been thinking more broadly and more thematically. I do think that whatever Paul meant, one of the best ways to achieve that goal is to have a healthy diet that’s drawing from everything in Scripture, drawing from the Old Testament and from the New Testament. I had the privilege of serving a short internship with William Still from Aberdeen in Scotland. His usual pattern was to preach whole chapters of the Bible Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday evening Bible study, and Friday evening prayer meeting. He preached every chapter in the entire Bible over the course of his ministry. That’s awesome but most preachers never get the chance to do that. We may not have the opportunity to do that either, but we can be drawing in a healthy way from many different parts of Scripture. We are giving our people a more balanced biblical diet rather than perhaps focusing on areas of particular interest for us—a broader exposure to Scripture that will build them up spiritually.

Number 25: The Old Testament helps us see the gospel. I think, for example, of the way that you see the gospel in Zechariah 3 where Joshua the High Priest is in
filthy clothes and the angel of the Lord defends him against the accusations of Satan, strips off his filthy robes, clothes him with new robes and with a turban that says “Holy to the Lord.” If you can’t see the gospel in that passage, you’re not going to see it. There are many passages like that in the Old Testament that show us the gospel, that specifically work out some of the details for us of the gospel. I’ve referred to Luke 24; I would also refer to Acts 8:35, which really struck me. It’s the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. He is reading Isaiah 53, evidently, and saying, “how do I understand this?” Philip preaches to him the gospel, the Ethiopian eunuch is baptized on the spot, but interestingly Acts 8:35 says he just began with that Scripture. That’s not where Philip ended. That was a good jumping off point. There’s a lot you can do in Isaiah 53, but there’s so much more in the Old Testament to preach the gospel to somebody so that they see it and come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Number 26: The Old Testament shows God’s one plan of redemption unfolded throughout all of history. There’s an amazing connectedness to Scripture, a total unity. This is a book where you really do see a lamb from the foundation of the world. You read the whole Scripture and you can see this in a totality that really holds together. There’s the development of the covenant, there’s themes in Scripture of marriage, the water of life, of fruitfulness that go right from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. But you are not going to understand that one unified story and that one plan of redemption unless you understand the Old Testament is part of God’s total work.

Number 27: The Old Testament will give you a broader perspective on the global work of missions. If you’re committed to the missionary advance of the gospel, to what God is doing in the nations, if you have a heart and maybe a calling for that, the Old Testament gives you many resources. It doesn’t start in Matthew 28 and Acts 1 with the Great Commission. It’s there from Abraham on in a plan that God is working out among the gentiles as gentiles come into the community of faith and as you have examples of where the message of God’s grace is meant to go out to the nations. There are many verses on this in the Psalms, for example. The Old Testament is tremendous for thinking about the missionary work of the church.

Number 28: The Old Testament will give you a deeper understanding of doctrine. So many doctrines develop already in the Old Testament. Think of how Martin Luther, for example, regarded the Psalms as a compendium of sacred theology. The sovereignty of God, the unity of God, His omnipresence, what it means to be adopted into the family of God, what it means to be justified, what it means to be glorified—these doctrines are there in the Old Testament Scriptures. If you want to be
a better systematic theologian, as well as biblical theologian, the Old Testament is an important part of laying that foundation.

Number 29: *The Old Testament—the First Testament—will bring people to faith in Christ.* This was Timothy’s story. Paul says to him, “the Scriptures are able to make you wise unto salvation.” He appeals to the experience Timothy had at his mother’s knee, under the influence of his grandmother’s prayer and ministry. It is the Old Testament that gave Timothy an understanding of the coming of the Messiah and of salvation. Not too long ago I heard of a Muslim man in China. A missionary had given him a Bible and encouraged him to begin with one of the Gospels. He could see that it was three quarters of the way through and he wanted to start at the beginning. So, he started in Genesis instead. By the grace of God he made it through Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and long before he got to the Gospels he came to the missionary and he said, “I see it: Jesus is the promised Messiah.” It was the Old Testament that had brought him to that understanding.

Number 30: *The Old Testament introduces many great heroes and heroines of the Christian faith.* We need those inspiring examples that set a pattern and a model for us. You get a lot of them in Hebrews 11, but you won’t really understand those stories unless you understand the Old Testament. Even Hebrews 11 tells you, “I’ve got so many good stories that I could tell you, I don’t have time to tell you all these stories.” Take the hint given in Hebrews and go read some of those stories as they’re recorded for us in the First Testament.

Number 31: Finally, *the Old Testament will grow you deeper in the life of prayer* because of all the prayers found in it: Moses interceding for the people of God, Solomon praying at the Temple, Hannah’s prayers, Daniel’s prayers of repentance, and all the prayers that you’re given in the Psalms, which Martin Luther described as the prayer book of the people of God.

This list is meant to be a cumulative case for the value of teaching and preaching the Old Testament. It shows so many of the things that I desire in my own life: a deeper understanding of the gospel, a knowledge of Christ, a heart for missions, a greater commitment to the life of prayer, a life that’s inspiring because it’s inspired by people whose lives themselves are inspiring. These are the things that I want for myself, the things I want for my children, the things I want for my campus and my congregation. This is a reminder of something you already know: the Old Testament is an amazing place to get all of those things!
Recovering the Song of Songs as a Christian Text

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Editorial Note: On July 16, 2018, Dr. Liam Goligher, Senior Minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, delivered the inaugural Paideia Center Summer Lecture at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando. We are pleased to publish a transcript of his address.

It’s a joy for me to be here at RTS Orlando, and a particular pleasure for me this evening to talk about the Song of Solomon which has fascinated me since childhood. In fact, as a sixteen-year old, I had the temerity to speak to our youth fellowship on a verse from Song of Solomon which provoked some animated discussion I seem to remember!

We actually are influenced by the Song of Songs in a whole variety of ways which we don’t recognize. References to it are being gently edited, for example, out of our hymns. We sang a hymn this morning in chapel and one of the verses from that hymn goes like this, “Jesus my Shepherd, Brother, Friend, my Prophet, Priest, and King.” The original by John Newton reads, “Jesus my Shepherd, Husband, Friend.” “Husband” has been changed to “brother” for some obscure reason. But the hymnbooks we used when I was a boy, had the original version.¹

And then there is its influence in the works of Samuel Rutherford:

The bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear Bridegroom’s face;
I shall not gaze on glory
But on my king of grace.
Not on the crown He gives me,
But on his pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory
of Emmanuel’s land.²

¹ “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” (John Newton, 1779).

² “The Sands of Time Are Sinking,” a hymn by Anne Cousin based on the letters and last words of Samuel Rutherford.
That is a very long hymn and we don’t sing all the verses. If you read the whole thing, it is saturated, as were Rutherford’s letters, with the language of the Song of Songs.

My third example is the great C. H. Spurgeon. He was a great Baptist preacher and he preached 54 sermons on the Song of Songs. He was a textual preacher, so you have to sift through his work to discover them. It was evangelistic preaching; it was pastoral preaching; and it was preaching that made the heart soar as you considered the themes that were introduced.

So why preach on the Song of Solomon? My answer is quite simply: to know God. At one level we know so little about God. Paul says that the heavens – the universe that God has made – shout to us of something of his eternal power and his divine nature. But we still know so little about God. Yet the God who knows himself has graciously revealed to us, using creaturely language, the language of analogy to communicate something of who he is. God is incomprehensible and ultimately unknowable apart from revelation. Scripture uses the language of analogy chastened and corrected by special revelation to speak truly if not exhaustively about God. That’s one of the things that we are rediscovering, as it where, as we come to look at the whole way in which we interpret the Bible today. God has given us two books by which we might know him: the book of nature and the book of Scripture. And he has given us two gifts by which we might know him: he has given us his Son and he has given us his Spirit. The whole point of the Christian life is that we might know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3).

So how may we know God? Throughout Scripture God is concerned to communicate to us theological knowledge, which by extension means Christological knowledge. In other words, the point of the Bible is that we might know God. In the book of nature, God teaches us all kinds of things that are available to people whether they are Christians or not, whether they are God-fearing or not. The book of nature teaches us not just about God, but about how to live as human beings in the world that God has made. From the book of nature, we learn how to farm and how to have interrelationships with other human beings. But the special revelation we find in Holy Scripture is given to us that we might know God and that we might know God particularly as he has revealed himself in Christ.

The Song of Songs, because it is Scripture, intends to bring us to this saving knowledge of God. Up until the middle of the nineteenth century, it was treated as a book of theological and spiritual knowledge pointing us to God. In fact, one writer calls it a sacramental word that uses visible and tangible things to point us to things that are invisible and immaterial.

What happened in the middle of the nineteenth century? German higher criticism, which was the fruit of the so-called Enlightenment, reordered the focus of
our handling of the Bible to a starkly literal reading of the text, on the principle that the text has only one meaning and that is the kind of surface meaning, one which the original author was aware of or would have testified to. Instead of asking the question, what was in the divine author’s mind in the writing of Scripture, the question focused on what the human author was thinking. This was a naturalistic approach: what does it mean at the natural level? At the natural level, what do you read in the Song of Songs, what do you have? Keil and Delitzch say that you have a love song, period. It has nothing to do with a relationship with God or anything about our relationship with God. Can we not read the Song as a series of lyrics about love and desire? Paul Griffiths responds, “well, of course, that is possible. But to do that would not be to read the Song as a Scriptural book; neither would it be to take seriously the weight of the Song’s readings by Jews and Christians over two thousand years.”

The Christian church through most of its history has seen the Song of Songs as a Christian book. D.M. Carr writes this, “The increasingly exclusive focus of the literal sense of the song has corresponded with the functional decanonization of the Song in those sections of the church and synagogue which have been most deeply influenced by the historical and critical method.” In other words, you don’t preach on it. You don’t want to preach on sex, don’t preach on the Song of Songs (unless you are someone like Mark Driscoll!). You don’t go anywhere near it. But in the history of interpretation, both in Jewish circles as well as Christian circles, it has been understood to be about God and his relationship to his people Israel and the Church.

At the first century Council of Jamnia, Rabbi Avika stated, “no one in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs. The whole world is not worth the day on which Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies” (Yadayim 3:5). The Song affirms two things. It affirms that the intimate elements of human love and marriage are important and significant, but it says it is teaching us that we must see beyond those to a spiritual, higher significance in the text.

Paul Griffiths argues for a figural reading of the text and he says that Scripture “is first and last about more than what the surface of its text says. That more is always and necessarily the triune Lord and, necessarily, that Lord’s incarnation as Jesus

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The New Testament teaches us that the key that unlocks the entire canon of Scripture are the events surrounding the sending of the Son and the Spirit in order to open the door of our understanding to a deeper knowledge of the God who is there.

It is impossible for us to avoid the Song of Songs if we have any grasp of the God that is revealed throughout the rest of Scripture. Here is a God who is passionate in his love for his chosen people Israel. He is a God who desires them for himself, who is jealous at her immorality by playing around with other gods. He is a God who is repeatedly approaching his people, wooing his people, speaking love to his people, drawing them to himself with the cords of love. Great passages such as Hosea 1-3 or Isaiah 50 or 54 or Jeremiah 2-3 and Ezekiel 16 display this passionate love of God for Israel. In the words of God, “for your maker is your husband, the Lord of Hosts is his name, and the Holy one of Israel is your redeemer. For a brief moment I deserted you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you says the Lord your redeemer” (Is 54:5-6). The language of Hosea and Jeremiah is even more intense and passionate on God’s love for his people. He communicates his love for his people through those creaturely realities of which we are aware, particularly, human love. He uses human love at its highest level – that is in marriage – and at the highest level within marriage – the sexual aspects of marriage – to communicate by analogy the intensity, particularity and passion with which he loves his people, his giving of himself to his people.

That is precisely what the New Testament writers recognize. Paul when he is writing to Corinth says, “I feel a divine jealously for you. I betrothed you to one husband. To present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2). Or Revelation 21:9 where it is the church that is “the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

In Ephesians 5, we read that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Here the apostle addresses Christian marriage and the responsibility of husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, and he quotes from Gen. 2:24: “for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.” That language of leaving and cleaving in the Old Testament is used of the way in which Israel is in a covenant relationship with God. Israel has to leave its idols and cleave to the Lord. This stresses “a radical change, not of domicile, but of one’s pre-eminent loyalty.” In other words, the marriage relationship becomes a template for the spiritual relationship between Israel and the Lord, between Christ and the church. Throughout the Old Testament the Lord’s relationship to Israel is that of between a husband a wife.

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5 Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, p. lvii.
When Paul is quoting that in Eph. 5, he says about marriage: that this mystery is great, and he’s talking about Christ and the church. Greg Beale and Benjamin Gladd in their book *Hidden But Now Revealed*, emphasize that nowhere else in the New Testament is the word mystery is labeled as “great,” in the way in which it is done here in Ephesians 5. Metaphorically, it applies to God and Israel. Sinai may be viewed as a marriage between the Lord and Israel. It points forward to the consummative marriage of Israel in the end time of which Isaiah speaks in Isaiah 61 and 62. Paul’s move is simply to identify the Lord with Christ and the church as the end time Israel. The word mystery captures the continuity and discontinuity between the two testaments and the fulfillment towards which the OT is moving. So that when Paul says of this mystery of marriage pointing to Christ and the church and says it is great, he is echoing the language of the Song of Songs that says the song about the marriage between the Lord and his people is the *Song of Songs*. That is, it is a superlative song as we will see in a moment.

I want to several things about the book as a whole. First of all, it is a poem. It is not a collection of poems, but a unified piece of poetry. Now, we see poetry all over the Bible. We see it in the psalms and the prophets. We need to know something about poetry. We need to understand that poetry at its best is evocative speech. Its metaphors, images, and phrases stir the imagination. They heighten our emotions. They are aesthetically pleasing. In poetry the effect of language is primary and uppermost. It elevates our thoughts. It is marked by the noblest of themes. It is meant to stir the purest of emotions and it should deal with the richest of ideas and should connect with the deepest feelings of our hearts. John Milton said, true poetry is “simple, sensuous, and passionate.”

The Song of Songs falls into the category of good poetry, even sublime poetry. When God made the world, he multiplied within the world beautiful sights and sounds and smells and senses. When he made us humans, he made us capable of enjoying and savoring such beauties. He gave us a love for beauty, and this poetic song is a work of exquisite beauty. Its theme is love, the love that is from God because God is love. Yes, it is a love song between a man and a woman, but that is only where it begins. It leaps from there to become a song of the relationship between Christ and the church.

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https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/of_education/text.shtml
A single woman leaving my congregation in Philadelphia early on in my series on the Song of Songs said to me at the door: “For the first time in my Christian life, I can read the Song of Songs and it can be for me.” The problem with making the Song of Songs only about love and marriage, is that you disenfranchise, not just our single people and our widowed people, but you actually disenfranchise 99% of our married people because they’ve never had that kind of experience either. Only in their dreams, they would have the kind of experience touted by those who teach a naturalistic view of the Song of Songs. It is more than that; it is above that, it is beyond that. It is beyond our creaturely experience, and that is intentional because it is lifting our thoughts to some other dimension above our creaturely experience. God is lifting us out of ourselves and away from ourselves and saying there is something higher, greater, better -- the spiritual realm of our relationship with God. It uses creaturely analogies because that’s what we know as creatures. In order to help our understanding of spiritual communion with God in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit employs from the tool box of God’s revelation the tools of natural things with which we are familiar. And so, this song of love points us beyond married love to something far greater, to the marriage we were made for.

It is a song that we are looking at, and the word “song” is used of many of the Psalms and other great songs in the Bible. Of particular relevance for us is that Psalm 45 belongs to that group. If you should read Psalm 45 together with the Song of Songs, you will find that there is a very close parallel between those two songs. Psalm 45 is a love song: “To the choirmaster according to the Lilies.” If you read the Song of Songs, you’ll find there is reference to lilies all over the place. The fact that this Psalm 45 mentions the lilies establishes a point of connection between these two songs. In Psalm 45:2, talking to the divine Son, we read, “you are the most handsome of the sons of men, grace is poured on your lips, therefore, God has blessed you forever.” The Psalm goes on to talk about the throne of Christ: ‘Your throne, O God is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of righteousness...therefore O God, your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions; your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.” It then goes on to talk about his marriage to the princess. “All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold...with her virgin companions following behind her.” The resemblances from what is a very well-received messianic Psalm and the Song of Songs are just too numerous to ignore.

A scriptural song is an act of confession. When you hear Moses or Mary or Elizabeth singing, or Isaiah’s poetic songs, they are acts of confession. The principle notes of these songs are praise and gratitude. And when we sing, at Christmastime for example, Mary’s great song, “My soul magnifies the Lord,” we are singing with Mary and we are saying that everything within our being is magnifying the Lord. We want
to be closer to the Lord. We want to have a more intimate relationship with the Lord. We want to embrace him. We want to have a personal relationship with him in a deeper and a more vital way. We are drawing nearer. These scriptural songs that we read throughout the Bible acknowledge the surprising, awe-inspiring, and wonderful presence of the Lord. Moses Song: the great movement of the children of the Israel through the Red Sea. The presence of the Lord. They compress great ideas in one place.

The Song of Songs is scripture. It’s in the Bible. If it is merely a love song, it probably shouldn’t bother being there. But it is in the Bible, which means that it partakes of the inspiration of the Bible, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It partakes of what the Confession calls the perfection of the Bible, because God’s ways are perfect. It partakes of the holiness of the Bible, because God is holy. Not only that, but it partakes of the theme of the Bible. What is the Bible all about? What did Jesus tell the people of his day what the Bible was all about? “These speak of me. You search the Scriptures, and yet, these Scriptures are about me and you don’t see it.” Jesus accused the Pharisees. To the disciple on the road to Emmaus, he showed them from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. The Bible is the revelation of God that culminates in the revelation of God the Son and God the Spirit.

One of the main Biblical themes that you see again and again in the Song of Songs is that of the garden. There are echoes of Eden in the Song of Songs. Eden you remember before the land was cursed was “very good.” There man and woman had a perfect relationship with one another, but also a personal and perfect relationship with God who walked among them and who met with them and who spoke to them in some way that we can’t speculate. God was there; he was present with them in the Garden of Eden. James Hamilton in his little book on the Song of Songs says, “The closest we get to bring to being back in the Garden of Eden in the whole of the Bible is in the Song of Songs.” This garden is linked in the Song with Jerusalem. Which is an interesting link because if we handle the Bible properly, very often it is better to go to the very end and to look at what happens at the very end. And at the very end of the Bible, here we have the bride, the lamb’s wife, coming down from God out of heaven as a garden city. The New Jerusalem the holy city. The place where God dwells. There is no temple because God lives there. Here is the new Eden. Here are springs of living water flowing from the temple echoing Ezekiel’s dream. Echoing Song of Songs’ garden with the flowing living water, that phrase that is used by Jesus when he is

talking in John 7 when he speaks to the woman at the well, in Revelation when it is
talking about that final temple that garden temple city new Jerusalem. That language
is from Song of Songs. The garden a renewed Eden. There in that garden there is a
new Adamic figure. There is the beloved. Her beloved the one that she is waiting for.
Who she describes as a new Adam as it were. The second Adam. He is the hero. The
seed of the woman, Abraham’s seed, from the tribe of Judah, son of David, who comes
to the garden to meet with his church.

Consider the placement of the Song in our Bibles. Originally, it belonged to
the writings. The book of the writings in the scripture are prefaced in the canon by
Psalms 1 and 2. They describe the godly man who walks with God, who obeys God,
who does everything that Adam failed to do. Who abides by the word of God. When
Psalms 1 and 2 are closely held together they are regarded as the introduction to the
book of Psalms and to the whole of the writings. In Psalm 2 you have God’s king,
eternally begotten of God, given the nations. The exhortation is “Kiss the Son, lest he
be angry.” Submit to him, kiss him, bow the knee to him, receive him and find in him
the refuge you need in the day of judgment. That theme pervades the writings. In the
Psalms, God’s king suffers before entering glory. In the book of Job, the innocent
suffers and is restored. In Proverbs, lady wisdom is seeking the son, seeking the king,
the messiah. Ruth, the wise Gentile, joins herself with God’s people and becomes an
ancestor of the Messiah.

In Song of Songs, these themes are brought together. Here is this woman who
represents the people of God. She is the church, she is Israel. She is looking for the
Messiah. She is longing to see the Messiah. Though she talks about him, though she
hears him speak to her early in the book, in the middle of the book you discover that
she has never actually seen him. She is challenged by some onlookers and they say
“what is your beloved more than another beloved?” and she describes him. Well, you
might think she was describing a statue, because she’s never actually met him at this
point. The book begins with a longing to have a personal relationship with him. “Kiss
me, with the kisses of your mouth:” in other words, appear to me. Speak to me.
Breathe in me. Be here. I want you to come here. She anticipates him coming. She sees
him racing over the mountains towards her echoing the language you find in Isaiah of
the mountains being leveled and everything being clear for the Lord is coming.
“Behold, he comes” she says. “Behold, the Lord comes,” says Isaiah. She is waiting for
him to come, longing for him to come. And he comes, but she doesn’t see him. There
she is in her house and he is on the outside looking in. She knows that he is present,
that he is looking, that he is searching, but she hasn’t seen him. She goes through the
garden, but he is not there. She prays to him, “will you not come?” He comes to her
and says “I was there in the garden.” The garden represents the temple the place of
worship. The place where you meet with God. And he tells her “I was there.” I was
among the lilies, which is how he names his people as the lilies. He is with his people. But she hasn’t seen him yet. Her longing is that one day she will see him. In her description of him, she describes him with a human appearance, but with a head of gold, and a belly of ivory, and legs of gold, in sockets of gold. It’s reminiscent of the kind of pictures you see in Ezekiel and Daniel and in these apocalyptic books, that attempts to describe the indescribable: Ezekiel says, it’s the appearance of the likeness of whatever. His language is bursting apart to describe the realities that are being revealed to us here.

Thirdly the Song of Songs is superlative. Just like the Sanctum Sanctorum, the heaven of Heavens, the Kings of Kings, the God of gods, the vanity of vanities, this is the Canticum Cantorum. It belongs to a special category. It is the highest song, we are being told. That’s the title actually that the Bible gives: The Song of Songs.

Consider all the songs of Scripture. Think of Mary’s song. Isn’t Mary’s song the most exalted song imaginable? Yes, it is. But what is she doing in that song? She is describing the Messiah. In the Song of Songs, you get to hear him speaking to his church. You hear what he thinks about his church: how he loves his people, how he delights in his people, how he projects onto his people his own characteristics so they become increasingly like him. You hear him. This is the song of songs: the very best song you could ever sing. And this is how we are to interpret this song.

Brian Toews in a paper on this song makes much of this. He asks us to think about what kind of song in the Bible would be the best song. Would it be man-centered or God-centered? Would the Song of Songs in the Bible be anything other than a God-centered song? Imagine if the best song you could ever sing in your life would be of a marriage, love, and sex, in the Bible. That is inconceivable. But if this song is God-centered, then the song is the best song we can sing about God.

Think about those great songs in the Bible that talk about God. Psalm 45 is a song about the love for the king who will come to deliver his people. Exodus 15 is Moses’s song about God’s rescue. Isaiah 5 sings of my beloved and his vineyard. Which has connections with the Song of Songs. This song is called the Song of Songs because it describes, as the Rabbi said it describes, what happens in the holy of holies. And it is addressed to him who alone is called the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. In other words, the Messiah stands at the center of Scripture’s self-revelation. The Song, then, is the superlative song of love between the believer and the church and her Lord. It transcends the songs of Mary, Simeon, Anna, and Elizabeth, because

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in this song the Lord speaks directly as a lover who longs for his people and desires to bring her into his presence.

There are biblical-theological connections. You find a lot about the doves in the Song of Songs. Doves? Isn’t that a random thought, we might think. He has doves’ eyes, which she recognizes. And she is pronounced by him to have dove’s eyes. He gives her doves’ eyes. You think, wow, are we getting into a bit above our paygrade here? But consider the two dominant features in the Christ figure in this song: (1) how he is named and (2) his chief characteristic. He is named the beloved and the chief characteristic his dove’s eyes.

When you go to the New Testament, the first major revelation we have of the Trinity acting inseparably (apart from the incarnation of Christ where they are acting inseparably to produce the Messiah), is at the baptism of Jesus when his public work begins. Three created realities identify the invisible and indivisible persons of the Holy Trinity. There is Jesus in his incarnate humanity, human soul and body. There is the Father, who creates a voice so that he is heard. And there is a dove, a created thing, descending as a marker identifying the presence at Jesus’ baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is remarkable: why would he choose a dove? As you look at the Old Testament, where would you find it associated with the Son? The answer is on Psalm 45 and the Song. Then there are the words of the Father: “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.” So when the Beloved who has ‘doves eyes’ gives ‘doves eyes’ to the woman in the Song, the eyes of the dove represent the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating Christ in His human nature and in illuminating the Church by His gift, thus opening her eyes to see her beloved. When she utters “I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved in mine” she is uttering the quintessential confession of faith. There is certainly more than a clue here of what is going on in the text.

We noted that there was a garden, which of course represents ultimately the temple. When Solomon erected the temple it was decorated with details that were arboreal and garden-like. In the garden in the Song, there are trees and there is a river of living water. Both of those details we know are in the final temple. When the bride, the lamb’s wife, descends from heaven, the holy city – New Jerusalem, the garden city – the trees of life line the river of life and those trees have leaves for the healing of the nations. Psalm 36 interprets the river from God’s presence in Eden as a picture of the abundant life that flows to God’s people:

How precious is your steadfast love O God!
The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house,
And you give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
for in your light we see light. (7-9)

And in Isaiah 60, it is said of God to Israel to Jerusalem especially to Zion the church representing the church, “He has beautified you.” God delights to beautify his people. And the point then of the book I think is very helpfully picked up by John Owen when he talks about our union and communion with the Lord Jesus.

We typically settle for a kind of semi-detached live-in boyfriend relationship with Christ. The Song of Songs challenges us to seek more in our personal relationship with Christ, to love him more, to know him better, to sound the depths of what has been revealed of him. Why are we Christians? Surely, we are Christians in order that we might know God. Why did Jesus come and why is the Holy Spirit given to us? In order that we may know the Father. The Son died and rose again that we might know the Father that we might know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of glory and of God, rests upon us that we might have a deeper love for, appreciation for, longing for the day.

When we read the very first lines of Song of Songs and we can identify with it:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine,
your anointing oils are fragrant. (2-3)

The bride is saying, “I know of you. I have an experience of you, but there is something missing. You are missing. You are missing in your face-to-face presence. I know you are there, and I love you wherever I am and in all the circumstances of my life. But what I long for is to have you face-to-face, face-to-face with Christ my savior, when with rapture I behold him: Jesus Christ who died for me.”

The Song will whet your appetite for more. More of Christ. More of God. More of a deep and lasting and growing relationship with the one who loves us so well.
The Hermit Who Saved the Hebrew Truth

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By the last half of the fourth century A.D., the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament, was universally received as the authoritative Old Testament for the Christian Church. In fact, it was thought to be of divine origin and divine inspiration. Numerous theologians, such as Eusebius and Augustine, believed that the Apostles transmitted the LXX to the church as the inspired OT text. Irenaeus and others understood the Apostles to have only used the LXX in their own writings and, therefore, it was the inspired and infallible translation of the OT for the church.¹ Even the great exegete Chrysostom drew “out a great chain of transmission of the Old Testament from Moses and the Prophets to Ezra to the Seventy through Jesus to the Apostles and down to the Gentiles.”²

They knew, of course, that the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. However, they believed the LXX to be a divinely inspired interpretation and completion of the Hebrew text. In that sense it was an inspired and infallible translation that was superior to the original Hebrew text. So what we see is the melding of the original Hebrew text with tradition and what comes forth is a completed, infallible work.

It seems obvious to us in the twenty-first century that whatever merits the LXX has or whatever authority it acquired in the church, it still is a translation and therefore secondary. And it is equally obvious that it is not a very good translation. Moreover, it was “useless in controversy with Jews, who openly laughed at some of its renderings and quite rightly pointed out that they were a travesty of the Hebrew.”³ But during the fourth century such things were not so obvious: the LXX was simply held to be the authoritative Old Testament for the Christian Church.

In order to challenge the universal assumption of the divine origin and inspiration of the LXX, the church was in need of an irascible theological brawler; a

¹ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 3.21.3.
street-fighter who would take on the dominant and weighty theologians of the day. And the church found one in Eusebius Hieronymus, or as most people know him, Jerome. He would make an *ad fontes* call to the church, that it would return to the sources and to the *Hebraica Veritas*, that is, the Hebrew truth. And this summons, in my opinion, is Jerome’s most significant contribution to the history and development of the church.

Jerome was singularly and uniquely prepared for this task since “hardly any of his contemporaries could come near to rivaling him.” The only one who perhaps could have fought the good fight would have been Epiphanius of Salamis, who was knowledgeable of Greek, Syrian, Coptic, Hebrew, and Latin. Jerome himself understood his unique ability in this regard: he said of himself, “ego . . . hebraeus, graecus, latinus, trilinguis,” that is, “I am . . . one who knows Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, a trilingual man.”

**Early Years**

There is some debate regarding the date of Jerome’s birth, but it appears to be in 347 A.D. in the city of Stridonius, a small town at the head of the Adriatic Sea (which today would be Bosnia/Herzegovina). He was born of Christian parents who were prosperous. They sent him to Rome for his education in about the year 360 A.D. In Rome, he studied under the famous grammarian Aelius Donatus. His native language was the Illyrian dialect, but in Rome he became fluent in Latin and Greek, and, indeed, began his studies of Koine Greek at that time. He was baptized by Pope Liberius in 360 A.D.

Jerome spent the next decade exploring the world and spending time in theological studies. In 373 A.D. he arrived at Antioch, and there resolved to lay aside any secular studies and only look to the Bible. He also was convinced to live a life of asceticism and he left Antioch to go live as a hermit in the desert of Chalcis, some fifty miles southeast of Antioch (in modern-day Syria). In his letter #15 he tells us why: “And because for my sins I exiled myself in that desert which bounds Syria by its adjacent border of wasteland.”

**In the Desert**

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Jerome lived four years in the desert in the practice of austerity and study. Yet, even seclusion in the desert did not cure him of the many temptations of the flesh. In a letter he wrote to his friend Eustochium, he explained, “In the remotest part of a wild and stony desert, burnt up with the heat of the sun, so scorching that it frightens even the monks who live there, I seemed to myself to be in the midst of the delights and crowds of Rome . . .” He said he could not get the dancing girls of Rome out of his head, and that he could not gain victory over his own flesh. So, what was he to do? What is one to do when such thoughts dominate and engulf one’s being? He tells us the following: “When my soul was on fire with wicked thoughts, as a last resort, I became a pupil to a monk who had been a Jew, in order to learn the Hebrew alphabet.”

Jerome immersed himself in the Hebrew language while in the desert. He says, “I turned to this language of hissing and harshness. What labor it cost me, what difficulties I went through, how often I despaired and abandoned it and began again to learn . . . I thank our Lord that I now gather such sweet fruit from the bitter sowing of those studies.” This sounds like a Hebrew student of the twenty-first century, but it worked! Jerome was able to expel and banish the thoughts of the dancing girls of Rome from his head and his heart. Ah, the glories of Hebrew!

In about 378 A.D., he left the desert, returned to Antioch and was ordained to the priesthood there. He ended up back in Rome, and was a close confidante of Pope Damasus. He, however, found life in the secular world burdensome and so in 386 A.D. he left for the Holy Land.

**In Bethlehem**

With the help of a friend of his named Paula, Jerome moved to Bethlehem and there built a monastery near the church of the Nativity. Jerome himself lived in a large cave next to the church and monastery. He opened a hospice for pilgrims at the site so that, according to Paula, “should Mary and Joseph visit Bethlehem again, they would have a place to stay.”

Jerome spent the last 34 years of his life here in study. He used much of the time mastering his Hebrew skills. In fact, in one letter Jerome speaks of a Jew named Bar Ananias, who came to him at night in order to teach him more Hebrew. He came in darkness so that other Jews would not find out what he was doing; Jerome called

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The Hermit Who Saved the Hebrew Truth

Bar Ananias “another Nicodemus.” It was also important that he lived where the names of biblical places, events, and customs all combined to give him a more vivid view of the Scriptures. In 348 A.D., Cyril of Jerusalem declared that “the land was the fifth gospel.” Thus, even in these early days, scholars understood the importance of the land of Israel for helping to interpret the Scriptures.

The Work of Translation

In the year 390/391 A.D., Jerome began his greatest undertaking: he was convinced that the original OT text in Hebrew has supreme authority. He thus wanted to challenge the commonly-held assumption of his time that the LXX was of direct, divine origin. He came under conviction that a satisfactory Latin version of the OT could be made only on the basis of the Hebrew original. And, therefore, Jerome decided to produce a completely new rendering of the OT from the Hebrew text. He believed it was essential to return to what he called the veritas Hebraica, that is “the Hebrew truth.”

Jerome spent the next 15 years in the cave in Bethlehem translating most of the books of the OT directly from the Hebrew. In Letter 112, he states his purpose clearly: “I only translated the divine texts as I found them in the Hebrew.” He began his translation with the books of Kings and then proceeded through the rest. However, when he came to the book of Daniel he found that a good portion of it was written in Aramaic. So what did he do? He learned the Aramaic language, and then finished his translation of Daniel. We really should be struck by Jerome’s scholarly tenacity.

His translation work was not without controversy. One of his primary opponents in this regard was Saint Augustine. Augustine accused Jerome of becoming a Judaizer by abandoning the LXX in favor of the Hebrew text. Augustine cited the use of the LXX by the Apostles in the NT as evidence that the LXX had the Apostolic imprimatur to be the OT for the church. Unfortunately, Augustine had the mistaken belief that was common at the time that the Apostles only used the LXX when they quoted the OT. That, of course, is flatly untrue: the Apostles and NT writers were obviously quite familiar with the Hebrew text and they quoted from it often. Jerome was correct in this controversy. What the debate did underscore is what one historian calls the great travesty of church history, which is that Augustine never learned Hebrew!

Not only did Jerome translate the OT into Latin directly from the Hebrew text, but he also produced a number of commentaries that discuss linguistic and textual
issues of the Hebrew text. The most valuable ones are on the book of Genesis, the Psalms, and some of the prophets. Exegetically, the literalness of the text of the OT dominates his methodology. He also did contextual work, such as research in geography, topography, and etymology. In his preaching, Jerome was not quite as strict in his historical-grammatical approach, and at times allegory would sneak in. But, for the most part, he was a solid exegete of the Hebrew text.

Jerome’s exegetical stance was not a popular one in the fourth century, and it led to a major controversy. There was a famous theologian of the day named Rufinus of Aquileia (in Italy near Trieste next to the Mediterranean), and he was a disciple of Origen. Origen, of course, was one of the great allegorists and spiritualizers in the history of the Christian Church. Rufinus published a new translation of Origen’s work *De principiis* in order to demonstrate that Origen was an orthodox interpreter of the Bible. Jerome responded to this publication in a fury. This led to a long, bitter, and fierce disagreement between the two men. In fact, Jerome did his own translation of Origen’s *De principiis* and published it in order to demonstrate how heretical Origen really was! This was a polemical treatise at its best, and, again, Jerome was correct and on the right side of the argument.

**Jerome’s Impact**

Jerome’s translation of the OT did not catch on right away. In fact, St. Augustine told the story of the Bishop of Tripoli who authorized the use of Jerome’s translation of Jonah in his church. When the people heard it, they rioted in the streets because the translation was so unfamiliar. His translation did not achieve any real acceptance or success until after his death. Yet over time it gained much acceptance so that at the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century, over 1100 years after his death, Jerome’s Vulgate was pronounced to be the authentic and authoritative Latin text of the Roman Catholic Church. When movable type was invented in the 15th century, in fact, Jerome’s translation was the first book printed.

Jerome died at the age of 73 in 420 A.D. He was buried under the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem where he had labored for so many years. Apparently in the thirteenth century his remains were removed and transported to Rome where he was buried in the Sistine Chapel of the basilica of Maria Maggiore, that is the Virgin Mary. Beneath the high altar of the basilica is the Crypt of the Nativity or the Bethlehem Crypt. It is said that this crypt in Rome contains some of the wood from the crib used for Jesus during his birth in Bethlehem. It is in this crypt that Jerome is now buried.
It is ironic, at least to me, that Jerome spent 34 years of his life in the real Bethlehem, but he is now buried in a crypt in Rome that merely commemorates Bethlehem. The Roman Catholic Church calls his re-burial a “translation.” But my sense is that he would not have approved of that translation for as we know Jerome loved that which is original and authentic.

**Assessment**

When we assess the impact of Jerome on the history of the church there is much that can be said. Let me draw just a few conclusions. First, Jerome’s return to the Hebrew text and his call back to the *Hebraica veritas* were seminal. In an age where Greek forms dominated much of the intellectual landscape of Christianity, Jerome attempted to restore the importance of the OT in Hebrew as foundational to the church. He evinced an enthusiasm for Hebrew texts not to be matched until the Reformation.

Jerome also had a strong yearning for accuracy of translation. He believed, and I think he was right, that the LXX was a poor translation that had been poorly transmitted to the church. And, thus, his pronouncement of the superiority of the Hebrew text of the OT over the Greek was spot on.

And, finally, Jerome was an important figure in the history of Hebrew exegesis. In this regard, Stefan Rebenich gives Jerome high praise when he says, “Jerome’s exegetical importance can properly be compared with the theological importance of Augustine.”

In my own estimation, Jerome was a towering figure in church history. He was a hermit who saved the Hebrew truth!

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Martin Luther’s Doctrine of Temptation

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“Living, nay rather dying and being damned make a theologian, not understanding, reading, or speculation.”1

“I did not learn my theology all at once, but I had to search deeper for it, where my temptations took me.”2

These intriguing words are attributed to Martin Luther, and they were not offhand statements. For Luther, more than academic theology simpliciter was at stake in the matter of temptation. Temptation was an important part of the Christian’s life. In a certain sense it was the issue of the Christian life. Luther had struggled with despair, which he called Anfechtung, before his discovery of the gospel. Roland Bainton defines Anfechtung as “a trial sent by God to test man, or an assault by the Devil to destroy man. It is all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of a man.”3 It has been suggested by some that Luther’s use of the word Anfechtung instead of the more common word for temptation, Versuchung, is striking and unusual.4 It is a broader term, because, as we shall see below, not just the Devil, but God is involved in every temptation. Every Christian must learn to deal with it, both before and after coming to faith. To do so is to find salvation, and to continue to do so is to keep believing the gospel.

One writing of his own which Luther valued was his commentary on Galatians (last edition, 1535). On Galatians 1:4, “Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father,” Luther wrote,

These things, as touching the words, we know well enough, and can talk of them. But in practice, and in the conflict, when the Devil goeth about to deface

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2 Ibid., p. 102.
Christ, and to pluck the word of grace out of our hearts, we find that we do not yet know them well and as we should do. He that at such a time of trial could find Christ truly, and could magnify Him and behold Him as his most sweet Savior, and High Priest, and not as a strait judge, this man hath overcome all evils, and were already in the Kingdom of Heaven. But this to do in the conflict, is of all things the most hard. I speak this by experience.5

Sometime after 1530 Luther had written,

If I should live a while longer, I would like to write a book about Anfechtung. Without it no man can rightly understand the Holy Scriptures or know what the fear and love of God is all about. In fact, without Anfechtung one does not really know what the spiritual life is.6

Luther scholar Heiko A. Oberman once wrote, “if I were to cut out the pages in the Weimar edition of Luther’s works in which he mentions the Devil more than twice, I would be left with perhaps two and a half volumes.”7 Indeed the theme is so prevalent in Luther that the modern mind has tried to explain it in psychoanalytic terms or as a function of physical ailment.8 But the issue is a biblical and theological one. Warren Hovland noted that even during Luther’s most distressed periods, his literary output was prodigious. This does not indicate a psychologically incapacitated person.9

The greatness of the Reformer and the importance of this subject in his theology call for a study of his doctrine of temptation. I shall begin the study in relation to the sovereignty of God and the nature of the Devil. Then consideration will


be given to the nature of temptation itself, the means of resistance, with a brief final word about the fruits of the struggle for the Christian.

The Sovereignty of God

Satan and temptation are a part of God’s sovereignty, in the sense both of his control of all things, and of his right to exercise that control, according to Luther. Luther taught that God was absolutely sovereign over the wills of men. That is, they are under his control. In his Bondage of the Will, Luther addressed the difficult problem of relating the providence of God and his sovereignty to sin in the world. Luther was bold to affirm that the Devil and fallen men are under divine power:

That remnant of nature, therefore, as we call it, in the ungodly man and Satan, as being the creature and work of God, is no less subject to divine omnipotence and activity than all other creatures and works of God. . . . It is just as if a carpenter were cutting badly with a chipped and jagged axe. Hence it comes about that the ungodly man cannot but continually err and sin, because he is caught up in the movement of divine power and not allowed to be idle, but wills, desires, and acts according to the kind of person he himself is.10

The creature serves the will of God, but does so most freely. God does not commit sin, but rules over the creature who sins, whether devil or man.11 However, consistent with the words above, “not allowed to be idle, but wills, desires, and acts according to the kind of person he himself is,” the devil is not passive. Sinful creatures act on their own desires, and are responsible for them. Luther follows Augustine and the Scriptures in his thought: only fundamentally bad works can flow from a fundamentally sinful person.

The power of evil and of temptation has a great place in this present world. In fact, Luther can write in the same treatise:

For Christians know there are two kingdoms in the world, which are bitterly opposed to each other. In one of them Satan reigns, who therefore is called by

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11 “This is the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith (3.1).
Martin Luther’s Doctrine of Temptation

Christ “the ruler of this world” and by Paul “the god of this world.” He holds captive to his will all who are not snatched away from him by the Spirit of Christ, as the same Paul testifies, nor does he allow them to be snatched away by any powers other than the Spirit of God, as Christ testifies in the parable of the strong man guarding his palace in peace. In the other Kingdom, Christ reigns, and his Kingdom ceaselessly resists and makes war on the kingdom of Satan. Into this Kingdom we are transferred, not by our own power, but by the grace of God, by which we are set free from the present evil age and delivered from the dominion of darkness.12

Describing Luther’s view of God’s rule a “contested omnipotence,” Oberman observes that “Luther is the one representative of the Western tradition who dares to be as dualistic as possible within the Christian confession of the omnipotence of God.”13 The Christian finds himself in the middle of a mighty struggle. Sin, Satan, and temptation are very real, yet totally overruled by God, always.

Further, God rules over the temptation of the Christian in the sense that He has the right to test the believer. Hovland noticed that in Luther’s exegesis, God Himself is often represented as the Christian’s antagonist. “In all Anfechtung we are dealing directly with God.”14 In His dealings with rebellious Adam, Cain, Jonah, and David, God appears as Judge. To Job He appears as an Enemy.15 For Jacob, the issue of trial is whether or not he is predestined to salvation. Luther portrays God as the tempter of Eve, Abraham, Peter, and Paul. In trial and temptation, God reveals His hiddenness and his “arbitrariness.”

Most interesting in pursuing this theme is Luther’s dealing with the temptation of the Canaanite woman in the gospels. Between 1523 and 1544, Luther preached on this text thirteen times. “… Christ like a hunter exercises and chases faith in his followers in order that it may become strong and firm.”16 In the gospel accounts, three times the Lord rebukes the woman. First, by silence He acts as though

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12 LW, vol. 33, p. 287.
15 Ibid., p. 53-54.
He will not be gracious to her. Then He rejects the prayers of others on her behalf. Third, he calls her a dog, which is to challenge her as not being predestined to life. “That is an eternally unanswerable reply, to which no one can give a satisfactory reply.” Notice though, the use which Luther says should be made of this by the tempted Christian:

All this, however, is written for our comfort and instruction, that we may know how deeply God conceals his grace before our face, and that we may not estimate him according to our feelings and thinking, but strictly according to his Word. For here you see, though Christ appears to be even hardhearted, yet He gives no final decision by saying “No.” All His answers indeed sound like no, but they are not no. They remain undecided and pending. . . . Yet all those trials of her faith sounded more like no than yes; but there was more yea in them than nay; aye, there is only yes in them, but it is very deep and very concealed, while there appears to be nothing but no. . . . Therefore it must turn from this feeling and lay hold of and retain the deep spiritual yes under and above the no with a firm faith in God’s Word, . . . and say God is right in his judgment which He visits upon us.

The tempted Christian is to accuse himself as Christ did the woman, and as the woman did when she agreed with Christ’s statement about her, yet also to cling firmly to the good will of God, even though he hides it. Luther is asserting the need for a basic distrust of the Christian’s own consciousness. How different this is from later Protestant thought, such as that represented by Schleiermacher. Later orthodox Protestants seeking to help the tempted, have expounded the passage in the same direction. To put it in a word, God has the right to try the Christian, and he uses it, but always for his children’s good.

Satan is God’s tool used for the Christian’s good. Oberman writes that Luther actually named the Devil Doctor Consolatorius, “Dr. Comforter.” As Luther said,

17 Ibid., p. 152.
18 Ibid., p. 152-53.
“because we are so attacked by the Devil, we are in excellent shape before God.”

When the Devil tempts the believer, Luther says, “Remember, he is Dr. Comforter. The very reason he comes is that he smells in you something of faith and Jesus Christ. He does not go to sinners; he is not interested in them. In his very appearance he brings you the Gospel: you are of Christ.” In all Satan’s malice, the sovereign God employs the Devil. He tries his people to build faith.

**The Nature of the Devil**

We turn next to the nature of Satan. Luther’s doctrine is not unique. There are fallen angels. In his Lectures on Genesis 1, which he continued to perfect until the end of his life, Luther simply brings together the testimony of Old and New Testaments. He cites John 8:44: “Ye are of [your] father the Devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.” Luther continues:

[The New Testament too, deals in a rather limited way with this doctrine; it adds nothing beyond the fact that they have been condemned and are held in prison, as it were, until the Day of Judgment (Rev. 20.2,7). So it is sufficient for us to know that there are good and evil angels and that God created all of them alike, as good. From this it follows necessarily that the evil angels fell and did not stand in the truth. How this came about is unknown; nevertheless, it is likely that they fell as the result of pride, because they despised the Word or the Son of God and wanted to place themselves above Him. More than this I do not have.]

Luther does not speculate about Satan’s origins.

The Devil is a creature, powerful and full of craft, but he is not comparable to God. He is neither omnipotent nor omniscient. He learns by trial and error, and with

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22 *LW*, vol. 1, p. 23.
five thousand years’ practice (!) has become very competent. I could not find Luther addressing how Satan introduces thoughts into the mind. That he can do so is assumed.

What is more, he is all evil; he is the essence of all that is depraved: On 1 Peter 5.8 the Reformer writes,

Satan is by nature such a wicked and poisonous spirit that he cannot tolerate anything that is good. It pains him that even an apple, a cherry, and the like grow. It causes him pain and grief that a single healthy person should live upon the earth, and if God would not restrain him, he would hurl everything together in ruin. But to nothing is he a more bitter enemy than the dear Word; because while he can conceal himself under all creatures, the Word is the only agency that can disclose him and reveal to everyone how black he is.\(^{23}\)

He is subtle, and knows how to lead away from God by degrees. Writing about his trick with Eve, first insinuating, then lying to her outright, Luther says,

Therefore we see here what an awful thing it is when the Devil begins to tempt a man. One lapse involves another lapse, and an apparently slight wrong brings about a prodigious lapse. It was something serious to turn away from God and from His Word and to lend her ears to Satan. But what is something far more serious now happens: that Eve agrees with Satan when he charges God with lying and, as it were, strikes God in the face with his fists. . . . Let these events be a warning for us that we may learn what man is. For if this happened when nature was perfect, what do we think will happen to us now?\(^{24}\)

Next we see Satan’s method and desire in temptation. Essentially, it is to challenge and overthrow the Word of God. This was his method before and after the fall of man. Luther comments extensively on the Devil’s desires in his lectures on Genesis 3.

For Luther, in man’s unfallen state, as well as after the fall, the Word of God is the basis of his life. The Reformer is insistent that God’s Word speaks with consummate authority and that man’s first duty is to trust that revelation. Adam and

\(^{23}\) Martin Luther, *A Commentary on Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), p. 219.

\(^{24}\) *LW*, vol. 1, p. 156.
Eve were to continue in the exercise of faith in that Word: “Where the Word is, there necessarily faith also is. Here is the Word that he should not eat of this tree; otherwise he would die. Therefore, Adam and Eve ought to have believed that this tree was detrimental to their welfare. Thus faith is included in this very commandment.”

This is all man’s wisdom. It also accounts for the gravity of the first sin:

[O]ne should not listen to those who maintain that it is cruel for this nature to be so pitifully corrupted and plunged into death and the rest of the disasters simply on account of a bite of fruit. When the Epicureans hear this they laugh at it as a fairy tale. But to the careful reader it readily becomes clear that the bite of the apple is not the reason. The reason is sin, through which Eve sinned against both tables of the Law and against God Himself and His Word; moreover, she sins in this way that she casts aside the Word of God and offers her whole self to Satan as his pupil. . . . Thus we must pay attention to the Word. Moreover, this is God’s Word. And so, just as important as the Word is, so important also is the sin which is committed against the Word. To this sin our entire nature has succumbed. How could it overcome this sin, since its magnitude is inexhaustible? To overcome this sin, we need Him who brings with him inexhaustible righteousness, that is, the Son of God.

Satan’s strategy was first, to cast doubt on God’s Word. Commenting on the serpent’s question to Eve in Genesis 3:1 “Yea, hath God said. Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” Luther writes: “the serpent directs its attack at God’s good will and makes it its business to prove from the prohibition of the tree that God’s will toward man is not good. . . . Eve is simply urged on to all sins, since she is being urged on against the Word and the good will of God.”

Because God spoke to our first parents, so did the Devil. “So he himself also preaches to Eve... from the corrupt Word of God, damnation results.” The Word is God’s revelation; it is Adam’s link to God. Luther says that as the Word is man’s greatest need, so Satan’s effort is directed to bringing him to believe a lie.

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26 Ibid., p. 162.
27 Ibid., p. 146.
28 Ibid., p. 147.
Therefore Satan here attacks Adam and Eve in this way to deprive them of the Word and to make them believe his lie after they have lost the Word and their trust in God. Is it a wonder that when this happens, man later on becomes proud, that he is a scorners of God and of men, that he becomes an adulterer or a murderer? Truly, therefore, this temptation is the sum of all temptations; it brings with it the overthrow or the violation of the entire Decalogue. Unbelief is the source of all sins; when Satan brought about this unbelief by driving out or corrupting the Word, the rest was easy for him. . . . The chief temptation was to listen to another word and to depart from the one which God had previously spoken.29

Luther warns his readers not to enter into discussions with those who pervert the truth. Under devilish influence, this remains the method of heretics, he says. To cast doubt on God’s Word is still his method after the fall. Most important for the Christian is to be satisfied with God’s Word just as it came from Him:

[People who are not wary allow themselves to be drawn away from the Word into dangerous discussions. Because they are not satisfied with the Word, they ask, ‘Why and wherefore do these things happen thus?’ Just as Eve was lost when she heard the Devil casting doubt upon the command of God so when we doubt whether God wanted us who are hard pressed by death and sin to be saved though Christ, how easily we are deceived and allow a monk’s cowl to be put on us in order to receive the crown on account of our perfect works!30

To understand Luther’s doctrine on the character of the devilish scheme to tempt fallen people, we must look briefly at his anthropology. Conscience still functions in man after the fall. In fact, it was the conscience that played a central role in Luther’s understanding of biblical interpretation, and in his understanding of the gospel. Roland Bainton quotes Luther’s most famous dictum from the Diet of Worms:

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. 148.
Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me.  

In one way or another, the conscience remains the Devil’s quarry. His prime activity is to manipulate the conscience. For the unbeliever, the Devil uses his art to still the conscience altogether. In other words, he quiets the conscience in various ways:

Scripture represents man as one who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead, but in addition to his other miseries is afflicted, through the agency of Satan his prince, with this misery of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, unfettered, able, well, and alive. For Satan knows that if men were aware of their misery, he would not be able to retain a single one of them in his kingdom, because God could not but at once pity and succor them in their acknowledged and crying wretchedness, seeing he is so highly extolled throughout Scripture as being near to the contrite in heart, as Christ too declares himself according to Isaiah 61. ... Accordingly, it is Satan’s work to prevent men from recognizing their plight and to keep them presuming that they can do everything they are told. But the work of Moses or a lawgiver is ... to make man’s plight plain to him by means of the law.

This was the source of Luther’s dissatisfaction with the penitential system of medieval Rome. Gordon Rupp writes, “His case against the penitential system ... was not that it failed to solace, but that it succeeded too well. ... Luther calls this ... the greatest and final temptation. He is fond of quoting St. Bernard: ‘the greatest temptation is to have no temptation.”  

The exaltation of human ability in the production of works of the “merit of congruity” had silenced the demands of the moral law and dulled the conscience. Hence Luther’s stress on man’s natural depravity, and the use of the law to awaken a sense of need for the gospel.

31 Bainton, _Here I Stand_, p. 185.

32 _LW_, vol. 33, p. 130.

33 Rupp, _Righteousness of God_, p. 115.
It is when we come to Satan’s temptation of the Christian that we find Luther with most to say. Here again, Oberman tells us that Luther had a name for the Devil, *Magister Conscientiae*, “Lord of the Conscience.” The Luther scholar contrasts “older” Luther research with Luther here, stating that in the former, “the conscience is that one remnant in us which has survived even the Fall to function as that internal faculty which is aware of God: like a needle in a compass, it always points us back to God. Luther, however, is convinced that the Devil is the *master of the conscience*.”

This seems to me an over simplification. Indeed Luther’s most frequent references to conscience refer to its perversion, but that does not imply that conscience has no positive function in his theology. It is rather that Luther sought to heal what Gordon Rupp called “the bruised conscience.”

In the dedication of his translation of Psalm 118, Luther wrote, “This is my own beloved Psalm.” Here he found in Scripture the struggle to keep faith, in spite of the Devil. Luther can write very warmly of a well-functioning conscience, or better, a believing conscience:

What could be more precious and nobler than an enlightened heart, a heart that knows God and all things, a heart that can judge rightly and speak truly in all things before God? Where could there be a higher or greater joy than in a happy, secure, and fearless conscience, a conscience that trusts in God and fears neither the world nor the Devil? On the other hand, where is there greater melancholy and a heavier heart than in an evil, despairing, and guilty conscience? What is more wretched and miserable than an erring and uncertain heart which can judge nothing properly?

It is in the last phrase that we find Luther’s view of Satan’s dealings with the conscience: an “uncertain heart which can judge nothing properly.” In other words, Satan attacks the Christian by accusing him of sin, thus using his conscience against him. This is a conscience that has been misled. The gospel does not inform it. Luther writes:

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34 Oberman, “Luther and the Devil,” p. 9.


When he is tormented in “Anfechtung” it seems to him that he is alone: God is angry only with him: then he alone is a sinner and all the others are in the right, and they work against him at God’s orders. There is nothing left for him but this unspeakable sighing through which, without knowing it, he is supported by the Spirit, and cries, “Why does God pick on me alone?”

Then remorse comes, and terrifies the conscience. Then all’s well with the world and he alone is a sinner. God is gracious to all the world save him alone. Nobody has to meet the Wrath of God save he alone, and he feels there is no wrath anywhere than that which he feels and he finds himself the most miserable of men.37

Luther considered this the beginning of the experience of the damned in hell.38

We shall see below that Luther has many sharp words for the temptations of Satan in the guilty conscience. But this might be misread. The spirit of our time is such that one might suppose Luther is against the moral law as a rule of life for the believer. This would be an utter mistake. What we noted above about the need for conscience to be awakened shows this. Luther’s comments on the law in the Galatians Commentary indicate the same:

We have said before that the law in a Christian ought not to pass its bounds, but ought to have dominion only over the flesh, which is in subjection to it, and remaineth under it. But if it should presume to creep into the conscience, and there seek to reign, see thou play the cunning logician and make the true division. Say thou: “O law, thou wouldest climb up into the kingdom of my conscience and there reprove it of sin, and take from me the joy of my heart, which I have by faith in Christ, and drive me to desperation that I may be without hope and utterly perish. Keep within thy bounds, and exercise thy power upon the flesh,” for I am baptized and by the gospel am pall’d to the partaking of righteousness and everlasting life.39

37 Quoted in Rupp, Righteousness of God, pp. 107-8.

38 Ibid, p. 110.

Temptation

From the nature of the Devil and his basic strategy, we turn to temptation more generally considered. Satan, though the most formidable of the Christian’s enemies, is not the only one. There are also the flesh and the world.

In his sermons on the Catechism in 1528, Luther took up the petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “And lead us not into temptation.” Still for the Christian, “sins cling to us.”40 That being so, the believer must be wary of the flesh. As he refers to “Master Devil,” Luther calls it “Master Flesh,” reminding us of Paul’s personification of sin in Romans 6: “the flesh, which says, ‘go ahead and have illicit intercourse another’s wife, daughter, or maid!... or he says, I’m going to sell the grain, beer, or goods as dearly as I can.’” Next is the world which tempts with envy, hatred, pride, and anger, “feeling an inclination to spite and lechery and dislike for your neighbor.”41 The flesh and the world lead primarily to sins against the neighbor.

The third in the trio is the Devil. Here Luther treats his work more popularly, but the basic motif remains:

He tempts you by causing you to disregard God’s Word: Oh, I have to look after the beer and malt, I can’t go to hear a sermon; or if you do come to church to hear the sermon, you go to sleep, you don’t take it in, you have no delight, no love, no reverence for the Word. ... Then too, it is Satan’s temptation when you are assailed by unbelief, diffidence, by fanatics, superstition, witchcraft, and the like. When you feel such temptations, go running to the Lord’s Prayer!42

Temptation is endlessly varied to the circumstances of providence and to the weakness of the individual Christian. There are temptations which arise from physical suffering or hardship. Luther calls these “temptations from the left side”: sickness,

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41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.
poverty, dishonor, “especially when our will, plan, opinions, counsel, words, and deeds are rejected and ridiculed.” This can lead to laziness, or to anger, hatred, or impatience. The temptation “from the right side” is trial from prosperity. “It is especially strong when people let us have our way, praise our words, our counsel, ... when they esteem us.” This test leads to unchastity, lust, pride, greed, and “vainglory, all that appeals to our human nature.” On Galatians 5.19, he writes,

Satan modifies his attack according to the particular character he finds in a person. No man therefore shall be without lusts and desires so long as he liveth in the flesh, and therefore no man shall be free from temptations. Notwithstanding some are tempted one way and some another, according to the difference of the persons. One man is assailed with more vehement and grievous motions, as with bitterness and anguish of spirit, blasphemy, distrust, and desperation; another with more gross temptations, as with fleshly lusts, wrath, envy, hatred and such-like. But in this case Paul requireth us that we walk in the Spirit, and resist the flesh. But whoso obeyeth the flesh, and continued without fear or remorse in accomplishing the desires of and lusts thereof, let him know that he pertaineth not unto Christ; and although he brag of the name of a Christian never so much, yet doth he but deceive himself. For they which are of Christ, do crucify their flesh with the affections and lusts thereof.

What is more, temptation is so subtle that it can assail the Christian both as to his bad works and as to his good works, writes Luther. Satan will do all he can, by accusation of guilt, to drive the Christian from reliance on God’s grace.

He can tolerate neither the Word of God nor those who keep and teach it. He besets them in life and in death. While the faithful are alive, he uses great attacks on their faith, hope, and love toward God. He beleaguerers and storms a heart with fear, doubt, and despair until it shies away from God, hates and

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43 *LW*, vol. 42, p. 72.
44 Ibid., p. 73.
45 Ibid.
46 Luther, *Selections from His Writings*, pp. 157-58.
blasphemes Him, and the wretched conscience believes that God, the Devil, death, sin, hell, and all creatures are one and have united as its eternal and relentless enemy. Neither the Turk nor the emperor can ever storm a city with such power as the Devil uses in attacking a conscience.47

The accusation of conscience as to bad works is clear, but what about the good? One might say that the Devil has no conscience!

What is worse, the Devil takes your best works and drives and plunges them into your conscience as worthless and condemned, so that all your sins do not frighten you as much as your best works, which are really quite good, and you wish you had done nothing but great sins instead of these works. He wants you to disown them as not having been done by God, and thus to blaspheme God as well. Then death and hell are not far away. But who can list all the tricks by which the Devil invokes sin, death, and hell? This is his trade. He has been at it for more than five thousand years, and he is a past master at it. That long he has been the prince of death. He has experimented and practiced thoroughly how to give a poor conscience the foretaste of death. The prophets, especially our dear brother David, have felt and tasted his power. For they certainly complain, teach, and talk about it as if they had often been there, speaking now of the gates of death, now of hell, now of the wrath of God.48

Notice here that Luther speaks of the believer’s works this way: they are “really quite good.” This is similar to the judgment of the Westminster Confession of Faith in its chapter on good works (16.6), “the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him, not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unreprovable in God’s sight, but that He, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.” Luther saw clearly the importance of not overstating the sinfulness of redeemed man, or obscuring God’s grace, and that it is the Devil who seeks to do so. All his effort is toward warping the judgment of God’s Word and works.

48 Ibid.
Perhaps no subject is more important in the study of the nature of temptation in Luther’s theology than the centrality of God. Sin is departure from God. Temptation is directed to this alone. So, Luther is very clear in distinguishing between the sins against the “first Table of the Law,” and the ‘second Table.” Without ignoring sins against the neighbor, or the sins of the flesh, Luther is eager to show that sins directly against God are the most serious. This is not to say that sins of the flesh are trivial. Clearly they are not, for Luther. But the First Table describes duties owed to God directly. “Luther went to confession, he said, ‘not about women, but about the really knotty problems,’ ... the ‘desire of the flesh’ is more easily overcome than spiritual temptations.”

On Genesis 3:7, “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they [were] naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons,” Luther comments

I said above that the pattern of all the temptations of Satan is the same, namely, that he first puts faith to trial and draws away from the Word. Then follow the sins against the Second Table. From our own experience we perceive that this is his procedure.

In a passage from the Galatians Commentary, Luther analyses the Christian’s condition, while he advises him to respond properly to the accusations of Satan in the time of death:

[I]n fact there is nothing in me but sins, and real and serious sins at that... These are not counterfeit or trivial sins; they are sins against the First Table, namely infidelity, doubt, despair, contempt for God, hatred, ignorance, blasphemy, ingratitude, the abuse of the name of God, neglect, loathing, and contempt for the Word of God, and the like. In addition, there are sins of the flesh against the Second Table: failure to honor my parents, disobedience to rulers, coveting another man’s property, wife, etc., although these vices are less grave than those against the First Table.

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49 Rupp, Righteousness of God, p. 107.

50 LW, vol. 1, p. 163.

51 LW, vol. 26, p. 36.
The sins of the heart are the most serious, or at least the most basic. Satan knows this and thus manages his snares in this direction. When the heart has been weakened, then all manner of outward sin follows:

And this also reveals Satan’s cunning. He does not immediately try to allure Eve by means of the loveliness of the fruit. He first attacks man’s greatest strength, faith in the Word. Therefore the root and source of sin is unbelief and turning away from God, just as, on the other hand, the source and root of righteousness is faith. Satan first draws away from faith to unbelief. When he achieved this - that Eve did not believe the command which God had given – it was easy to bring this about also, that she rushed to the tree, plucked the fruit, and ate it. The outward act of disobedience follows sin, which through unbelief has fully developed in the Heart. Thus the nature of sin must be considered in accordance with its true immensity, in which we have all perished.52

Satan’s chief target is the heart, because the heart is the crucial spring of man’s acts. How sad that this great theologian did not regard James 1.14,15 more highly!

[He] is a master at puffing up sin and pointing to God’s wrath. He is a strange and powerful creature who out of one sin can foment such fear and conjure up such a hell. It is true that no human being ever sees his real sins, namely, unbelief, contempt of God’s Word, the failure to fear, love, and trust God as he should and similar sins of the heart, which are the chief transgressions. Nor would it be good for him to see them, for I do not know if there is a faith on earth that could endure it without falling and despairing. For this reason, God lets the Devil operate with our sins of commission. He easily creates hell and damnation for you because you take one drink too many or sleep too long, and soon you become sick with conscience scruples and despondency and practically die of grief.53

52 LW, vol. 1, p. 162.
We notice also the grace of God in restraining the Devil in his wicked work. God prevents a full knowledge of sins of omission, since failures are the most serious sins.

Gordon Rupp has written that *Anfechtung* is the key to Luther's doctrine of faith and justification, “for nobody who has taken seriously these passages can possibly suppose that Luther regarded faith merely as intellectual assent, or an emotion of confidence.”\(^{54}\) It is the Law of God, as used by the conscience, that drives the sinner to a sense of need. The gospel of justification by faith is God’s answer to that need. But the temptations of the Devil continue to address the same issues. It is here, perhaps, that Luther writes with most passion: temptation assaults the Christian’s faith in God’s promise of grace. This is especially true in the midst of suffering. Here Satan appears to bring up the same old issues, but with the tremendous force of painful circumstances.

In this connection Luther wrote of Abraham’s temptations arising from God’s command to sacrifice Isaac. Again, we notice that God was the tempter, and the question was the consistency of His promise with His command.

The verb “to tempt” must be particularly noted, for it is not put here needlessly. Nor should it be treated coldly as James does (1.13), when he declares that nobody is tempted by God. For here Scripture states plainly that Abraham was actually tempted by God Himself, not concerning a woman, gold, silver, death, or life but concerning a contradiction of Holy Scripture. Here God is clearly contradicting Himself; for how do these statements agree: “Through Isaac shall your descendants be named” (Gen. 21.12) and “Take your son, and sacrifice him”? . . . [H]e himself is commanded to do the slaying, evidently in order that he may have no doubt that Isaac has actually been killed.

In this situation, would he not murmur against God and think; “This is not a command of God; it is a trick of Satan. Why then does God command that he should be killed? Undoubtedly God is repenting of His promise. Otherwise He would not contradict Himself. Or have I committed some extraordinary sin, with which I have deeply offended God, so that He is withdrawing the promise?\(^{55}\)

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\(^{55}\) *LW*, vol. 4, p. 92.
Human nature is susceptible to suffering. The imperfectly sanctified mind begins to doubt the goodness of God. Satan is there to blow the spark into flame.

By nature we are all in the habit of doing this. When some physical affliction besets us, our conscience is soon at hand, and the Devil torments it by assembling all the circumstances. Therefore a troubled heart looks about and considers how it may have offended God most. This leads to murmuring against God and to the greatest trial, hatred of God. . . .

This trial cannot be overcome and is far too great to be understood by us. For there is a contradiction with which God contradicts Himself. It is impossible for the flesh to understand this; for it inevitably concludes either, that God is lying – and this is blasphemy – or that God hates me – and this leads to despair. Accordingly, this passage cannot be explained in a manner commensurate with the importance of the subject matter. . . . We are frequently tempted to thoughts of despair, for what human being is there who could be without this thought: “What if God did not want you to be saved?”

Here the temptation is its most acute. Again, Luther offers the promise of God as the consolation:

But in this situation, there is need of fervent prayer that God may give us His Spirit, in order that the promise may not be wrested from us. I am unable to resolve this contradiction. Our only consolation is that in affliction we take refuge in the promise; for it alone is our staff and rod, and if Satan strikes it of our hands, we have no place left to stand. But we must hold fast to the promise and maintain that, just as the text states about Abraham, we are tempted by God, not because He really wants this, but because He wants to find out whether we love Him above all things and are able to bear Him when He is angry as we gladly bear Him when He is beneficent and makes promises.

Luther repeats his exposition of temptation to unbelief in the midst of suffering at a number of places. When preaching from Luke 2, he supposes that Mary

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56 Ibid., p. 93.
57 Ibid.
was tempted to ask, “What have I done that God would have me lose His son?”
Likewise he writes on Psalm 118:18. “The LORD hath chastened me sore: but he hath not given me over unto death,”

It is a much greater art to be able to sing this verse when the Devil, as he did to Job and many other saints, becomes so hostile that death appears. He can give the heart a most forceful picture of death. He does not simply say, as men would: “You shall be burned or drowned.” He magnifies what a horrible, abominable, eternal thing death is, and raps out the wrath of God. With overwhelming thoughts he drives and presses into the heart until it becomes unbearable and unendurable. Here a good interpreter is needed, one who can outshout the Devil and overcome him by saying: “This is still not death, nor is it God’s wrath. It is gracious chastisement and fatherly punishment. I still know that you will not turn me over to death. I will not believe it is wrath, even though all hell were to affirm it in chorus. Were an angel from heaven to say this, let him be accursed (Gal 1:8). Were God Himself to say it. I would still believe that He was trying me as He tried Abraham, merely feigning wrath, and not in earnest. For He does not take back His promise. Here is the truth: He chastises me, but He will not kill me. I insist on this and will not let anyone take it from me or explain, interpret, or expound it differently.

Death is the final temptation. Luther writes much about the temptation Satan brings to the Christian at death. We quote a representative selection:

Therefore you must make thorough preparations not only for the time of temptation but also for the time and struggle of death. Then your conscience will be terrified by the recollection of your past sins. The Devil will attack you vigorously and will try to swamp you with piles, floods, and whole oceans of sins, in order to frighten you, drive you away from Christ, and plunge you into despair. Then you must be able to say with confident assurance: “Christ, the Son of God, was given, not for righteousness and for saints but for unrighteousness and for sinners. If I were righteous and without sin, I would

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58 Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 2:19.

59 *LW*, vol. 14, pp. 89-90.
have no need of Christ as my Propitiator. Satan, you cantankerous saint, why do you try to make me feel holy and look for righteousness in myself when in fact there is nothing in me but sins, and real and serious sins at that?  

### Resisting Temptation

What weapons is the Christian to use, according to Luther, to resist temptation?  

They are faith in the written Word, prayer, baptism, and the communion of the saints.

First of all is God’s written Word. There must be a consciousness of it and dependence on what God says in it:

> Sober you should be, and vigilant, but to the end that the body be kept in a proper frame. Yet with all this, the Devil is not routed; this only suffices to afford the body less occasion to sin. The true sword is that you be strong and firm in the faith. If you in heart lay hold on the Word of God and maintain your grasp by faith, then the Devil cannot gain the advantage, but will be compelled to flee. If you can say: This has my God said, on this I will stand, then shall you see that he will quickly depart, and ill-humor, evil lusts, wrath, avarice, melancholy, and doubt will all vanish. But the Devil is artful and does not readily permit you to understand this, and so he assaults you in order to take the word out of your hand. If he can make you lazy, so that your body is unguarded and inclined to wantonness, then will he quickly wrench the sword from your grasp. . . . If he comes and would drive you into despondency because of sin, only seize hold of the Word of God, that speaks of the forgiveness of sin, and exercise yourself in that. Then he will be compelled quickly to let you alone.”

The reason Scripture instructs the Christian to resist, “strong in your faith,” is that faith looks away from self to God and to His provision. The “alien righteousness”

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60 *LW*, vol. 26, p. 36.

61 I was disappointed not to be able to find Luther’s sermon, “The Christian’s Armor and Weapons,” preached in 1533 on Eph 6:10-20.

of the gospel is exactly what the Christian needs to contemplate and grasp in the midst of Satan’s temptation. Luther expounds this in his lectures on Psalm 118:17 (“I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD”):

Well, no matter when or how it happens, we learn here that the saints must wrestle with the devil and fight with death, whether by persecution or pestilence, or other sickness and mortal danger. In that conflict nothing is better and more vital for victory than learning to sing this little song of the saints, that is, to look away from self and to cling to the hand of God. Thus the devil is defrauded and made to miss the boat. It works like this: I am nothing. The Lord is all my strength, as stated above. I am stripped of everything, of myself and all that is mine. I can say: ‘Devil what are you fighting? If you try to denounce my good works and my holiness before God, why, I have none. My strength is not my own; the Lord is my Strength. You can’t squeeze blood out of a turnip! If you try to prosecute my sins, I have none of those either. Here is God’s strength - prosecute it until you have had enough. I know absolutely nothing about sins or holiness in me. I know nothing whatever except God’s power in me. . . .

What can the devil do when he finds a soul so naked that it can respond neither to sin nor to holiness? He must give up all his skill, both to puff up sin and to decry good works. He is referred to the right hand of God, and he must by all means let it alone. But if you forget this prescription and he seizes you in your sins and good works, and you begin to argue with him, to observe and hear him, then he will shape you to suit himself; and you will forget and forfeit God, His right hand, and everything.

As we have heard, it is an art to forget self. We must keep learning this lesson as long as we live.63

When he deals with the wrestling of Jacob, Luther writes that again the solution is to hold to the promise of the Word. In this case Jacob must, of course, prevail over God. Luther says he prayed thus to God: “Now Lord, you have promised

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us grace and mercy and that you will help us and make us holy. Help us now. Lord, it is high time!” This was to find “the soft spot where God may be grasped.”

The Word becomes the substance of prayer. Roland Bainton notes how Luther expounded the book of Jonah as a tempted and sinning saint’s restoration. Even the simplest prayer is strength against temptation, though it proves the hardest thing in the world to do. “I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord” (Jonah 2:2).

Luther comments:

This shows that we must always pray to God. If you can just cry your agony is over. Hell is not hell any more if you can cry to God. But no one can believe how hard this is. We can understand wailing, trembling, sighing, doubting, but to cry out, this is what we cannot do. Conscience, sin, and the wrath of God are about our necks. Nature cannot cry out. When Jonah reached the point that he could cry, he had won. Cry unto the Lord in your anguish, and it will be milder... He does not ask you about your merit. Reason does not understand this, and always wants to bring in something to placate God. But there is just nothing to bring... all that is needed to placate God’s anger is a cry.

The next means of meeting temptation was the appeal to baptism. Luther often appealed to his own baptism as a sign of God’s grace to him. Because of his appeal to baptism, some have thought Luther believed in baptismal regeneration. I have not been able to look into this extensively. Nevertheless, William Cunningham argues, that the Reformers generally discussed baptism as they did the professions of believers: that baptism should be taken to indicate what it signifies in the case of the believer to whom it properly belongs. There is nothing I have been able to find in Luther which indicates that he took baptism to be more than a sign of God’s gospel promise. Of course, that is something important in temptation! Luther says:

[F]aith must have something which it believes, that is, of which it takes hold, and upon which it stands and rests. Thus faith clings to the water, and believes

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64 Hovland, “Anfechtung,” p. 56.

65 Bainton, Here I Stand, p. 357.

that it is Baptism, in which there is pure salvation and life; not through the water (as we have sufficiently stated), but through the fact that it is embodied in the Word and institution of God, and the name of God inheres in it. Now, if I believe this, what else is it than believing in God as in Him who has given and planted His Word into this ordinance, and proposes to us this external thing wherein we may apprehend such a treasure?67

Further, Luther had much practical counsel as to how temptation was to be faced. One must recognize his place in life. “Boys are tempted by beautiful girls. But when they are thirty years old they are tempted by gold, and when they are forty years old, they are tempted by the quest for honor and glory.”68 He warned the despairing Jerome Weller that the Devil will actually conquer the saint using his fear of sin. “This Devil is conquered by mocking and despising him, not by resisting and arguing with him.”69

Normal life was a great help as well. The despondent must get out of himself and make use of God’s good gifts: in the fellowship and friendship of the saints and the family. He needs to realize that he is not alone, but that all God’s saints are tempted also “He must not imagine that he is the only one assailed about his salvation.”70 To the overscrupulous, he counsels, “We shall be overcome if we worry too much about falling into sin.”71 He gives solace to the tempted in that they know that Christ has been tempted.

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69 Ibid.


71 Luther, Letters of Spiritual Counsel, p. 86.
Temptation and Its Benefits

What are the benefits of these trials for the Christian? His faith is made active.
God, *Anfechtung*, and Satan together drive the Christian to learn to pray."72 He learns to know himself and God.

But why does God let man be thus assailed by sin? ... So that man can learn to know himself and God; to know himself is to learn that all he is capable of is sinning and doing evil; to know God is to learn that God’s grace is stronger than all creatures.73

Most important, the character of the believer is made like Christ’s.

As long as sin only attacks but does not gain dominion over the saints, it is compelled to serve them (Rom. 8.28 ... 1 Cor. 10.13). Thus luxurious living makes the soul more chaste when it attacks, pride makes the soul humbler, laziness makes it more active, avarice makes it more generous, anger more mild, gluttony more abstemious. For in all these instances, the hatred of the spiritual man increases more and more against the thing which is attacking him. Thus temptation is a most useful thing. Thus also it has dominion over the mortal body when a man yields to it. But temptation becomes a servant when we resist it.74

We have found Luther to be a rich source of biblical, theological, and experiential understanding of the nature of temptation. Luther found the theology of medieval Christendom of no value in facing his trials before God.75 His rediscovery of the gospel of free grace and the means necessary to hold to it, remain a legacy to the Church. Two generations later, the Westminster Assembly took up many of Luther’s

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73 Luther, Large Catechism, p. 74 (on the Lord’s Prayer).

74 *LW*, vol. 25. p. 319.

75 John von Rohr, “Medieval Consolation and the Young Luther’s Despair,” in *Reformation Studies*, pp. 61-62.
themes in its Confession and Catechisms. It has been observed, rightly, I think, that the Lutheran view of sanctification is more adjusting one’s consciousness to his justification, rather than growing in union with Christ. This appears to be borne out in Luther’s view of temptation. Further study ought to be given to this question in Luther. However that may be, well might B. B. Warfield characterize Luther’s summary of the Pauline gospel as, “Grace! grace! grace! – in spite of the Devil.”

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76 WCF 20:1, “Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience,” is a breviary of Luther’s *Freedom of a Christian Man*.


The recent translation of Geerhardus Vos’s (1862-1949) *Reformed Dogmatics* has created great excitement among devotees to Vos’s biblical theology.¹ People have lauded Vos as the father of Reformed biblical theology and thus they have high expectations for Vos’s lectures on systematic theology.² What new insights might we glean from one of the Reformed tradition’s greatest minds? Some believe that Vos is one of the finest Reformed theologians since John Calvin (1509-64) and that he presents unparalleled insights in his lectures on systematic theology. While this characterization of Vos’s lectures might be true, such lofty claims indubitably invite scrutiny. This essay argues that Vos is certainly an astute theologian, but his lectures on systematic theology do not support the claim that he is one of the finest theologians since Calvin or that he presents unparalleled insights. Rather, the more likely scenario is that when Vos took up his professorship at the Theological School (now Calvin Theological Seminary) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he operated like many new professors who find themselves pressed by the demands of writing lectures on a topic that is outside their main field of study; in this case Vos’s field was biblical studies.³ Vos drew upon existing textbooks and resources to write his own lectures. In this particular case Vos likely used Heinrich Heppe’s (1820-79) *Reformed Dogmatics* to inform his lectures. Drawing on Heppe is within the bounds of academic propriety, but it raises doubt regarding Vos’s supposed “unparalleled insights” and labeling him as one of the finest Reformed theologians since Calvin.

In order to demonstrate this thesis, this essay first examines the claims of Vos’s supposed unparalleled theological genius particularly as it pertains to his doctrine of

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creation. The second section explores what Vos stated regarding the doctrine of creation vis-à-vis God’s immutability. The third section investigates the Reformed Orthodox and ultimately Thomistic and Aristotelian roots of Vos’s doctrine of creation to prove that his insights were unoriginal and drawn from the Reformed and catholic tradition. The fourth section determines the implications of Vos’s Thomistic doctrine of creation concerning his supposed status as an unparalleled theologian. The essay then concludes with some summary observations.

The Claim

In a recent brief article Westminster Theological Seminary professor of systematic theology, Lane Tipton, tries to prove several claims about Vos’s *Reformed Dogmatics*. First, he claims that the recent translation of Vos’s work “has brought to light yet another theological treasure from perhaps the finest Reformed theologian since Calvin.”4 Second, Vos engages in creedal doctrinal retrieval while at the same time “reforming that creedal doctrine in the formulation of a confessionally constructive, Reformed theology, tethered to its preceding creedal and confessional expressions, yet advancing organically beyond both, through biblical and systematic theological methods of interpreting the inerrant Scriptures.” In Tipton’s estimation, Vos remains within confessional boundaries while at the same time advancing “that confessional theology with unparalleled insight.”5 In order to prove these two claims, Tipton points to two aspects of Vos’s theology, “the proper relation between the absolute and unchanging triune Creator and an eschatologically oriented creation, focused specifically on man as the image of God.”6 This essay focuses on the first of these areas: the relationship between the immutable God and his act of creation.

Tipton begins his explanation of Vos’s doctrine of creation by drawing attention to the Dutchman’s claim that creation is a *transitive act*, which is set qualitatively and ontologically over and against the triune God who is absolute and for whom time does not exist. Because of this ontological difference, God’s act of creation does not constitute a change in God. Rather, his act of creation expresses the willing agency of the absolute and immutable God. Tipton then presents an extract

from Vos and acknowledges that Vos quotes Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676): “Creation, actively considered, is not a real change because by it God is not changed by the act; it only requires a new relationship of Creator to what is created. And this new relation, which is not real in God, can therefore not effect a real change in Him.”⁷ God remains absolute both behind and in the new relation (ad intra et ad extra), but this is a logical rather than a real distinction. There is no change in God as he creates, which Vos emphasizes when he states that there is “no real change” in God. This understanding of creation is one of Tipton’s pieces of evidence to support his claims about the supposed unparalleled insights of Vos’s lectures on systematic theology.

**What Vos Wrote**

Tipton’s exegesis of Vos’s doctrine of creation is theologically accurate insofar as he grasps the significance of Vos’s point: God remains immutable even in his act of creation, which Vos defines as a “new relation.” Nonetheless, there is a piece of evidence that Tipton passes over, Vos’s quotation of Voetius. This quotation alone might not automatically disqualify Vos from presenting unparalleled theological insights, but it certainly raises the question, How unparalleled can Vos’s claim be if he quotes an early modern Reformed theologian to make it? Does not the quotation itself prove that there is at least one parallel? In his defense, Tipton’s article is brief, a mere three pages written for a popular audience. Thus, one should not expect in-depth historical-theological analysis of Vos’s doctrine. At the same time, Vos’s Voetius quotation invites further investigation to see what else Vos has to say on the subject.

Vos addresses the question of God’s relationship to the creation under the question, “Does not the creation of the universe detract from the immutability of God?” Vos’s short answer is, no. He argues that Scripture only appears to speak of successive moments of time in God but that such language is a human accommodation; Vos does not use the specific term, but it is an anthropopathism.⁸ Vos appeals to Psalm 90 to support his claim because the passage teaches the absolute eternity of God, “Before the mountains were born and You had brought forth the earth and the world, yes, from everlasting to everlasting You are God” (v. 2). Vos argues that the word “before” appears to introduce time into eternity, but this merely

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⁸ Vos, Reformed Dogmatics, I:177.
reveals the limitations of human language. Vos buttresses his argument by appealing to the distinction between active and passive creation (creatio activa et passiva). Active creation has the act of creating in God and passive creation refers to the universe as created. From this context Vos appeals to Voetius: “Of the former [active creation] Voetius says, ‘Creation actively considered, is not a real change because by it God is not changed by that act; it only requires a new relationship of the Creator to what is created. And this new relation, which is not real in God, can therefore not effect a real change in Him.’” Vos presents a second quotation by Johannes Wollebius (1589-1629): “The creation is not a change in the Creator, but a change in the creature, a change from potential being to actual being.” Vos does not provide citations for his quotations, so one cannot immediately identify the precise sources. Did Vos interact directly with primary sources or did he use secondary sources?

The Thomistic and Aristotelian Roots of Vos’s Doctrine

Identifying Vos’s sources will assist with two aspects of proving this essay’s thesis: (1) it can reveal how original or unoriginal Vos’s theology is at this point, and (2) it proves whether Vos presents distinctly unique Reformed insights or that he promoted common catholic theology. Once we can identify Vos’s source we can then explore the theological roots of what Voetius and Wollebius argue.

Vos’s Sources

First, there is the distinct possibility that Vos directly engaged primary sources for Voetius and Wollebius. Vos’s essay on the Reformed doctrine of the covenant appears to indicate that Vos was well-read in early modern primary sources. On the other hand, the absence of specific citations may point in another direction. There is evidence, for example, that Vos employed Heinrich Heppe’s Reformed Dogmatics for

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9 Vos, Reformed Dogmatics, I:178.

10 A more refined way to define these terms is active creation is the divine act of creating the world ex nihilo whereas the passive creation is the coming to be of the created order (see Richard A. Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology, 2nd ed. [1986; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017], s. v. creation [p. 83]).

11 Vos, Reformed Dogmatics, I:178.

12 Vos, Reformed Dogmatics, I:178.
both historical and theological purposes. When one examines Heppe’s chapter on the doctrine of creation, there are several signs that point to the fact that Vos used this book as a source for his lectures.

There are four parallels between Vos and Heppe in their explanation of God’s immutability to his act of creation. (a) In the immediate context Heppe introduces the distinction of creatio activa et passiva: “Hence creatio activa is nothing but the effectiveness of the divine will in relation to its definite purpose; where as creatio passiva is the coming of the world into existence.” This set of definitions parallels Vos’s definitions of the same terms. (b) Within this same context Heppe makes the same point as Vos regarding the anthropopathic language of time as a human accommodation, though Heppe appeals to Psalm 115:3 whereas Vos cites Psalm 90. (c) Heppe has the same quotation from Wollebius that Vos uses: “Creation is a transition not of the Creator but of the creature from potency to actuality.” And (d), Heppe also quotes Voetius, though it is not the same quotation that Vos uses: “There are no outward impelling causes (if one may indeed use this expression of God). The divine goodness is inward; the good diffuses and communicates itself.” These parallels point in the direction that one of Vos’s sources was probably Heppe’s Reformed Dogmatics.


15 Heppe, Dogmatik, 141; cf. idem, Reformed Dogmatics, 193.

16 Heppe, Dogmatik, 138; cf. idem, Reformed Dogmatics, 194.

17 Heppe, Dogmatik, 142; cf. Reformed Dogmatics, 195.

18 There are other potential but less likely scenarios. It does not appear that Vos relied on his theological text book at the Theological School, Aegidius Francken’s Kern der Christelyke Leere, as Francken does not appeal to any sources in his treatment of the doctrine of creation (Aegidius Francken, Kern der Christelyke Leere [Rotterdam: J. Spandaw, 1768], 109-16). It is also unlikely that Vos relied on the work of Foppe Martin Ten Hoor (1855-1934), who taught systematic theology at the Theological School after Vos from 1900-24 and who published his own systematic theology (Foppe Martin Ten Hoor, Compendium der Gereformeerde Dogmawe [Holland: A. Ten Hoor, 1922; J. Mark Beach, “Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership,” Mid-America Journal of Theology 20 [2009] 49-73, esp. 49n. 2). I was unable to consult Ten Hoor’s work to confirm the absence of connections to Vos.
Geerhardus Vos’s Thomistic Doctrine of Creation

Given the difference between the Voetius quotations, signs indicate that Vos appealed directly to Voetius as a primary source. Vos did not use Abraham Kuyper’s (1837-1920) edited volume of select disputations by Voetius, as this book does not contain a disputation on creation. Instead, Vos may have read Voetius’s disputations on creation, but the lone quotation provides scant information as to how extensively Vos may have read through the numerous disputations that fill more than three hundred pages. The specific quote that Vos presents, however, appears several pages after the quote that Heppe employs. In other words, one possible scenario is that Vos read Heppe, which pointed Vos to Voetius’s disputations. But there are further considerations regarding the Voetius quotation. Within this context Voetius appeals to several sources, two of whom include Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) and Jesuit Francisco Suarez (1548-1617). The point that Voetius makes regarding the “new relation” all the while maintaining God’s immutability comes from Aquinas, hence we will focus upon his explanations of the doctrine of creation.

Voetius, Aquinas, and Aristotle

Voetius specifically cites Aquinas’s discussion of creation to support his claims that creation does not involve a change in God. Within context, Thomas argues from Scripture that God created all things (Gen. 1:1). But then he responds to the specific objection that to create something requires a change in the creator, Aquinas argues:

19 Gisbertus Voetius, Selectarum Disputationum, ed. Abraham Kuyper (Amsterdam: Johannes Adam Wormser, 1888), vi.

20 Gisbertus Voetius, Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum, vol. 1 (Utrecht: Johannes à Wansberge, 1668), 552-881.

21 Heppe, Dogmatik, 142; idem, Reformed Dogmatics, 195; cf. Gisbertius Voetius, Selectarum Disputationum, 558; versus Vos, Reformed Dogmatics, I:178; cf. Voetius, Selectarum Disputationum, 565: “Quod active sumpta non sit ver inutatio, quia per Deus non mutator, sed tantum acquirit novam relationem createm ad rem creatam; quae relation iam in Deo no sit realis, non efficit realem mutationem.”


23 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (rep; Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948), Ia q. 45 arts. 2-3.

24 Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Ia q. 45 art. 2 sed contra.
Creation is not change, except according to a mode of understanding. For change means that the same something should be different now from what it was previously. Sometimes, indeed, the same actual thing is different now from what it was before, as in motion according to quantity, quality and place; but sometimes it is the same being only in potentiality, as in substantial change, the subject of which is matter. But in creation, by which the whole substance of a thing is produced, the same thing can be taken as different now and before only according to our way of understanding, so that a thing is understood as first not existing at all, and afterwards as existing. But as action and passion coincide as to the substance of motion, and differ only according to diverse relations (Phys. iii, text 20, 21), it must follow that when motion is withdrawn, only diverse relations remain in the Creator and in the creature. But because the mode of signification follows the mode of understanding as was said above (q. 13 art. 1), creation is signified by mode of change; and on this account it is said that to create is to make something from nothing. And yet ‘to make’ and ‘to be made’ are more suitable expressions here than ‘to change’ and ‘to be changed,’ because ‘to make’ and ‘to be made’ import a relation of cause to the effect, and of effect to the cause, and imply change only as a consequence.25

When God creates, this act does not represent a change in him. Because, strictly speaking, God does not change but rather creates *ex nihilo*. Thus, it is incorrect to speak of *change* but instead preferable to say that God *makes*. Aquinas notably draws this distinction from Aristotle’s *Physics*.

In the subsequent article Aquinas deals with the specific question of whether creation requires a change in God and he invokes the distinction between *creatio activa et passiva*, which is virtually the same point that Vos makes through his quotation of Voetius:

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25 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia q. 45 art. 2 ad 2.
Voetius appeals to Aquinas because he persuasively defended the immutability of God but at the same time maintained *creatio ex nihilo*. He believed that Aquinas faithfully exposited the biblical doctrine of creation.

Vos’s second quotation of Wollebius may come from Heppe, as both theologians use the same statement: “The creation is not a change in the Creator, but a change in the creature, a change from potential being to actual being.” Although, Vos may have directly read Wollebius. In order to understand this statement, we must go back to Wollebius’s original because both Vos and the translator (Gaffin) of Vos’s *Dogmatics* have obscured technical language:

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26 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia q. 45 art. 3 ad 2.


Creatio, non creatoris, sed creatura est à potentia ad actum transitio.  

De schepping is niet een overgang in den schepper, maar een overgang in het scheepsel, een overgang van potentieel zijn tot werkelijk-zijn.

The creation is not a change in the Creator, but a change in the creature, a change from potential being to actual being.

For creatures, but not for the creator, creation is the transition from potency to act.

What Vos and Gaffin shade in their translations of Wollebius’s statement are the technical terms: potentia and actus, or potency and act. Both would have done better to leave the technical Latin terms untranslated to alert the reader to their use. Why is this significant?

Like Voetius, Wollebius’s statement reveals the use of modified Aristotelian metaphysical categories of potency and act. According to the Aristotelian ontological categories that lie at the root of Reformed scholastic language about being, actus, or actuality, refers to that which exists or is actualized. Conversely, potentia, denotes what might exist or has the potential to exist. As Aristotle states in his *Metaphysics*: “Actuality, then is the existence of a thing not in the way which we express by

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29 Johannes Wollebius, *Christianae Theologiae Compendium* (Basil: Johannes Jacob Genath, 1633), I.v.3 (p. 43). Heppe's quotation of Wollebius is the same (Heppe, *Dogmatik*, 138).


34 Muller, *Dictionary*, s. v. *actus* (p. 7).
‘potentiality’; we say that potentially, for instance, a statue of Hermes is in the block of wood and the half-line is in the whole, because it might be separated out.” Wollebius employs this metaphysical distinction to delineate the differences between the creature and creator. God is pure actuality in whom there is no potency, therefore he cannot transition from potentiality to actuality. This is the same distinction Aquinas employs in his own doctrine of creation evident in the above-cited quotation when he refers to action and passion, or act and potency. Action (such as when fire heats water) versus passion (the water being heated) are the same event but from different perspectives: action (heating) and passion (being heated). In one particular case, Aquinas discusses Aristotle’s example regarding teaching and learning. Teaching and learning are the same motion—the action of teaching and the passion of learning are identical “in subject,” but they differ conceptually or in definition. Or in other words, teaching and learning have the same referent—the same change that occurs in the learner. But they are distinct insofar as the teacher’s action causes the change and the passion expresses the idea that the change occurs in the learner. Aquinas and Wollebius both use this Aristotelian distinction to guard the fact that change results in the creation but not in God.

This entire argument rests on the distinction between a real and conceptual (relationis rationis) relation, which lies at the heart of Vos’s Voetius quote: “This new relation, which is not real in God, can therefore not effect a real change in Him.” What is the difference between a real and conceptual relation? And why are these distinctions necessary? Simply stated, everything that exists stands in relation to something else. Aquinas explains that there are three ways in which a relation is real

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or logical: (1) when we say that a thing is the same as itself, where reason apprehends the same thing as two distinct things; (2) relations can be real, such as when one compares two things that share a common quality, such as number—there are five oranges and five apples; and (3) relations can be mixed, when one is real and the other is conceptual, such as when two things are of different orders, such as God (who is infinite) and creatures (who belong to the order of finite being).40 Mixed relations arise when one thing is ordered to another, but the two are not mutually related to each other. For example, when two ships sail side by side but then ship A changes course so that ship B is now aft rather than starboard, then there is a real change in ship A but only a conceptual change in ship B. Ship B has not moved and thus there is no real change to ship B.41

Aquinas employs these Aristotelian metaphysical distinctions, real versus conceptual change, to preserve several key scriptural teachings: the immutability of the divine essence and the contingent nature of the creation. First, God and creatures do not belong to the same order, as God has aseity whereas the creation is contingent and creatures only exist by participation. Thus, creatures have a real relation to God but God only has a conceptual relation to the creation.42 Vos quotes Voetius who cites Aquinas on this very point: “This new relation, which is not real in God.”43 Although creator only becomes predicable of God when he creates, the fact that we call him creator does not imply a change in God. Rather, it signifies the immutable divine essence insofar as creatures relate to it, as when ship A changed course in relation to ship B; ship B did not move, only ship A changed course.44 This is the “new relation” that Vos highlights in the Voetius quote.

Second, the real versus conceptual relation operates in tandem with the ideas of active and passive creation, a connection that Vos explicitly drew with his use of this set of terms. The distinction stands against a backdrop of creation from motion.


41 Matawa, Divine Causality, 271.

42 Matawa, Divine Causality, 272.

43 Vos, Reformed Dogmatics, I:178.

44 Matawa, Divine Causality, 272.
Strictly speaking, creation is not motion, but the easiest way to think about creation is in terms of motion. Creation is unique, or *sui generis*. Hence, as we can conceptualize motion in terms of action and passion, or act and potency, the same is true *mutatis mutandis* for creation. Therefore, the distinction between active and passive creation is a way to comprehend creation as motion but with the necessary qualifications. In this case, since God creates *ex nihilo* active creation can only be predicated of God; conversely, Aquinas applies passive creation to the created order. Vos saw this connection and followed his quotation of Voetius with a quote from Wollebius, who pointed out the difference between act and potency. God is pure actuality and hence no change disrupts his immutability; the change occurs in the creation.

Now some may object because it appears as if Thomas’s whole conception of relations rests on Aristotelian philosophical and metaphysical assumptions. Yet, Thomas bases some of his argument on Augustine (354-430), who did not have access to the works of Aristotle. Augustine was perhaps one of the first theologians to address the question of the relationship between an immutable God and creation. He writes in book V of *De Trinitate*:

> Wherefore nothing in Him is said in respect to accident, since nothing is accidental to Him, and yet all that is said is not said according to substance. For in created and changeable things, that which is not said according to substance, must, by necessary alternative, be said according to accident. For all things are accidents to them, which can be either lost or diminished, whether magnitudes or qualities; and so also is that which is said in relation to something, as friendships, relationships, services, likenesses, equalities, and anything else of the kind; so also positions and conditions, places and times, acts and passions. But in God nothing is said to be according to accident, because in Him nothing is changeable; and yet everything that is said, is not said, according to substance.

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45 Commentators are in agreement regarding the Aristotelian character of Thomas’s theory of relations, though he does cite other sources (Svoboda, “Aquinas on Real Relation,” 149-52; Brower, “Medieval Theories,” §§ 1-2).

46 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia q. 13 art. 7 sed contra; Brower, “Medieval Theories,” §5.

In other words, Augustine recognizes that there are no accidents in God; humans have mutable and thus accidental qualities. Hence, when we speak of God we recognize his immutable essence but the mutability of creatures. God does not change, creatures do.

He argues that when we speak of God in time, we do so only relatively, not accidentally. That is, we do not say that God acquires new accidental qualities or attributes but rather, like Thomas, Voetius, and Vos after him, that he has entered a new relation. Augustine illustrates this point with money:

Money, when it is called a price, is spoken of relatively, and yet it was not changed when it began to be a price; nor, again, when it its called a pledge, or any other thing of the kind. If, therefore, money can so often be spoken of relatively with no change of itself, so that neither when it begins, nor when it ceases to be so spoken of, does any change take place in that nature or form of it, whereby it is money; how much more easily ought we to admit, concerning that unchangeable substance of God, that something may be so predicated relatively in respect to the creature, that although it begin to be so predicated in time, yet nothing shall be understand to have happened to the substance itself of God, but only to that creature in respect to which it is predicated?

In other words, when someone mints a coin it has a value, but the market can fluctuate and the value of the coin rises or falls. The coin’s value may oscillate but the substance of the coin itself does not change. Rather, the coin’s relation to the market value changes; the change occurs in the market, not the coin. If we can predicate this about coins, why not God? This means that Augustine and Thomas tap into common sense observations and employ them as heuristic devices to clarify theological argumentation; Thomas (or Vos for that matter) has not imbibed from pagan philosophy and thus corrupted the integrity of their theology at this point.

Some might object to Aquinas’s arguments, and thus reject Voetius and Vos for that matter, given their heuristic use of Aristotelian metaphysics. How can the creature’s relation to God be real but God’s relation to the creation is only conceptual? Does this not make God the dreaded Aristotelian unmoved mover, the god of the Greeks but not the God of the Bible? Reformed Orthodox theologians

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found these distinctions useful, as Vos did, because when we say that God does not have a real relation to creatures, we highlight his immutability and aseity. This is a technical way of stating God is God and we are finite creatures. Moreover, such distinctions do not prevent us from saying that God truly loves creatures. Rather, embedded in these distinctions (real vs. conceptual, act and potency, active and passive creation) is that our language about God is analogical and not univocal. We can summarize our language about God in a three-step process: affirmation, negation, and eminence. We first affirm something about God: he loves us. Second, we clarify our statement by clearing away misunderstandings: God loves us but this does not mean he is dependent on creatures. Third, God undoubtedly loves to the highest degree because God is love. In our explanations of God, we must account for the distinction between the creator and the creature, otherwise we run the risk of collapsing one into the other. Hence, the conceptual relation (as opposed to the real relation) preserves God’s transcendence and immutability. For all of these reasons, Vos saw the biblical fidelity and utility of such distinctions and thus employed them in his lectures on systematic theology.

**The Implications of Vos’s Thomistic Doctrine of Creation**

As well as Vos provides smooth and concise theological exposition in his lectures, his likely reliance on Heppe and engagement with Voetius and Wollebius reveals that his insights regarding the immutability of God and his act of creation were not his own. In this respect, active and passive creation were common to both medieval and early modern Reformed Orthodox theology. Johannes Maccovius (1588-1644), delegate to the Synod of Dort (1618-19) discusses the terms and makes the connection to the Aristotelian metaphysical distinction: “According to the well-known rule, however, words ending on -io and derived from *active* signify both action and passion. When the word ‘creation’ is taken in an active and not in a passive sense, we concede that creation is God himself.”

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49 Svoboda, “Aquinas on Real Relation,” 158n. 54.


employs the distinction in a similar fashion. Voetius, Wollebius, Maccovius, and Van Mastricht were not, as Tipton claims about Vos, “reforming that creedal doctrine in the formulation of a confessionally constructive, Reformed theology, tethered to its preceding creedal and confessional expressions, yet advancing organically beyond both, through biblical and systematic theological methods of interpreting the inerrant Scriptures.” Rather, the fact that they comfortably employed Aristotelian and Thomistic concepts was because they did not believe that this area of doctrine required reforming. Vos stood in this same tradition evident by his own use of the same distinctions and ideas.

Some might object to the genealogy of Vos’s doctrine of creation given its Thomistic and Aristotelian elements and claim that he later disinfected his theology of such things when he turned his attention to the purer discipline of biblical theology. The historian always has to be open to the possibility that a theologian’s views develop and evolve. At the same time, as common as the claim is that biblical theology is more biblical because it is not encumbered by theological terminology and interloping philosophical concepts like act and potency, any time a human being interprets the biblical text he always brings philosophical baggage, sometimes consciously or unconsciously. Biblical theologians may claim to exegete purely and biblically, but they import their metaphysical commitments to the process whether they acknowledge them or not. In Vos’s case, one has to provide documentation to demonstrate that he eventually discarded his use of Thomist distinctions in his doctrine of creation. It does not appear that Vos employs such concepts or terminology in his Biblical Theology, which constituted the core of the work of his later teaching career. But are such metaphysical distinctions necessary in the task of exegetical theology?

Vos explains the differences between biblical and systematic theology: “The only difference is, that in the one case this constructive principle is systematic and logical, whereas in the other case it is purely historical.” That is, biblical theology is

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52 Petrus Van Mastricht, Theoretico-Practica Theologia (Utrecht: Thomas Appels, 1698), III.v.5 (p. 313).


Geerhardus Vos’s Thomistic Doctrine of Creation

historical—it traces the organic development of revelation through redemptive history, from Genesis to Revelation. Systematic theology seeks to explain how the varied and sundry parts logically cohere. In the former, one traces the old creation to the new, whereas in the latter he must explain how creating the old does not introduce mutability into an immutable God. In Vos’s well-known characterization, “Systematic theology endeavors to construct a circle, Biblical Theology seeks to reproduce a line.”

Rather than trying to escape or scuttle the catholic elements in Vos’s theology by claiming that he evolved and shed his vestigial metaphysical limbs as he stood on two feet and walked upright to do biblical theology, there is a more interesting Vosian narrative. Namely, Vos the systematic theologian devoted to historic Reformed Orthodox theology is one and the same as Vos the biblical theologian. There are not two Vosses but rather one Vos in whom both historic Reformed systematic theology with all of its catholic elements happily coexist with all of his biblical theological commitments.

Conclusion

In the end, despite claims of “unparalleled insights,” Vos’s doctrine of creation rests on a quotation of Voetius who is himself quoting Aquinas who employs Aristotelian metaphysics of act and potency to explain how an immutable God can create without becoming mutable. Vos’s “insight” does not qualify as unparalleled given its antecedent parallels in Voetius and Aquinas as well as its use by other Reformed Orthodox theologians. At a minimum, Vos conceptually agreed with this Thomistic form of argumentation and employed it with little concern or knowledge of its origins; its mundane presence in the tradition and theological utility in explaining the doctrine of creation in a biblically faithful manner was sufficient reason to employ the concepts. But if Vos actually read Voetius’s disputations on creation, which his unique citation of Voetius suggests, then he was fully aware of the Thomistic roots, realistic epistemology, and heuristic use of modified Aristotelian metaphysics in the argument. Regardless of Vos’s precise relationship to the Thomistic elements in Voetius’s quote, this much remains true: talk of unparalleled Vosian insights and reforming creedal doctrine within confessional boundaries should be set aside. Vos was doing nothing of the sort. Rather, he was promoting and

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teaching historic Reformed Orthodox and confessional theology, which tapped into the catholic tradition. In truth, Vos was a young professor teaching outside of his discipline and was thus writing lectures partially cribbed from sources like Heppe’s *Reformed Dogmatics* as well as his own primary source research. This does not warrant the claim that Vos is the finest theologian since Calvin. Such a claim might be true, but students of Vos’s theology must first carefully comb through his lectures and examine his sources. Every time he mentions a name or invokes classic theological terminology, such as *creatio activa et passiva*, students must delve into early modern Reformed sources, medieval texts, and patristic sources to determine to what degree Vos recapitulates historic Reformed and catholic theology. Only then can one truly measure Vos’s originality and determine how unparalleled his insights might be. Great theologians need not be unparalleled or innovative to be admired. Rather, the more seemingly mundane scriptural and confessional fidelity is the truly admirable trait of Vos’s theology. When there are an infinite number of ways Vos could have abandoned the tradition on God’s immutability, he withstood the temptation to innovate.
Columbia Old and New: A Review Essay

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For many conservative Presbyterians, the professors and supporters of Columbia Theological Seminary represent a collection of theological giants. In the nineteenth century, the Columbia faculty had leaders like Howe, Jones, Smyth, Thornwell, Palmer, Leighton and Ruggles Wilson, Girardeau, and Adger. The story of “Old Columbia” has received treatment in the past, but finds a renewed telling in To Count Our Days from the eminent historian and Columbia Seminary professor emeritus, Erskine Clarke. One could hardly imagine a better teller of this story than Clarke, winner of the Bancroft Prize for his brilliant account of the white and black family of Charles Colcock Jones in Dwelling Place (2005). Likewise, Clarke covered similar territory in his book, Our Southern Zion (1996), which charted the course of the Presbyterian and Reformed churches of the South Carolina Lowcountry, and By the Rivers of Water (2013), which told of the missionary career of John Leighton Wilson and his wife Jane. All of that previous research and story-telling is brought to bear here in To Count Our Days and the result is a fascinating tale of how these brilliant leaders shared Columbia Seminary as a common project and concern.

A Tragic Legacy

One of the real strengths of this first half of this book was Clarke’s sense of the tragic in Columbia’s founding generation. In Greek tragedy, the hero is truly heroic—a powerful warrior, a brilliant statesman, a telling poet—and yet undone ultimately by a fatal flaw. In Clarke’s account, the fatal flaw in the founding generation was its defense of race-based slavery. Of Thornwell, Palmer, Adger, and the others, he noted that “they were the most brilliant and influential generation in the seminary’s history. But they were to bear, as Thornwell feared they would have to bear, the reproach of

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the world. They were to be accused, as Thornwell foresaw, of seeking their own freedom by perpetuating the slavery of black men, women, and children. This reproach, these accusations, and this burden of their history would be their most enduring legacy” (90). Even with this fatal flaw, Clarke’s treatment of this generation was a genuinely sympathetic-critical account. As a reader, I felt the power, brilliance, culture, and even heroism of men like Charles Colcock Jones, who gave his life to evangelizing slaves; Thomas Smyth, who used his money, his books, his influence to further the work of the seminary; and of course, James Henley Thornwell, who led an entire state from his positions at the church, college, and seminary in Columbia. To be sure, the fatal flaw was always present and presented, but Clarke’s telling seemed eminently even-handed and fair. Because of his telling, one wished to be able to be part of that nineteenth-century world for a moment to know it and to understand it.

In addition, Clarke’s account of the evolution controversy, which centered on James Woodrow, was sure-footed and well-told. Woodrow, the Perkins Professor of Natural Science in Connexion with Revelation, was a brilliant polymath: chemist who worked on munitions for the Confederates during the Civil War, minister who served in church as moderator of presbytery and synod, publisher who oversaw both the Southern Presbyterian newspaper and the Southern Presbyterian Review. Though some had raised concerns about Woodrow’s views on the method of God’s creation, most notably Union Seminary professor Robert Lewis Dabney, it was not until the late 1870s that Woodrow’s views came under scrutiny within the seminary’s constituency. Clarke showed how the seminary’s financial instability and struggling student enrollment served as the context in which Woodrow’s views were surfaced and attacked by John L. Girardeau and his proxy on the seminary board J. B. Mack. The results for the seminary were devastating—a lengthy disciplinary process that cost Woodrow his job but exonerated him in the courts of the church, that led other faculty to resign and students to flee, and that would divide friends, allies, and even family members from one another. While Clarke breaks little new ground, his telling makes understandable the seminary’s weakness in the aftermath, those forty years between 1880 and 1920.3

The seminary’s weakness—in terms of both enrollment and endowment—invited a number of potential merger conversations. One of the more fascinating bits

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in Clarke’s account were the machinations in the early decades of the twentieth century that sought to merge Columbia with Union Seminary in Virginia, with Louisville Seminary, or even with Louisville and Austin seminaries as part of a new “western” seminary in Memphis. It is hard to imagine how different the history of the southern Presbyterian church would have been had such a merger taken place: if there had been two seminaries instead of four, if there had been two seminaries in border states, if the faculty at Columbia in the 1920s had merged with the Union faculty right at the time the latter was hiring E. T. Thompson and E. C. Caldwell. The entire southern Presbyterian story and even the birth of the PCA would have changed.

“The Phraseology of the Past”

These clear strengths in Clarke’s account demonstrated how significant Columbia Seminary was—for those throughout South Carolina and Georgia, Columbia was “our seminary,” a source of identity and pride. Indeed, the book’s first hundred pages or so were extremely strong and valuable. It was frustrating that the last hundred pages, which covered the more recent past, did not match their excellence. It was perhaps inevitable—every institutional history struggles with whether or not to hold on to a narrative thread or to forsake that thread by mentioning a cast of characters who were part of the institution, but not a truly significant part. Unfortunately, Clarke chose the latter, apparently feeling the need to mention nearly everyone who was associated with Columbia, especially during his own years at the seminary. In one paragraph (on page 263), he mentioned twenty-seven different staff members! While it was kind to mention them, it does not make for good historical narrative. Likewise, he surveys the range of faculty members—especially as the faculty expanded in the 1980s and beyond, the comings and goings of faculty members became a blur of names and disciplines. And Clarke took the opportunity to mention a range of programs and initiatives, some of which he himself led, that were certainly interesting at the time, but seemed oddly placed for thinking about the significance of the institution (239; 247-49; 275).

There were opportunities and even hints toward the larger narrative framework that he wanted to pursue: the transitions from a hierarchical and organic society that shaped the seminary in the nineteenth century to an egalitarian and inclusive society that shaped it presently, and the movement from the more agrarian values of an early age to the market-oriented values of the present age (227-229). And yet, these were hints that were not fully developed. Even more, possible themes from
earlier in the book were dropped. Much was made early on of “Columbia moderation” or the “middle way”—but such moderation did not make much of an appearance as the book came to the latter half of the twentieth century. And this was a special fault in Clarke’s treatment with J. McDowell Richards, who served as president of the seminary from 1932 until 1971. If anyone represented such moderation, it was Richards: he was constantly tacking and balancing the forces that buffeted his institution in the post-World War II era. One of the missed opportunities of the book was to tell the story of this undeniably important southern Presbyterian institutional leader with the same care that was taken with the nineteenth-century leaders and faculty.

Clarke’s lack of care was most obvious in his treatment of conservative Presbyterians, especially those who would form the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), but also those stretching back to Girardeau who represented an antimodern stance within the southern church. Clarke uses Girardeau’s 1871 Confederate Memorial Day speech as evidence of his commitment to the “phraseology of the past,” whether politically, socially, or theologically (97-100). It merged together Lost Cause ideology with white paternalism toward blacks alongside of propositional theology. This commitment to talking about the past with the received doctrines of the past would keep the southern Presbyterian church and Columbia Seminary mired in an intellectual backwater, Clarke argued. Indeed, Girardeau’s perspective represented a “constricted world,” in which the “horizons were limited by the bitterness of defeat, by an engulfing poverty, [and] by a deep nostalgia for a lost world” (106). Coupled together with Girardeau’s leading role in the Woodrow controversy, it seems as though Clarke had a ready-made villain who was “deeply fearful of modern scholarship and had little engagement with the great intellectual issues of the day” (133).

The fault here was in not treating the antimodern stance as a legitimate critique of the developing New South ethos. Girardeau, of course, was not the only one who provided such a critique; he was joined by a range of thinkers inside and outside the church who stood for a “southern conservative tradition.” It birthed not only a political stance, but a cultural one as well, represented by the Agrarians who wrote *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930). Again, such a movement is not beyond critique—it should be criticized especially for its racial traditionalism and defense of segregation. But by not placing Girardeau and his fellow southern Presbyterian conservatives rightly, Clarke missed an opportunity to describe that to which some Columbia
institutional leaders were responding and how the seminary sought to stand between antيمodernism and modernism to carve out its own stance. 4

Girardeau’s conservative emphases and perspective would be represented on the faculty by W. M. McPheeters (on faculty from 1888 until 1933) and William Childs Robinson (faculty from 1927 until 1968). Neither McPheeters nor Robinson fare well in Clarke’s telling. Though McPheeters served for nearly forty-five years on faculty, many of those years as chairman of the faculty, he comes across simply as a crank, a representative of “a strident and embattled white Southern Presbyterian orthodoxy” (178). To be sure, toward the end of his life, McPheeters was very concerned about the direction of his church. And yet, there is little about McPheeters’s life (his father was a significant Presbyterian minister in his own right), his writing or editorial work, or his effort to sustain the seminary during the lean years. 5 The result is that McPheeters comes across as a cardboard character, one that stands in contrast to the careful account that Clarke gave for characters like Thornwell, Jones, and Smyth.

In a similar fashion, Robinson carries on the Girardeau-McPheeters’ legacy at the seminary. He stood as an example of “the suspicious nature and fighting spirit of fundamentalism,” one that evidenced “a deep fear of modernity and held tightly to the values of an older rural America,” and “viewed the Bible as containing a rational system of divinely inspired propositions” (178). Clarke’s proof for this characterization for Robinson was his early stance against a faculty member who objected to promising not to teach any doctrine “contrary to the Scriptures as interpreted by these [Westminster] standards.” Robinson’s concern was that by unhitching the Scriptures from the Westminster Standards, the board would no longer have a baseline for what true doctrine would be. If someone was teaching heresy, on what basis would the board discipline such a faculty member? To be sure,


5 McPheeters’s father was Samuel B. McPheeters, who was at the center of controversy for the spirituality of the church during the Civil War; see Preston D. Graham, Jr., A Kingdom Not of This World: Stuart Robinson’s Struggle to Distinguish the Sacred from the Secular During the Civil War (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2002), 64-89. For McPheeters’s controversies toward the end of his life, see Sean Michael Lucas, “Our Church Will Be on Trial”: W. M. McPheeters and the Beginnings of Conservative Dissent in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.,” Journal of Presbyterian History 84 (2006): 52-66.
the way Clarke reports Robinson’s concern, the professor comes across as arrogant and impolitic. But historian Clarke also shows an insensitivity to Robinson himself by failing to present his own argument in a way that he would likely recognize.

Further, there was more nuance in Robinson’s theological position that Clarke gives him credit for. While Clarke grudgingly noted that Robinson was aware of European theological movements (229), he was far more than that. Robinson enthusiastically engaged the work of Karl Barth, studying with him in Basel in 1938 and seeking to find points of commonality between his own orthodox commitments and the neo-orthodox movement. That was, perhaps, why Robinson helped to recruit Shirley Guthrie to the faculty at Columbia, a move that he would later regret, but one that is only understandable when Robinson’s engagement of Barth is accounted for. Robinson sought to defend a classical Reformed position that harkened back to the sixteenth century itself, to Calvin especially and his later interpreters, a position that caused theological liberals to reject him and conservatives not to understand him fully. It is sadly the case that Robinson defended white supremacy and southern segregation in the pages of the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*. Yet Clarke’s account of him was too facile and in the end too convenient.6

The same could be said in general about the way Clarke handled the post-World War II conflict in the southern Presbyterian church. When he summarized the continuing church movement that produced the PCA, he typified it as a movement that “believed that Christian faith involved a rational system of divinely inspired propositions—especially as articulated in late nineteenth-century fundamentalism. They insisted that the Bible was an inerrant text and that all theological teaching proceed[ed] by rational argument. They rejected evolution. And they provided vigorous support for a segregated South” (235). Clearly, for Clarke, these are bad things—but to understand the conflicts that Columbia endured in the 1950s and 1960s, it might have been profitable to treat the Columbia students and graduates who joined the continuing church movement and formed the PCA with more charity. How did these students—university, not “Bible school,” graduates who were Columbia alumni—come to believe that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God? Why was that significant to them and why were they concerned that Columbia was moving away from historic orthodoxy? What is “propositional truth” and why is that a bad thing?

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Which propositional truths are we to give up—the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the Trinity—and still have Christianity or the Reformed tradition? Why did these Columbia alumni believe that these truths were important enough to leave their church, which they loved? By not asking these kinds of questions, Clarke’s historical analysis fails to match the generosity of understanding that he extended to the founding generation of Columbia faculty or even those who opposed Woodrow.\(^7\)

All of this is disappointing because Clarke is a far better historian than he showed in the latter part of *To Count Our Days*. Like the Presbyterian historian E. T. Thompson, Clarke was a participant-observer in many of these scenes and knew many of these people; perhaps that colors his judgment at points. Regardless, for those who know this history well, it was a disappointment not to receive a fuller, more nuanced picture.

**Mainline or Oldline**

There were other questions that I had, especially concerning the seminary in the post-World War II world, which were left unanswered. For example, while noting repeatedly that southern Presbyterian conservatives held on to the racist heritage of the later nineteenth century, Clarke does little meaningful reflection about the seminary’s lack of leadership on racial justice during the 1950s and 1960s. It is the case that the seminary’s president, McDowell Richards, boldly preached a sermon, “Our Brothers in Black,” in 1940 that urged racial reconciliation. And yet, there was little significant movement towards recruiting black students. As Clarke noted, in the 1960s, the seminary had one black student, Joe Robinson: “the seminary was overwhelmingly white...Columbia’s white campus and white curriculum and white assumptions reflected—and reflected very clearly—the power of race and racism in shaping the contours of the nation’s life and the theological education of pastors and priests” (221). Could it be that the white moderates who ran Columbia in this period were as racially complicit as the more obviously racist actors in the southern church?

This is one of those places where asking harder questions might have brought greater nuance and sympathy in the latter sections of Clarke’s account. As historian Kevin Kruse has noted, white flight in places like Atlanta fueled much of modern

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\(^7\) As Clarke notes, “Columbia Seminary graduates were intimately involved in the formation of the PCA.” Over half of the pastors were graduates; twenty-two of the third pastors who worked on the Book of Church Order were as well (235).
political conservatism. But I wonder if the white flight that also fueled the growth of Decatur, Georgia, the seminary’s location since 1927, during this period did not also affect the seminary in a range of ways. Clarke is generally so attentive to the significance of place in his work, most obviously in his treatments of low country South Carolina and Liberty County, Georgia. Too, the seminary board was regularly led by corporate CEOs based in Atlanta. How did their leadership shape the general institutional slowness to address and engage racial justice in the 1960s? Perhaps the location and constituency of suburban Atlanta would have provided fruitful clues to the lack of movement by the seminary’s leadership on these issues.

That did not stop Clarke from repeatedly observing that Columbia Seminary was a “world-class” theological school. While the school has attracted highly credential scholars as part of its faculty and its facilities are magnificent, such a perspective represents an overestimation of its importance in today’s world of theological education. While there are always ebbs and flows in student enrollment, it is still the case that the mainline Presbyterian seminaries have been in general decline for many years and are significantly smaller than their peer conservative Presbyterian seminaries. For example, the 2017-18 Association of Theological School’s data tables report that Columbia Seminary has 98 full-time equivalent (FTE) students in their Master of Divinity program and 191 FTE total. By comparison, Reformed Theological Seminary has 283 FTE Master of Divinity students and 585 total; Westminster Theological Seminary has 208 FTE Master of Divinity students and 516 total; and Covenant Theological Seminary has 152 FTE Master of Divinity students and 342 total. In other words, each of the three seminaries that supply students to the PCA have been one and half to three times more FTE students than Columbia has. Despite this, historians that tell the stories of mainline Presbyterian seminaries continue to overestimate the importance of their own schools in the larger theological world.

Such a reality raises the question about the mainline Presbyterian denomination in general and whether it is truly “mainline” anymore. A similar question is whether or not Columbia Seminary is meaningfully Presbyterian or contributing to the life of the Presbyterian church anymore. That question came through in almost side-reflections offered by Clarke (268; cf. 276). But he also

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observed that while the faculty pledged themselves to further the work of the church, it was not “in service to some narrow denominationalism” (269). As more faculty represented denominations other than Presbyterianism, ties to Presbyterianism weakened and the distinctively Presbyterian culture of the school weakened as well. Somewhat ironically, Clarke pins much of the movement away from Presbyterian identity at Columbia on the evangelical seminary president, Steve Hayner (279-90). But such a movement away from a Presbyterian commitment occurred much earlier than 2009; it started when the faculty added Irish Catholic and Disciples of Christ members in the 1980s. And it accelerated as the Presbyterian Church USA began unraveling over issues related to homosexuality and ordination.

A further question might be asked about Presbyterian identity for institutional cohesion. If one forsakes a doctrinal component for Presbyterian identity, then how does the story get told? How do institutions and institutional loyalties and commitments form? As I have suggested elsewhere, it is difficult for mainline Presbyterian historians to tell denominational stories because of a deep present commitment to pluralism. That same difficulty can also be found in the larger denominational commitments with which the PC(USA) struggles. As more and more students and faculty at schools like Columbia have only a tangential commitment to Presbyterian identity—its distinctive beliefs, practices, and stories—the question remains whether Columbia Seminary will be a recognizably Presbyterian theological school in the decades to come (291-92). It would be ironic that the school in which James Henley Thornwell taught when he was accused of “ultra-Presbyterianism” might no longer champion Presbyterianism at all by the mid-twenty-first century.10

It is a credit to Erskine Clarke that an institutional history of a theological seminary could range so far and provoke such reaction. One of the great historians of southern Presbyterianism of this present generation, his work of worthy of such an engagement. While this may not represent his best work, To Count Our Days still offers an important telling of a school that has shaped and continues to shape various branches of Presbyterianism. If it causes us to engage these stories more thoroughly, it will have served a worthy cause.

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The last few decades have seen an explosion in New Testament scholarship working to understand the different ways New Testament texts use the Old Testament. As the studies have become more complex, scholars have been turning to the narrative shape of New Testament texts and how that shape makes use of the Hebrew Scriptures. In other words, New Testament scholars have looked at not only what the text says but how it says it. In *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe*, Patrick Schreiner, son of Thomas Schreiner, and assistant professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Western Seminary (Portland, Oregon), seeks to advance this discussion.

In this review, we will focus mainly on the first two chapters (where Schreiner lays out his thesis and methodology), while giving a brief summary of the rest of the book. Schreiner’s basic argument is “that Matthew is the discipled scribe who narrates Jesus’s life through the alternation of the new and the old” (9, cf. 241). The image of the discipled scribe comes from Matt. 13:52, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained (γραμματεύς μαθητευθεὶς, which Schreiner translates as “discipled scribe”) for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of house, who brings out of his treasure what is old and new.” Building off of recent studies interpreting Jesus through the lens of wisdom traditions (e.g., Ben Witherington and Jonathan Pennington), Schreiner seeks to place Matthew in a self-conscious position of scribe. While some may find his argument unconvincing, he does make a solid case for seeing certain scribal tendencies in Matthew. It’s clear that Matthew matches a functional definition of scribe, “(1) learning, (2) writing/interpreting, (3) distributing, and (4) teaching” (22). The first gospel also suggests that Jesus is establishing his own sort of alternative scribal school (36).
The payoff for Schreiner in seeing scribal tendencies in Matthew is that this legitimizes a fundamentally “Old Testamenty” reading of the first gospel. Here Schreiner gets into his methodology. Matthew the Scribe, according to Schreiner, self-consciously sees Jesus through the lens of Old Testament narratives: “The First Gospel presents Jesus as the continuation and climactic completion of the story of Israel. He shapes his stories to sound like OT narratives to show that his narrative joins seamlessly to God’s unfinished work” (31). Most will not find much that is novel or controversial here. But Schreiner goes on to suggest a new way of reading Matthew that pulls together several more established threads of gospel studies. Schreiner states his proposed Matthean method as such: “Matthew learned from his teacher that the arrival of the apocalyptic sage-messiah fulfills the hopes of Israel; this results in the unification of Jewish history,” and “the method Matthew employs to communicate this conviction is ‘gospel-narration’ through the use of shadow stories” (38). Shadow stories are, for Schreiner, short-hand for how one ought to read Matthew. Explicit quotations and references only get one so far. Schreiner intends to show that by attending to shadow stories, i.e., stories that hearken back to “persons, places, things, offices, events, actions, and institutions of the OT” (55), a deeper and more satisfying reading will emerge. For those who desire clearer criteria, Schreiner admits that he is proposing a method that “resists tabulation and requires wrestling” (60). The narrative form of the first gospel invites exploration that moves beyond surface-level readings.

The rest of the book (chs. 3-7) is Schreiner’s attempt to apply his basic method to Matthew’s gospel. Each chapter approaches the story of Jesus as through a lens of a different stage of redemptive-history. Since Schreiner argues that Matthew unites all of Israel’s history in the person of Christ (38), the stages themselves do not function in isolation from each other. Instead each informs the other and deepens the significance of Christ’s earthly ministry.

Chapters three and four, “Jesus and the Journey of the Davidic King” and “Jesus as the Ideal and Wise King,” coordinate to picture Jesus as the final king of Israel. Central to Schreiner’s concern here is the stabilizing nature of the Davidic imagery in the first gospel (67). Beginning with the genealogy and ending with the titulus on the cross. Schreiner paints a vivid picture of how Jesus fulfills the role of the King as. Schreiner pulls from several different sources and methods in order to do this. Of note is the recent work by Joshua Jipp and the king as the embodiment of the law (102). Jipp’s research makes this a particularly interesting chapter for anyone interested in how royal ideologies may play a part in the New Testament.
While Schreiner's notion of kingship sets the tone for the rest of the book, he devotes a significant amount of space (chs. 5-7) working backwards through Israel's history. Chapter five develops Jesus as he stands in relation to Moses. Mosaic imagery in Matthew is common currency in gospel studies, and Schreiner does not necessarily add anything new to the conversation. Still, his keen literary eye allows him to bring out motifs quite clearly. Schreiner then moves from Moses to Abraham in chapter six. This and the next chapter are the best parts of the book for those interested in questions of intertextuality, typology, and literary readings of the first Gospel. The Matthean genealogy identifies Jesus as the son of Abraham, though many readings of Matthew miss the depth to which the disciple takes that identity. Schreiner doesn’t want readers to make this same mistake and proves a capable mentor in how to read the genealogy. The seventh chapter expands the Abraham typology into that of Israel as a whole. Here Schreiner is not concerned with specific episodes as much as the whole panorama of Israel. A broad vision is a fitting end to such wide-eyed book. The careful reader will notice that Schreiner is slowly working backwards to make plain just how comprehensive Matthew's Jesus-Israel connection is.

For his conclusion Schreiner looks to bring his reading Matthew into discussion with practical concerns. If Matthew is first and foremost a scribe, then his purposes for writing are fundamentally about practical discipleship: “The purpose of this scribal training and profession was the formation of a certain type of person” (35). By becoming better readers of Matthew, Christians become better disciples. Though Schreiner gives some excellent reflections here on how Matthew provokes us to wisdom, the practical considerations, an important piece to Schreiner’s argument, receive little attention. A more thorough and sustained treatment of the implications for discipleship would have strengthened the book.

There are good reasons to read this book. Schreiner displays exegetical and literary abilities all along the way. His sensitive eye draws connections that many would pass over without a second thought. Schreiner also has a firm grip on the latest scholarship for both the New Testament and Old, so readers will unfamiliar with current trends will find this book a useful guide.

Two criticisms are worth mentioning. First, a popular level book such as this simply does not have the space to develop a methodology such as the one that Schreiner seeks to use. In many ways, this reviewer found his treatment of biblical theology more confusing than helpful. Eager to bring together both prospective and retrospective readings of the Old Testament, Schreiner does not reconcile such disparate voices as Geerhardus Vos (whose definition of biblical theology he uses
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[8n4]) and Richard Hays). At times Schreiner seems to give greater weight to more modern ways of reading (40), only then to support the idea of meaning more in line with Vos and Reformed methods of biblical theology (50). Some readers will be more frustrated than others with this tension

Second, and more significantly, is the uncertainty of many exegetical decisions. Many will think Schreiner is too quick to read the New Testament in light of the Old. Sometimes this is due to his own reading, while other times because of weaknesses in the source material. A significant example is Schreiner’s reliance on Jipp’s work. There is great debate over the presence of Counter-Imperial ideologies in Paul, so it follows that similar concerns extend to Matthew. For being such a significant piece to a chapter, Jipp’s work is dubious at best.

These criticisms aside, Schreiner has written an excellent example of reading the gospels with an eye to the whole of Scripture. Engagingly written and thorough in its scope, Matthew, Disciple and Scribe is worth the attention of anyone who wants to become a better reader of Scripture. And here Schreiner is most certainly correct—the better readers of Scripture we are, the better disciples of Jesus we are.

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More than a century ago James Stalker warned:

I believe the question, what is to be the type and the tone of the ministry in any generation, is decided in the theological seminaries. What the students are there, the ministers of the country will be by-and-by. . . . The state of feeling in a theological seminary ought to be such, that any man living a life inconsistent with his future profession should feel thoroughly uncomfortable, and have the
conviction driven in upon his conscience every day, that the ministry is no place for him (Yale Preaching Lectures, 1891).

If theological students are to live consistently with their calling to the pastoral office, both in seminary and after, then the nature of that call and the character of the minister must weigh upon them heavily. The full gravity of that weight can be obtained only by a careful study of the scriptures, a life of prayer, the examples of men devoted to the pastoral office, and the reading of books that uphold the best of the Reformed pastoral tradition. Which is why, after its 2018 publication, I immediately made Albert N. Martin’s *The Man of God: His Calling and Godly Life* (the first of a projected three volumes in pastoral theology), required reading for my first year students.

On full display is the author’s pastoral wisdom, obtained through a long and fruitful ministry – 46 years of which were spent as pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Montville, New Jersey. During his tenure, he delivered the pastoral theology lectures at Trinity Ministerial Academy. Many pastors my age benefitted from those lectures when they were distributed on cassette tapes. To have them available in print will prove a great encouragement to the next generation of ministerial students and pastors.

An ever-present danger exists that seminary students will underestimate the responsibilities of their pastoral office, and leave school with unrealistic expectations and without a comprehensive view of what the ministry requires. Martin alerts young ministers to what lies ahead, even as he reminds older ministers of the duties that belong to them as shepherds of God’s people.

There are three reasons ministers – and especially young ministers – should read this book. First, the author’s pastoral experience. Now in his eighties, Martin’s writings in pastoral ministry will undoubtedly prove to be the capstone of his service to God’s church. His work has been carried out in the daily life of pastoral ministry, with all its joys and sorrows, encouragements and frustrations, trials and triumphs. Young ministers need experienced wisdom. They may lack older mentors. Or, when serious conversations about ministry take place, they are only with fellow ministers their same age. Books like this will enable them to enjoy the mature wisdom of pastors who have labored long, hard, and faithfully for Jesus.

Secondly, the author’s experience of lecturing to pastors. Preparing lectures is demanding work. Good lectures require sustained reflection on the topic at hand. I cannot imagine a more comprehensive treatment of the pastor’s call and character
than is found here. In addition to the contents already described, the author gives attention to topics such as establishing a balanced reading program, fighting temptations to laziness, earning trust, dress and appearance, safeguarding pastoral integrity, and many others.

Finally, the author’s deep acquaintance with the classic Reformed texts in pastoral theology. While at seminary, I want my students to begin a life-long habit of reading the best in pastoral theology. Extensive quotes from the classic works of Richard Baxter, William Blaikie, Charles Bridges, Patrick Fairbairn, Thomas Murphy, John Owen, and many others point readers to solid resources for further study and inspiration. I would encourage young ministers to begin a file of helpful quotes, and also a list of books to read in the years ahead.

The book focuses on two areas: the call of the man of God and the life of the man of God. John Newton was correct: “None but he who made the world can make a minister of the gospel” (17). And the God who makes ministers, Martin argues, has entrusted to the men he calls and to the church that calls them, the solemn duty of identifying the distinguishing traits and gifts required for the pastoral office.

No man should be admitted to the pastorate solely on the basis of his preaching gifts. A thorough self-assessment and assessment by the church is essential. The book’s first unit contains sustained and thorough teaching on the call to pastoral office, describing in detail the various qualifications for ministry in character, Christian experience, and intellectual, speaking, and leadership gifts.

A pastor’s Christian character must be balanced. For example, “a man with great moral courage who obviously lacks sensitivity to people is a man whose character is out of balance. The same is true of a man who has great sensitivity to people, but who lacks moral courage” (75).

Martin begins his second unit – the Life of the Man of God in the Pastoral Office – with this assertion: “sustained effectiveness in pastoral ministry is generally realized in proportion to the health and vigor of the pastor in his relationship to God, the church, himself, the management of his time and manifold responsibilities, and his family” (227). He reminds his fellow pastors that “it is what we are before God that determines the character and usefulness of our ministries” (233).

The examination of the minister’s life is thorough. Chapters are devoted to the minister’s relationships: to God spiritually, intellectually, physically, and emotionally; to his people; to his wife and children; and his relation to himself.

The minister must have an experiential acquaintance with God and his truths, lest his ministry be powerless. Without that acquaintance, James Stalker observes, his
“hearers may not know why their minister with all his gifts, does not make a religious impression on them; but it is because he is not himself a spiritual power” (237). The minister must apply himself to the diligent use of means: the devotional assimilation of the Word of God, the habit and spirit of secret prayer, and the maintenance of a good conscience. The pastor embraces these means in the context of a ministry that is marked by various levels of suffering.

No small part of a seminary’s work is to prepare men to enter the ministry with eyes wide open to its attendant temptations, to the opposition of men that accompanies faithful ministry, and to the difficulties associated with laboring in bodies weakened by infirmity. How much crippling disappointment comes to new ministers because they know neither the cost of faithful ministry nor the concomitant truth that it is in the context of suffering that the minister learns to rely not upon self, but upon God who raises the dead (2 Cor 1:9).

The author’s warnings are timely. Our society has unparalleled access to materials that defile body and soul. The wise minister does not forget that “the first step to apostasy is thrusting away a good conscience – not necessarily sound doctrine or good morals, but a good conscience” (271).

Martin writes, “I am conscious of my accountability to God in discharging my stewardship of this instruction in pastoral theology” (3). It seems to this reviewer that he has discharged that responsibility admirably. I enthusiastically recommend this book, both to young ministers who want to begin ministry on a solid biblical footing, and to seasoned pastors who want to stay the course and finish well.

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