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In This Issue

January 2021 marked the third annual conference of the Paideia Center for Theological Discipleship at RTS Orlando, on the theme of the Christian Life. Because of Covid-19 restrictions the lectures were offered remotely to conference registrants. We are pleased to present two of the presentations in this issue, by Michael S. Horton and Scott Swain. (Dr. Horton's lecture is adapted from chapter 11 of Justification, volume 1 by Michael Horton. Copyright © 2018 by Michael Horton. Used by permission of Zondervan.)

Paideia events for 2020-2021 will be on the theme of the City of God. More information about the Paideia Center, including regional reading groups, can be found on the Paideia Center website: www.paideiacenter.org.

Also in this issue we begin a series on the five presentations that Dr. Ligon Duncan delivered at the John Reed Miller Preaching Lectures at RTS Jackson in November 2020, on the theme, “The Pastoral Ministry of Public Worship: Leading the Congregation in Reading, Hearing, Praying, Singing and Seeing the Word.” His first lecture is “Helping the Congregation to Hear the Word Read.”

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Justification and the Christian Life

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Justification and the Christian life -- this is where the rubber meets the road, isn’t it? Those of us who cherish this wonderful doctrine, rediscovered in the Reformation, can attest to the existential significance of this doctrine, the pastoral weight that it has, and the spiritual comfort that it gives us each day of our lives as believers.

And yet not everybody feels that way. A purely forensic declaration as the ground for God’s acceptance? God reckoning that the just, even while they are unjust, to be righteous simply for the sake of Christ? That righteousness is imputed to them through faith alone? That doctrine sounds miles away from anything that would produce any kind of ethical motivation, at least according to some.

Of course, Roman Catholic polemics have always made that point, but so have a number of Protestants going all the way back to Albert Schweitzer, who said, “Those who subsequently made the doctrine of justification by faith the center of Christian belief, have had the tragic experience of finding that they were dealing with a conception of redemption from which no ethic could logically be derived.” ² Not everyone has put it so crisply, so clearly, so eloquently as Schweitzer, but there is a feeling among many people that justification just doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter to the questions we’re asking today. If we’re looking for solutions to our personal, social, political and ethical problems, how on earth is a doctrine like this going to give us very much support?

Let us begin by getting this out of the way: historically, this is a pretty difficult thesis to sustain. Very few specialists in the Reformation are going to hazard the thesis that the Reformation bred passivity and indifference. On the contrary, they point out

¹ Adapted from chapter 11 of Justification, volume 1 by Michael Horton. Copyright © 2018 by Michael Horton. Used by permission of Zondervan.

how it encouraged incredible activism among the laity. It really liberated average Christians for a life of gratitude in ways that are historically significant. But Schweitzer complains the doctrine offers a view of redemption from which no ethic could logically be derived. So that’s his argument – logically, regardless of the history, whether it has or not – logically, how can you get any kind of ethical impetus from a doctrine of justification? I want to try to answer that question in the brief time that we have together.

**Fears Relieved**

The first thing I want to focus on is justification’s personal impact on us: fears relieved. I call this “carrots and sticks versus gratitude.” At least as important for the reformers as the doctrine of justification was the distinction between the law and the gospel. Everything from Genesis to Revelation is God’s Word. But God does different things when he speaks. He creates by his speech. He sustains by his speech. He judges by his speech. He redeems by his speech. He tears down and he builds up. He wounds and he heals.

And the law is God’s command that comes to us as a very good thing. But the problem is we hear it in our condition as sinful children of Adam, as damning, as well we should, if this is what we’re banking our hopes of assurance on.

In his *Antidote to the Council of Trent*, John Calvin observes the numerous passages promising all believers the assurance that comes from Christ. He asks, who is to deprive brothers and sisters of that which Christ purchased at the cost of his own blood? He continues,

> Why do they not remember what they learned when boys at school that what is subordinate is not contrary? I say that it is owing to free imputation that we are considered righteous before God. I say that from this [and that is key: *from this*] is also another benefit proceeds, namely that our works have the name of righteousness, though they are far from having the reality of righteousness. In short, I affirm that not by our own merit, but by faith alone, are both our persons and our works justified, and that the justification of works depends on the justification of the person, as the effect on the cause. ... Hence, it is a most iniquitous perversion to substitute some kind of meritorious for a gratuitous righteousness, as if God, after justifying us once freely in a single moment, left...
us to procure righteousness for ourselves by the observance of the law during the whole of life.³

A lot of Christians live the way that he’s describing here. It was great when I became a Christian, all my sins were forgiven. I felt liberated and reconciled to God. A weight off my back. I experienced that joy of my salvation. And then, when falling into doubt or a besetting sin, one starts to wonder: is that still for me now? Was there enough grace at the beginning? Do I have to procure my ongoing justification by in my own works?

Calvin is not a minor point here when he says that our persons as well as our works are justified. Even the sin clinging to our best works is forgiven and forgotten and cleansed by Christ’s righteousness. I remember when my dad tried to teach me how to fix a car. He was an airplane mechanic in World War II, and the apple not only fell far from the tree, it rolled down the hill into the street, got run over by a few trucks, and then ran to the gutter. I have no mechanical skills whatsoever and I never have. One day the car hood was open. My dad wasn’t exasperated. He wasn’t impatient with me, but I wasn’t getting it. He said, put your hands here in the -- whatever it was, I think it was the motor. Get your hands dirty, just tinker around in there. And then he flipped up whatever needed to be flipped up. We went inside the house with our towels, and my mom asked us what we were doing. He told my mom that I fixed the car. Now, of course, I didn’t fix the car. My dad was being so gracious to me because he accepted my person and he accepted that work, insufficient and inadequate as it was. That work didn’t contribute to my acceptance before him. He even took joy in my inept participation in what he was doing.

That’s the kind of good Father we have, but incomparably greater in his goodness and grace. It’s exactly the opposite in the Roman Catholic conception: the works justify the person. If the works are righteous, then the person will be righteous. But here we have a God who justifies the sinner, and the sinner now is considered righteous before God on account of Christ. Therefore, God even uses the imperfect works that we do as part of that divine economy of grace. Isn’t it amazing?

Peter spoke of the law in Acts 15:10 as that which “neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.” Calvin comments on this: “It is an error to suppose that this

refers only to ceremonies." We have big debates today, especially around what is called the New Perspectives on Paul, where Paul’s reference to the works of the law refers to circumcision and dietary laws, the things that distinguish Jews from Gentiles. That is exactly what Rome was saying as well. Calvin asks: what was so arduous in ceremonies “as to make all human strength fail under the burden of them?” What a good question! People could get circumcised and they could keep kosher. What was so arduous that the burden was too heavy for them to bear? “Hence too it is that Christ’s yoke is easy and his burden light not because there are fewer laws. But because the saints feel an alacrity in their liberty while they feel themselves no longer under the law.” Not under some laws, but under the law at all for justification. At the heart of the Council of Trent’s errors, said Calvin, is the confusion of the law and the gospel. He argues this, especially in relation to canons 12 and 20:

Paul calls the gospel, rather than the law, “the doctrine of faith.” He, moreover, declares that the gospel is the message of reconciliation. ... For the words of Paul always hold true that the difference between the law and the gospel lies in this, that the latter does not like the former promised life under the condition of works, but from faith. What can be clearer than the antithesis? “The righteousness of the law is in this wise, the man who does these things shall live by them.” But the righteousness which is of faith speaks thus: “whosoever believeth ...” (Rom 10:5).

We cannot be sure of our final justification, according to the Council of Trent. Yet, Calvin replies, “Christ says, ‘Son, be of good cheer. Thy sins are forgiven thee.’ This sentence the horned fathers abominate whenever anyone teaches that acquittal is completed by faith alone.”

When it comes to assurance, Calvin agrees with Trent that we cannot speculate about our predestination. He writes,

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4 Calvin, Acts and Antidote, 131.
5 Calvin, Acts and Antidote, 131.
6 Calvin, Acts and Antidote, 131-32.
7 Calvin, Acts and Antidote, 154-56.
8 Calvin, Acts and Antidote, 154 (“horned” means “mitred.”)
I acknowledge indeed, and we are careful to teach, that nothing is more pernicious than to inquire into the secret counsel of God with a view of thereby obtaining a knowledge of our election – that is a whirlpool in which we shall be swallowed up and lost. But seeing that our Heavenly Father holds forth in Christ a mirror of our eternal adoption, no man truly holds what has been given us by Christ save he who is assured that Christ himself has been given to him by the Father, so that he will not perish.9

How can the Fathers at Trent, Calvin continues, argue that the average believer in this life cannot have any assurance? That one can hope for justification, but doesn’t have assurance of present pardon now, especially when scripture freely promises that assurance to every believer, even the weakest believer? Calvin writes, “On whole, then, we see that what the venerable fathers call rash and damnable presumption is nothing other than that holy confidence in our adoption revealed to us by Christ, to which God everywhere encourages his people.”10

Nor can penance be an assurance that one has regained lost grace. You see the penitential system was like a bathtub. You committed a venial sin and there was a little break in the bathtub, and grace leaked out. You just patched it up with a little bit of penance. But then the whole bathtub broke, and the water rushed out. Now you really need to come back, start from scratch. Jerome called this a “second plank after shipwreck.”

I grew up in a very different tradition, a Protestant evangelical tradition. We had rededication. If we really slipped up, then we would come forward in the service to rededicate our lives. It was like a second plank after a shipwreck. Calvin says:

I would ask why [Jerome] calls it a second plank and not a third or fourth? For how few who are there who do not during life make more than one shipwreck. Nay, what man was ever found whom the grace of God has not rescued from daily shipwrecks. But I have no business with Jerome at present. The Fathers of

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Trent do not treat of repentance but of the sacrament of penance, which they pretend to have been instituted by Christ.\textsuperscript{11}

Besides the requirement of auricular confession to a priest privately since the Fourth Lateran Council, penance was completely unknown in the ancient church. Calvin points out that not until Innocent III “entangled the Christian people in this net, which the fathers of Trent would now make fast.”\textsuperscript{12} And it was never imposed as necessary in the churches of the East.

But God nevertheless still chastises believers. I admit it. But to what end? Is it that he, by inflicting punishment, may pay what is due to himself and his own justice? Not at all, but that he may humble them by striking them, by striking them with a dread of his anger, that he may produce in them an earnest feeling of repentance and render them more cautious in the future. . . . To sum up the whole: though believers ought to be constantly thinking of repentance, these Holy Fathers imagine it to be an indescribable something of rare occurrence.\textsuperscript{13}

You see the irony: we actually believe in repentance more than Rome does, Calvin says. We think it should be a daily occurrence. Calvin is reprising here the very first of Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

With justification already attained, we are free to pursue repentance and faith without making them the ground of our confidence. I am not assured because of the quality of my faith and repentance, but I repent in order to believe and trust more firmly in that full redemption accomplished by Christ. If God treated us according to justice, we have no hope, because, as Calvin points out here, all sins are mortal. All sins burst the bathtub. Any sin against a holy God, a perfect God, a just God, would be of infinite injustice.

What you see here is that Calvin has a very pastoral motivation. He doesn’t want to win an argument. He wants to win people. He is jealous for the comfort that he wants the sheep of Christ to have and are lacking because this truth is being

\textsuperscript{11} Calvin, \textit{Acts and Antidote}, 138.

\textsuperscript{12} Calvin, \textit{Acts and Antidote}, 140.

\textsuperscript{13} Calvin, \textit{Acts and Antidote}, 142-43.
withheld from them. These are life and death issues. Like Paul, Calvin is asking, “tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?” (Gal 4:21). Calvin asserts:

These new lawgivers tie down forgiveness to a formula of confession contrary to the command of God and assert that it is redeemed by satisfaction. ... I am desirous to be assured of my salvation. I am shown in the Word of God a simple way which will lead me straight to the entire and tranquil possession of this great boon. I will say no more. Men come and lay hands on me, and tie me down to a necessity of confession from which Christ frees me. They lay upon me the burden of satisfaction, ordering me to provide at my own hand that which Christ shows me is to be sought from his hand alone. Can I long doubt what is expedient to do? No, away with all hesitation, when attempts are made to lead us away from the only author of our salvation.14

This is not a mere theological quarrel. Calvin seems stupefied not only by their exegesis but by their experiential naiveté. “It is not strange that addle-pated monks who, having never experienced any real struggle of conscience ... should thus prate about the perfection of the law” despite their own hypocrisy. “With the same confidence do they talk of a heaven for hire, while they themselves meanwhile continue engrossed with the present hire, after which they're always gaping?” They fail to realize “that there is no work untainted with impurity, until it be washed away by the blood of Christ.”15 He continues: “Were regeneration perfected in this life the observance of the law would be possible. ... But there is no wonder that they speak so boldly of things they do not understand. War is pleasant to those who have never tried it.”16 “Such boldness is not strange in men who have never felt any serious fear of the Divine judgment,” Calvin adds.17 They do not know or teach others to know truly that they are “pardoned by a paternal indulgence.”18

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We reach the haven of security, only when God lays aside the character of a judge and exhibits himself to us as a Father. . . . Therefore, paying no regard to the Council of Trent, let us hold that fixed faith, which the Prophets and Apostles, by the Spirit of Christ, delivered to us, knowing whence we have learned it.19

Calvin’s *Antidote to Trent* is very similar to a warm and impassioned letter he wrote to Cardinal Sadoleto. The Cardinal was trying to recall Geneva back to the arms of Rome while Calvin was ensconced in Strasbourg, and the City Council of Geneva asked Calvin to compose the response on behalf of Geneva. He says:

Hence, I observe, Cardinal Sadoleto, that you have too lazy a theology, as is almost always the case with those who have never experienced any serious struggles of conscience. For otherwise, you would never place a Christian man on the ground so slippery, nay, so precipitous that he could scarcely stand a moment if even given the slightest push.20

So many Christians are like that, aren’t they? You might be in that situation right now: just the slightest push and you just give it all up. You’d say, “I’m lost and there is no hope for me.” Recalling his own early years, Calvin relates:

I believed, as I had been taught, that I was redeemed by the death of Christ from liability to eternal death. But the redemption, I thought, was one whose virtue could never reach me. I anticipated a future resurrection, but hated to think of it, as being an event most dreadful. . . . They, indeed, preached of [God’s] mercy towards men, but confined it to those who could show themselves deserving of it.21

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And then, he continues, he heard “a very different doctrine” which actually “brought me back to its fountainhead. . . . Offended by the novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted; for . . . it was with the greatest difficulty that I was induced to confess that I had all my life been in ignorance and error. One thing in particular made me averse to these new teachers; namely, reverence for the Church.”22 Yet, Calvin says, once he opened his eyes, he understood the truth from those who treasured it. “They spoke nobly of the Church and showed the greatest desire to cultivate it.”23

So our first point is that the only way to have a genuine, heartfelt response of love and gratitude to God is for it to come naturally from our hearts as a gift. It comes from our confidence that we are justified and adopted, accepted by God the Father, solely because of his son, Jesus Christ.

Looking Up to God in Faith and Out to Neighbor in Loving Works

This leads to our good works toward our neighbor. Luther famously said – or at least it is commonly paraphrased – God doesn’t need your good works, your neighbor does. We read in James that all good gifts come from the Father of lights, and Paul tells us in Romans 11 that no one has given God anything that God should repay him, for from him and to him and through him are all things to whom be the glory forever. Amen.

God is the giver of gifts. God gives salvation. There’s not one parcel of it, not one morsel that we can claim as our own and hold it up to God and say: “See, I did this. At least, I did that.” It’s all God, it’s all his work, and he receives consequently all of the glory for it.

What does it say about our theology if our ethics can only be derived from some type of analytic righteousness, that is, a righteousness that God sees in me intrinsically? Or from the other side, why do we assume, a priori, that a gospel of free acceptance with God in Christ alone, through faith alone, cannot yield any ethical imperatives or actions?

We’ve got to be very careful here because justification isn’t an imperative. Justification should never and can never be confused with sanctification. That was

22 Calvin, Response to Sadoleto, 62.

23 Calvin, Response to Sadoleto, 63.
Rome’s error, and it is the error of many Protestants. Nevertheless, how can it be imagined that out of the boon of this great salvation God has given us in Christ, there would be no motivation for good works?

Critics such as Schweitzer tell us that justification is a legal fiction. It has no basis in reality. But in fact it has the greatest basis in reality. Two thousand years ago outside the center city of Jerusalem, God gave his Son and his Son willingly gave himself up on the cross for us, and then three days later he was raised for our justification. That’s not a legal fiction that actually happened in history, and that is the ground for our justification here and now.

Let us respond point by point to Schweitzer’s complaint. First, we have to say the doctrine of justification doesn’t say everything that is included in the good news, but apart from it, there is no good news. Let me repeat that: the gospel is not merely our justification. It is our election, our redemption in Christ, our justification, our sanctification, our glorification, our adoption. There are so many gifts that we have in Jesus Christ, Christ himself being the greatest gift of all. To have Christ is to have him with all of his gifts.

And so justification is not the whole package. Justification isn’t the only gift that we receive in union with Christ. But without it, we can’t receive any of the others. Without justification, even if God had chosen us, we would never be accepted before him. Without justification, even though he calls us to himself, and even though he sanctifies us, we would never have that holiness in this life which God requires. And therefore, we would never be glorified. While justification doesn’t say everything, while it can’t be made to hold the weight for everything in the Christian life, it is that linchpin without which nothing else matters.

It is true that an ethical system can’t be derived from the doctrine of justification, but can an ethics be derived from any one doctrine at all? Each doctrine in the Christian faith answers a different question, exposing a different piece of the architectural framework. But only as a system of interconnected parts does the whole constitute a building. It’s not the purpose of the doctrine of justification to provide an ethic. Most people don’t think that they are in a situation where the wrath of God is a serious problem to face. The problem, as they see it, is that we need more morality in the world. We need more justice, more love, and more forgiveness. We need to be better people. We need better social structures. We need to be better mothers and fathers and children, and so on.

If we lose the perspective of a holy God, not what God can do for us as individuals or a society, but what we owe to him, if we lose that transcendent
perspective, of course justification before a holy God will be of little consequence. But if that is our situation, if that is our condition, justification takes on an immense burden. It answers the most important question. Until that question is answered, none of the other questions matter. It’s not just one doctrine, among many. Justification really is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls.

Not condemnation, but death, is our central problem, others say. The real focus of salvation is not this legal framework that some are so obsessed with, but deliverance from death. Yet, as Scripture declares, death is the wages of sin. It is a sentence rendered on the basis of the verdict of God’s law. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:56-57, “the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, remove the curse, and the sentence of death is lifted. The curse is a legal judicial matter. Once that problem is solved, the fear and sting of death goes away.

Still other people will say, it’s not legal penal justification, it’s Christ’s victory over the powers. Isn’t that what Paul says in Colossians 2:15, that “he disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in Christ”? Yes, it does say that, but the previous verses read, “and you who were dead in your trespasses and the circumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (13-14). Even for Christ’s victory over the powers you need the judicial satisfaction of God’s righteous will.

Nor can peace with God – reconciliation – take the place of justification. Paul says in Romans 5:1, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” My point is not that justification is all of these things. Not that justification is reconciliation. Not simply that justification is the victory of Christ over the powers. Not that justification is the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. But without justification, none of these other wonderful gifts of our salvation is possible.

Secondly, in the Reformers’ understanding justification is not the alternative to, but the basis for sanctification. This is the problem in not only Roman Catholicism, but also in a lot of Protestant alternatives today to the doctrine of justification as understood by the Reformation. You have to choose between justification by an imputed righteousness or sanctification by an infused righteousness. It is either one or the other. But in the Reformation doctrine, that’s a false choice. These are twin gifts that
we have in union with Christ. Not in spite of, but because of justification, the Christian is liberated to look up in faith to God and out to neighbors in love.

This is such a liberating ethic. It liberates us for activity that isn’t based on our fear of punishment and our hope of rewards. Freed from the curse of the law, believers can now exalt, "Oh, how I love your law!" It is wonderful for us finally to get to the place where we can say, I love you God and I love your law. But you can’t be justified on that basis because love is the summary of the law. Jesus said that to be justified by loving God and our neighbors is to be justified by works.

Justification is not the goal, but the source of our love and service. Justification is not the be-all and end-all the Christian life, but it is the source. We keep returning to it not just once, not just twice, but every day. We need to know we have that solid acceptance before God. It is like marriage. Some people will say today, I don’t need a piece of paper. It’s a relationship, not a legal institution. But legal marriage provides the sure foundation for the relationship. The same is true of adoption. People who have been adopted talk about the security that they have, knowing that they are equal members of the family to any of the other natural siblings. They have an entitlement to the same inheritance, legally secure and set in stone. Justification isn’t the marriage, it isn’t the family life, but it is the secure basis for that union that we have in Christ and that adoption that we have by the Father in the Son, entitled to his entire inheritance, coheirs with Christ.

Third, the doctrine of justification is far from rendering believers passive. We are trying to get justification to do too much here. Justification isn’t regeneration, and it isn’t regeneration. Justification doesn’t answer every question about salvation, yet it does answer the question, how can a sinner be right before God? It doesn’t fully explain how the power of sin in your life can be broken. But that power cannot be broken unless you are legally set right before a holy God.

Luther said, “faith is a busy thing.” Faith “kills the old Adam and makes altogether different people, in heart and spirit and mind powers, and it brings with it the Holy Spirit.” Luther adds:

Oh, it’s a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. And so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question arises, it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them. He who does not do these works is a faithless man. He gropes and looks about after faith and good works and knows neither what faith is nor what good works are, though he talks and talks, with many
words about faith and good works. Faith as a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times.24

That doesn’t sound like a barren, sterile doctrine, does it? That sounds like something that very much fuels the Christian life. From this perspective – justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – not only do we get a Father instead of a judge, we get neighbors instead of threats.

When we look out on the world today, other people are primarily threats. But not in God’s economy; in God’s economy they are my neighbor. I might disagree with them about all kinds of things. They might be totally opposed to my worldview. They may be living lives that are totally contrary to the word of God. They may be hostile to the Christian faith, hostile perhaps even to the liberties of Christians to continue to proclaim the gospel. But they are my neighbors, and I can love them because I don’t need them for my justification. Rather, they need my good works, they need my neighborliness, they need my love.

Luther says, “This confidence in God’s grace and knowledge of it makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all his creatures.” “And thus,” he continues, “it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as it has to separate burning and shining from fire. Beware, therefore, of your own false notions and of the idle talkers, who would be wise enough to make decisions about faith and good works, and yet are the greatest fools.”25

Calvin makes the same point. Since our works cannot satisfy God, let them satisfy our neighbors who need them. This is a completely new outlook. If you look at Luther’s Freedom of the Christian or Calvin’s Institutes (especially book three), you’ll see very clearly how they connect justification to the life of faith.

Presenting our works to God as if they demanded a reward makes God mad because we presumptuously imagine that our works could possibly contribute anything more than what his sacrificial love in Jesus Christ provided. God is angered when we do that. We are not helped, because we can’t add one ounce of righteousness to Christ’s righteousness. And our neighbor isn’t served.


25 Luther, Commentary on Romans, xvii.
But with justification firmly in place, God is satisfied. He accepts us, and now we can accept our neighbor. The crucial insight of the Reformation, then, wasn’t a movement from injustice or justice nor even the recognition that all of salvation is due to God’s grace alone. The Reformation was a paradigmatic shift away from you and me to the Triune God.

Does this doctrine matter? Absolutely it matters. I remember when this doctrine first hit me. I was digging into Romans. The pastor in my evangelical church believed one could lose one’s salvation. Worried that I was getting into some bad theology, he asked me, “young man, when were you saved?” I wasn’t trying to be cute, but for the first time it occurred to me. I said, “Two-thousand years ago outside the center city of Jerusalem.”

That is the anchor, that is the confidence that this wonderful truth brings to us. No other truth answers that specific question that only justification can answer. Justification doesn’t answer all the questions, but it answers that question. And unless and until that question is answered in a biblical way, none of the other fears that grip us in this hour or any hour will go away.
The Psalms as handbook for the Christian life

In his “Preface to the Revised Edition of the German Psalter” (1531), Martin Luther called the Psalms “a Little Bible, wherein everything contained in the entire Bible is beautifully and briefly comprehended.” In praising the Psalter this way, the German Reformer follows the example of what he calls the “holy fathers.” According to one such father, Basil of Caesarea, different books of the Bible teach different doctrines that, in turn, provide different remedies for the soul: “the prophets teach one thing, historians another, the law something else, and the form of advice found in the proverbs something different still.” “But,” the Cappadocian father tells us, “the Book of Psalms has taken over what is profitable from all.” “It foretells coming events; it recalls history; it frames laws for life; it suggests what must be done; and, in general, it is the common treasury of good doctrine, carefully finding out what is suitable for each one. The old wounds of souls it cures completely, and to the recently wounded it brings speedy improvement; the diseased it treats, and the unharmed it preserves.” Not only is the Psalter “a common treasury of good doctrine” for the cure of souls according to Basil. It is also “a great public treasury” of “perfect theology.” The theological treasury of the Psalms contains “a prediction of the coming of Christ in the flesh, a threat of judgment, a hope of resurrection, a fear of punishment, promises of glory, an unveiling of mysteries.”

My focus in what follows is not on the Psalms as a compendium of “perfect theology” but as a “handbook” (Luther) for the Christian life. Such a focus requires little justification, for the Psalms lie at the heart of Christian piety. Sung in the daily office by members of religious orders in patristic and medieval times, Thomas

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Cranmer integrated the Psalms into the “common prayer” of the Reformed Church of England at the time of the Reformation. The Psalms are specially suited to such devotional use. Their concise poetic lines, rich in imagery, make the Psalms easy to savor, easy to sing, and thus easy to memorize. Their brief and beautiful words are honey from the honeycomb (Ps 19:10), the delight of all the saints. But the Psalms are not mere ornament or empty aesthetic. The Psalms are *torah*, divine instruction. And this, according to Basil, is part of their divinely designed brilliance. As we learn to chant the “harmonious melodies of the psalms,” we “become trained in soul.” The beauty and brevity of the Psalms serve the beatifying end of making us whole and happy persons, holy and happy in God.

*The Psalms and the good life*

As a handbook for the Christian life, the Psalms have much to say about keeping God’s law, about avoiding evil, and about fulfilling religious duties. However, the Psalter begins its teaching on the Christian life under the banner of beatitude: “How *blessed* is the man . . .” (Ps 1:1). By beginning with beatitude, the Psalms locate the rest of their teaching on the Christian life within this larger framework. The Psalms teach us that the Christian life is the good life, the abundant life, the happy life.

The poetry of the Psalter paints a number of pictures that help us better perceive the nature of beatitude. The “blessed” or “happy” man of Psalm 1 is “like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither” (Ps 1:3; 92:12-14). Like meadows “clothed” with flocks and valleys “decked” with grain (Ps 65:13), the happy person is adorned in glory. Like “the going out of the morning and the evening,” the blessed community has abundant reasons to “shout and sing together for joy” (Ps 65:8, 13; 19:5). For happiness is a state where longings are fulfilled, where desires are fully satisfied (Ps 63:5). The blessed person lays his eyes on beauty (Ps 27:4; 17:15), feasts on abundance, and drinks from a river of delights (Ps 36:8). Fullness and flourishing, glory, satisfaction, and joy are the main features of beatitude according to the Psalms.

To locate the Psalter’s teaching on the Christian life under the banner of beatitude is not yet to distinguish its teaching as Christian teaching. After all,
according to Aristotle, all people desire to be happy. They just fail to agree about what happiness is or about how to achieve it.  

In a university sermon on Psalm 84, Thomas Aquinas notes that, in the ancient world, many sought happiness in the possession of worldly goods such as wealth, power, honor, fame, and desire. Thomas argues that worldly goods such as these, whatever temporary happiness they may provide, are inadequate objects of perfect happiness. Because we can never get enough of them, they can never satisfy our cravings, they can never give rest to our souls. Moreover, due to their inherent fragility, even the limited joy they bring is always mixed with sadness and fear: “the more we love (amo) the goods we possess, the more affliction they bring about as we fear losing them.” Because worldly goods lack permanence and security, they cannot make us perfectly happy. Thomas, following the psalmist, proclaims that perfect happiness can only be found in the Lord’s house: “Blessed are those who dwell in your house” (Ps 84:4).

More recently, in his book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Carl Trueman has shown that, for many in the late modern West, happiness is defined primarily in psychological categories. Happiness lies in deciding for myself who I want to be and in receiving recognition and affirmation from broader society (ideally through political mechanisms) of my self-chosen identity. Following Thomas’ example above, I would suggest that the self, and society’s affirmation of the self, is also a fragile frame for securing happiness (cf. John 5:44).

Aristotle is right. Though the pursuit of happiness is universal, people disagree about what happiness is and about how to achieve it. Where, then, does the Psalter’s claim that the Christian life is the good life fit among these competing visions of human happiness and its acquisition? In our short time we cannot possibly explore the full treasury of the Psalter’s teaching on the good life. I propose instead to consider how the Psalms aim to make us whole and happy persons, holy and happy in God by instructing us on three topics: (1) God’s house, which is the end of the good life, (2) God’s instruction, which is the way of the good life, and (3) God’s anointed

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king, in whom the end and the way of the good life are personally embodied. According to the Psalter, the good life is found ultimately in God’s house, by following the path of God’s instruction, in fellowship with God’s anointed king.

**God’s house, the end of the good life**

According to the Psalms, the good life is ultimately realized through residence in God’s house, the temple God has established on Mount Zion: “Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise!” (Ps 84:4; 23:6).

God’s dwelling place in Zion is both a political and cultic reality, a palace where the divine king reigns and a temple where the divine king is worshipped. Zion is the glad recipient of the evangelical announcement, “the Lord reigns” (Ps 97:1, 8; 48:11). The Lord installs his anointed king in Zion (Ps 2:6) and sends forth his royal scepter from Zion to rule in the midst of his enemies (Ps 110:2). As the dwelling place of the divine king and his anointed Son, Zion is the pinnacle of beauty, the joy of all the earth (Ps 48:2). The streams of Zion’s river “make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High” (Ps 46:4). Zion is secure, abiding forever (Pss 48:8; 125:1; 146:10), the source of salvation and blessing (Pss 20:2; 128:5; 134:3).

As the seat of God’s international rule, the house of God in Zion is also the center of international worship, where God’s anointed king ministers as a Melchizedekian priest (Ps 110:4). Not only do the Lord’s servants stand in the house of the Lord to serve him day and night (Ps 134:1; 135:2). “The princes of the peoples” also “gather as the people of the God of Abraham” in his sovereign, holy presence (Pss 47:8-9; 68:29, 31-32) to call upon his name, to offer burnt offerings, and to perform their vows (Pss 66:13; 116:17-19). Worshippers in God’s temple behold the beauty of his glory (Ps 27:4), feast on the abundance of his house, and drink from the river of his delights (Ps 36:8). Those he chooses and brings near are happy: they are satisfied with the goodness of his house, the holiness of his temple (Ps 65:4). They flourish like a green olive tree in his presence (Pss 52:8; 92:13), “ever singing his praise” (Ps 84:4).

The Psalter portrays God’s house in Zion as our supreme good and final end. In Psalm 84:10, the psalmist declares: “a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper”—occupying the lowest social position—“in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.” In Psalm 137:6, the psalmist pronounces a curse on himself if he fails to remember Zion or to set Jerusalem above his highest joy. As our supreme good, God’s house is also our final end, the goal of all our quests and the end of all our journeys. “For every faithful
person on pilgrimage in this world,” Augustine says, “there is nothing more agreeable than the thought of the city which is the goal of our journey.”5 There all thirsts are quenched and all hungers are satisfied (Pss 42:2; 63:1-2; 65:4; 84:2).

To speak of God’s house as the supreme good and final end of the Christian life is not to say that God’s house is the product of the good life, the work of our hands. God’s house is not the “end” of the good life in that sense.6 According to the Psalms, it is God who loves, chooses, and establishes Zion (Pss 51:18; 78:68; 87:2; 102:16; 132:13). God’s house is our supreme good and final end, not as the product of the good life, but as the crowning good that God promises his people. According to Augustine, the blessing of dwelling in God’s house is God’s “ultimate promise,” “to which our hope aspires, so that when we reach it we shall look for nothing further nor ask anything more.”7 In God’s house, we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28).

The reason God’s house holds this place in the Christian life is because “God is in the midst of her” (Ps 46:5). As both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas affirm, God’s house is blessed because “the blessed God” (1 Tim 1:11) dwells there.8 God, according to the psalmist, is our supreme good: “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you” (Ps 16:2). And God is our final end: “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance” (Ps 16:5-6). It is good to dwell in God’s house because “it is good to be near God” (Ps 73:28), to gaze upon his beauty (Ps 27:4), to be satisfied with his likeness (Ps 17:15).

The Psalms portray God as our supreme good and final end by applying multiple images to him and to the beatitude that comes from dwelling in his presence. “The Lord God is a sun and shield”—the source of blessing and security. “No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps 84:11). When feasting on the abundance of his house, we drink from a river of delights because with him is the fountain of life; and in his light do we see light (Ps 36:8-9).

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Augustine observes something peculiar in the Psalms’ use of this imagery. In identifying God by varied images, the Psalms identify God as the singular source of varied blessings, blessings related to both intellect and appetite. The divine reality “that is light is also a fountain: a fountain because it drenches the thirsty, a light because it illumines the blind.” This identification stands in contrast to earthly goods, which may illumine us without quenching our thirst or which may quench our thirst without giving light to our eyes.9

Identifying God as the light in which we see light and as the fountain of life not only signifies that God is the singular source of varied goods. It also signifies that God is “himself good in the proper sense.”10 God is not merely light. God is a sun, a self-originating light. God is not merely alive. God is a fountain of life, one who has life in himself. Again, in Augustine’s words, God is “good by his own goodness, not by participating in some good thing outside himself; he is good by his own good self, not by cleaving to some other good.”11 He goes on, “Plainly I cannot praise these other things apart from him [Ps 16:2!], but I find him to be perfect without them, needing nothing, unchangeable, seeking no kind of good to enhance his own happiness and fearing no manner of evil whereby he could be diminished.”12 This, according to Augustine, is ultimately what it means to say, “the Lord is good” (Pss 34:8; 100:5; 135:3; 145:9).

In God alone, who is the fullness of light and life in and of himself, we find the adequate object of happiness that ends all quests for happiness. In God alone, and in God’s house, we find the kind of happiness that can be found in no other: supreme, secure, and perfect.13 For this reason, according to the Psalter, God is not only the sole adequate object of our spiritual appetites: the soul’s most blessed vision and most satisfying food. God is the sole adequate object of our bodily existence as well: we were made and redeemed to walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living (Ps 116:9) and to open our lips that our mouths might declare his praise (Pss 51:15; 119:175).

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Far from being a private, competitive good, moreover, God’s status as our supreme good and final end makes him the sole adequate object for the realization of our social nature as well. Delighting in him (Ps 16:2), we learn to delight in “the saints in the land,” “the excellent ones” in whom is all our delight (Pss 16:3; 133). The announcement of the Lord’s reign in Zion is not reason for Israel’s parochial joy. It is reason for “the many coastlands” to “be glad” (Ps 97:1). Beyond the inclusion of Israel and the nations, “Even the sparrow finds a home” in God’s house, “and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young” (Ps 84:3). Because the one who dwells in Zion is the supreme good, he is worthy of cosmic praise, reason enough that all things, in heaven and on earth, in the sea and all its depths, at all times should praise the Lord (Pss 146-150): “let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever” (Ps 145:21).

**God’s instruction, the path of the good life**

If, according to the Psalms, God’s house is the promised end of the good life, then God’s instruction is the path that leads us there. “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion” (Ps 84:5).

The metaphor of the “path” or “way” in the Psalter teaches us a number of things about the nature of God’s torah, law, or instruction. As an image of divine instruction, the metaphor of path points not only to that which the Lord prescribes: “Teach me your way, O Lord,” the psalmist prays (Ps 27:11). Path also points to the “life formed according to” the Lord’s “prescription.” Thus, in response to the Lord’s blessing, the psalmist declares: “I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart” (Ps 119:32).

The path metaphor also indicates that God’s instruction has a telos, it leads us somewhere. Divine instruction is not mere rule, mere prescription of certain kinds of behavior. Divine instruction is a guide that directs us to a certain kind of end, namely, beatitude. The one who follows God’s law, delighting in it, meditating on it day and night, walking in it (Ps 1:1-2), travels “the way of the righteous” (Ps 1:6), whose end is like that of “a tree planted by streams of water . . .” (Ps 1:3). This blessed end stands in


stark contrast to the utter ruin to which “the way of the wicked” tends (Ps 1:6; 73:17-18).

As the image of the tree suggests, the eschatological telos to which the law directs us is also an anthropological telos. The law of God, according to the Psalms, is a means to human wholeness. Psalm 19 praises God’s law for its perfection and purity. The law reveals a “sure” foundation for belief and the “right” standard for living (Ps 19:7-8). The law is “pure” and “clean,” “true” and “righteous” altogether, without any mixture of error (Ps 19:8-9). The perfection and purity of God’s law, in turn, promote human wholeness, a point the psalmist makes by means of merism, referring to various parts of the human anatomy to illustrate the wholeness of the law-directed person. God’s instruction revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes, delights the taste, conveys eternal life, and delivers from destruction (Ps 19:7-11). The law directs us to a holy and happy place, life in God’s house; and the law makes us whole and happy persons, who flourish in singing God’s praise: “The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him” (Ps 92:12-15).

The law is no arbitrary divine policy. It is the divinely revealed path to creaturely beatitude. “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose hearts are the highways to Zion” (Ps 84:5). But the metaphor of path, in the context of the Psalter, also suggests that we have not yet arrived at our happy destination. Following God’s instruction, we must pass through “the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps 23:4), through “the Valley of Baca,” which is the valley of tears (Ps 84:6). Of the many types of psalms included in the Psalter, psalms of lament are by far the most common. And this with good reason: those who long to dwell in God’s house, ever singing his praise, must first learn songs of mourning, songs suited to the present distress. Thus Augustine encourages his congregation: “So, then, brothers and sisters, we feed on hope now, but there is no real life for us other than the life promised us in the future. Here our experience is of groaning, temptations, miseries, and dangers; but in the world to come our souls will praise the Lord as he deserves to be praised.”16

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Thomas says, we are “the ones on the way (viatores) to happiness,” not the ones who have already arrived.17

Following God’s instruction in this vale of tears we find many occasions for lament, and the Psalms prepare us for all of these occasions. The Psalms teach us to lament the wicked, who devotes all his energies to our downfall and destruction (Ps 36:1-4). The Psalms teach us to lament the betrayal of friends (Pss 55; 69; 109). The Psalms teach us to lament the mismatch between God’s promises and present realities (Ps 89). And the Psalms teach us to lament our sin, our inbred capacity (Ps 51:5) to stray from God’s path “like a lost sheep” (Ps 119:176), a capacity which eludes our power to grasp or to master (Ps 19:12-13).

But the Psalms also teach miserable sinners like us to call upon the name of the Lord: “Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God” (Ps 43:3-4; 119:176). God’s law in the Psalter is not only a path that he reveals and that he calls us to travel. It is also a path on which he sends us aid by sending us himself—“God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness!” (Ps 57:3; cf. Isa 40:3), a path on which he accompanies us—“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Ps 23:4), and a path on which he leads us, as our front and rear guard, to our final, blessed destination—“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps 23:6). Because of the Lord’s presence to help, accompany, and guide us, the valley of tears becomes “a place of springs” (Ps 84:6).

**God’s anointed king**

The Psalms claim that the Christian life is the good life. They seek to make us whole and happy persons, holy and happy in God, by directing us to the end of the good life, which is to dwell in God’s house, and by directing us to the path of the good life, which lies in following God’s instruction. Our survey of the Psalms’ teaching on the good life would not be complete, however, without considering the personal, messianic dimension of its moral instruction. The Psalms seek to make us whole and

happy persons, holy and happy in God, by knitting our hearts to God’s anointed king, who is both the end of the good life and the path to that end.

Psalms 1 and 2 introduce the two themes we have already discussed regarding the good life in connection to God’s anointed king. On one ancient and well-established reading, the “blessed man” of Psalm 1, who travels the “way of the righteous,” is first and foremost the king, who serves as exemplar and guide for the blessed life. More explicitly, Psalm 2 promises blessedness to those who take refuge in the king, the object of divine begetting and recipient of divine promises, whom God has installed on his holy hill. In Psalm 16, God’s anointed king addresses God as his supreme good and final end, in whose presence there is fullness of joy, at whose right hand are pleasures evermore; and he addresses God as the one who makes known to him “the path of life” (Ps 16:2, 5-6, 11). God’s anointed king is both beatitude in person and the means to our beatitude in fellowship with him. “The oil of gladness” (Ps 45:7), poured on the king’s head, runs down his beard and saturates his body, causing his people to rejoice in him (Ps 133:2). For this reason, the king’s suffering in the Psalter is an occasion for lament: “Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed!” (Ps 84:10), while the king’s exaltation is cause for celebration: “May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun! May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed!” (Ps 72:17).

To speak of God’s anointed king in this manner is to speak in light of the Psalms’ fulfillment in the apostolic announcement of Jesus Christ and his coming. But this evangelical speech, enabled by apostolic announcement, answers to the speech of the Psalter as well. Through the speech of the Psalms, the to-be-incarnate Son of God presents himself to us, in riddle and promise, as the one in whom the good life finds fulfillment. God’s anointed king is not simply one theme among others in the Psalms. Properly speaking, he is not a theme at all. In the Psalms, God’s anointed king is the personal object of divine and human address (Pss 2; 45; 110).18 In the Psalms, we hear his voice, offering lament and laud to God (Pss 16; 22), promising to proclaim God’s name to his siblings, and to give God praise in the midst of the congregation (Ps 22:22). “Grace is poured upon your lips,” Psalm 45:2 declares, because, in the Psalms, God’s anointed king sings us into God’s kingdom.

Paying attention to the speech of God’s anointed king, and to how others speak to and of him, is essential to seeing how the Psalms seek to make us whole and happy people, holy and happy in God. In Psalm 110, the most often cited Psalm in the New Testament, God’s anointed king is addressed by God as God and enthroned by God as God: “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’” (Ps 110:1). The divine identity of God’s anointed king resolves the Psalter’s riddle regarding what it means for the Lord to send out his light and his truth to lead us to his holy hill and to his dwelling (Pss 43:3; 57:3). How does the Lord send the Lord? By sending us his divine Son. . . (Mark 12:1-12, 35-37; Gal 4:4-7; etc.).

The divine identity of God’s anointed king also answers the Psalter’s promise that the Lord himself will help, accompany, and guide us on the path of God’s law to the beatitude of God’s house. Indeed, the Psalms suggest, in pregnant terms, just how the Lord will do so. According to Psalm 40:6-8, God’s anointed king “comes” into the world as “it is written” of him “in the scroll of the book.” To what end does he come? Not to offer the blood of bulls and goats, which cannot atone for sin (Pss 50:13; 51:16), but to receive “an open ear” that he might fulfill God’s law. God’s anointed king does not hover ghostlike above the path that leads to God’s house. He walks it, body and soul, as our brother and, in so doing, offers the costly ransom for us that only God could afford to give (Ps 49:7-8, 15). He suffers the Godforsakenness that his sinful people deserve (Ps 22:1) and causes the afflicted to be satisfied with the result that “all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you” (Ps 22:26-27).

Finally, God’s anointed king is not only the path that leads us to God’s house. He is also the supreme good and final end to which that path leads us. Installed by God on Mount Zion (Pss 2:6; 110:1-2), God’s anointed king is the supremely “pleasant theme/thing/word” of the Psalter as a whole (Ps 45:1). He is “the most handsome of the sons of men” (Ps 45:2), anointed by God with “the oil of gladness” beyond his companions (Ps 45:7). In majesty he rides out victoriously “for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness” (Ps 45:4), sending sharp arrows into “the heart of the king’s enemies” (Ps 45:5). By his beauty and majesty, his bride is drawn to forsake her father’s house for his (Ps 45:10-16). By his beauty and majesty, he causes his name to be “remembered in all generations” and nations to praise him “forever and ever” (Ps 45:17). God’s anointed king is, in this sense, the supreme good and final end to which
the Psalms direct us. “When we reach him,” Augustine tells us, “we shall have nowhere further to go, and so he is called the ‘end’ of our journey.”

Grace is poured upon his lips. By divine design, the Psalms seek to make us whole and happy persons, holy and happy in God, by enabling us to hear his voice, the voice of God’s anointed king. He sings to us, with us, in us, and through us as we walk the path of God’s law, offering lament and praise in this vale of tears. He sings us into the kingdom, into God’s house, leading a chorus of happy praise to God (Ps 145) and, with God, receives the praise of which God alone is worthy: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” (Ps 45:6).

Conclusion

Much has been written in recent days about the place of habituation in virtue formation. The Psalms have much to teach us here. Their brief and beautiful lines lend themselves to repetition, memorization, and habituation. Moreover, they are specifically designed with virtue formation in view. According to Basil, the Spirit “devised for us these harmonious melodies of the psalms, that they who are children in age or, even those who are youthful in disposition might to all appearances chant but, in reality, become trained in soul.” The Psalms are designed to make us whole and happy persons, holy and happy in God.

But, as we have seen with the help of readers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the Psalms do not form us merely through repetition, merely by habituation. As the Spirit writes their words on our hearts (cf. Ps 84:5), the Psalms form us by presenting to us the supreme good and final end of the Christian life, by directing us on the path that leads to that supreme good and final end, and by knitting our hearts in faith, hope, and love to the one who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), God’s anointed king, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Christian life, thus understood, is the good life, the virtuous life, the life of beatitude that belongs to those who through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ come to

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dwell in God’s house, ever singing his praise (Ps 84:4). “May we be led to it by the Son.”

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Metaphysics and the Interpretation of Scripture:  
A Reply to Daniel Treier

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In the last issue Dan Treier responded to my book, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*. I thank him for doing so and I wish to offer a few thoughts in response so as to continue what I think is an important conversation about the importance of certain metaphysical commitments for the true interpretation of Scripture.

At the outset of his paper, Treier says that he is not sure if one can maintain both “the Protestant primacy of the literal sense and the hermeneutical pertinence of a classically Christian theological ontology.” He concludes the paper with “a hopeful yes” but with the significant qualification that “such an ontology can embrace aspects of Christian Platonism without insisting on its general or comprehensive necessity.” This conclusion reflects the general tenor of the entire paper in which a certain vagueness is allowed to persist as to the exact metaphysical propositions we should (and should not) embrace and also as to the exact relationship of these metaphysical propositions to biblical exegesis. This vagueness is not unique to Treier; rather, it is endemic today in confessional Protestant and Evangelical theology.

The crucial question is how classical theism, and the classical metaphysics upon which it rests, relates to the Bible. It actually is a question of whether or not the classical Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy of the creedal tradition, including metaphysical doctrines such as simplicity, immutability, eternity, and aseity, express the true teaching of Scripture. If we wish to affirm the classical doctrine of God, to what extent are we then obligated to hold to the metaphysical principles and doctrines on which it rests such as act and potency, causation, and realism? Since, as everyone knows, the Bible does not contain the technical vocabulary of Aristotelian-Thomist metaphysics, the question naturally arises as to how one could claim biblical support for doctrines such as Divine simplicity, which rests on the concept of God as pure Act. This problem is not restricted to issues related to classical theism; it extends to the central confession of the Trinity itself.

The Bible, of course, also does not contain the term “Trinity” as used in the *Nicene Creed*, nor, for that matter, the categories of “person” and “nature” as used in the *Definition of Chalcedon*. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* and other Reformation
confessions teach Divine simplicity, which is not comprehensible apart from certain classical metaphysical categories such as actuality and potentiality. The orthodox creeds and confessions have always made use of extrabiblical categories, terms and concepts in stating the teaching of Scripture, but in our “post-metaphysical” age of ideology this sort of things is frowned upon by powerful cultural forces.

Addressing these questions requires thinking carefully about how exegesis, doctrine, and metaphysics relate to each other. It requires us to consider the relationship between philosophy and exegesis and between faith and reason. Should systematic theology make use of philosophy? Should exegesis make use of systematic theology? These issues are vast and complex. But we cannot shrink from the task because the questions and concerns Treier identifies in this paper are very widespread among Evangelical and conservative, confessional Protestants today. In fact, I would go so far as to say that Protestant theology is in crisis today and that the nature of this has to do with the most fundamental part of our Christian confession imaginable: the nature of the biblical God.

This paper will proceed as follows. In part one, I will summarize and comment briefly on the four steps Treier takes in the essay as he wrestles with the issue of how the literal sense of Scripture relates to classical metaphysical doctrines about God. Then, in part two, I will try to respond by suggesting some possible ways of thinking more clearly about the relationship of metaphysics to the Bible.

I. Engagement

In part one of his essay, Treier confesses that “Like many biblical and theological scholars, I received meager philosophical training.” This is probably true, not only for most Evangelical scholars in biblical and theological studies, but for most theologians in the Anglo-Saxon world in general. It is a little less extreme in Europe, but in North America philosophy is not taken very seriously by biblical scholars and theologians. It is not required for entrance to seminaries or graduate programs in theology. These programs fail to teach much of the history of philosophy or metaphysics. Treier notes that this left him perplexed as to what to make of the postmodern critique of metaphysics. Like many others, he perceived the extremes to be Thomas Aquinas and Jurgen Moltmann and looked for a middle way. I would suggest that this is the story of twentieth century theology: looking for a middle way
between classical theism and modern, relational theism.\(^1\) However, in my opinion, the search for such a middle way is a dead end.

Treier notes that modern “historical habits of mind” seem to involve the rejection of metaphysics and can lead to the rejection of Scripture’s witness to the triune God. He rightly notes that the stress on the single meaning of the text as the human author’s intention is “pluralizing” since very often it is impossible to know precisely what the human author intended (especially in edited or anonymous texts). Thus, meaning comes to depend on a hypothetical (unprovable) historical reconstruction of the psychological state of the human author behind the text. Meaning thus no longer resides in the text itself or in the Divine Author’s mind. It should be noted that the only way for authorial intention to be (1) decisive for meaning, (2) stable, and (3) never contradictory of other texts is if it is primarily Divine authorial intention. But modern historical criticism ignores the Divine Author in its preoccupation with the human aspect of Scripture.

In part two, Treier states that biblical ontology is “systematically underdetermined,” which is an ambiguous phrase. If it means that the Bible does not present a system of metaphysics complete with philosophical descriptions, arguments and technical terminology, then it is true but hardly controversial. Any Thomist would say the same. If it means, however, that metaphysical truths cannot be deduced from doctrines that arise out of exegesis, then it is making a much more radical claim, one that anyone who holds to the *Westminster Confession* could not accept.

Treier suggests that the Bible sets “certain parameters within which theologians should address ontological systems, but not requiring a particular theoretical account or tradition.” He puts forward three reasons taking this approach. First, he says that those who (like me) claim that certain metaphysical doctrines are deducible from doctrines supported by exegesis often make little reference to biblical texts when they make ontological claims.\(^2\) Second, he says that Christian Platonism is

\(^1\) For an example of this, see Oliver D. Crisp, *Analyzing Theology: Toward a Systematic Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019). In chapter two he describes classical theism and theistic personalism and then declares that he will pursue a “middle way” that he calls “chastened theism” (33). He states explicitly that part of what motivates him to do so is the criticism of classical theism in writers like R. T. Mullins, who denies simplicity, immutability, and other key elements of classical theism.

\(^2\) I acknowledge that this has been a problem at times, and I seek to address it by spending four chapters discussing the doctrine of God as it emerges from Isaiah 40-48 in my forthcoming book,
an example of contextualizing the Biblical message for Greek culture, which means that “insisting upon Christian Platonism in return risks colonizing all subsequent cultures.” Third, he says that my case for the necessity of Christian Platonism depends on debatable definitions of “metaphysics” and “modernity” that the Bible does not require. He suggests that Kevin Hector has offered “plausible” reasons for avoiding some versions of metaphysical inquiry without becoming relativistic.

In the third section, however, Treier seems to reverse course and acknowledges that “Christian Platonism’s substance metaphysics came to expression in conciliar Christology” and so it appears that to reject it completely risks undermining the creedal core of Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy. Thus, Treier finds himself arguing both sides of the case at once. On the one hand, he argues that metaphysics is optional and not really based on biblical teaching. But, on the other hand, it seems that the creeds presuppose metaphysical doctrines, and he does not want to undermine creedal orthodoxy. What to do? He wonders “Perhaps, therefore, Protestant hermeneutics cannot be disentangled from classical ontological commitments as readily as many biblical scholars believe.” He then goes on to discuss some concerns raised by Michael Allen about Iain Provan’s book, _The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture._ Treier notes that Richard Muller sees more continuities than Provan does between Calvin and the Medieval tradition of the four-fold sense. Treier raises the vexed issue of nominalism with regard to Luther, but he does not consider the recovery of classical metaphysics in the second and subsequent generations of reformers.

In the fourth section, Treier rightly sees that what is at stake is the doctrine of creation. The pressure felt by theologians to speak about ontology comes from the fact that the Bible teaches certain things about created reality that dominant streams in modernity deny. Treier’s response to that pressure is typical of contemporary Evangelical theology: he retreats into biblical theology, not as a basis for making
ontological statements, but as an alternative to doing so. He contrasts a sacramental ontology with a “covenantal ontology.” One is reminded of Karl Barth’s famous axiom: “the creation is the external basis of the covenant; the covenant is the internal basis of creation.” But the question I have for both Barth and Treier is this: “Is covenant an ontological category?”

Treier is aware of the problem. He writes: “For all its importance, however, covenant is a redemptive-historical category. . . this category helps us understand relations and acts, not being as such.” He knows that historical categories alone do not allow us to re-state the biblical truths of creation that undergird the truths of redemption. He suggests the answer is a “doxological ontology,” the exact meaning of which, I confess, I do not really understand. In what sense is the doxological ontology he recommends different from a sacramental ontology? Does the kind of Christological mediation he is describing have overlaps with sacramental ontology? Could it be expressed in terms of substance metaphysics? Could it be expressed adequately while rejecting substance metaphysics? Is it anything more than biblical theology waiting for dogmatics to take it up and make use of it? It seems that the hermeneutical confusion Treier admits to experiencing in the opening paragraphs remains unresolved by the end of his paper.

In conclusion, Treier writes the following two sentences that I wish to highlight:

Such an ontology can embrace aspects of Christian Platonism without insisting upon its general or comprehensive necessity. Such an ontology can also embrace seriously literal interpretation while insisting upon its robustly Trinitarian practice.

I have questions about each of these sentences. First, which aspects of Christian Platonism, as I defined it in the book, are to be rejected or may be regarded as optional? Could a faithful biblical interpreter embrace nominalism or mechanism or materialism or skepticism or relativism? Second, why does the second sentence

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4 For more on this move, which is widespread in Evangelical theology today, see Carl Trueman, “Foreword” to my forthcoming Contemplating God with the Great Tradition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), xi-xiii.

make it seem as if it is hard to hold together literal interpretation and Trinitarian theology? The literal meaning of the Bible, I would have thought, is precisely the doctrine of the Trinity. I will have more to say about these issues below.

II. Response

It seems important to reiterate at the outset of my remarks that Treier is representative of a large number of Evangelical biblical scholars and theologians in that he regards metaphysics as a bit esoteric, that is, as a rather arcane, mysterious, perhaps hopelessly complicated and not particularly useful bit of academic theorizing. As a systematic theologian he does not see the need to engage in depth the classical metaphysical tradition that stems from the church fathers through Augustine into Medieval figures such as Anselm, Lombard, and Bonaventure and comes to a high point in the Augustinian-Aristotelian synthesis of Thomas Aquinas. This tradition continued in Protestant scholasticism into the eighteenth century before going into eclipse in the Enlightenment and becoming a minority position in the nineteenth century before almost disappearing in the twentieth.

In 1879, however, Pope Leo XIII issued *Aeterni Patris*, which sparked a massive revival of Thomistic studies, which bore much fruit in the twentieth century among Roman Catholic, especially French Dominican, scholarship. Now, in the early twenty-first century, confessional Protestants are re-discovering the classical metaphysics of the Great Tradition and we are witnessing a revival of interest in a Reformed version of Thomism. In a development that would have seemed incredible as little as three decades ago, figures such as William Perkins, John Owen, Francis Turrettin, Amanda Polanus, and Petrus Van Mastricht are becoming important for conservative systematic theology. Contemporary scholars such as Carl Trueman, Richard Muller, Scott Swain, Michael Allen, Matthew Barrett, Stephen Duby, James Dolezal, J. V. Fesko, and Fred Sanders, most of whom have been influenced by the example of the later John Webster, are recovering the classical tradition of metaphysics through the Reformed scholastics. In so doing, they are choosing a starting point for dogmatics that lies outside of modernity. It is almost as if they, along with Pope Leo XIII, do not

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6 See, for example, the work of Gilles Emery, Servais Pinckaers, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange and many others. Etienne Gilson is of central importance as well.

7 See, for example, the interesting collection of essays in *Aquinas Among the Protestants*, eds. Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen (Oxford: WILEY Blackwell, 2018).
accept the notion that Hume and Kant have demolished substance metaphysics once and for all. This development is, I would argue, not only significant but also extremely hopeful.

It is important to note that the term “Christian Platonism” is primarily a historical term used rather un-controversially in patristic scholarship to describe the thought of Augustine. In *The City of God*, Augustine discussed the Platonists extensively even to the extent of providing a mini-history of Greek philosophy in Book VIII. He concluded that the Platonists were the best of the Greek philosophers. At least they believed in the existence of a transcendent realm of unchanging realities on which the changing world of flux depended for stability. The Christian doctrine of creation provided a basis for the Platonic realm of ideas, although scholastic theology would improve on both the Platonic and the Aristotelian accounts of universals. For Plato, the universals existed in an intelligible “third realm” apart from the sensible world. Whereas Aristotle held that form subsists in the material entity and not separately from it. Scholasticism came to view the universals as ideas in the mind of God and therefore as eternal. So Christian Platonism is not static nor is it finished; it is a tradition. It grew historically into Thomism and persisted for centuries in the form of scholasticism in both pre- and post-Reformation, and both Roman Catholic and Protestant, streams. Augustine insists that although Platonism can tell you that God must exist, there is nothing in the books of the Platonists about the incarnation of Jesus Christ or the redemption of the world through his atoning death and resurrection. Augustine can be scathing in his indictment of the Platonists for participating in idolatry even though they knew better, and he clearly expected them to become Christians and criticized them when they did not. His efforts were not directed toward making Christians into Platonists. Instead, he was out to make Christians out of Platonists.

Perhaps we should not emphasize Christian Platonism today and speak instead of Reformed Thomism or Reformed scholasticism. However, in the name of historical accuracy, I must insist on the point that Aristotelian-Thomism and Reformed scholasticism are both subsets of Christian Platonism, historically
considered. Even the contemporary Roman Catholic, analytic, Thomist philosopher Edward Feser agrees with that assessment.

I would like to make three main points in response to Treier’s paper. First, I want to argue that systematic theology is concerned with exegesis (what the biblical text means) and also with doctrines that can be deduced from the results of exegesis. Second, I want to argue that some of the doctrines thus derived from the Bible are metaphysical in nature, such as *creatio ex nihilo*, Divine aseity, and Divine transcendence. Third, I want to argue that the Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy of the ecumenical creeds of the first five centuries includes metaphysical doctrines. Therefore, metaphysics can never be separated from systematic theology or become optional for us if we wish to give an account of what it is that the church has believed about God, Christ, and creation for its two-thousand-year history. In conclusion, I will issue a call for confessional Protestants to recover our common heritage of metaphysical truth as part of the renewal of Protestant theology in the twenty-first century.

**How Theology Works**

Theology consists of exegesis plus dogmatics. We begin by reading the Scripture and doing exegesis. Exegesis is the attempt to re-state in our own words the true meaning of the biblical text. In exegesis we seek to inhabit the thought world of the text and grasp its meaning from the inside as it were. As we engage in this work, we gradually pile up exegetical results and as we do so we begin to notice patterns. As we analyze these patterns of ideas, we begin to formulate doctrines. So, for example, as we contemplate the exegesis of texts such as Genesis 1:1; Psalm 33:6, 9; 90:2; John 1:1-3; Acts 14:5; Romans 15:17; Colossians 1:15-17 and Hebrews 11:2, we begin to formulate a doctrine of creation.

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Theology, however, is more than the mere repetition of the thoughts contained in Holy Scripture. It also involves making deductions from what the Scriptures teach. As the Westminster Confession puts it:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.\(^{10}\)

Notice that the whole counsel of God includes both what is “expressly set down in Scripture” and also that which “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” As we contemplate what the Scriptural texts mentioned above expressly say about creation, it is possible to deduce from what they say the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo. Thus, we have a doctrine which can both be said to be a biblical doctrine and also a metaphysical doctrine. We can deduce the idea of transcendence from creatio ex nihilo and transcendence entails simplicity, eternality, aseity, and immutability. Space here does not permit me to argue all this out in detail. My point here is simply that I am claiming that the metaphysical aspects of Trinitarian classical theism arise out of the contemplation of the results of Scriptural exegesis.

This understanding of how theology works should preclude anyone from accepting a naïve biblicism that reduces theology to the mere exegesis of texts and summarizing the results of such exegesis in the form of biblical theology. Such work is good but it is not the whole of theology. Certainly, exegesis and biblical theology are foundational and determinative for theology, but by themselves they are not complete. Historic Christian orthodoxy has always found it necessary to go beyond summaries of biblical exegesis to consider what sorts of metaphysical doctrines may be ruled out by Scriptural teaching, as well as what sorts of metaphysical doctrines can be deduced from Scriptural teaching.

**Metaphysics and Orthodoxy**

One of the arguments the Arians used against the Nicene homoousios is that it is not a biblical word so therefore it should not be mandatory. To put it in the creed required one to confess an extra-biblical term in order to be considered orthodox. Why is this justified? It can only be justified if oneness of being (homoousios) between the Father and the Son is a concept that can be deduced from what Scripture does actually teach. One of the things that convinced most of the fourth century bishops who had reservations about the word homoousios to come round to supporting its inclusion in the creed was the fact that those who rejected it seemed always to end up making the Son subordinate to the Father ontologically. The emergence of the heteroousians in the 350s and 360s, once it became fashionable to deny Nicaea, was proof that the rejection of the homoousios was actually a rejection of the clear Scriptural teaching that the Son is equal in glory and majesty with the Father. The homoousios was useful to rule out false metaphysical statements, which distort biblical teaching.

It is impossible to name a doctrine more central to, or emblematic of, classical orthodoxy than the Nicene teaching that the Father and Son are two hypostases but one ousia. Yet this lynchpin of orthodoxy requires us to think in terms of a substance metaphysics in which we make statements about the being of God, not merely about his actions in history. It is true that we come to know the truth about the sameness in being of Father and Son by means of God’s self-revelation in the incarnation. But what we learn from God’s action in history goes beyond repeating the narrative of what happened; it includes deductions from that narrative about the very nature of the eternal, Divine being in and of itself. To imagine that one could ever totally disentangle metaphysics from classical theology is a non-starter.

Systematic theology depends on exegesis and biblical theology but cannot be reduced to them. Systematic theology involves contemplation of the result of exegetical work, formulation of doctrines on the basis of those results and then deducing from these doctrines what must be true about the being of God and God’s relationship to the creation. Systematic theology thus produces a metaphysical account of the reality in which the biblical interpreter stands while doing exegesis. This provides the context for a “second exegesis”\textsuperscript{11} of the text from within that metaphysics. All exegesis involves presuppositions about the nature of reality.

\textsuperscript{11} I explain and put into practice this concept of a “second exegesis” at length in my forthcoming book, \textit{Contemplating God with the Great Tradition}. 
including the nature of the interpreter, the nature of the text, and the nature of the God about whom the text speaks. In this second exegesis, there is an opportunity for the interpreter to ask whether or not the first exegesis was conducted on the basis of the correct metaphysical account of reality. This may sometimes lead to correcting the exegesis done the first time, but it will always lead the interpreter to see deeper meaning in the biblical text. The unity of the Bible will come into sharper focus and the inter-relationship of various texts will become plainer. The result will be a deeper and more profound understanding of the biblical text.

In this process of doing what I call a second exegesis, we are doing exactly what the historical criticism that emerged out of the Enlightenment disallowed. We are reading the text from within the framework of the historic creeds and confessions of the church. We are using orthodoxy to deepen our understanding of Scripture. Many Evangelicals today understand the relationship between biblical and systematic theology to be a one-way street in which the traffic flows only from biblical exegesis to doctrinal formulation. I am suggesting that it is a two-way street and that traffic ought to flow in both directions. Systematic theology is supposed to be every bit as “biblical” as biblical theology is. The difference is not that one is biblical and the other is a combination of biblical content plus a dose of speculative opinion or personal preferences or cultural biases. No, both are meant to express the teaching of Scripture.

Biblical theology focuses on doctrine arranged according to the canonical presentation of teaching, while systematic theology focuses on contemplating the doctrines arising from Scripture, considering what may be deduced from them, how certain metaphysical concepts must be ruled out, and certain other ones reformed for use within theology. There is an endless cycling back to the sources over and over again for deeper insight. Theology never leaves the Bible behind as if it were merely a source which could be dispensed with once it has been milked by exegesis. Scripture stands forever as the Word of God to the church. Its riches and depths can never be fully plumbed in this life.

For the Enlightenment rationalists, the meaning of the text is reduced to what the human author intended to convey to the original audience in the original, historical situation. This kind of historicism renders Divine inspiration moot for all practical intents and purposes. The Church, on the other hand, has always seen the Bible as the Word of God given in the words of human authors and has always understood its meaning as going beyond what the human author may have consciously understood. As Peter puts it, the Old Testament prophets searched and inquired as to what the Holy Spirit was saying through them about the Christ (1 Peter
1:10-12). There is more meaning in Isaiah 53 than Isaiah himself comprehended, but that meaning is not just anything the interpreter wants it to be. The meaning is controlled by virtue of the fact that it is the meaning intended by the Divine Author who speaks through the entire canon of Scripture. When the systematic theologian re-reads Isaiah 53 in the light of the New Testament more meaning is apparent than the original audience would have seen. Yet that meaning is by no means in contradiction to what Isaiah the prophet consciously intended, nor is it incompatible with the meaning understood by the prophet’s first readers and it is never disconnected from the original human authorial intent. All this is true because of the miracle of inspiration, which is the reason why layers of meaning come to be embedded in the text by the Divine Author.

Some of these layers of meaning were not uncovered until the early church entered into the controversies that led to the formulation of the ecumenical creeds. The classical doctrine of God that emerged is not partially based on culture-bound, philosophical speculation and partially based on biblical exegesis. Rather, the entire classical doctrine of God, including the metaphysics used to express it, is an elaboration of the truth contained in the Holy Scriptures.

Conclusion

As confessional Protestants today we need to be sure that our doctrine of God is not a departure from classical orthodoxy; but rather, is consistent with the ecumenical creeds of the first five centuries and the confessions of the Reformation. In order to do so, we need to make sure that we understand the metaphysical implications of that doctrine. The best way to do that is to engage in Ressourcement and recover the patristic, medieval, and post-Reformation formulations of the doctrine of God including its metaphysical foundations. I am pleased to see this recovery going on today and hope to make some small contribution to it myself in my writings. But I feel compelled to add this warning: if we do not locate a starting point for our systematic theology outside of modernity, we will lose the metaphysics that is necessary to make sense of the classical doctrine of God.

The best starting place for confessional theology in the twenty-first century, in my view, is the post-Reformation reformed scholasticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Understanding these theologians will require us to understand the theological and philosophical tradition in which they worked. It is crucial that we take our stand within that tradition, not simply to repeat it mindlessly, but rather, in
order to build on it as we confront the future. We must reject forcefully the idea that
doing metaphysics is in any way optional or unnecessary, let alone a departure from
the purity of biblical truth.
Helping the Congregation to Hear the Word Read

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This is the first of a five-part series of presentations on The Pastoral Ministry of Public Worship: Leading the Congregation in Reading, Hearing, Praying, Singing and Seeing the Word, delivered by Dr. Duncan at the John Reed Miller Preaching Lectures at RTS Jackson in November 2020.

There is nothing more important in Christian public worship than the reading of the Scriptures, God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, authoritative Word. In 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul says to Timothy: “Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and teaching” (emphasis added). For Paul, reading the Word aloud when the congregation gathers is just as important as the sermon. And this idea does not originate with Paul. It is rooted in the whole history of the people of God, beginning in the days of Moses.

When the children of Israel gathered at Mt. Sinai for worship after the Exodus from Egypt, Moses read God’s word aloud to them. Exodus 24:7 says “he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people.” When Israel finally arrived in the Promised Land, Joshua read Scriptures aloud to them again. Joshua 8:35 tells us “There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel.”

When the long lost book of the law was discovered by Hilkiah in the Temple in the days of good King Josiah (2 Chronicles 34:14), we learn that the King himself “read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the Lord” (2 Chronicles 34:30). After the people of Israel returned from exile in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, Ezra read the book of the law of Moses to the assembled people from early morning until midday (Nehemiah 8:1-8), with all the people standing out of reverence for God’s word!

At the outset of his public ministry, Jesus went to his home synagogue in Nazareth and read the Scriptures, from the prophet of Isaiah (Luke 4:14-21). So, for thousands of years, from Moses’ time to Jesus’ day, the public reading of Scripture was central to the gathering of the people of God. And no wonder, since “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 may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

**Reading the Word in Worship**

Hughes Old has established beyond the shadow of a doubt the central importance of the reading of the word of God as an essential component of Christian worship in the total history of the church.¹ And the church’s practice was squarely based on Scripture. As we have already seen, the public reading of the Bible has been at the heart of the worship of God since Old Testament times. What we need today is ministers who take this directive seriously, for rare is the evangelical church whose service can be characterized as full of Scripture.

In the reading of God’s word, God speaks most directly to His people. And so, this act of worship, in which the verbal self-revelation of God is addressed unedited to the hearts of his gathered people ought not to be ignored, skipped or squeezed out. It is irritating enough to have to endure preachers who say “I don’t have time to read my text today” (as if to say, “we need to hurry on past God’s word to get to mine!”), but to have whole worship services in which the formal reading of God’s word is absent is a self-imposed famine of the word.

Dr. John Reed Miller used to say to me, “Ligon, the reading of the word of God ought to be an event.” It ought to be arresting to the congregation. It ought to grab their attention. It ought sometimes to make them tremble and other times rejoice. It ought to be elevated to the same status and gravity as the other biblical elements of worship, and seen, in combination with pastoral preaching and prayer, as part of the essential *triplex munus* of the Gospel minister in public worship. Thus it needs to be prepared for just like public prayer, just like the sermon, just like the totality of the worship service. The minister of the word can convey the supreme importance of the reading of the word just in the way he does it.

So how does one do it? How ought we to approach this in our corporate worship? The prescription of the *Westminster Directory for Public Worship* is just what the doctor ordered:

¹Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). This multi-volume series constitutes Old’s *magnum opus* and should be the starting point for any intelligent discussion of this matter.
Reading of the word in the congregation, being part of the publick worship of God, (wherein we; acknowledge our dependence upon him, and subjection to him,) and one mean sanctified by him for the edifying of his people, is to be performed by the pastors and teachers.

Howbeit, such as intend the ministry, may occasionally both read the word, and exercise their gift in preaching in the congregation, if allowed by the presbytery thereunto.

All the canonical books of the Old and New Testament (but none of those which are commonly called Apocrypha) shall be publickly read in the vulgar tongue, out of the best allowed translation, distinctly, that all may hear and understand.

How large a portion shall be read at once, is left to the wisdom of the minister; but it is convenient, that ordinarily one chapter of each Testament be read at every meeting; and sometimes more, where the chapters be short, or the coherence of matter requireth it.

It is requisite that all the canonical books be read over in order, that the people may be better acquainted with the whole body of the scriptures; and ordinarily, where the reading in either Testament endeth on one Lord’s day, it is to begin the next.

We commend also the more frequent reading of such scriptures as he that readeth shall think best for edification of his hearers, as the book of Psalms, and such like.

When the minister who readeth shall judge it necessary to expound any part of what is read, let it not be done until the whole chapter or psalm be ended; and regard is always to be had unto the time, that neither preaching, nor other ordinances be straitened, or rendered tedious. Which rule is to be observed in all other publick performances.

Beside publick reading of the holy scriptures, every person that can read, is to be exhorted to read the scriptures privately, (and all others that cannot read, if not disabled by age, or otherwise, are likewise to be exhorted to learn to read,) and to have a Bible. ²

²Of Publick Reading of the Holy Scriptures” in “The Directory for the Publick Worship of God,” The Subordinate Standards and Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland), 138-139.
There are eleven pieces of exceedingly wise biblical and pastoral counsel here.

1. **The public reading of Scripture is a part, an element to be exact, of corporate worship.** It is not an option. When it is neglected an essential aspect of Christian worship is lost irreparably. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* notes: “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God” (23.5). Not reading the Scriptures is on the same order as not having a sermon, or omitting congregational singing.

2. **The public reading of Scripture is a means of grace.** It not only serves as an opportunity whereby we openly and corporately sit under his word—acknowledging his authority, acknowledging our dependence upon the initiative of his self-revelation, acknowledging our glad surrender to the Lordship of his word—but it is also a God-appointed means whereby we are strengthened by and receive his favor. The Lord has deigned to bless and edify his people by it.

3. **The public reading of Scripture ought to be done by those responsible for the preaching of the word.** It is not uncommon to see congregation members invited to lead the church in the reading of Scripture in various ecclesiastical traditions. Sometimes this is done with the desire to make the church service more congregational and participatory. Sometimes it is done to stress a positive form of anti-clericalism or the priesthood of all believers. I’ll not take up that discussion here. The point I want to press home is that pastors should not abandon and totally delegate the reading of the Scriptures to others. The Westminster Directory argued for the minister reading the Scriptures on simple, biblical grounds: Since the preaching of God’s word is to be the unique responsibility of the minister, so also is the reading of that same word. It is all about the coordination of the read and proclaimed word. The read word is not on some lower order of significance than the proclaimed word, but that is the inevitable message sent if preaching in a church is restricted to ministers and elders and the reading of the word is not. The PCA *Book of Church Order, Directory of Worship* picks up on this same theme and says:

The public reading of the Holy Scriptures is performed by the minister as God’s servant. Through it God speaks most directly to the congregation, even more directly than through the sermon. The reading of the Scriptures by the
minister is to be distinguished from the responsive reading of certain portions of Scripture by the minister and the congregation. In the former God addresses His people; in the latter God’s people give expression in the words of Scripture to their contrition, adoration, gratitude and other holy sentiments.3

4. **Aim to read all of Scripture to his people.** The whole canon is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” and so the people of God need to hear from that whole body of God’s word: not only the well-known parts and the encouraging passages or the New Testament and the Psalms, but also the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Wisdom Literature, the historical books, the Gospels and the Epistles, Acts and Revelation. The Reformers not only believed in *sola scriptura* (scripture is the sole, final authority for faith and practice), they believed in *tota scriptura* (ALL scripture is inspired). The Puritans often criticized the court divines of their day for failing to read consecutively through the balance of Scripture. This doesn’t mean that we have to start at Genesis and end at Revelation, but it does mean we ought to be following a method of reading and we ought to be reading through whole books, chapter by chapter, or significant portion by significant portion.

5. **Read from the best available translation.** Now, of course, we could strike up a quick debate about which translation is the best available. But don’t miss a good point here. The minister ought to read from a sound version to which the people have access – a translation. Read from the best available faithful translation in the language of your congregation as a deliberate act of pastoral care. This will promote what the Assembly desired when it said “every person that can read, is to be exhorted to read the scriptures privately, . . . and to have a Bible.”

6. **Exercise common sense in deciding how much Scripture to read at once.** If a congregation has never had a large portion of Scripture reading in its service, I can’t think of a better way to kill the reading of the word than to start plowing through Numbers, or Leviticus, or Chronicles, or Job a chapter at a time. Use discretion! Start with something easy and well-known. Be committed to getting to the point of reading a substantial portion, but take smaller bits at first. Break up over-long chapters. Mark out natural pericopes. Ease the people of God into the habit. Let them drink from the water fountain first, not the fire hydrant. Try a Gospel first—say Mark. Divide up the chapters. Give them a feel for the total story of Jesus’ ministry

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and work. You can read through it in less than half a year, even at a less aggressive pace, and then move on to more challenging matter.

7. **Keep a balance of reading between the two Testaments.** If you are preaching through a New Testament book in your service, then read from the Old Testament. If you are preaching through an Old Testament book, read from a New Testament one. The Westminster directory contemplated a chapter from the Old Testament and a chapter from the New Testament at every service, in addition to the sermon text and message! That is probably a little aggressive for today and for our typical service lengths, but the principle of paying attention to the balance of Old and New in your reading is as wise as when they first said it. Depending upon the duration of your service, it may eventually become possible to have more than one reading.

8. **Develop an orderly plan for reading through the Scripture.** The Directory says that “it is requisite that all the canonical books be read over in order, that the people may be better acquainted with the whole body of the scriptures.” As we mentioned under point number 4, develop and follow a practical and rational plan for working through the Scriptures. Move chronologically, or through alternate types of biblical literature, or for a time in canonical order. But whatever the case may be, there needs to be some method to what you plan to read.

9. **Pick up where you leave off.** Following on the last point, the Directory advises that “ordinarily, where the reading in either Testament endeth on one Lord’s Day, it is to begin the next.” The Puritans often poked fun at the Anglican court divines for the endless skipping around in their brief readings. Their path resembled rabbit trails, the Puritans said. Remind the people what they read last, show them the connections with today’s reading, give them a feel for the big picture, and remember – sad to say– many in your hearing will not have picked up a Bible at any point during the week. This may be the only time they hear the word read or read it for themselves all week. This reading, then, is important.

10. **Make regular use of exceptionally edifying portions of Scripture like the Psalms.** There are some parts of Scripture that lend themselves to greater profit in being read aloud. It is not that they are more inspired, but who can doubt that Psalm 51 is capable of yielding an immediate and obvious benefit that would escape most hearers of the genealogy of 1 Chronicles 6? The reading and hearing of the Psalms, for instance, provides resources for a profound spirituality, a piety that equals the exigencies of our experience. The Psalms deal with the realities of life and reveal a soul poured out to the living God—the complaints, the heartaches, the emptiness—and yet alongside these, acknowledge a God who is incomparably great, whose plans and
Helping the Congregation to Hear the Word Read

purposes are far above our agendas and understandings, but who also loves us with an everlasting covenant love. Thus, we see in the Psalms, conjoined, a perfect biblical balance of objective and subjective in spiritual experience. In the Psalms, God and his word are clearly dominant in the believer’s experience without any diminution whatsoever of the wounds and quandaries and questions of life in a fallen world. No wonder the Reformers thought we ought to sing the Psalms and read the Psalms in worship—they saw them as the very core of a well-rounded Christian experience. So, it is natural that the Psalms might be featured with a prominence in our cycle of public readings that, say, 2 Samuel would not share.

11. Offer brief explanatory remarks about the reading (but those remarks ought not to be over-long nor overshadow the event of the reading of the word). In other words, very quickly provide some well-thought-out sentences of background and introduction. What is the context of the passage? What is its main point? What should the hearer listen for in particular? The design of these comments should not be to preach a brief sermon, but to help hearers understand better what is about to be read.

If Bible-believing churches started reading a significant amount of Scripture in every service (not just the minister’s sermon text), it would greatly enrich the people of God, who need the Word of God more than they need food. “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

I like Osborne’s book. The title (*Divine Blessing and the Fullness of Life in the Presence of God*) and the series name (“Short Studies in Biblical Theology”) tell you a lot about it. It is a theology of the blessings God brings to his people (“Divine Blessing”). These blessings may be summarized as including both material and spiritual benefits (“Fullness of Life”). They are primarily experienced only in a covenantal relationship with God (“in the Presence of God”). The character of these blessings is slightly modified throughout redemptive-history, and all of this is done well in 126 small pages of text (“Short Studies in Biblical Theology”).

Osborne writes for ordinary church members so they can appreciate what it means to be blessed by God. He notes the common, and many times non-biblical, “blessing” usage in our culture that is virtually a boast about oneself by using humble-sounding words, e.g., “I am so blessed to be good at soccer” (my example). He also tells the personal story of being in a small group where someone asks, “If God gives me a car, is he blessing me?” and the various conflicting answers that were given by well-meaning Christians (p. 107). Finally, he has a soft polemic in much of the book against a prosperity-gospel use of blessing where “blessing = wealth” (p. 72). He points out that there are many biblical situations where it is emphasized that “prosperity ≠ righteousness,” and “suffering ≠ wickedness” (p. 102).

In addressing a broad audience, Osborne has a non-academic and winsome style. There is even occasionally a little comedy, e.g., “God’s [land] promise is not just a place for Abram to tie up his camels!” (p. 59). Given this, there is significant substance to his theology and exegesis that any sophisticated reader will quickly recognize.
the text per se, Osborne presents his arguments assuming conservative assumptions, and, as I perceive it, from at least a generally Reformed perspective. As can be seen from his footnotes, however, he is well aware of academic critical/liberal-versus-conservative issues along with often using common-grace insights of critical/liberal scholars.

In the academic world, there has been some debate as to the best summary of the multifaceted use of the “blessing” word group (ברך, εὐλογέω, and cognates). Osborne has three main uses: (1) “to bless as an action,” (2) “a blessing as thing... a gift,” and (3) “being blessed as a state of being” (p. 20). He also appropriately includes discussions of the conceptually similar “happy”/“blessed” (אשֶׁר, μακάρις). Finally, he occasionally looks at passages where none of these words are used but the concept surely is (e.g., Israel’s sacrificial system, the “all things” of Rom. 8:32).

Osborne covers many details connected to “blessing” throughout redemptive-history. His primary point is: “God’s blessings for his people are relational, spiritual, material, present, and eschatological” (p. 133). Of course, in the final eschaton, he notes that there still will be spiritual and material blessings in a relational context, but there will no longer be a now/not-yet aspect. To make his broad point, the book consists of an introduction and five chapters. Using my wording, the chapters cover (1) Genesis 1–3, (2) Genesis 12–50, (3) Exodus through the post-exilic era, (4) the New Testament age, and (5) the final eschaton (new heavens and new earth). Of the five, by far the least space is given to the final eschaton.

As part of the soft anti-health-and-wealth polemic, there are two significant emphases. The first is that the Old Testament blessings are more than material. Yes, they include material benefits, but there are also spiritual benefits. And both of these benefits are in the primary covenantal relationship with God, which then would include proper relationships with other humans. These blessings are not due to merit, but they are related to “faith-driven obedience” (p. 57, 66). The Old Testament, especially certain Psalms and Job, also include righteous suffering and poverty. The second significant emphasis is to show that this same Old Testament material-spiritual-relational understanding of blessing comes into the New Testament. There are, however, some redemptive-historical changes, including now/not-yet factors and more of an emphasis on the spiritual. But fundamentally, it is the same blessing theology.
There is a keen pastoral insight stressed in this book. Do not make a “false dichotomy of either loving the giver or the gift” (p. 104). Concerning loving the gift more than the giver, Osborne includes a striking illustration. Consider a typical child at Christmas who receives a really good gift. But he gets so overly excited at the gift that he (unconsciously) focuses his joy only on the gift and forgets about the giver. Osborne offers sage advice for the modern Christian upon receiving a material or circumstantial benefit that appears on the surface to be a blessing. “Does this ‘blessing’ draw me closer to the triune God? Does this need being met bring me nearer to the giver, or is it a distraction?” (p.126, emphasis removed).

Although not stated in this book, its understanding of blessings as including both material and spiritual aspects in every redemptive-historical age well matches standard Reformed theology. Chapter XIII of The Second Helvetic Confession (AD 1566) notes that both Old and New Testament believers had “two kinds of promises.” Some were “of present and transitory things: such as were the promises of the land of Canaan, and of victories; and such as are nowadays concerning our daily bread. Other promises there were then, and are now, of heavenly and everlasting things; as of God’s favor, remission of sins, and life everlasting, through faith in Jesus Christ” (emphasis mine). Reformed theology and Osborne’s book get this right.

RTS students and pastors should read this book. It helps solidify for them a basic and important theme in the Bible, which in turn allows them to better educate church members and/or recommend this book to members. And, in addition, RTS students and pastors may want to read chapter XIII of The Second Helvetic Confession!

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reflection on fashion. Far from strangers forced together, what emerges clearly is that theologians ancient and modern alike took “fashion seriously well before the discipline of fashion theory” (21). Indeed, by exploring the intersection of fashion and theology through the lenses of tradition, reform, public discourse, art, and everyday life, Covolo shows not only the many ways in which fashion theory and theology can be fruitfully connected, but also “the debt fashion theory holds to theology.” (115) In many ways, Covolo’s work here is a vindication of what Herman Bavinck had said a little over a century ago in one sphere of life: “There is nothing human that cannot be called Christian” – and fashion, as a facet of human existence, can indeed be traced fruitfully to Christian thought.¹

In the first chapter on tradition, Covolo outlines the responses to fashion by Tertullian, Augustine, and Aquinas. While Tertullian insisted on an antithesis between Christian dress (arguing, for example, that Christians ought to avoid the Roman toga and opt for a Pallum to distinguish their dress), Augustine made several concessions to the cultural plurality, relativity, and usefulness of fashion. Aquinas, on the other hand, adopted Augustine’s concessions while synthesizing Aristotle’s moral theology to argue that dress should be moderated by temperance, with social harmony as a goal. Following the Aristotelian framework of distributive justice, Aquinas argued that appropriate dress should be followed in accordance with one’s status and social standing within society, arguing as well that subjective considerations play a role in why someone might put on make-up or a particular outfit. Though there’s a variety of opinions presented here, what emerges clearly is that fashion was considered to reflect particular objective realities in nature and society, and that what one wears is for the goal of conformity to those external conditions.

Chapter two begins with a discussion of Calvin on fashion. While Calvin maintained the common pastoral concern to warn the laity about the moral excesses associated with dress and to pursue modesty, he linked clothing with food as gifts of God. Far from the stereotype of Calvin as a killjoy, Covolo argued that Calvin rooted a beauty for fashion in the lavishness of the Creator himself, who presents his own glory in the theater of creation. Removing the crux of the divine drama from the Mass to the ordinary, Calvin imbued a sense of transcendence into the mundane lives of the public. Strikingly, what emerges in Calvin is both a nuanced theological appreciation for fashion and a public moral imperative tied to it that anticipates what Christopher Watkin has recently called diagonalization:

Whereas Luther’s two kingdoms tended to retain sartorial hierarchies in society, and [Menno] Simon’s radicalization of Luther’s two kingdoms recapitulated a Tertullian limitation of sartorial directives to the church, Calvin’s approach created a dialectic that both recognized and relativized sartorial distinction across society at the same time. (26, emphasis his).

When one turns to Kuyper in the 19th century, what emerges is an emphasis on the deadening uniformity that arises from the French Revolution for fashion. Kuyper argues that the hegemonic influence of secularism from the revolution led to a halting of the colorful and decadent diversity of the past, with a self-proclaimed elite class imposing its bland style on others. Kuyper’s visit to America showed him that American style was at once more elegant and diverse than what he was used to in Europe – an achievement that he would characteristically trace back to America’s Calvinist origins, which, in his (rather dated) words, only “produced well-dressed people” (36).

Kuyper’s comments about the uniformity of secularist dress would be radically challenged as the 20th century continues. No longer is it possible to speak of a singular fashion of a singular period, the 20th century saw the booming of fashion theory and particularized fashions for every aspect of modern life and preference. Barth, likewise, suggested that fashion was at once both a legitimate creaturely enterprise often hijacked by dark forces, and pointed out that the fashions of the day often reflected a culture’s zeitgeist.

Covolo’s third chapter explores precisely that relationship between fashion and public life. Covolo challenges the narrative that suggests that the rise of fashion is incompatible with a healthy democratic society. This narrative suggests that a focus on fashion shifts the imagination away from public rationality to personal taste determined by an aristocratic elite from the top down. The opposing narrative that suggest that fashion actually flattens the social classes – especially in the modern age of bottom-up pluralization - is also too simplistic. Nonetheless, these twin problematic narratives hold in common that faith is a negative influence for rational public life, with the former suggesting that faith, like fashion, prefers blind representation over rationality, and the latter that faith, as opposed to fashion, is an authoritarian tyrant that suppresses freedom and expression. Covolo notes that this rejection of theology and social ontology inherent within the rise of secularism and modern fashion renders fashion inherently unstable. Freed from claims of the good,
fashion is reduced to mere self-display with no other basis than an arbitrary appeal to
taste.

Yet, such micro-level reductions of fashion to individual preference can never
be fully abstracted from broader, contextual, normative, and societal concerns. Society
inevitably imposes itself, as every individual demands mutual recognition for what is
‘in’ or ‘out’ of fashion. The secular world, despite its claims to tolerance and freedom,
actually impinges on the choices of particular cultures precisely when what one wears
reflects theological convictions that challenge the secular status quo – as displayed in
the secular suspicion of the Muslim woman wearing the headscarf. It is in seeing these
opportunities that Covolo retrieved Kuyper’s desire to articulate a “Christian fashion,”
that is, a fashion that arises out of a holistic Christian world-and-life view
(weltaanschaung). Without denying the reality of pluralism and a legitimate public
space where religious and areligious expression obtain, a Christian (Kuyperian)
thology, Covolo suggests, provides good grounds for engagement with this public
space of fashion.

Chapter four explores whether fashion should be included as an art. While
Kantian schools argue that fashion stifles contemplation and distracts with aesthetic
forms, others argue that fashion, like real art, can produce the same “aura” that roots
that artwork in a particular place, time, ritual, and tradition. This insight brings
Covolo to a discussion of priestly garments and the role of beauty within the broader
Catholic imagination, noting that beauty – for thinkers like Augustine – is a “signpost
for the Christian” that recalls the soul’s contact with infinite Beauty himself (77).
Aquinas argues that perception of beauty is cognitive, a path of knowing that leads
the mind to a right contemplation of the object. Dante articulates beauty as a transit
toward the divine. Contemporary understandings of fashion, however, reflect the view
that sartorial choices are based on shifting social consensus. And, despite the desire to
appropriate Catholic style in modern fashion, as reflected, for example, in the
Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibit ‘Heavenly Bodies,’ the relationship between
Catholic beauty and modern fashion remains tenuous at best.

Here, Covolo then considers again a Reformational view of fashion as an
alternative to engage modern fashion discourse. Calvin argued that art’s place was not
to picture the divine (for that would be idolatrous), but rather to capture that which
was already visible. Kuyper took this insight and argued that the Reformation had
freed art from the Church’s dominion and allowed it to come to its own. Yet, Covolo
then turns to more contemporary neo-Calvinist thinkers like Calvin Seerveld and
Nicholas Wolterstorff to critique Kuyper’s (rather Kantian) ideal of art as invoking
detached contemplation. Seerveld argues that art is a “God-given sphere of cultural endeavor uniquely tasked with a normative aesthetic based on the fabric of creation’s ‘allusiveness’ – a quality of ‘nuancefulness’ that stimulates the senses and emotions through the free play of symbolic action” (87). This leads Seerveld to caution against fashion’s tendency to be mired up in consumerist fads, but simultaneously to affirm that human beings were duty-bound to dress in a way that echoes ‘the multifaceted aesthetic modality of the world God made” (87). Wolterstorff, too, critiques the classical and Enlightenment views of art as contemplative rather than constructive, for such models leave art out of the ordinary lives of individuals embedded within society. An illumining summative paragraph concludes this section and anticipates the final chapter:

Seerveld and Wolterstorff offer a theological basis for understanding the art of fashion that departs from the Catholic imagination. Because humanity is called as God’s agents to purposeful action within creation – working with both physical realities and social, cultural, and hermeneutic worlds – such purposeful aesthetic action is already theological. Drawing from Calvin’s view of art as one of the good gifts given in creation, and retaining his suspicion of art as a conveyor of transcendent beauty, Neo-Reformed thought brings new theological lenses to the art of fashion. Whereas the Catholic imagination looked to art to capture the timeless, the universal, and the beautiful, the Protestant imagination gave theological justification for art to capture the ephemeral, the particular, and the mundane. And whereas the Catholic imagination retained images as stand-alone artifacts to be experienced through absorbed attention, the Protestant imagination reframed images as conceptual sites of meaning. These schools of thought issue two very different approaches to the art of fashion: (1) fashionable art as enchanted artifacts that life the viewer into another world, and (2) fashionable art as sites of meaning that challenge convention while raising conceptual issues. The first is an art that connects the viewer upward; the second is an art that is comfortable retaining a terrestrial conversation. (89)

With this observation in view, Covolo argues that the Protestant imagination for art is a fecund resource for empowering and engaging with contemporary modes of fashion.
The last chapter offers a theological reflection of fashion for the everyday. Covolo begins by discussing the modern preoccupation with the novel and Augustine’s views of time in the *Confessions*. Fixating on the new signals at once the fallen condition of eluding the divine and yet also the desire for something that would finally satisfy the human heart. Covolo then discusses the way in which one’s fashion choices reflect mini-narratives that imagines audiences and arcs within the day. These observations invite Christians to think of fashion in terms of God’s time and narrative in redemptive-history. Drawing from the recent ‘theatrical’ turn of the Christian life as actors in an over-arching theo-drama, Covolo argues that Christians ought to take their sartorial cues from Christ himself. Fittingly, this chapter concludes with a sketch of what this means for Christian dress: culturally engaged (for Christ too did not repudiate but lived and dressed within his own cultural milieu), hospitable, joyful, convivial, prophetic (for dress can be used to challenge post-lapsarian status quos), and hopeful.

A project of neo-Calvinism was always the bringing to bear of theology to every area of life, and a common, rather cynical, retort to that aim is the taunt in the form of a quick *reductio ad absurdum* - something to the effect of: “surely Christianity doesn’t change anything in the way we view food, or what we wear!” Indeed, I have a vivid memory of an interlocutor claiming that the Kuyperian project is fixated on high culture far detached from the concerns of the mundane, and talk of a Christian world-and-life-view is irrelevant to normal domains of food and dress. At times Kuyperians can also blunder by offering theologically thin and thoughtless responses to such queries. Herein is the value of Covolo’s work as a beginning of a vindication of this neo-Calvinistic (or neo-Reformed) impulse: he shows not only that fashion can be connected to theology, but that fashion is indeed *indebted* to theology. The broad Christian tradition has always offered a theological engagement with fashion, and neo-Calvinist thought has drawn from and extended those insights.

Neo-Calvinists need these performative works that not merely repeat the dictum that all things can be related to Christ: they need to show, not tell. Covolo, along with the recent work of other fresh thinkers like Matthew Kaemingk and Cory Wilson (e.g. *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, Eerdmans, 2018; *Work and Worship*, Baker Academic, 2020), are helpful in showing how the Kuyperian impulse is deeply traditioned, practical, and fruitful.

Several questions, of course, still remain. I wonder if it was necessary, for example, to pit the Protestant instinct of interpreting art as a depiction of visible realities with the classical view of art as depicting another world. A Reformed
eclecticism might argue that these options are not mutually exclusive but rather can be brought together. And I wonder if at times the neo-Calvinist philosophers here have too quickly criticized their own Catholic tradition. Further, the discussion of the theo-dramatic and neo-Reformational views of art and the everyday might benefit from a more substantial analysis of phenomenology as a philosophical tool that grants significance to everyday, nonconceptual embodiment and perception.

These questions merely show that Covolo was right to note that his explorations are starting points for further work to be done. Indeed, I should note that Covolo’s prose was smooth and lucid – the book serves not just as a theological reflection on fashion, but also an invitation for students and scholars alike to enter into this theologically fruitful program of linking particular spheres of creational life to Christ’s lordship.

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Criticism can drive men from the ministry. For some it comes early in their careers, unexpected and fierce, like a flash flood. Unable to receive criticism, the pastor resigns or moves to another field believing, wrongly, that his initial experience was unique.

What went wrong? Part of the problem can be unrealistic expectations. While preparing for ministry, a young man envisions his future congregation as a group of believers eager to learn from him and follow his leadership. Early on, criticism came and expectations were shattered, leaving him hurt and disillusioned. Isolation can exacerbate the problem. Perhaps for the first time, he is experiencing life without the support of nearby family, encouraging friends, and affirming professors.

Inexperience can intensify the hurt. He may arrive at his first church with little or no management experience – he hasn’t been exposed to the kind of criticism that comes with the responsibility of leadership.
I want my seminary students properly prepared for this particular challenge, which is why I was glad to make *Pastors and Their Critics* a required text in my recent seminary leadership class. Judging from student papers, without exception they found the authors' counsel valuable.

The book’s four parts provide a comprehensive framework for thinking through this challenge in ministry.

**Part One: Biblical Foundations for Coping with Criticism**

As with any issue of faith and practice, study must begin with the Word of God. What do the Scriptures teach us about coping with criticism?

The authors remind us that we need not read far in Genesis before we encounter the first example of unjust criticism. The serpent assaults God’s character, denying his goodness.

The abuse directed at God continues and its scope widens as God’s servants find themselves on the receiving end of those attacks. The life of Moses, Aaron, and David are used to explore the verbal flak that is directed at leaders from within the covenant community. Nehemiah becomes a case study of facing opposition from the unbelieving world.

Criticism tests the mettle of one’s faith. Fundamental questions came to mind: Does the pastor trust the rule of the sovereign God who works all things according the counsel of his will and for his glory? Does he believe that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, a decree that includes the mistreatment of his servants? Does his faith rest in the Lord’s “omniscient mercy and overruling justice”? When mistreated, does he, like Nehemiah, persevere in doing good?

When the authors turn to the New Testament, Christ and his sufferings become the object of their study. Although Christ’s sufferings as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin are unique, his response to those who treated him unjustly becomes the model for pastors who endure unjust treatment.

**Part Two: Practical Principles for Coping with Criticism**

Contents of this section are arranged under four exhortations: receive criticism realistically, receive criticism humbly, respond with sober judgment, and respond with grace.
The authors’ counsel is comprehensive, practical, and pastoral. Conflict is an unavoidable reality in a fallen world. Pastors must become skilled at analyzing it, pinpointing its source, evaluating its content, and determining the extent of the criticism by members of the congregation. The wise pastor determines to understand both the motives of his critic and to sympathize with the trials his critic faces.

The minister must also approach conflict with humility. He must listen carefully to critics, evaluate his actions in light of their criticism, examine his own motives, and seek the honest feedback of trusted confidantes who will help assess the validity of the complaints. He recognizes that his tone of voice can hurt or help the situation.

Responding to criticism with sober judgment requires disciplined prayer and an abundance of wisdom. Does the situation require silence or verbal response? If a verbal response is required, what about its timing?

If a pastor is to respond to his critics with grace, he must first have a clean conscience before God. A defiled conscience leads to the minimizing of his own sins and the magnifying of the sins of others. Either impairs his ability to handle verbal criticism in a way that promotes holiness of life.

Pastors must possess spiritual eyes that see critics – both fair and unfair - as gifts from God for their own sanctification.

**Part Three: Practical Principles for Constructive Criticism in the Church**

When a pastor must offer godly criticism to a member of his flock, he must take into account more than the words he will use. True, they must be carefully chosen. But he must also cultivate a pastoral demeanor that reinforces his concern for his congregation. His ministry must be distinguished by personal involvement in the lives of his congregation and a tenor of ministry that convinces them that their pastor is for them in Jesus Christ.

The pastor seeks to pursue a congregational environment conducive to the offering of godly counsel and criticism. That environment will only exist where the ministry of the word exalts Christ and is supported by earnest prayer that diligently seeks the spiritual fruits of the preached word. The pastor sustains that environment by his readiness to confess his own public faults and provides platforms for members of the congregation to voice their concerns.
Part Four: Theological Vision for Coping with Criticism

Receiving and giving criticism is a component of ministry. One temptation is to become so consumed with it that the pastor loses sight of the big picture – namely, that his labors are for the glory of God and the edification of his church and that they must be performed in light of the coming Judgment Day. The pastor always has eternity in mind, and the perfect love that distinguishes the world to come. Thoughts fixed on that hope will sustain pastors through present trials. Coping with critics is for this age and not the age to come!

Conclusion

I wholeheartedly commend this book. Its sound exegesis, practical counsel, and concrete examples will encourage ministers at any stage of pastoral ministry. Seminarians will want to read carefully the appendix, “Preparing for the Fires of Criticism While in Seminary,” by Nick Thompson.

As mentor pastors read this book, they should ask themselves how they can best prepare their interns and assistants to cope with criticism. I have mentored men for several decades now and am convinced we must resist the temptation to act like overly protective parents, shielding young men from criticism. Instead, we want them to receive it during a time when we can help them process it and learn to respond to it appropriately. That means talking with young men about the criticism they receive, making sure they have listened carefully to the concerns expressed, helping them to judge their accuracy, and sending them back to their critics to foster a mutually beneficial relationship. Not every outcome will be ideal, but this is one way we can, along with our authors, help our men cope constructively with criticism to the glory of God and to the building up in holiness of our Savior’s beloved church.

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