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“Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”
A Centennial Symposium

This May marks the one-hundredth anniversary of the sermon preached by Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” We offer five reflections on the sermon, its role in the Presbyterian controversy in the early twentieth century, and the lessons it bears for Presbyterianism in the twenty-first century.

Harry Emerson Fosdick and the Spirit of American Liberalism
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On May 21, 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick took to the pulpit of Old First—the historic First Presbyterian Church (est. 1716) located on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan—to deliver what would be his most famous sermon. The American church broadly, and the Presbyterian church specifically, were already divided into conservative and liberal camps. Fosdick’s sermon did not create this theological and ecclesiastical division. But his sermon that spring clearly exposed the division, and, more than that, it exemplified all the reasons for it. For as much as Fosdick thought of himself as irenic, moderate, and peace-loving, one does not entitle a sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” without meaning to pick a fight.

A Sermon for the Times

The text for Fosdick’s sermon that morning came from Acts 5:38-39 where the esteemed Gamaliel, a leader of the Jewish Sanhedrin, counsels an angry mob to leave the apostles alone, for if their “work be of men, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it.” Whether Fosdick fancied himself Gamaliel or not, he considered the Pharisee’s words from the first century to be a model for the twentieth century. What the church needed more than ever was a spirit of liberality and tolerance. In particular, this meant a spirit of charity toward the “multitudes of reverent Christians who have been unable to keep this new knowledge [about science, history, and religion] in one compartment of their minds and the Christian faith in another.” In affirming the aphorism “cantankerousness is worse than heterodoxy,” Fosdick argued that “the worst kind of church that can be offered to the allegiance of the new generation is an intolerant church.”

1 Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” Christian Work 102 (June 10, 1922), 716-722.
At the heart of the sermon was an indictment of fundamentalists and their fundamentals. Ostensibly, Fosdick was simply making the case that no one has “a right to deny the Christian name to those who differ” on the disputed points of Fundamentalism, but it was also obvious that Fosdick looked on fundamentalist doctrines with incredulity. Fosdick questioned the historicity of miracles and the Virgin Birth, he denied the inerrancy of the Scriptures and the atonement as a propitiatory sacrifice, and he did not accept the second coming of Christ as a literal event to be looked for in the clouds.

Key to Fosdick’s theological hermeneutic was his conviction that religion was an evolutionary development, and that religious belief should evolve as well. Just as people in previous generations had to learn that the earth revolves around the sun, so our generation must find a way for “the new knowledge and the old faith” to be “blended in a new combination.” In Fosdick’s estimation, educated people were turned off by the staid doctrines of the past and were starting to look for religious answers outside the church. If the church did not offer new ideas for a new day, it would suffer embarrassment and sink into irrelevance.

In the sermon’s stirring conclusion, Fosdick stated adamantly, “I do not believe for a moment that the Fundamentalists are going to succeed.” Love would triumph over intolerance; that’s what mattered. “There are many opinions in the field of modern controversy,” Fosdick observed, “concerning which I am not sure whether they are right or wrong, but there is one thing I am sure of: courtesy and kindness and tolerance and humility and fairness are right. Opinions may be mistaken; love never is.” That last sentence perfectly captures the spirit of Fosdick’s sermon and the spirit of the liberalism he did so much to promote. For Fosdick, it was a “penitent shame that the Christian church should be quarreling over little matters when the world is dying of great needs.” The fundamentalists were insisting on dubious theological theories and waging war for doctrinal idiosyncrasies when, in Fosdick’s words, “So much of it does not matter!” In Fosdick’s mind, there was “not a single thing at stake in the controversy on which depends the salvation of human souls.” The need of the hour was not theological wrangling, but laboring so “that men in their personal lives and in their social relationships should know Jesus Christ.” In short, Fosdick’s vision for the church was the expansive charity of liberalism instead of the cramped rigidity of fundamentalism. “God keep us,” he exhorted in the last line of his sermon, “intellectually hospitable, open-minded, liberty-loving, fair, tolerant, not with the tolerance of indifference as though we did not care about the faith, but because always our major emphasis is upon the weightier matters of the law.”

A Heretic for his Generation

Harry Emerson Fosdick was born in 1878 in Buffalo, New York into a family that Fosdick later described as both “deeply Christian” and possessing “a strong tradition of noncomformity.” Although he readily embraced his parents’ faith—by

contagion rather than coercion, he recalled—religion became the main source of his unhappiness as a child. In his autobiography, Fosdick reflected (sounding more like an adult than a child) that “some of the most wretched hours of my boyhood were caused by the pettiness and obscurantism, the miserable legalism and terrifying appeals to fear that were associated with the religion of the churches.” As a sensitive boy, deeply religious and morbidly introspective, Fosdick recalled “weeping at night for fear of going to hell.” He agonized that he had committed the unpardonable sin and that he would suffer forever in the horrors described in the book of Revelation. It is not hard to see how the young Fosdick (or at least as he remembered himself) would grow into the adult Fosdick: an earnest man committed to the uplifting power of religion, with an equal commitment to ridding religion of antiquated and unhelpful elements from the past.

In 1900, Fosdick graduated from Colgate University where his thinking was profoundly shaped by the liberal Baptist theologian William Newton Clarke (1841-1912). At Colgate, Fosdick became a firm believer in evolution and a skeptic toward orthodox Christianity. When he first felt a call to ministry in college, most of his classmates were surprised. By his own admission, as a college student, he was a better dancer than theologian. In fact, so eviscerated was his faith, Fosdick wondered whether any church would want him for a pastor:

I was through with orthodox dogma. I had not the faintest interest in any sect or denomination. I could not have told clearly what I believed about any major Christian doctrine. I did not see how any denomination could ever accept me as its minister. But I did not care. I wanted to make a contribution to the spiritual life of my generation.

In time, however, crowds would clamor for Fosdick the minister. After graduating with a Bachelor of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1904, Fosdick was ordained to the Baptist ministry and took the pulpit of First Baptist Church in Montclair, New Jersey. After pastoring in Montclair for more than a decade, Fosdick crossed the Hudson and served in three different churches in New York City: First Presbyterian Church (1918-25), Park Avenue Baptist Church (1925-30), and Riverside Church (1930-1946), the interdenominational church whose 2500-seat gothic cathedral was conceived and financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. with the intention that Fosdick would be the senior pastor. Fosdick also taught homiletics at Union Theological Seminary from 1915 to 1946.

By all accounts, Fosdick was one of the most prominent preachers of the twentieth century. He wrote forty-seven books, numerous articles, and the well-

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3 Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 33.

4 Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 35-36.

5 Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 57.

6 Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 57.
known hymn “God of Grace and God of Glory.” Martin Luther King, Jr., called Fosdick the greatest preacher of the century. Labeled as “modernism’s Moses,” Fosdick was a spiritual inspiration to some and a singular instance of spiritual declension to others. When Ivy Lee, a leading advertising executive and a member of Fosdick’s church, saw to it that “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” was sent to every ordained Protestant minister in the country and that the sermon was reprinted in numerous liberal periodicals, there was bound to be a quick and vociferous response. For orthodox Presbyterians, Fosdick was everything they had feared and everything that was wrong with their denomination.

In Fosdick’s telling, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” was a plea for tolerance, a good faith petition for the church “to take in both liberals and conservatives without either trying to drive the other out.” And yet, even Robert Moats Miller, Fosdick’s sympathetic biographer, acknowledges that “Fosdick was kidding himself” by characterizing the sermon in this way. “What were conservative Presbyterians to think when this Baptist declared himself from a Presbyterian pulpit belief in the virgin birth nonessential, the inerrancy of the Scriptures incredible, the second coming of Christ from the skies an outmoded phrasing of hope?” Mired in denominational controversy and feeling the sting of criticism, Fosdick resigned his pastorate at Old Church in 1924. “They call me a heretic,” Fosdick said in his farewell sermon. “Well, I am a heretic if conventional orthodoxy is the standard. I should be ashamed to live in this generation and not be a heretic.”

A Champion for True Liberalism

The purpose of this article is not to evaluate Fosdick’s ministry. Judged by historic Christian orthodoxy, let alone by the confessions of the Presbyterian church, Fosdick is a cautionary tale in how to end up on the wrong side of Machen’s “Christianity and Liberalism” divide. Judged by the internal logic of liberalism, Fosdick is a successful example—outdated though it may be—of how one man reached out to an unbelieving world with a message of Christian spirituality to those who might not have otherwise listened. “The idea of liberal theology,” writes Gary Dorrien, a professor at Fosdick’s alma mater, Union Theological Seminary, is the 300-year-old idea “that Christian theology can be genuinely Christian without being based upon external authority.” Liberalism is the belief that “religion should be modern and progressive from the standpoint of modern knowledge and experience.” It is the conviction that one can be a faithful Christian without believing

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8 Fosdick, Living of These Days, 145.


10 Fosdick, Living of These Days, 176.
in hell or in a universal flood, without believing that God commanded the extermination of the Canaanites, and without believing that God “demanded the literal sacrifice of his Son as a substitutionary legal payment for sin.”

In all of this, Fosdick was one of liberalism’s most eloquent and effective spokesmen of the last century. Fosdick was not as radical as some of his followers would have liked. He was not a revolutionary. He valued the church or believed in the transforming power of Christianity (as he understood it). Like most mainliner Protestants of his age, Fosdick was anticommunist and an unapologetic supporter of democracy. Later in life, under the influence of Swiss theologian Karl Barth, Fosdick insisted that the church had to go beyond modernism and that the world needed to rediscover the doctrine of sin. He was an “evangelical liberal” in that he took the Bible seriously—believed it contained old truths that needed to be expressed in new language—and wanted people to have a relationship with Jesus.

And yet, even if Fosdick had an evangelical impulse to win the hearts of the masses, in any true theological sense of the word, he was a liberal. Indeed, Fosdick openly and unabashedly described himself as a liberal. And rightly so. When Fosdick preached about salvation from sin there was no clear doctrine of Christ’s atonement, no mention of divine wrath, only a vague sentiment that Jesus “came to save men from that inner wrongness that curses human life.” Just as important, Fosdick did not believe in the divinity of Christ in any meaningful sense. “Wherever goodness, beauty, truth, love are—there is the divine,” Fosdick preached in a 1933 sermon. We can call Jesus divine if we mean “the divinity of his spiritual life,” but Jesus’s divinity differs from ours only in degree, not in kind. In explicitly rejecting the Chalcedonian Definition—that Christ is the second person of the Trinity, eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, who took upon himself a human nature, so that the two distinct natures were inseparably joined together in one person—Fosdick argued that the historic church had “garbled [Jesus] beyond all recognition.” When Fosdick calls himself a heretic, we should take him at his word.

According to Miller, Fosdick’s ministry can be summed up with a single line: “though astronomies change, the stars abide.” This was Fosdick’s conviction

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12 See, for example, Fosdick’s sermon “A Religion to Support Democracy” (1955) in *Answers to Real Problems: Selected Sermons of Harry Emerson Fosdick*, Ed. Mark E. Yurs (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008). “Democracy has done for us Christians an incalculable service, and now in her hour of need democracy asks us what we can do for her. What kind of religion ought ours to be if it is to support the democratic faith and practice?” (216).

13 Mark Yurs calls Fosdick “an evangelical liberal” in his Introduction to *Answers to Real Problems*, viii.

14 From Fosdick’s sermon “The Modern World’s Rediscovery of Sin” (1941) in *Answers to Real Problems*, 140.

15 From Fosdick’s sermon “The Peril of Worshiping Jesus” (1933) in *Answers to Real Problems*, 32.


17 Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, viii.
throughout his pastoral career. In one of his later sermons, he described religion as akin to courtesy: an inward spirit that expresses itself in many forms.\footnote{Fosdick, \textit{Answers to Real Problems}, 208.} Preaching from Joshua 7:6 about Joshua falling on his face before the ark, Fosdick argued that “arks pass away, but religion remains.”\footnote{From Fosdick’s sermon “Conservative and Liberal Temperaments in Religion” (1955) in \textit{Answers to Real Problems}, 208.} For many Christians, Fosdick explains, their “ark” is a special doctrine or specific denomination, some bit of ritual, some miracle in history, a special theory of the atonement, a belief in fiat creation or the Virgin Birth. “Such things may have been very precious in your experience,” Fosdick allows, but we must not confuse keeping the faith with keeping the ark.\footnote{Fosdick, \textit{Answers to Real Problems}, 212.} Christians are too easily separated by creeds and rituals, when we can find common ground in our prayers and hymns.\footnote{Fosdick, \textit{Answers to Real Problems}, 214.} That was the essence of Fosdick’s message and the essence of twentieth-century liberal Christianity. “If, then, you ask what a true liberalism is, I should say that it is one that pays little attention to the arks that divide, but cares with all its heart about the religion that unites.”\footnote{Fosdick, \textit{Answers to Real Problems}, 215.}
Context: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Fosdick’s Sermon

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When Harry Emerson Fosdick stepped into the pulpit at First Presbyterian Church, New York City, on May 21, 1922, he undoubtedly reckoned that he was firing a broadside shot towards conservative religionists within the northern Baptist and Presbyterian denominations. After all, the Baptist preacher and homiletics professor knew that, in provocatively asking “shall the fundamentalists win,” he was building a case for them to be defeated. However, Fosdick probably did not reckon with how his sermon would serve as the point when, properly speaking, the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy reached its crisis moment. Perhaps it is only in retrospect that historians can see this was in fact the case.¹

Stunningly, by 1925, the controversy would largely be over. Fundamentalists would be pilloried by the press, academia, and polite society over the Scopes Trial in Tennessee. In the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), the denominational machinery would identify Princeton Seminary and, especially, one of its faculty members as the center of the unrest and begin to deal with that “problem.” And a year later, the Northern Baptist Convention failed to heed fundamentalists’ demands for doctrinal specificity and clarity. By the 1930s, several small fundamentalist denominations would split out of the two mainline bodies, but by all accounts, not only did the fundamentalists not win—as Fosdick wondered in 1922—but they were routed.

The Early Days of the Controversy

In the beginning days of the controversy, it did look as though the Fundamentalists would win. Though the northern Presbyterian church had embraced a limited revision of the Westminster Standards in 1903, conservatives had successfully forced Charles Briggs out of their denomination—though not out of Union Theological Seminary in New York City. A chief advocate for thorough confessional revision and professor of Old Testament at Union, Briggs drew furious conservative opposition to his understanding of the authority of Scripture. Briggs believed that the results of historical and scientific study, discovered by reason, were a second, and sometimes superior, source of authority that could supplement and correct Scripture. In fact, he taught, once believers gave up the idea that the Bible was the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God, they would come to see that

the Bible was a (fallible) historical record of religious experience that mediated the same experience of God to those who encountered it. Conservatives were able to block Briggs’ appointment to a chair of biblical theology at Union Seminary, bring disciplinary charges against him, and eventually depose him from Presbyterian ministry. Further, conservatives used Briggs’ errors as the basis for the 1892 PCUSA General Assembly to declare as “fundamental doctrine...that the Old and New Testaments are the inspired and infallible Word of God. Our church holds that the inspired Word, as it came from God, is without error.” The net effect of this statement was to identify the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture as particularly contained in the ordination vows of elders and ministers. This “Portland Deliverance,” named after the city where the assembly was held, put the church on notice that Briggs’ errors would not be tolerated.2

This precedence of highlighting one doctrine as especially contained in one’s ordination vows began the process of identifying certain “fundamental” doctrines, which would give the movement its “fundamentalist” moniker. In the PCUSA, this process of identifying fundamental doctrines culminated in 1910. In response to the Presbytery of New York’s licensure of three men who denied the virgin birth, the General Assembly declared that one’s ordination vows committed oneself to belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth of Jesus, his substitutionary atonement and bodily resurrection, and the reality of supernatural miracles. These five “fundamentals” would be reaffirmed by the General Assembly in 1916 and 1923.

And these fundamentals would be picked up and championed across denominations through a series of booklets called “The Fundamentals.” Funded by erstwhile Presbyterians, Lyman and Milton Stewart, these twelve booklets published between 1910 and 1915 brought together a number of conservative pastors and scholars—with varying degrees of commonality—to defend a range of biblical truths that would come to represent mainstream evangelical theology in the twentieth century. These booklets served to highlight the transdenominational commitment to fundamental doctrines and to buttress those within the Presbyterian church in fighting for the faith. From the Briggs trial and from these repeated affirmations of basic biblical doctrines, it appeared that the fundamentalists were in fact winning.3

The Faith of Modernists

Appearances can be deceiving, though. After the 1892 General Assembly affirmed the inerrancy of the Bible and disciplined Briggs, the following year eighty-

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seven ministers and elders protested “the Portland Deliverance.” In 1894, the Presbyterian League of New York formed to advocate “a better declaration of the faith that it now possesses—if possible, in the form of a short and simple creed, expressed, as far as may be, in Scriptural language.” The League also longed for “the visible unity of the Church of Christ on earth,” which would be assisted undoubtedly by confessional revision and restatement. These three issues—the nature and authority of Scripture; the desire for confessional revision or even more a brief Christian creed; and ecclesial union—would be drivers for the developing controversy.⁴

For those who came to be known as modernists, creeds represented only the highest wisdom of a given time and place. The upshot was that when a later time and place arrived, that generation might have a different perspective or greater wisdom that would allow for a revision of the creed to better reflect the religious experience of the moment. Such a view of creeds had its roots in the thought the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his effort to appeal to religion’s cultured despisers, Schleiermacher held that when human beings experienced an absolute sense of dependence upon another, that was equivalent to being-in-relation with God. This central experience was what was fundamental about religion; theology was second-order reflection upon this first order religious experience. As a result, theology may shift and change over time as it struggled to account for the individual’s God-consciousness. As Schleiermacher’s views came to America, mediated especially by Romantic exemplar Samuel Taylor Coleridge, they found a ready exponent in Horace Bushnell. The Hartford, Connecticut, pastor argued that Christianity as given by Christ was pure experience and life; it was later corrupted by theology, which systematized experience into thought forms that were inadequate to represent it. While Bushnell would not abandon theology, he wanted to put it in its proper place: a second-order reflection on first-order religious experience. If Christians would see theology in its proper light, he declared, then they would be able to move beyond their distinctive creeds and confessional positions toward a Christian comprehensiveness rooted in a shared experience of Christ.⁵

As modernism took shape in the early decades of the twentieth century, it forthrightly embraced its experiential, non-doctrinal basis. For example, the dean of Chicago Divinity School, Shailer Mathews observed in his book, The Faith of Modernism, that modernism is a set of attitudes, not doctrines. “If the temptation of the dogmatic mind is toward inflexible formula, that of the Modernist is toward indifference in formula,” Mathews averred. If there were a “doctrinal” center for the Modernist, it was a confidence that “[Jesus’s] life and teachings reveal the divine

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⁴“The Presbyterian League,” The Outlook (16 June 1894): 1113-1114; Loetscher, Broadening Church, 68-69.

purpose in humanity and therefore it is practicable to organize life upon his revelation of good will.” Human beings are fundamentally good; God’s Spirit is present in all humans of good will; and what was necessary was to experience the love of God in Jesus Christ and to move forward with the example of Jesus to do his work in the world. Since Christianity is bound together by a shared attitude and experience, not by shared doctrine, it made sense to modernists to work toward an ecclesial union that would set aside unnecessary distinctions and differences and allow Christian churches to bring as many as possible into the ineffable experience they offered. Such an experience would then equip people to live ethical lives that would bring the Kingdom of God to America.6

Perhaps the blasé attitude toward creedal difference was what led the session of First Presbyterian Church, New York City, to call Harry Fosdick to serve as stated supply of their church. After all, Fosdick was a well-known Baptist pastor and Union Seminary professor; yet his doctrinal differences with the Westminster Standards did not seem to matter when he began preaching at the church in 1919. In some ways, Fosdick represented the modernist ideal: a union of denominations based on a shared religious experience to rescue America from itself.

Unionism and Division

What Fosdick represented was being sought by many leaders within the Presbyterian church. In 1918, the PCUSA General Assembly formed a Committee on Church Cooperation and Union, which sought not only potential unions with other Presbyterian denominations, but the forging of a “united church of Christ in America.” When the doctrinal basis of the proposed church union was shared with the 1920 PCUSA General Assembly, several leaders, including Princeton professor J. Gresham Machen, protested the non-doctrinal basis of the church union. In fact, Machen observed that the failure of the proposed plan of union to take doctrine seriously represented “a denial of the Christian faith” all together. Such a denial was the offspring of “that naturalistic liberalism which is the chief enemy of Christianity in the modern world,” he held.7

In the end, the attempts to forge a single united church of Christ failed in the United States for the time being—though it would succeed in 1925 in Canada through the creation of the United Church of Christ in Canada. Yet men like Machen in the Presbyterian church, along with William Bell Riley among the Baptists, would constantly and consistently decry the denigration of doctrine in the effort to merge churches and do away with Christian distinctives. Perhaps the highpoint of this defense of doctrinal Christianity was Machen’s 1923 manifesto, Christianity and Liberalism. Representing the premier conservative scholarly defense of the faith,

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7 The next several paragraphs rely in modified form upon Sean Michael Lucas, J. Gresham Machen (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2015), 40-43, 45-49.
Machen arraigned liberalism against the standard of Christian orthodoxy, summarized in all its great creeds and especially in the Westminster Standards. For Machen, the key difference between theological modernism and historic Christianity was that historic Christianity asserted the logical priority of doctrine over experience. Presbyterians needed to stand on this point: that Christianity was a way of life based on doctrine.

However, within the PCUSA, this message of doctrinal particularity—which seemed to be what the denomination itself stood for in its “five fundamentals” affirmed the same year that Machen’s classic work was published—would receive a major pushback. On January 9, 1924, the Auburn Affirmation was released. Signed initially by 150 ministers (but ultimately signed by 1300 ministers and elders), the Auburn Affirmation defended the freedom of liberal Presbyterians to teach other interpretations of doctrines such as “the inspiration of the Bible, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and the continuing life and supernatural power of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, the affirmation stood exactly on the territory that Fosdick staked out in his infamous sermon eighteen months prior.

When the 1924 General Assembly failed to discipline those who signed the affirmation and failed to deal with ministers who denied the virgin birth of Jesus, conservatives had to know that they already lost the controversy. By the following year, modernists and their moderate allies, determined to bring the unrest in the church to an end, sought to reign in Machen and his fellow conservatives within the Presbyterian church. And though the dénouement would take several years, division within the PCUSA would finally come in 1936 when the PCUSA deposed Machen from its ministry and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was formed. Among Baptists, there would be small secessions in 1932 and 1946 that produced more conservative bodies, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches and the Conservative Baptist Association.

Thus, the great irony of Fosdick’s sermon was that his central concern in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy happened, but not in the way he feared. His key troubling question was, “Has anybody a right to deny the Christian name to those who differ with him on such points and to shut against them the doors of the Christian fellowship?” In the end, because the fundamentalists lost, they ended up forfeiting their places in the Christian fellowships to which they once belonged. The doors would be shut for a generation, and even today there is question whether those who differ with mainstream Protestant leaders have a right to the Christian name. And this was all because the modernists won.

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8 On the post-1925 struggles that Machen experienced, which led to the formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, see Lucas, J. Gresham Machen, 79-116; D. G. Hart and John Muether, Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (Philadelphia: OPC, 1995), 15-39.
Evangelicalism After Fosdick: Macartney as a Case Study

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Harry Emerson Fosdick was clearly picking a fight, as Kevin DeYoung writes, when he delivered his sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” on May 21, 1922. At the same time, the fundamentalists themselves “welcomed the sermon” because it graphically exposed the liberal agenda and would force “moderates to take sides.” ¹ This was certainly true of the first conservative to respond, who wrote, “one cannot but feel glad that Dr. Fosdick has spoken so frankly as he has.” Clarence Macartney (1879-1957) was pastor of Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia when wrote a series of two articles, “Shall Unbelief Win?” that appeared in the weekly Presbyterian in July 1922.² Macartney anticipated J. Gresham Machen’s Christianity and Liberalism (published in the next year), as he pressed readers to see that Fosdick was commending a faith completely incompatible with historic Christianity:

Those who, above all others, ought to read this sermon, are not the conservatives and not the rationalists, but the middle-of-the-road people who are fondly hoping that these schools are divided only by a difference in words and names, and that the two positions can and will be reconciled. Dr. Fosdick’s sermon shows the impossibility and the non-desirability of such reconciliation.³

Macartney went on to defend the doctrinal points that Fosdick challenged: the virgin birth of Christ, the inspiration of Scripture, the return of Christ, and the atonement. He urged his readers to take on the burden “to contend earnestly and intelligently and in a Christian spirit, but nevertheless, contend, for the faith.”⁴ Specifically, it was the duty of the church to demand fidelity from its pulpits to the church’s doctrinal standards:


² Clarence E. Macartney, “Shall Unbelief Win? An Answer to Dr. Fosdick”, pp. 323-43 in William S. Barker and Samuel T. Logan, Jr., Sermons that Shaped America: Reformed Preaching From 1630-2001 (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003). Macartney’s response has often been referred to as a sermon, and Macartney described it as such. See his The Making of a Minister: The Autobiography of Clarence E. Macartney, ed. J. Clyde Henry (Great Neck, NY: Channel Press, 1961), 184. But I have found no evidence that it was preached at Arch Street Presbyterian Church or elsewhere. The sheer length of the response argues against its original form as a preached sermon: it is over 7600 words compared to 4700 words by Fosdick.


Dr. Fosdick is not a Presbyterian, but he stands in a Presbyterian pulpit and gets his bread from a Presbyterian congregation. In view of this fact how can his holding the purely naturalistic account of the stories of the birth of Jesus be in harmony with his preaching in the pulpit of a Church whose Creed, never revoked, declares (The Confession of Faith, Chapter VIII, Article XI), “The Son of God—when the fulness of time was come did take upon Him man’s nature—being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance”? This article of the creed may be impossible for the “modern” mind to hold; it may be myth or rubbish. But myth or fact, truth or rubbish, it is a solemn declaration of the Church from which Dr. Fosdick takes his bread.5

Early Returns

Conservatives gained momentum when Macartney’s response was also widely distributed. In October 1922, Macartney led the Philadelphia Presbytery to overture the General Assembly to direct the Presbytery of New York “to require that the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York City conform to the system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith.”6 When this was passed by a majority of the following General Assembly in May, 1923, it was hailed as a great victory for confessional orthodoxy (although delays by the New York Presbytery did not bring about Fosdick’s resignation until nearly two years later).

A further sign of conservative strength was Macartney’s election as moderator of the General Assembly in 1924. (At the age of 42 he was the youngest moderator in the history of the church.) At the close of that Assembly, vice-moderator William Jennings Bryan crowed, “we have won every point” and “we will not have any preacher in our church who is not within reach of our stick.”7 Bryan was not alone in that assessment. As strange at this may seem to contemporary students of the conflict, most participants and observers by mid-decade shared a common expectation of the likely result of the warfare: eventually a small number of modernists would follow Fosdick in being forced to leave the church. Albert Dieffenbach, a liberal German Reformed minister who turned Unitarian, insisted that this was the only logical outcome, “If our spirit goes over completely to Dr. Fosdick for his spirit, our intelligence goes over quite completely to Dr. Macartney for his impregnable defense of the orthodox Presbyterian faith.” Dieffenbach accused Fosdick of deception by claiming to be an “evangelical liberal” as those were “mutually exclusive terms.”8

5 Macartney, “Shall Unbelief Win?” 335.


7 Quoted in Miller, Fosdick, 171.

According to George Marsden’s account, the liberal *Christian Century* claimed that the fundamentalists had “outmaneuvered” the liberals, and the secular press, riveted to this unfolding controversy, opined that if modernists “contradicted the creeds that denominations had always affirmed, then it would be only gentlemanly to withdraw and found denominations on some other basis.”

The forced exodus of modernists did not take place, of course, and that owes in large part to what the 1924 General Assembly failed to do. Many had anticipated that the Auburn Affirmation (originally signed by 150 Presbyterian ministers and later supplemented by 1000 additional ministers) would command the Assembly’s attention. Fosdick did not author the Auburn Affirmation but it faithfully articulated his position: the so-called fundamentals of the faith were merely theories and not essential Biblical truths that ministers were bound to believe and teach. Yet no disciplinary action was taken against the signers of the Auburn Affirmation, a failure that many have pondered. One explanation was a naïve sense on the part of some that the spirit of the Affirmation died with the departure of Fosdick. Perhaps a better explanation is found from Macartney himself. In “Shall Unbelief Win?” he counseled against ecclesiastical trials of modernists in the church:

> I am coming to think less and less of excision and excommunication as a means of preserving the church from false teaching not because of any base or ignoble fear on the part of those who might so proceed of being called “heresy hunters,” “medieval,” etc., but because I am convinced that the far more useful course to pursue is to declare the whole counsel of God so clearly and fearlessly that the whole world may know there is a difference between what is and what is not Christianity.

Whatever the reason for this missed opportunity, it allowed for countermaneuvering by Henry Sloane Coffin, then pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York and, like Fosdick, a selfstyled “liberal evangelical.” Coffin’s threat of a liberal walk-out at the 1925 General Assembly redirected the denomination’s attention to the “causes making for unrest” in the church, namely Princeton Seminary, whose confessional theology was regarded as out of touch with the Presbyterian Church. This was a victory, in Macartney’s judgment, of a “coalition of modernists, indifferentists, and pacifists.”

With the 1929 reorganization of Princeton Seminary that included signers of the Auburn Affirmation on the seminary board, Macartney resigned his Princeton Seminary board membership and joined Machen to become the most prominent

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10 *The Presbyterian Conflict* (p. 34) cites that argument from *The Presbyterian*, September 4, 1924.


member of the board of Westminster Seminary, which opened its doors in
September.

But the controversy was beginning to take its toll on Clarence Macartney,
who in 1927 had accepted a call at First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. In 1936,
he would regret as “sad, lamentable, tragic, and unthinkable” the way in which
Machen was cast out of the fellowship of the Presbyterian Church. But he refused
to join with Machen, fearing that Machen’s response to the crisis had become too
radical, and he opted instead to continue to serve at First Presbyterian for two
decades, maintaining membership in that denomination for the rest of his ministry.

He also withdrew from the Board of Westminster Seminary, and in the same
month that Machen formed a new denomination, he was elected President of the
League of Faith, a short-lived effort to restore the Presbyterian Church USA to
doctrinal fidelity by “reform from within.”

Conservatives and Liberals Together

As firmly as Macartney opposed the modernism of Fosdick, his approach to
the controversy shared similar features with Fosdick. Consider, first, the appeal for
tolerance in Fosdick’s sermon. “The fundamentalists,” he bellowed, “are giving us
one of the worst exhibitions of bitter intolerance that the churches in the country
have ever seen.” (145). A decade later conservatives began to display an attitude
unrecognizable from Fosdick’s description. One Auburn Affirmationist, J. A.
MacCallum observed in 1939, “the conservatives are not so conservative, or at least
not so militant …as a few years ago.” In that same year, Macartney returned the
compliment in kind. In an article he wrote in the Christian Century on “how his mind
had changed,” Macartney identified renewed health in the church. “I am glad to
note,” he wrote, “what seems to be a decided swing back from the extreme
modernist position toward what may be described as the conservative or
evangelical position. Certainly the modernism of the pulpit today is not so loud,
confident, aggressive and arrogant as it was ten or fifteen years ago.”

Modernism might still be incompatible, but Macartney found it more tolerable.

Secondly, Fosdick may have been prescient about the obsolescence of the
Confession of the Faith in the Presbyterian Church. For his part, he never disguised
his distaste for creedal Christianity. As he explained years later, his “long-standing
and assured conviction” was that “creedal subscription to ancient confessions of
faith is a practice dangerous to the welfare of the church and to the integrity of the
individual conscience.” Among conservative voices, the Confession was never the
object of ridicule, but it was undergoing more subtle decline in the changing

13 Rian, The Presbyterian Conflict, 127.
14 Quoted in Rian, The Presbyterian Conflict, 190.
16 Fosdick, The Living of these Days, 172.
character of conservative rhetoric. Allegiance to a system of doctrine often took a
back seat to a defense of “evangelical essentials.” It was particularly revealing that
Macartney’s posthumously published autobiography limits any reference to the
Westminster Standards to a few cites in the chapter dealing with the Fosdick
controversy. The Confession of Faith does not come to bear otherwise in the conduct
of his pastoral ministry.

Finally, Fosdick in his own autobiographical reflections described himself as
a “convinced interdenominationalist.” What he loved about his tenure at “Old First”
was the “new freedom with which Christians could disregard denominational lines
and work together.” If in 1923, Macartney warned that many were beginning to
turn away from the call to protest and appeal the established unbelief in the
denomination, by the time of his 1939 Christian Century article his mind had
changed significantly:

I value less the whole ecclesiastical structure, and feel that more and more
for the true witness to the gospel and the Kingdom of God we must depend
on the local church, the individual minister and the individual Christian.
Between such believers and such Christians there is indeed a real church
unity. Hands of fellowship reach over the separating walls of denominational
barriers and voices of mutual encouragement echo in the hearts of those who
fear the Lord.

In sum, the “reform from within” strategy adopted by Macartney and other
conservatives who remained in the Presbyterian church reverted into a functional
congregationalism, without obligation to the corporate witness of the denomination
beyond the local church. This may be most clearly evident in the story of a colleague
of Macartney’s, Wilbur Smith, who maintained his post as a Presbyterian minister in
Coatesville, Pennsylvania, with the claim that “there is no reason at all for bringing
division into a church such as that of Coatesville, which was evangelical, missionary-
minded, and loyal to its pastor.” Although he too abominated modernism, he
observed that retaining his membership in the Presbyterian church afforded him
freedom as “if I were the pastor of a church entirely independent of any
ecclesiastical organization.”

At First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Macartney developed an
influential pulpit and radio ministry. He could be considered the grandfather of the


21 Quoted in George M. Marsden, Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism
neo-evangelical turn in mid-century American evangelicalism as the mentor of a generation of gifted leaders coming of age. Most notably, Macartney “shone forth as a beacon of light in the midst of perilous storms” for Harold J. Ockenga when the young Westminster graduate interned briefly under him at First Presbyterian before his 33-year tenure at Park Street Church in Boston.\(^22\)

It is uncharitable, therefore, to dismiss Macartney in the way one Lutheran described him a decade after the crisis. “He often mediates between Christian confessionalism and liberal concessionalism,” wrote J. Theodore Mueller.\(^23\) But what does seem to characterize Macartney’s ministry is the atrophying of ecclesiological categories in his posture against theological liberalism.

Historian Bradley Longfield has suggested that the controversy in the mainline Presbyterian church was followed by a brief and fragile peace that was shattered by “theological fragmentation” by the 1960s. Ultimately it reached the point where a 1988 General Assembly report wrote “our unity is merely formal and our diversity is divisive,” owing to the lack of clear biblical and creedal boundaries.\(^24\)

Observers of contemporary evangelicalism have identified similar fragmentation as it also struggles with the erosion of doctrinal boundaries and the decline of confessional identity. If Macartney’s effort to sustain a coherent conservative opposition to liberalism proved inadequate, it may suggest that there are still lessons from Fosdick’s sermon and its aftermath that the church needs to learn a century later.

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For Machen, Fosdick Was a Small Part of the Problem

D. G. Hart
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Harry Emerson Fosdick's provocative sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?,” delivered on May 21, 1922, is as good a date as any to locate the start of the controversy between conservatives and liberals in the Presbyterian Church. It did prompt conservative reactions and put the Presbytery of New York at the center of Presbyterian deliberations for the next three years. It was in a sense a clarifying moment for Presbyterians.

But it came from an unlikely source. For one, Fosdick was a Baptist and though preaching as stated supply at First Presbyterian Church, New York City, he had no obvious awareness of developments in Presbyterianism beyond his urban associates. Fosdick had recently visited China and seen the opposition from conservative Baptists to stop the spread of liberal views. Indeed, the origin of the word, “fundamentalist,” was Baptist. Two years before as conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention along with northern and Canadian counterparts fought liberalism along a variety of fronts, Curtis Lee Laws, the editor of the Baptist newspaper, The Watchman-Examiner, popularized the term. It became a badge of honor among Baptists, including John Roach Straton, who kept close tabs on liberals in New York City, which meant keeping an eye on Fosdick. For this reason, Fosdick was likely most concerned about fundamentalism among Baptists.¹ He unintentionally kicked the sleeping Presbyterian giant by raising fears about fundamentalist intolerance in the setting of an apparently welcome environment like First Presbyterian Church. He had not counted on Presbyterian polity and a system of graded courts.

J. Gresham Machen was a frequent visitor to New York City for its bookstores, theaters, and restaurants. He often attended the churches of known liberal preachers to hear the other side, though his efforts to monitor modernist sermons became most notable after 1923. When Fosdick preached his infamous sermon, Machen was more involved in his own academic work. His New Testament Greek for Beginners had just been published with Macmillan. Machen was also likely thrilled to see a positive response from liberal New Testament scholars to his first book, The Origin of Paul's Religion, published the previous year also with Macmillan. Although many reviews faulted Machen for not granting more influence from the surrounding first-century culture on the apostle’s thought, most were also impressed by the young scholar’s command of the sources and secondary literature. Benjamin W. Bacon, professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School, esteemed the book as “worthy of a high place among the products of American biblical scholarship.”

Rudolf Bultmann praised Machen for representing fairly the views of scholars who questioned the supernatural character of the New Testament.\(^2\)

This is not to say, however, that Machen was indifferent to liberalism in either American Protestantism or European theological scholarship. His book on Paul was an obvious demonstration of being steeped in the kind of polemical scholarship, both biblical and theological, that had long characterized Princeton Theological Seminary’s faculty going back to Archibald Alexander, Samuel Miller, and Charles Hodge. Machen was also keenly aware of liberalism in the Presbyterian Church in 1922 and was preparing his famous book, *Christianity and Liberalism* at the very time that Fosdick preached his controversial sermon.

Machen’s alertness to liberalism predated the Fosdick controversy by two years. In 1920 he had attended in Philadelphia his first General Assembly as a commissioner. There he heard a report from a special committee of the General Assembly on “Church Cooperation and Union.” The presentation contained a plan for an organic union of the major Protestant denominations in the United States that would constitute a national body comparable to the United Church of Canada (formed in 1925). This proposed merger went beyond the federal union involved in the already existent Federal Council of Churches (1908). Instead of cooperating in a federal system that still recognized the several powers of member denominations, the proposed organic union would combine the ratifying denominations into a single body. The proposal alarmed Machen partly because the person presenting the report was J. Ross Stevenson, the president of Princeton Seminary. In the subsequent year, many of Princeton’s faculty along with Machen wrote articles in opposition to the plan because its creedal basis was meager to the point of being pointless. Machen also came to see that the interdenominational and ecumenical endeavors of America’s leading denominations were vehicles for the Social Gospel. Ever since the reunion of the Old and New School (northern) Presbyterian Churches in 1869, Presbyterians had led the way in channeling the resources of the church on behalf of the nation. The Social Gospel was in fact an early example of Christian nationalism in the sense that Protestants cooperated to promote policies and laws that preserved the Christian character of American society. Evidence of the social aims of ecumenism came explicitly at the first meeting of the Federal Council where the body produced a “Social Creed for the Churches,” a list of roughly fifteen points to end the unrest between organized labor and industrial capitalism.\(^3\)

Machen’s concerns about the plan for union drew him into the company of conservatives in the presbyteries of Philadelphia and Chester (just south and west of Philadelphia) who also saw church union as a threat to the integrity of the PCUSA. He gave a lecture in 1921 to a body of elders in the Presbytery of Chester which became the basis for an article, “Christianity or Liberalism,” in the fall issue of the

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For Machen, Fosdick Was a Small Part of the Problem

*Princeton Theological Review.* What alarmed Machen about the plan, as he explained repeatedly throughout the Presbyterian controversy, was a “basis for Christian fellowship” that was “couched in the vague language of modern naturalism.” Such vague affirmations of the faith “relegated to the realm of the nonessential our historic Confession of Faith.”

The social utility of the plan was also a big part of Machen’s forthcoming book on liberalism. Instead of attacking erroneous views of creation and Christ’s return, or even faulty understanding of the infallibility of the Bible (Machen mentioned inerrancy in *Christianity and Liberalism* on a mere two-page section), he argued that liberalism’s understanding of salvation contradicted historic Christianity. Liberals promoted a gospel of improvement and human agency unlike the doctrine of salvation taught in the Bible which depended on the supernatural entrance of God into human history to accomplish the salvation of his people. For Machen this saving work was especially dependent on the work of Christ and the vicarious atonement. Curiously enough, in the very same chapter (the longest) where Machen defended that doctrine of salvation, he also mocked the ham fisted social utilitarianism that informed Protestant modernism. To the question of immigration, Machen wrote, liberals “called in” the Bible to solve the problem of cultural diversity. “We are inclined to proceed against the immigrants now with a Bible in one hand and a club in the other offering them the blessings of liberty. That is what is sometimes meant by ‘Christian Americanization.’”

At the same time, even if Machen was on guard against liberal developments in the PCUSA before Fosdick’s sermon, the Princeton professor was by no means indifferent to the sermon or its significance. When Machen gave testimony to various Presbyterian committees between 1925 and 1935, he listed Fosdick right behind the Plan for Organic Union as the leading examples of modernism in the PCUSA. When asked to testify before the Special Commission of 1925, for example, a body whose task was to diagnose the causes of controversy in the church, Machen stated that Fosdick represented “in typical fashion the pragmatist skepticism of our day, which holds that what is really constant in religion is an inner experience that clothes itself from generation to generation in necessarily changing intellectual forms.” Again, in his testimony before the Special Committee to Investigate Princeton Seminary (1926), another body charged with exploring the causes of controversy at the church’s oldest seminary, Machen identified Fosdick as an example of liberalism in the church. In his explanation for supporting Clarence Macartney instead of Charles Erdman, a Princeton Seminary faculty member, as moderator for the 1924 General Assembly, Machen brought up Fosdick. When a leading Presbyterian praised Erdman as a man “who stands for presenting a united front rather than the encouragement of controversy,” Machen vigorously dissented. For him it was foolish to embrace unity over conflict when “agnostic Modernism as represented by Dr. Fosdick and his Presbyterian supporters was contending for the control of our church.”

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As it turned out, Machen himself preached a sermon that became an inflection point in the Presbyterian controversy and that seemed to have all the marks of a direct reply to Fosdick. During the second half of 1923, Machen filled the pulpit at First Presbyterian Church, Princeton. His last sermon of the calendar year, “The Present Issue in the Church,” became part of a national news story when it prompted one of the congregation’s prominent members to leave the church. Henry Van Dyke, a professor of literature at Princeton University and Woodrow Wilson’s ambassador to the Netherlands, objected to Machen’s argumentative sermons and determined to worship elsewhere. Van Dyke actually held a press conference to announce his decision. As a result, reporters included material from Machen’s sermon in their coverage. Many also began to pester Machen for comments. One indication of his newfound celebrity was the increase of sales of Christianity and Liberalism. In 1923 the book had sold roughly 1,000 copies. The next year that figure jumped four-fold.

One reason to think that Machen had Fosdick in view was that he countered the liberal Baptist directly on the question of intolerance in the church. Fosdick was concerned about the tension between modern science and Christian conviction. Modern learning was out of step with certain doctrines and he did not want fundamentalists to drive out of the church “multitudes of young men and women at this season of the year are graduating from our schools of learning.” Part of the solution was tolerance. “As I plead thus for an intellectually hospitable, tolerant, liberty-loving church, I am of course thinking primarily about this new generation. . . . the worst kind of church that can possibly be offered to the allegiance of the new generation is an intolerant church.”

In his own sermon, Machen was also concerned about modern learning and tolerance. His message was one of hopefulness. He wanted to see a return to the theology of the Reformation and the kind of intellectual vitality that had sustained it. One factor necessary for such a recovery was intellectual honesty. Modern hermeneutics had given license to interpretative models that implicitly allowed denials of mathematical and historical truths. For instance, modern examples of interpretation could render six times nine not as fifty-four but as one-hundred-twenty-eight, or the Declaration of Independence was adopted not in Philadelphia but in San Francisco. It could even turn “the third day He arose again from the dead” into “the third day He did not rise again from the dead.” This was not exactly a brief for intellectual achievement but Machen was trying to acknowledge that in the conflict between science and faith, Christians might have to choose faith over science. Otherwise, they might wind up abandoning truths upon which Christian salvation depended.

When it came to tolerance, Machen was surprisingly on Fosdick’s side, but with a twist. For a revival of the Christian religion, Americans need to return to the “great achievement of our forefathers” – “tolerance or religious liberty.”

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churches, and schools needed the freedom to teach children “any form of religious belief they desire.” Machen in other essays included Roman Catholics and Jewish Americans in this freedom. He was particularly agitated about Progressive educational reforms that restricted what private and religious schools could teach in the interest of assimilating all children to American patriotic ideals. Many Protestants supported these measures again in the interest of preserving a Christian America in which all people, no matter their religious or ethnic background, supported American civic norms. Machen regarded such restriction of freedom of association and religion as a hindrance to “any great spiritual advance.” “Place children in their formative years under the despotic control of experts appointed by the state, and you have a really more effective interference with civil and religious liberty than the Inquisition.”

The contrast between Machen and Fosdick is striking. Both understood that advances in modern learning had made implausible important parts of older Christian convictions. Neither of their sermons proposed how to resolve the conflict. Fosdick did worry that the church would lose its younger generation if it did not welcome modern scholarship. Machen, in contrast, worried what would become of Christianity if the church followed Fosdick’s advice. Also, both recommended tolerance. For Fosdick, the church needed to be open to all points of view. For Machen, the state needed to protect religious and intellectual freedom which in turn would allow the church to be free to follow its own convictions. That freedom also involved excluding those (at least officers) who refused to affirm the church’s creeds.

In effect, Machen’s reaction to Fosdick was of a piece with his opposition to the ecumenism of the mainline churches and the Social Gospel. Was the church a servant to the nation, an institution that mirrored civic norms in order to promote the larger society’s well-being? Or was the church called to be a separate institution in service of a kingdom that transcended national borders and patriotic virtues? Machen and Fosdick answered each question differently. That difference in turn reflected a fundamental divergence at a crucial point in American church history. By rejecting the political and religious strategies of Progressive Protestants like Fosdick, in 1922 Machen was objecting to more than simply theological fuzziness on inerrancy or the virgin birth. He was rejecting the nationalism that had informed mainline Protestantism fifty years earlier since the end of the Civil War and that would eventually crash and burn fifty years later during the Vietnam War.

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What Happened to Liberalism?

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As a formal movement embedded in mainline seminaries and denominations, American Protestant liberalism has been on the retreat for the better part of two generations now. Outflanked by more progressive strands of liberation and postmodern theologies on the one side and a resurging conservative Christian orthodoxy on the other, liberalism’s once commanding public voice has been reduced to a pleading whimper. Protestant mainline denominations, once the mainstay of American religion, have seen their numbers steadily plummet. As of 2017, “self-described mainline Protestants composed just 10% of the American public,” a statistic further diminished by the fact that of these, “barely a quarter actually attended church.”¹ By such measures, liberalism appears to be dead, or nearly so. But is it?

If we equate liberalism with its institutional form – the kind that took up residence at Harvard in the nineteenth-century, put forward nationally renowned theologians who labored to make Christianity credible to the modern world, published leading journals and Sunday School curricula shaping the thought life of a generation, and was heralded by celebrated pastors like Fosdick – then the bell tolled for liberalism long ago. In his massive trilogy tracing the history of American liberal theology, Gary Dorrien relays the accepted narrative: “In the nineteenth century it took root and flowered; in the early twentieth century it became the founding idea of a new theological establishment; in the 1930s it was marginalized by neo-orthodox theology; in the 1960s it was rejected by liberation theology; by the 1970s it was often taken for dead.”²

We would be mistaken, however, to equate liberalism exclusively with its established, institutional form, just as we would be mistaken to equate Gnosticism singularly with the official movement of self-styled Gnostics that early Christianity defeated. Though the published works of gnostic theologians were entirely lost long ago, the impulse of their thought has persisted to the present day (as Phillip Lee and others have demonstrated).³ In the same way, liberalism in its institutional form has suffered an outward defeat, but that does not mean liberalism itself has been vanquished.

The heart of liberalism has proven to be not its institutions, but its ideological core. That core was clearly identified by J. Gresham Machen in Christianity and Liberalism, in which Machen pointed to liberalism’s (1) naturalistic approach to religion, (2) appeal to human experience (and ultimately individual


experience) as a final authority, and (3) exclusively imperatival message. On this last count, liberalism jettisons the grand “indicative” of the Gospel—that is, the announcement of the great things God has done in Christ for sinners (think Romans 1-8 or Ephesians 1-3) and is thus left to traffic exclusively in commands and aspirations (imperatives). In one of his most profound statements, Machen announces, “Here is found the most fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity—liberalism is altogether in the imperative mood, while Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative; liberalism appeals to man’s will, while Christianity announces, first, a gracious act of God.”

What happens when we look for liberalism’s ideological core of naturalism, the authority of experience, and the imperatival mood? We find that liberalism has outlived the decline of its institutional citadels. Notre Dame sociologists Christian Smith and Patricia Snell write, “[A] historical nemesis of evangelicalism, liberal Protestantism can afford to be losing its organizational battles now precisely because long ago it effectively won the bigger, more important struggle over culture.” Put another way, if institutional liberalism is effectively dead, ideological liberalism is more alive than it has ever been. Where do we find it?

The Ideological Core of Liberalism in Liberation Theologies

As a formal school of thought, liberal theology took a back seat to a host of liberation theologies arising with Latin American and black liberation theologies in the 1960s and, in the decades that followed, with feminist and gay rights liberation theologies, among others. In one sense, the projects of liberal theology and liberation theology are quite different. Liberal theology privileges the voices of the scientific and cultural elite in its aim of making the Christian faith more credible to the modern world. Liberation theology, on the other hand, privileges the voices of the marginalized and oppressed (it often maintains that “the cry of the oppressed is the voice of God”) with the aim of raising select themes of the Christian faith in protest against the modern world. That is why liberation theologies position themselves as a rejection of liberalism.

But beneath these above-ground differences, liberation theologies borrow and build upon liberalism’s substructure. Both liberalism and liberation theology see men and societies as facing their problems without the help of heaven—everything is interpreted and remedied naturalistically, within what philosopher Charles Taylors would call the “immanent frame.” Moreover, both place the seat of authority in human experience. Harold O. J. Brown, former professor at RTS-Charlotte, emphasized the underlying connection: “Because this standard [of liberation theology] is drawn from human feelings and experience—although limited to those of a particular group or class—liberation theology also resembles classic Protestant liberalism after Schleiermacher: it has made human feelings and

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4 Machen, Christianity and Liberalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), 47.

human sensitivity a source of divine revelation that can be placed alongside Scripture.” Finally, both sound their messages entirely in the imperative mood, whether that is the call of liberalism to “end war and poverty,” or the call of liberation theology to “resist oppressive power structures.” If Machen had lived to critique liberation theology, he would only have needed to add an appendix to *Christianity and Liberalism* rather than write a new book.

**The Ideological Core of Liberalism in Progressive Christianity**

Second, the core features of liberalism abide in the many leading voices of self-styled “progressive Christianity.” Granted, the term “progressive Christianity” is quite vague. Some define it as liberal Christianity that adopts certain insights and accents of liberation theology. Others find that progressive Christianity is a large umbrella term under which self-identified Christians who prefer egalitarian approaches to marriage and ministry and who support the LGBTQ+ movement can publicly identify (often without having to do the hard work of examining whether these commitments are actually compatible with their other theological positions). Progressive Christianity lacks the established tradition and formidable theological giants that liberal theology in the first half of the twentieth century boasted—liberal theology was a disciplined school of thought, while progressive Christianity consists mostly of a patchwork of blogs, social media influencers, and authors of easy-read books (think Rob Bell). Roger Olson’s observation that progressive Christianity is a kind of “halfway house” between fundamentalism and liberalism seems apt: “Some get stuck there, but some move on to the ‘left’ into liberal Christianity without understanding that tradition.”

Those distinctions being what they are, we would still say that the shoe of Machen’s description of early twentieth-century liberalism fits the foot of early twenty-first century progressive Christianity in key ways. In its emphasis on openness, uncertainty, and questioning, progressive Christianity caters to a suspicion of external authority paired with a deferential posture toward new insights from human experience, especially the experience of those who claim victimhood. In this way, progressive Christianity adopts the oppressor-oppressed hermeneutic of liberation theology, but employs this hermeneutic more toward liberalism’s goal of making one’s own beliefs credible to the prevailing culture than toward liberation theology’s goal of taking meaningful action on behalf of the oppressed (this raises the question of whether progressive Christianity is more geared toward protecting the adherent from the dominant culture’s shaming reflex than toward loving one’s neighbor in hidden (Matt. 25:37-39) and costly ways).

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8 Olson, “What is a ‘Progressive Christian’ and How Is That Different from a ‘Liberal Christian’?”.
Moreover, for all of its openness to mysticism, progressive Christianity speaks with more confidence about the things below than the things above, consistent with the naturalistic bent of liberalism. Finally, progressive Christianity presents itself overwhelmingly in the imperative mood, marching under the cultural shibboleths of “science is real,” “love is love,” and “kindness is everything,” all of which declare how people should think and behave, and none of which point to the best news Jesus proclaimed to the paralytic: “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mt. 9:2).

The Cultural Triumph of Protestant Liberalism in America

Thus far we have seen how the ideological core of liberalism abides in liberation theologies and progressive Christianity. But the core that Machen identifies exists well beyond these two movements. It has, to use a social media term, “gone viral.”

Consider the parallels between the ideological core of liberalism and the main features of what Notre Dame professors Christian Smith and Patricia Snell recently found to be the default religious outlook of America’s teenagers and young adults, regardless of their historic faith tradition. According to their now famous acronym, MTD (Moralistic Therapeutic Deism), Smith and Snell found that young Americans across the board believed: 1) a God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life, 2) God wants people to be nice, good, and fair to each other, 3) the goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself, 4) God does not need to be particularly involved in our lives except when he is needed to solve a problem, and 5) good people go to heaven when they die.9 Where did young people get this outlook? Smith and Snell’s research found “that teenagers learned their MTD primarily from their parents.”10 As these teenagers moved into young adulthood, the general outlook remains largely in place: “Religion exists to support individuals, according to emerging adults, to provide useful beliefs and morals that help people live better lives. People should take and use what is helpful in it, what makes sense to them, what fits their experience—and they can leave the rest.”11

Smith and Snell interpret these findings as signaling “the cultural triumph of liberal Protestantism.” They endorse Demerath’s thesis that, “far from representing failure, the decline of Liberal Protestantism may actually stem from its success. It may be the painful structural consequences of [its] wider cultural triumph.... Liberal Protestants have lost structurally at the micro level precisely because they won culturally at the macro level.”12 In other words, the growth of ideological liberalism inevitably undercuts institutional liberalism, since ideological liberalism is by

10 Smith and Snell, Souls in Transition, 155.
nature too individualistic and present-minded to see the use of historic institutions (such as mainline churches and denominations). Therefore, even the demise of institutional liberalism is another sign of its ideological victory.

The one difference Smith and Snell find in the outlook of young adults and the ideological core of liberalism is that liberalism—being a product of modernism—was optimistic about the future, while today’s young adults—being children of postmodernism—are quite “dubious about the future of society, politics, and the world beyond their individual lives.” Nonetheless, Smith and Snell were struck by the similarities of the religious outlook of twenty-first century young adults and the theology of liberalism that preceded them by a century, and which doubtless most of them have never read. “The likes of Adolf von Harnack, Albrecht Ritschl, Wilhelm Herman, and Harry Emerson Fosdick would be proud,” they muse, adding, “People, it is clear, need not study liberal Protestant theology to be well inducted into its worldview, since it has simply become part of the cultural air that many Americans now breathe.”

Tara Isabella Burton has recently distinguished between institutional religion and intuitional religion, finding in her research that America’s religious “Nones” (those claiming no religious affiliation) are actually ensconced in religious commitments and practices, just not in the kind connected with historic religious institutions. Borrowing her lexical distinction, we might say that while institutional liberalism is all but dead, intuitional liberalism is alive and well—more than that, it is the default way of thinking about God, society, the self, and the meaning of life in American culture today. Liberalism may be withering in its denominational form and passé as a formal school of theology, but it reigns triumphant in the far broader sphere of culture. This makes it simultaneously more potent and harder to spot, most especially within ourselves.

A Concluding Unscientific Postscript

If liberalism now supplies the atmospheric conditions for our culture, what should the descendants of Machen do? The evangelical counterstrategy to liberalism thus far has focused on opposing its doctrinal tenets (its embrace of evolution and its hollowed-out doctrines of Scripture, of Christ, and of salvation) while shoring up within our own churches and institutions “liberal-proof” confessions on these doctrines and adjacent issues. But we have not yet deprived liberalism of one of its most effective criticisms—namely, that conservative Christianity tends to focus on personal salvation and doctrinal precision to the unnecessary exclusion of concern for the poor and the problems of the world.

Conservative theologians have acknowledged this problem in the past, particularly Carl F. H. Henry in The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism

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13 Smith and Snell, Souls in Transition, 289.

14 Smith and Snell, Souls in Transition, 288-289.

15 Burton, Strange Rites, 33-52.
What Happened to Liberalism?

(1947) and Francis Schaeffer in *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1970). Among these works belongs Harold O. J. Brown’s *The Protest of a Troubled Protestant* (1967). In that work, Brown, who held four degrees from Harvard and together with Francis Schaeffer, would launch the evangelical pro-life movement in the mid-1970s, paced his readers through a Machen-like critique of the errors of “modern theology.” But he closed with his own “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” in which he exposed and critiqued his fellow evangelicals:

Evangelicals sharply criticize liberals and modernists for abandoning the church’s God-appointed task, to save men, in order to try to reshape society. This criticism is serious and legitimate. But we evangelicals are stained by the sin of our relative indifference to society’s problems... The early church, for example, did nothing about slavery. And evangelicals, like the early Christians, have often been a despised minority without much real hope of changing the structures of society. But where evangelicals have been strong—as for example in the American South—they have been as slow to deal with prejudice as the ancient church was to deal with slavery—and even more reluctant. There is no other word for this lethargy in obedience than sin...  

He then pivots to a summons:

The pressure by apostate elements within the organization of many churches to turn them into instruments of social revolution must be resisted—but it must not be resisted by turning our back on social problems... Evangelicals must not dance to the tune of the non-Christian social revolutionaries. We have clearly said that this profanes the Gospel. But we must learn to write our own music: a program of social action in harmony with God’s Word and with the ring of honesty to those it is supposed to help.

If we heed Brown’s call, we will position ourselves to give a more full-orbed witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ not only to a watching world, but also to those within our fold and within our own families who might otherwise find appeal in “another Gospel” (Gal. 1:6-7) that has criticized their own tradition’s indifference to matters beyond individual salvation and doctrinal precision. Put another way, if evangelicals

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16 “We may preach truth. We may preach orthodoxy. We may even stand against the practice of untruth strongly. But... unless people see in our churches not only the preaching of the truth, but the practice of the truth, the practice of love and the practice of beauty; unless they see that the thing that the humanists rightly want but cannot achieve on a humanist base – human communication and human relationship – is able to be practiced in our communities, then let me say it clearly: They will not listen and they should not listen.” Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the 20th Century* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 39-40.


wish to make the music of liberalism’s social concern sound less attractive to the ears of professing Christians, we must, as Brown says, “learn to write our own music.” Or, in the words of Machen himself with which we close:

The “otherworldliness” of Christianity involves no withdrawal from the battle of this world; our Lord Himself, with His stupendous mission, lived among the throng and the press. Plainly, then, the Christian man may not simplify his problems by withdrawing from the business of the world, but must learn to apply the principles of Jesus even to the complex problems of modern industrial life. At this point Christian teaching is in full accord with the modern liberal Church; the evangelical Christian is not true to his profession if he leaves his Christianity behind him on Monday morning. On the contrary, the whole of life, including business and all of social relations, must be made obedient to the law of love.  

20 Machen, Christianity and Liberalism, 155.
Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Romans 1:3-4

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Paul’s epistle to the Romans opens with a proverbial fireworks show as he wastes no time unleashing theological truth: “Concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 1:3-4). In the history of interpretation theologians have appealed to this passage to support the claim that Paul was highlighting the two natures of Christ, human and divine. But in recent years some Reformed interpreters have taken a slightly different tack inspired by the exegesis of Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949), among others. Rather than highlight ontological (or vertical) aspects of the text, Vos draws attention to redemptive-historical (or horizontal) features.1 In past generations exegetes would unhesitatingly appeal to Romans 1:3-4 as evidence of Christ’s deity, whereas now some say that verse 3 does not refer to “Jesus’ deity but to his messianic kingship as the descendant of David.”2 What makes Vos’s exegesis of Romans 1:3-4 interesting is that he initially held the traditional (vertical-ontological) view but later changed his mind and promoted the redemptive-historical (or horizontal view). In other words, Vos now believed Paul’s chief interest was tracing the line of redemptive history rather than speaking of the two natures of Christ. There are a number of interesting questions that surround Vos’s change of opinion such as, what made him change his mind? Who were his sources? What did his colleagues think? This essay seeks to answer these questions.

The chief thesis of this essay is that Vos shifted his interpretation because he was interested in pursuing the discipline of biblical theology, which naturally focused his attention upon the redemptive-historical (or horizontal) features of the biblical text. The first step in proving this thesis unfolds in exploring the history of interpretation of Romans 1:3-4 to set the context for Vos’s own changing view. This is an important step in proving the thesis. At the root of Vos’s change of opinion lies the views of sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546), who was a likely inspiration for contemporary German New Testament scholarship that informed Vos’s revised exegesis. Moreover, examining the history of exegesis also shows that Vos was not the first exegete to notice

1 See, e.g., Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Resurrection and Redemption (1978; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1987), 100-10; John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 5-12. This is not to say that Gaffin, or Murray for that matter, deny the “underlying ontological element,” nevertheless maintains that Vos’s “newer interpretation” as the “more satisfactory alternative” instead of the older ontological view (Gaffin, Resurrection, 100-01).

2 Thomas Schreiner, Romans, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 42. Note, there are many different interpretive options for Romans 1:3-4. This essay does not seek to exhaust every single option but rather focuses upon Vos’s change of opinion and whether his early and late positions are irreconcilable. For a survey of the various interpretive positions, see Richard N. Longenecker, The Epistle to the Romans, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 63-77.
horizontal elements in the text. Second, the essay examines Vos’s early and late exegesis and investigates the contemporary German New Testament scholars who inspired his change of opinion. Third, the essay explains the reasons why Vos changed his view and its reception by his fellow Princeton Theological Seminary colleague, B. B. Warfield (1851-1921). This third section also poses the question of whether the early and late Vos are at odds with one another. Does Vos abandon the Old Princeton line on Romans 1:3-4 or add greater redemptive-historical texture to it? Given what Vos has written in both his systematic- and biblical-theological works, one need not choose between Vos the theologian versus the exegete, but rather both peacefully coexist in the same man. The essay concludes with some summary observations about Vos’s exegesis and the irrefragable nature of systematic and biblical theology.

**History of Interpretation**

**Augustine**

Augustine’s unfinished commentary on Romans was one of the earliest works to explain Romans 1:3-4 along vertical lines. He writes: “It was necessary to meet those who, in their impiety, only accept our Lord Jesus Christ in their humanity, assumed by him, but do not recognize his divinity, which distinguishes him and separates him from all creation.” The Word, the eternal Son of God, became incarnate as a descendant of David: “This Word became a man of the lineage of David and dwelt among us (cf. Jn 1,14); but he did not change, becoming flesh, but he clothed himself with flesh to manifest himself in the proper way to carnal men.” To ensure that people knew that Christ’s descent from David did not denote his ontological genesis as merely human, Augustine emphasizes that Paul’s phrase, “according to the flesh,” means that the Son of God was not created by God, but rather his human nature was born.3

Conversely, when Paul speaks of Christ being “predestinated with power to the Son of God . . . according to the Spirit,” it reveals the Son’s divinity: “The fact of having died makes reference to being the son of David; on the other hand, his resurrection from the dead refers to his divine filiation, being also Lord of David himself” (2 Cor. 13:4). Augustine zeroes in on the specific meaning of Paul’s statement, i.e., why does he say that Christ was predestined to be the Son of God if he was already the Son? Augustine explains:

He was actually predestined to be the Son of God with a certain primacy in the resurrection, since his predestination was from the resurrection of all the dead, that is, he was destined to rise above others and before others. The words Son of God, placed behind it was predestined, are like the confirmation of such high dignity. Only the Son of God could be predestined to this, since he is also the head of the Church, and the same Apostle in another place calls him first-born from the dead (cf. Col. 1:18). It was convenient that the judge

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of the resurrected was the one who had preceded them as a model. But not as a model of all the resurrected ones, but as an example of those who have to resuscitate to live and reign eternally: he is precisely their head, and they are their body.\(^4\)

Augustine does not restrict Romans 1:4 to the confirmation of the Son’s deity and appointment as head of the church but also notes that “according to the Spirit of sanctification by his resurrection from the dead” means that after Christ’s resurrection believers received the gift of the Spirit. How so? Anyone in union with Christ receives the Spirit.\(^5\)

**Thomas Aquinas**

In the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) echoes Augustine’s exegesis. He argues that Paul addresses the dual origin of the Son when he writes, concerning his Son, where he reveals the eternal generation of the Son, something that was previously concealed. At his baptism, the Father therefore declared of his Son: “This is my beloved Son” (Matt. 3:17). The Son, argues Aquinas, is the Word and begotten wisdom of God: “Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). But Aquinas explains that people have erred in three ways concerning God’s Son. First, some have erroneously argued that Christ was the adopted Son of God. Photinus (d. 376) taught that Christ derived his origin from Mary as a mere man, but because of his profound piety, achieved an exalted state. But Aquinas avers that if this had happened, that Christ would not have testified that he had descended from heaven (John 6:38).

Second, some have mistakenly claimed that Christ’s sonship was in name only, such as Sabellius (fl. ca. 215). Aquinas has modalism in view here, namely, that the Father came down and merely took the name of Son. But, if this were true, Jesus would not have said that his Father sent him (John 6:38). Third, Arius (250-336) wrongly taught that Jesus’ sonship was created—Christ was the most perfect creature. But such a view conflicts with John 1:3, which says that everything was created by the Word.\(^6\) When Paul writes on the Son’s natural origins in Romans 1:3, these three aforementioned errors run into problems. The fact that Paul writes that Jesus was descended from David destroys Photinus’s view, because Jesus was not adopted. This statement also contradicts Arius’s opinion that he was created *ex nihilo* according to both his divine and human natures. In short, Paul’s statements create obstacles for heretical teaching because they affirm the full humanity of Christ.

Paul turns away from Christ’s origin (Rom. 1:3), and pivots to address his power by three means: predestination, his dignity or power, and his sign or effect. Aquinas’s first point originates from the Latin translation of the Scriptures, which state Christ was

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“predestined the Son of God in power,” and thus God predetermined to ordain the incarnation of the eternal Son. Aquinas writes: “Just as a man’s union with God through grace of adoption falls under predestination, so also the union with God in person through the grace of union falls under predestination.” But Aquinas clarifies that when God predestined the incarnation, this does not mean that there was a time when the Son did not exist. Rather, “Christ was predestinated, i.e., foreknown, from eternity to be revealed in time as the Son of God in power.” In other words, God the Father predestined the fully divine eternal Son to be revealed both through the incarnation and the resurrection in power, to confirm his character as the Son. This point informs the second issue, namely, the Son’s dignity or power: “Thus from the Son of God he descends to the flesh and from the flesh, by way of predestination, he ascends to the Son of God, in order to show that neither did the glory of the Godhead prevent the weakness of the flesh nor did the weakness of the flesh diminish the majesty of the Godhead.” Aquinas addresses the third point, which pertains to the effect or sign. In this case, the sign or the effect is that the Spirit of holiness wrought the resurrection. God was accustomed to sanctify sinners by means of the Spirit’s anointing (Lev. 20:8; Isa. 42:5). But through Christ God would send the Spirit (John 15:26) and sanctify and justify sinners (1 Cor. 6:11). This does not mean that saints were never sanctified prior to Christ’s resurrection but rather from the time that Christ arose from the dead, the Father poured out a more copious dispensation of the Spirit, which began with Christ’s resurrection from the dead. This manifestation of the Spirit in the resurrection of Christ reveals “that Christ is the Son of God in power.”

John Calvin

During the Reformation John Calvin (1509-64) walked in the well-worn path hewn by earlier theologians and exegetes by contending that two things can be found in Christ: his divinity and humanity. His divinity possesses power, righteousness, and life, which he conveys to sinners by means of his humanity. Paul reminds readers, however, that Jesus descended from David. Christ’s Davidic lineage harkens to God’s promises concerning the Messiah, which highlights that Jesus was truly human. Calvin takes this opportunity to mention the “impious ravings of Servetus” (d. 1553), who claimed that Christ’s human nature was composed of three uncreated elements. Conversely, Christ was declared to be the Son of God in power by his resurrection, which has roots in Psalm 2:7. The resurrection was the definitive testimony and celestial power of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who

7 Aquinas, Romans, comm. Rom. 1:4, §46 (p. 17).
9 Aquinas, Romans, comm. Rom. 1:4, §52 (p. 19).
10 Aquinas, Romans, comm. 1:4, §58 (pp. 20-21).
11 Aquinas, Romans, comm. 1:4, §59 (p. 21).
regenerates sinners and raises them from death to life. But the resurrection was also a
demonstration of Christ’s divine power, which he confirmed by his testimony that he would
raise himself from the dead (John 2:19; 10:18). Other Reformers interpret the text
similarly, including Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563).

Martin Luther

Outside the Reformed tradition Luther’s 1515 lectures on the book of Romans offer
another point of view. According to Luther, “This passage has, as far as I know, never been
explained correctly or sufficiently by anyone.” Luther believed that patristic exegetes
inadequately explained the text and medieval theologians lacked the Spirit. In a nutshell,
Luther argues: “The contents, or object, of the Gospel, or—as others [Nicholas of Lyra]
say—its subject, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born of the seed of David according to the
flesh and now appointed King and Lord over all things in power, and this according to the
Holy Spirit, who has raised Him from the dead.” Luther analyzes Paul’s Greek, though he
relied upon Lorenzo Valla’s (c. 1407-57) Adnotationes that translate ὁ ῥισθέντος (“declared”) as definitus, which means “chosen, or designated, declared, ordained, to be the
Son of God in power.” He also notes that the Son of God became incarnate “by emptying
himself.” He emptied himself when he became the Son of David, but on the heels of his
resurrection he has “been established and designated the Son of God in all power and
glory.” Luther sees the Son’s descent and ascent in Romans 1:3-4—the Son’s descent into
weakness through the incarnation and his ascent to the revelation of the fullness of his
deity in his resurrection. Luther characterizes this pattern as, “This God is the Son of David,
and this Man is the Son of God.” He even writes of the Son’s humanity being “completed and
translated to divine being.”

Unlike earlier interpretations of Romans 1:3-4, Luther looked at these verses as
explaining the redemptive-historical sweep of the Son’s incarnation and ministry. Luther writes:

But even though it is true that He was not made the Son of God, but only the
Son of Man, nevertheless, one and the same Person has always been the Son
and is the Son of God even then. But this fact was not chosen, declared, and

13 Calvin, Romans, comm. Rom. 1:4 (pp. 45-46).
15 Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans, Luther’s Works, vol. 25 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1972), 146.
16 Luther, Romans, 146.
17 Luther, Romans, 146n. 23; cf. Lorenzo Valla, Latinam Novi Testamenti Interpretationem ex Collatione
18 Luther, Romans, 146-47.
19 Luther, Romans, 147.
ordained so far as man were concerned. He had already received power over all things and was the Son of God, but as yet He was not exercising that power and was not recognized as that Son of God. This was brought about only through the Spirit of sanctification. The Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet been glorified. This Man, the Son of David according to the flesh, is now publicly declared the Son of God in power, that is, over all things. For as the Son of David He was weak and subject to all things. All this was done according to the Spirit of sanctification. To Him is attributed the glorification of Christ, as stated above. But the Holy Spirit did this only after the resurrection of Christ. Therefore he adds by the resurrection from the dead, because the Spirit was not given before the resurrection of Christ.  

In short, Paul traces the lines of Christ's incarnation to his exaltation, a theme that also appears in Philippians 2:5-11. Romans 1:3-4 is not, therefore, primarily about the humanity and divinity of Christ but about the sweep of redemptive history. The resurrection of Christ by the power of the Spirit declares his sonship: “Before the resurrection this was not revealed and manifest but hidden in the flesh of Christ.” In contemporary nomenclature, Romans 1:3-4 is not about the Son’s ontology but about the historia salutis, eschatology, the outpouring of the Spirit, and the exaltation of the Son. Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) presents a similar interpretation, though unlike Luther, he says that Paul is also interested in highlighting the Son’s two natures.  

Post-Reformation Theologians  

The Annotations of the Westminster Assembly fall into the vertical category. The Annotations explain that when Paul states that Christ was “descended from David according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3), that the apostle highlights the Son of God assumed a human nature in the unity of his person—that is, he was of the substance of Mary, who was a descendant of David and that Paul’s reference to flesh refers to his human nature. Conversely, when Paul says that he “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:4), that Paul does not mean that he was made the Son of God in the same way that he was incarnate. Rather, God declared him to be the Son of God by means of a definitive judgment and sentence, which they connect to Psalm 2:7, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” The fact that this declaration occurs by the power of the Spirit means that God declares his Son to possess a divine nature. The Synod of Dort (1618-19) in its whole-Bible commentary presents the

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20 Luther, Romans, 147.

21 Luther, Romans, 148.

22 Philip Melanchthon, Commentary on Romans, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1992), 63-64.


same exegesis, as do other Reformed orthodox theologians, including Moïses Amyraut (1596-1664), David Dickson (1583-1663), David Pareus (1548-1622), and John Brown of Wamphray (ca. 1610-79). In fact, Wamphray’s explanation mirrors the scope and extent of Aquinas’s detailed theological exegesis concerning the two natures of Christ.

There are some outliers and slight variations among post-Reformation interpreters, such as Johannes Cocceius’s (1603-69) exegesis. Like earlier interpreters, Cocceius addresses the question of Christ’s two natures, but unlike earlier theologians, he traces Christ’s human nature through redemptive history as the promised seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), the seed of Abraham (Gen. 22:18), and the universal scope of blessing that came through them, which appears in Psalm 8:6—the Son of Man. This redemptive historical line lies behind the phrase that Jesus “descended from David according to the flesh,” which pulls other significant biblical texts in its wake (Gen. 49:10; 2 Sam. 7:11-14; Psalm 132:17; Matt. 1; Luke 3). Cocceius offers an equally expansive horizontal explanation of verse 4’s statement about Christ’s resurrection. Like Calvin’s earlier exegesis, God raised Christ from the dead as a confirmation of divine promises (Psa. 16:9-10; Isa. 53:10; Acts 17:31). But the resurrection also confirmed the outpouring of the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:4-8, 25, 32-36) first announced by the prophets, and the fact that Jesus is Lord (Rev. 5:12, John 3:35; Heb. 1:1-2; Psa. 2:8; Heb. 2:10; 5:8-9; Isa. 41:14; Gen. 48:16; John 17:10; 1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Pet. 1:18-19). So while Cocceius follows the common track of the vertical interpretation, he also explores the horizontal lines of the text by tracing promise and fulfillment from Old Testament to New.

Another outlier is the commentary of Andrew Willet (1562-1621), who offers somewhat unique comments given that he surveys the history of interpretation. Christ was descended from David according to the flesh, which points to the Spirit’s work in the incarnation and Christ’s human nature, features noted by interpreters such as Chrysostom (ca. 347-407), Origen (ca. 184 – c. 253), and Theodore Beza (1519-1605). More specifically, Augustine argues that this phrase addresses the virgin birth of Christ. Willet also searches through other commentators such as Ambrose of Milan (ca. 340 - 397), who recognizes that Christ’s genealogy was traced back to Joseph and Mary, both of whom were descendants of David. When Paul says that Christ was declared to be the Son of God by the power of the Spirit’s resurrection, interpreters usually appeal to three elements to


26 Johannes Cocceius, S. Pauli Apostoli Epistola ad Romanos (Leiden: Arnold Doude, 1668), 14.

27 Cocceius, 17.

28 Cocceius, 18.

prove the Son’s divine nature: the power of miracles, the Holy Spirit, and Christ’s claims that he would raise himself—points raised by Chrysostom, Andreas Hyperius (1511-64), and Benedict Aretius (1522-74), among others. But Willet avers that a slightly better path of interpretation addresses that the resurrection proclaims his divine nature by the Spirit of sanctification, whereby he sanctified his own flesh and that of his mystical body, the church. Willet surveys a number of interpretations that seek to explain Paul’s reference to the Holy Spirit and argues that the “Spirit of sanctification” refers not to the Holy Spirit but to Christ’s divine nature. He believes this is the case because of two other statements in Scripture, namely, that Christ was “justified in the Spirit” (1 Tim. 3:16) and that he offered himself up in sacrifice “through the eternal Spirit” (Heb. 9:14). That is, by the power of his divine spirit he sanctifies his own body, his own hypostasis, and consequently his mystical body, the church. Willet mines this interpretation from Beza, Pareus, and Ambrose.

Matthew Henry and Robert Haldane

In the eighteenth-century Matthew Henry (1662-1714) follows the broad contours of earlier exegetes by arguing that Paul’s statements show Christ’s two natures. Among nineteenth-century commentators, Robert Haldane (1764-1842) travels the beaten path by explaining that Romans 1:3 refers to the Son’s human nature. He quickly notes that Christ’s divine nature was begotten, not made (John 1:4; Gal. 4:4), to stipulate that the Son is fully God. He traces the seed of David back to Abraham and Judah and the Shiloh prophecy (Gen. 49:8-10). Through the incarnation Paul demonstrates the willingness of the Son to humble himself. Haldane contends that Paul’s statement, “descended from David according to the flesh,” both reveals his divinity and humanity.

Romans 1:4 conveys the idea that the Son was not born but declared to be God’s Son by the resurrection. Haldane argues that the Son’s resurrection is distinct from his descent from David:

This expression, the Son of God, definitely imports Deity, as applied to Jesus Christ. It properly denotes participation of the Divine nature, as the contrasted expression, Son of Man, denotes participation of the human nature. As Jesus Christ is called the Son of Man in the proper sense to assert His humanity, so, when in contrast with his deity He is called the Son of God, the phrase must be understood in its proper sense as asserting His Deity.

30 Willet, Hexapla, 40.

31 Willet, Hexapla, 41-42.


34 Haldane, Romans, 23.
On the heels of this statement Haldane embarks on a defense of the full deity of Christ for several pages. According to Haldane, the subsequent phrase, “with power,” refers both to the Spirit’s activity in raising Christ from the dead as well as Christ’s giving of the Spirit when he ascended to the Father. Before his resurrection Christ was covered in a veil of humility but after his resurrection he was invested with all power: “For He who thus sends forth this glorious Spirit must be possessed of sovereign and infinite power, and consequently must be the Son of God.” Haldane, therefore, does not cease with pointing out the Son’s deity, but draws connections to redemptive history and his outpouring of the Spirit. Granted, he shows that only someone who is God could pour out the Spirit, thus this horizontal activity is yet more evidence of the Son’s deity.

Haldane reinforces the links between the Son and Spirit when he explains the phrase, “according to the Spirit of holiness.” Again, this refers to the deity of Christ and stands in contrast to his humanity. But more specifically, the “Spirit of holiness,” refers to the Holy Spirit. In this case, the Son pours out the Spirit on the heels of his resurrection and baptizes the church, thereby communicating spirit and life to all its members. This is why Paul, according to Haldane, calls Christ “a quickening Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45). In Haldane’s judgment, Paul begins his epistle by showing that the foundation of redemption rests upon the union of the divine and human natures of Christ.

The final piece of the puzzle is Christ’s resurrection from the dead, which constituted an authentic judgment by God by which he declared Jesus to be his Son, a truth prophesied in Psalm 2:7 and confirmed in Acts 13:33, “When the Son of God was raised from the dead, His eternal dignity, which was before concealed, was brought to light. His Divine power, being infinite and unchangeable, could receive no augmentation of dignity or majesty.” In short, “By His resurrection, God proclaimed to the universe that Christ was His only-begotten Son.” Haldane thus summarizes Romans 1:3-4 in the following manner:

By His incarnation, Jesus Christ received in His human nature the fulness of His Spirit; but He received it covered with the veil of His flesh. By His death He merited the Spirit to sanctify His people; but still this was only a right which He had acquired, without its execution. By His resurrection He entered into the full exercise of this right; He received the full dispensation of the Spirit, to communicate it to them; and it was then He was declared to be the Son of God with power.

Haldane labored in Europe, largely in Scotland and in Geneva, Switzerland, but another nineteenth-century theologian offered a slightly different interpretation of Romans 1:3-4.

35 Haldane, Romans, 26.
36 Haldane, Romans, 26.
37 Haldane, Romans, 27.
38 Haldane, Romans, 28.
39 Haldane, Romans, 30.
Charles Hodge (1797-1878) is of special interest because he labored at Princeton Theological Seminary where Vos eventually studied. Vos never took any classes from Hodge since he had died before Vos enrolled, but Vos took classes from Caspar Wistar Hodge (1830-91), Hodge’s grandson. The elder Hodge’s influence was undoubtedly significant at Old Princeton. Early in his career Hodge wrote of three leading interpretations of the verses in question: (1) Jesus was the Son of David according to his human nature and the Son of God according to his divine nature, a fact proven by his resurrection from the dead; (2) Christ was in a state of humiliation as the Son of David but was constituted as the Son of God in his state of exaltation by his resurrection; and (3) Christ was the Son of David according to his human nature but was declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection, in accordance with the Scriptures.40 Hodge opts for the first view, which as this survey has shown, was a common interpretation. Hodge believed that this view was commended by several considerations.

First, Christ “was made of the seed of David according to the flesh,” means that he was born (Gal. 4:4; John 8:41; 1 Pet. 3:6). More specifically, the phrase “according to the flesh,” has reference to Christ’s human nature. The term flesh is often used for men as the expression “all flesh” suggests, and as the term appears elsewhere in the New Testament (John 1:14; 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 John 4:2; Rom. 9:5).41 Like earlier commentators, Hodge then breaks down Romans 1:4 into three parts: (1) declared to be the Son of God with power, (2) according to the Spirit of holiness, and (3) by the resurrection from the dead. Hodge references both Chrysostom and Theodoret (ca. 393 - 457) to prove that declared means to reveal a thing’s true nature. This means that the resurrection was the means by which God revealed Christ’s true nature, i.e., he was “clearly declared to be the Son of God.”42

Second, the Scriptures refer to Christ’s divine nature as “spirit” (Heb. 9:14; 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 3:18). That is, when the Jewish authorities crucified Christ they put him to death as to his flesh but when he was raised, he lived “as to the Spirit,” which according to Peter’s usage this refers to Christ’s divine nature, the means by which Christ preached to the spirits in prison.43 Third, “the resurrection of the dead,” was the “great decisive evidence that he was the Son of God; it was the public acknowledgement by God of the validity of all the claims of which Christ had made.”44 Hodge believed in the accuracy of his exegesis because Paul also says that Jesus is the “Son of God,” which is a title that applies to Jesus in a unique way.45

41 Hodge, Romans, 5.
42 Hodge, Romans, 6.
43 Hodge, Romans, 7.
44 Hodge, Romans, 7.
45 Hodge, Romans, 8.
Johann Peter Lange and John Albrecht Bengel

Johann Peter Lange (1802-84) wrote commentaries on the whole Bible, including Romans.46 Lange makes specific observations regarding the structure of the text, namely, that Paul presents an antithetical parallelism. Lange notes that John Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) first observed this feature of Paul’s text.47 Bengel’s interpretation largely colors within the lines of earlier explanations, as he expounds that when the Bible mentions the human nature of Christ, it comes first, because the resurrection proved his divine nature.48 Like earlier commentators, he points out that the Son’s resurrection was a declaration, and not the ontological genesis, of his sonship (Psa. 2:7; Acts 2:22), and that the “Spirit of holiness,” refers to Christ, and not the Holy Spirit. But Bengel notes that Paul places flesh and spirit in antithesis, and thus that flesh and Godhead stand opposed to one another. They stand opposed to each other to highlight the efficacy of the holiness or divinity of the Savior’s resurrection both as a revelation and consequence of his resurrection. But Paul’s use of prepositions, ἐκ ... κατὰ σάρκα and κατὰ ... ἐξ ἀναστάσεως, present an antithesis, or antithetical parallelism.49 Bengel’s observation is likely one of the first times an exegete has drawn attention to this feature of Paul’s text and Lange took notice, though Lange also credits John Forbes with making the same observation about Paul’s statement. Noteworthy is that the subtitle of Forbes’s work draws attention to a key feature of his exegesis: “Tracing the Train of Thought by the Aid of Parallels.”50

Lange sets out the antithetical parallelism to show the structure of Paul’s statement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>γενομένου</th>
<th>ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυίδ</th>
<th>κατὰ σάρκα</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ὁρισθέντος υἱὸῦ θεοῦ ἐν δυνάμει</td>
<td>ἐξ ἀναστάσεως</td>
<td>κατὰ πνεῦμα ἁγίωσύνης</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lange argues that Paul’s antithetical parallelism conveys the following meaning:

Concerning His Son,

Who was born [Son of Man in weakness]


47 Lange, *Romans*, 60.


50 John Forbes, *Analytical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: Tracing the Train of Thought by the Aid of Parallelism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868).
from the seed of David,

as to the flesh,

Who was installed Son of God in power

from the resurrection of the dead,

as to the Spirit of holiness.

Even Jesus Christ our Lord.\(^{51}\)

Earlier interpreters have always taken note of horizontal aspects of the statement, such as Aquinas or Calvin arguing that references to the seed of David draws readers’ attention to God’s past promises; this is especially true of Cocceius’s interpretation. But in this particular case, Lange stresses both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the text by highlighting Paul’s use of the antithetical parallelism.

Lange picks up the horizontal dimensions of Romans 1:3-4 through Forbes’s earlier work, who comments on the text’s structure:

\( ^{a} \text{Concerning His Son,} \)

\( ^{b} \text{Which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh,} \)

\( ^{c} \text{And ordained the Son of God with power,} \)

\( \text{According to the Spirit of holiness,} \)

\( \text{By the resurrection of the dead} \)

Even Jesus Christ our Lord.

Forbes explains:

There is a beautiful gradation in the original; \( ^{a} \), v. 3, ‘concerning His Son,’ refers to the incommunicable Sonship of the Only-Begotten in his pre-existent state; \( ^{b} \) and \( ^{c} \), to that Sonship, which in its two stages, at the incarnation and resurrection, He assumed that He might communicate it to ‘many brethren’ – \( ^{b} \) referring to His state of humiliation; \( ^{c} \), of exaltation—by which He became ‘Jesus’ (Matt. i.21)—the Christ—our Lord (Acts ii.36).\(^{52}\)

\(^{51}\) Lange, *Romans*, 60.

\(^{52}\) Forbes, *Analytical Commentary on Romans*, 2.
Forbes and Lange draw attention to Christ’s states of humiliation and exaltation, which was an interpretation of which Hodge was aware but nevertheless set aside for the more common explanation of Paul referring to Christ’s two natures. Hodge saw the two interpretations as mutually exclusive, and while Lange places more emphasis upon the horizontal plane, he does not do so to the detriment of the vertical plane.

When Lange, for example, explains the nature of flesh (σάρξ), like Aquinas before him, he rejects Apollinarian interpretations, i.e., Christ did not merely assume a human body with an animal but not a rational soul, which was replaced by the Logos. Rather σάρξ, argues Lange, refers to an entire human nature, body and soul, sin excepted.53 Moreover, like earlier interpreters who stressed Christ’s communication of the Spirit by means of his resurrection, Lange observes:

\[
\text{Κατὰ πνεῦμα ἁγιώσυνης is evidently the antithesis or counterpart of κατὰ σάρκα, and as σάρξ here means the human nature of Christ, πνεῦμα must mean His divine nature, which is all Spirit, and intrinsically holy; ἁγιώσυνης is the genitive of qualification, showing that holiness is the essential characteristic of Christ’s Spirit, and yet it distinguishes this from the πνεῦμα ἁγιον, which is the teaching designation of the third person of the Trinity.} \]

Lange, therefore, neither sets aside ontological considerations in favor of economic features, nor ignores doctrinal categories such as the trinity or full humanity of Christ. Rather, he highlights the vertical and horizontal aspects.

**William Plummer**

William Plummer (1873-1943) provides a helpful summary of the different interpretive opinions that have appeared throughout the ages. Plummer first explains the uncontested point that reflects the opinion of most commentators, namely, that because Paul says that Christ was descended from David according to the flesh that this refers to the Son’s humanity (2 Sam. 7:16; Isa. 11:1).55 Second, when he crosses the threshold of verse 4, he notes the varied opinions concerning the different clauses. Despite differences of opinion regarding the meaning of declared to be the Son of God, whether declared (Chrysostom, Theodoret, William Tyndale, Thomas Cranmer, Calvin, Beza, Giovani Diodati, John Brown of Wamphray, August Tholuck, and Hodge), determined (the Westminster Assembly’s Annotations, and John Owen), marked out (Le Clerc, Elsner, Doddridge, Conybeare, and Howson),

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54 Lange, *Romans*, 62.

proved (Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, and Boothroyd), demonstrated (Macknight, Freme, Burkitt, Whitby, and Cox), or made known as (Peshitta), Plummer believes that they more or less intend the same thing. The two meanings he rejects are predestined (by Irenaeus, Augustine, Vulgate, Doway and Rheims) and constituted (Stuart).  

According to the Spirit of holiness has had a number of different interpretations, which some connect to the Holy Spirit as a sanctifying agent (Tyndale, Wycliff, Cranmer, Calvin, Rheims, the Peshitta, Beza). Others argue that it refers to Christ’s own spirit (Ferme, Stuart). Among these different variants, Plummer identifies three different versions where the phrase refers to: (1) Christ’s personal sanctity as a man, but Plummer immediately dismisses this as untenable; (2) the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity (so Calvin, Burkitt, Doddridge, Scott, Williams, et al.); or (3) a reference to the Son’s divine nature (so Diodati, Beza, Pool, Hammond, Ferme, Guyse, the Dutch Annotations, the Assembly’s Annotations, Locke, Alford, Olshausen, Stuart, Haldane, and Hodge). Plummer explains that the attraction to the third view (reference to Christ’s divine nature) appears in the antithesis between flesh and spirit (Matt. 12:32; Rom. 4:4; 8:1, 4-5), and thus he opts for this view.

By the resurrection from the dead has competing interpretations like the previous two clauses. Plummer notes that most commentators agree with the Authorized Version, namely, that it refers to Christ’s own resurrection. The latter phrase is literally the resurrection of the dead (cf. 1 Cor. 15:43; Heb. 6:2). The resurrection of Christ “settles his divine sonship in the clearest manner,” writes Plummer. He presents five ways that confirm his status as God’s Son through the resurrection:

1. It was a remarkable display of God’s power (Eph. 1:19-20).

2. Jesus foretold he would rise by his own power, which proves he possess the power of omnipotence with the Father.

3. Jesus was the surety for his people, thus eternal justice would not release him from the bonds of death until his state of humiliation was completed.

4. He said and did many things where he established the highest claims of reverence, worship, and obedience from people. If he were not truly divine, confirmed by his resurrection from the dead, then he would have been proven a deceiver.

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56 Plummer, Romans, 35.

57 Plummer, Romans, 35-36.

58 Plummer, Romans, 36.
5. His resurrection is connected with our justification to the extent that the whole of our salvation depends upon it (Rom. 4:25; 1 Pet. 1:3).

Plummer lists all of these reasons as the explanation of the significance of Christ’s resurrection, though he does not attach any theologian to the various points. Given the above survey, Plummer’s list reads almost like a summation of the history of exegesis for the latter part of Romans 1:4, “by the resurrection of the dead.”

Summary

In this brief sketch of the history of the interpretation of Romans 1:3-4, we can place interpreters in one of three chief categories: (1) ontological (or vertical), (2) redemptive-historical (or horizontal), or (3) both ontological and redemptive-historical:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ontological (Vertical)</th>
<th>Ontological and Redemptive-Historical</th>
<th>Redemptive-Historical (Horizontal)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Augustine</td>
<td>Aquinas</td>
<td>Luther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>Melanchthon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musculus</td>
<td>Cocceius</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westminster Annotations</td>
<td>Lange</td>
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<tr>
<td>Synod of Dort</td>
<td>Bengel</td>
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<td>Amyraut</td>
<td>Forbes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dickson</td>
<td>Haldane</td>
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<td>Pareus</td>
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<td>Henry</td>
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<td>Hodge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plummer</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This taxonomy reveals that up to Vos, the majority of surveyed commentators believed that Paul highlighted the two natures of Christ and, conversely, only Luther argued that the passage was exclusively about the unfolding redemptive-historical narrative. At the same time, a number of commentators point to both the vertical and horizontal elements of Romans 1:3-4. This is not to say that they emphasize the horizontal to the same degree that they do the vertical but that they nevertheless draw attention to it. The taxonomy also shows that Vos is not the first to argue that Paul addresses redemptive-historical rather than ontological truths. This survey sets the stage for unpacking Vos’s view.

Vos’s Exegesis

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59 Plummer, Romans, 36.
At the outset of Vos’s tenure at the Theological School in Grand Rapids, he lectured on a number of subjects including theology. He lectured on systematic theology from 1888 – 1893, and his lectures were published in limited form in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. These lectures represent his earliest recorded thought on a host of topics including his understanding of Romans 1:3-4. In his explanation and exegesis of the *descensus* (1 Pet. 3:18-19), Vos appeals to Romans 1:3-4 and argues that Paul’s text refers to the human and divine natures of Christ. Like Hodge before him, he appeals to Romans 9:5, “From which is Christ, as far as the flesh is concerned, who is God over all to be praised forever.” He also appeals to John 1:14, “the Word became flesh.” Vos notes, “Here ‘flesh’ always means the whole of human nature, inclusive of soul and body.”\(^{60}\) At this point in Vos’s career, he echoed the Old Princeton line on Romans 1:3-4, but he later changed his view.

Vos left the Theological School in 1893 to start his teaching post for the newly created chair of Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary. During this time, he shifted his labors to this new discipline and in 1912 published an essay entitled, “The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit,” which represents a shift in his thought. Vos moved away from the Old Princeton line and advocated a different understanding of Romans 1:3-4.\(^{61}\) The overall thrust of Vos’s essay is to show to what extent Paul connects the work of the Spirit with eschatology.\(^{62}\) Vos sees this link in the New Testament because the Spirit is the dominant part of the eschatological world.\(^{63}\) Vos traces the themes of Spirit and eschatology back to the Old Testament through four observations.

First, is the promised effusion of the Spirit in Joel 2:28-32. Second, the Spirit serves as the “official equipment of the Messiah,” his “permanent possession” (Isa. 11.2; 28:5; 42:1; 49:21; 61:1). Third, the Spirit is the source of Israel’s future life, especially noteworthy in the prophets (Isa. 33:15-17; 44:3; 49:21; Ezek. 36:27; 37:14; 39:29). And fourth, the Spirit is the “comprehensive formula for the transcendental, the supernatural.”\(^{64}\) Important to note, however, is a source with which Vos interacts. He does not create insights *de novo* from the biblical text but engages contemporary German New Testament scholars. He cites Paul Volz’s (1871-1941) work on the Spirit in the Old Testament, though he takes issue with some of his conclusions.\(^{65}\) Vos was not, it seems, in dialogue with the history of the


\(^{63}\) Vos, “Eschatological Aspect,” 216.


47
interpretation of Romans 1:3-4 but only wrestling with its contemporary understanding from the perspective of recent German New Testament scholarship. His published essay neither shows signs of interaction with English New Testament scholarship, such as Lange, Forbes, Bengal, Henry, or Plummer, nor historical sources such as Augustine, Aquinas, or Calvin, among others.

Nevertheless, Vos continues his survey and examines Rabbinic understandings of the work of the Spirit, accessed through the work of Volz, as well as several passages from the gospels until he finally arrives at the letters of Paul. Vos observes that Paul specifically links the Christian’s possession of the Spirit to the Old Testament promises of the Spirit’s last days effusion (Acts 28:25; Rom. 7:14; 1 Cor. 1:3-4; Gal. 4:29; 1 Tim. 4:1). From this Pauline platform Vos first approaches Romans 1:3-4. Like Hodge’s earlier exegesis, Vos argues that the Messianic Person, κατὰ σάρκα and κατὰ πνεῦμα is part of the promise of the Scriptures. As he walks through the aforementioned Pauline texts, he again comes back to Romans 1:3-4 where he exeges the Greek text and notes the parallelism:

| γενομένος  | ὁρισθείς   |
| κατὰ σάρκα | κατὰ πνεῦμα ἁγιωσύνης |
| ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυὶδ | ἔξ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν |

Recall, Vos is not the first exegete to observe the parallelism in Romans 1:3-4, as Lange drew upon the earlier work of Forbes and Bengel. Nonetheless, Vos does not cite any sources here, which means this might be his own observation.

Paul’s parallelism leads Vos to a different interpretation than Hodge and earlier exeges, when he writes: “The reference is not to two coexisting sides in the constitution of the Saviour, but to two successive stages in his life . . . the two prepositional phrases have adverbial force: they describe the mode of the process, yet so as to throw emphasis rather on the result than on the initial act: Christ came into being as to his sarkic existence, and he was introduced by ὁρισθείς into this pneumatic existence.” Vos contends that the twofold κατὰ and the mode of each existence is contrasted by the twofold ἐκ, which indicates origin. Christ’s resurrection is the beginning of a new status of sonship. Vos writes: “From resurrection-beginnings, from an eschatological genesis dates the pneumatic state of Christ’s glory which is described as sonship of God ἐν δυνάμει.” Vos’s exegesis to a degree echoes the earlier interpretations of Luther and Cocceius, but he does not cite either theologian. Rather, he positively cites the work of two contemporary

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German New Testament scholars, Johannes Gloël (1857-91) and Emil Georg Hermann Sokolowski (1819-69).71

Between the two sources, Sokolowski presents the more detailed exegesis for his interpretation, and his spadework informs Vos’s own exegesis.72 Sokolowski notes Paul’s parallelism, the governing nature of Paul’s use of κατὰ, the Old Testament roots of the Spirit’s work, the significance of the respective use of ἐκ, and the differences between γενομένου (“descended”) and ὄρισθέντος (“declared”). The κατὰ contrasts the two modes of Christ’s existence, and does not address Christ’s two natures; Gloël makes the same point.73 Where do the interpretations of Sokolowski and Gloël originate? That is, both exegete Romans 1:3-4, but who guides them in the process? Gloël and Sokolowski guided Vos, but who were their guides? Both Gloël and Sokolowski cite a number of contemporary sources, but of interest is that both reference Bernhard Weiss’s (1827-1918) commentary on Romans.74 Weiss’s commentary engages in deeper historical work on Romans 1:3-4 than Gloël and Sokolowski. Weiss, for example, cites Calvin, Bengel, and Luther, among others.75 Weiss was familiar with the history of interpretation of this verse; what pushed Weiss to look at Romans 1:3-4 horizontally was an insight drawn from Luther.76 Vos was interacting with his contemporaries, but the taproot of his reconceived exegesis of Romans 1:3-4 rested first in the mind of Luther.

Analysis

There are several questions that naturally arise in the wake of uncovering Vos’s sources. First, what caused Vos’s change of opinion? Second, how was Vos’s new view received? Third, is the difference between the ontological (vertical) versus redemptive-historical (horizontal) position genuinely a shift in Vos’s view, or do they actually complement one another? In other words, is it a false dichotomy to choose either the ontological or the redemptive historical interpretation?


72 I am thankful to my TA, Levi Berntson, for translating the relevant portions from both Sokolowski’s and Gloël’s works.

73 Sokolowski, Die Begriffe, 57-58; Gloël, De heilige Geest, 115.

74 Bernhard Weiss, Der Brief an di Römer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1899); cf. Sokolowski, Die Begriffe, 60; Gloël, De heilige Geest, 115.

75 Weiss, Der Brief an di Römer, 46.

The cause of Vos's change of opinion

We should assume that an interpreter of Scripture does his best to explain what the text of Scripture says. At the same time, there are different contextual and circumstantial factors that account for how and why a theologian arrives at or changes his position. In Vos’s case, the initial context of his first interpretation of Romans 1:3-4 shaped his view. First, he was a graduate of Old Princeton and sat under the tutelage of Charles Hodge’s grandson, Caspar Wistar. Moreover, the Hodges’ ontological interpretation stood as a common view among historic Reformed interpreters such as Calvin, Musculus, the Westminster Annotations, and the Synod of Dort. Second, Vos was at the beginning stages of his teaching career and did not have opportunity to plumb the depths of every passage of Scripture to which he appealed in his lectures. Third, given that he was lecturing in systematic theology, he was likely inclined to look for ontological categories. Vos’s initial exegesis of Romans 1:3-4 appears, for example, in his lectures on Christology. So, what caused the shift?

As Vos explains the discipline of biblical theology, he indicated that he preferred the term *history of special revelation*. This means that as he prosecuted his discipline, Vos was focused upon the horizontal rather than the vertical plane of ontology. This does not mean that Vos ignored ontological categories, as he was keen on distinguishing his own version of biblical theology from its rationalist sibling. Rationalist biblical theologians sought to neutralize the revelatory principle of Scripture with appeal to history. Nevertheless, because Vos shifted his vantage point from which he spied out the text naturally opened his line of sight to see other aspects. Such a shift appears, for example, in the subtitles of the two sources Vos cites. The subtitle of Sokolowski’s *Spirit and Life in Paul* is, *Eine exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (“an exegetical history of religions investigation”). And the subtitle of Gloël’s *The Holy Spirit in the Redemptive Preaching of Paul* is *Eine biblisch-theologische Untersuchung* (“a biblical theological investigation”). Both Sokolowski and Gloël have their sights set on the horizontal plane. This changed perspective therefore impelled Vos to situate Paul’s statement in its horizontal context—within the unfolding plan of redemption.

The reception of Vos’s view

Given Vos’s shift in opinion, how was his new view received? There is no immediate evidence regarding the reception of Vos’s new interpretation, but there is one significant piece of circumstantial evidence from his Princeton colleague B. B.
Warfield. Recall that Vos published his essay on “The Eschatological Aspect of the Spirit,” in 1912; Warfield published an essay entitled, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” in 1918 where he defends Hodge’s interpretation. In his essay, Warfield argued that Paul preached the historical Christ as the long-awaited Messiah who was also the very Son of God, and Romans 1:3-4 confirms this point.\textsuperscript{79} The life-history of the Christ Paul preached was none other than the seed of David at his birth and by his birth. Christ’s resurrection confirmed that he was also the very Son of God, but the juxtaposition of these two aspects of the Son’s character do not indicate a temporal succession; rather, Paul’s ordering is logical rather than temporal. These two sayings are simply the greatest things that Paul can say about Jesus and his historical manifestation.\textsuperscript{80} Warfield notes nature of Paul’s word choices. That he says that Jesus “came,” or “became,” is related to verse 2’s “promised afore,” which is the same point that Hodge argues. That is, Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophetic Old Testament, but at the same time that he became the seed of David also hints at his preexistence, which is a point that J. B. Lightfoot (1828-89) observes.\textsuperscript{81} Jesus, however, came into the world as the promised Messiah and he went out of the world as the demonstrated Son of God. This does not mean that Christ shed his messiahship when he ascended, but that he passed from one glory to another. Christ did not therefore cease to be of the seed of David when he rose from the dead; conversely, when he became the seed of David, he did not cease to be the Son of God; Paul does not say that the resurrection made him the Son of God. Rather, he was “defined,” or “marked out,” as the Son of God by the resurrection.\textsuperscript{82} Again, this is virtually the same point that Hodge made earlier in his Romans commentary.

Warfield clearly states that Paul’s two clauses do not refer to two different modes of being through which Christ passed:

We could think at most only of two successive stages of manifestation of the Son of God. At most we could see in it a declaration that He who always was and continues always to be the Son of God was manifested to men first as the Son of David, and then, after His resurrection, as also the exalted Lord. He always was in the essence of His being the Son of God; this Son of God became the seed of David and was installed as—what He always was—the Son of God, though now in His Proper power, by the resurrection of the dead.\textsuperscript{83}


\textsuperscript{80} Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” 79.

\textsuperscript{81} Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” 79.

\textsuperscript{82} Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” 80-81.

\textsuperscript{83} Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” 81-82.
These verses do not, therefore, indicate a temporal succession. But what, specifically does Paul mean by “according to the flesh” and “marked out as the Son of God in power ‘according to the Spirit of holiness’”? Paul did not restrict Christ’s messiahship only with his earthly ministry and his divine Sonship only with his post-resurrection existence.\footnote{Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” 83.}

In Warfield’s assessment, Paul was not contrasting Christ’s pre- and post-resurrection modes of being by the juxtaposition of terms, flesh and spirit; he was also not using these terms according to their ethical connotations. Warfield does not identify his interlocutor, but he also rejects the idea that Paul was contrasting the sin cursed flesh with the spirit of holiness, and that through the resurrection of the dead Christ was set free from the “likeness of (weak and sinful) flesh.” This interpretation is a reductio ad absurdum according to Warfield. Rather, Paul distinguishes between elements of Christ’s constitution; in other words, Paul distinguishes between the human and divine natures of Christ: “He is at one and the same time both the Messiah and the Son of God. He became the seed of David with respect to the flesh, and by the resurrection of the dead was mightily proven to be also the Son of God with respect to the Spirit of holiness.”\footnote{Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” 84.} Moreover, “according to the flesh,” refers to Christ’s entire humanity (body and soul), and “according to the Spirit of holiness,” refers to the means by which he was declared to be the Son of God, a “metaphysical designation asserting equality with God” (cf. Rom. 9:5).\footnote{Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” 85-86.} Once again, Warfield’s interpretation closely follows Hodge’s. And even though Warfield writes of the “Spirit of holiness,” which stands in contrast to Hodge’s “spirit of holiness,” he still makes the same point that the phrase refers to Christ’s spirit and not the Holy Spirit—a spirit of intrinsic holiness that Christ always possessed.\footnote{Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” 87.} One of the reasons Warfield was likely keen on defending Hodge’s view was he was one of Warfield’s professors.\footnote{Fred G. Zaspel, The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 29.}

There are three notable observations about Warfield’s essay that speak to the question of the reception of Vos’s new interpretation. First, Warfield and Vos were good friends and colleagues; they took walks together at Princeton.\footnote{Danny Olinger, Geerhardus Vos: Reformed Biblical Theologian, Confessional Presbyterian (Philadelphia, PA: Reformed Forum, 2018), 119.} Given that Warfield’s essay appeared six years after Vos’s essay means that they probably discussed this particular text. Second, even though Warfield does not mention or cite Vos’s view, it seems that he has it in view when he rejects the idea that Paul was writing of two successive stages in Christ’s ministry.\footnote{Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” 87.} Warfield, therefore, was
unpersuaded by Vos’s exegesis. Third, even though Warfield disagreed with Vos, he was charitable enough not to draw explicit attention to his dissent given that he neither mentioned Vos nor any of his sources (i.e., Sokowlowski and Gloël). He nevertheless wanted to record his dissent and defend the view of his professor.

A false dichotomy?

Given the difference between Vos and Warfield, should readers of Paul’s letter be forced to choose between the two titans of modern Reformed theology? While some have certainly chosen between the two, the image of Vos and Warfield walking together visually suggests that the two positions are not irreconcilable. If Vos the biblical theologian and Warfield the systematic theologian could walk side by side as good friends, is it not possible that their interpretations of Romans 1:3-4 are not incommensurable? The answer to this question is not to try to reconcile the irreconcilable but rather to appeal to the rest of Vos’s theology. If one assumes the presuppositions of rationalistic biblical theology, then history neutralizes ontology and revelation and Paul’s statements are purely historical. Vos, of course, does not take things to this extreme, but to suggest that either Paul is speaking of redemptive history or the Son’s ontology foists a false dilemma upon the text. Vos is right to trace the redemptive-historical flow of Paul’s sárxis – pneuma antithetical parallelism. At the same time, that Paul calls Jesus the son of David and the son of God speak to his person and natures.

Vos notes that the titles son of Man and son of David conceptually overlap. According to Vos, son of Man is a title that originates in Daniel 7, and especially verses 13-14 have the Messiah in view since Daniel’s Son of Man will supersede the earlier world-kings; he is the ruler over and representative of Israel.91 Son of David both alludes to Jesus’ lineage as well as his role as the Davidic successor, the Messiah.92 Vos explains that the title Son of God speaks to the “eternal-essential constitutive relationship between Father and Son—thus within the Triune Being—that exists entirely apart from the work of the Mediator and does not first flow from it.”93 Vos then asks the question, “As a result of the meaning of these different names, what can already be established provisionally concerning the person of the Mediator and His natures?” Vos gives an answer in four parts. First, the names reveal that the Son is truly God, which is especially evident in the name Son of God. Second, that he is truly man, which is evident in the name Son of Man. Third, that in his two natures he was anointed to three offices as prophet, priest, and king. And fourth, that as the Mediator he had to pass through a state of humiliation as well as a state of exaltation.94

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90 Warfield, “The Christ that Paul Preached,” 81-82.
91 Vos, Reformed Dogmatics, III:17.
92 Vos, Reformed Dogmatics, III:19.
93 Vos, Reformed Dogmatics, III:15.
Given what Vos says about the titles *Son of David* and *Son of God*, does he therefore abandon Hodge’s earlier ontological interpretation of Romans 1:3-4 or add greater texture to it by factoring its redemptive historical context and flow? While Warfield defended the interpretation of Hodge and Luther boldly announced that earlier interpreters misunderstood Paul’s statement, given Vos’s commitment to the relationship between biblical and systematic theology, it seems that, if pressed, he would acknowledge that the redemptive historical aspects complement and inform the ontological aspects of the text. Or in Vos’s own explanation of the relationship between biblical and systematic theology, the biblical-theological *line* that Paul traces with the *sax* – *pneuma* antithetical parallelism is not contrary to the systematic-theological *circle* observations regarding Christ’s two natures. The line and the circle that one draws with the biblical text rest on the same exegetical data. In other words, the God-man, the Son of David according to the flesh, was inaugurated into his eschatological state as the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead by the Holy Spirit, which was also evidence that he was no mere man but truly divine. Vos’s newer interpretation does not contradict Hodge’s earlier view but rather completes and fills it out. At the same time, Vos himself likely believed that his newer redemptive-historical interpretation differed from his and Hodge’s earlier ontological interpretation.

In Vos’s understanding of biblical and systematic theology he argues that the constructive principle of systematic theology is “systematic and logical,” and thus “systematic theology endeavors to construct a circle.” Biblical theology, on the other hand, “seeks to reproduce a line.” As John Webster (1955-2016) observes, “Something has gone awry here.” Webster identifies two problems. Vos has separated the historical-discursive (or horizontal) from the analytical intelligence (or vertical) and distributes them between two distinct theological disciplines, biblical versus systematic theology. The first problem is: systematic theology (categorizing and systematizing according to logical principles) moves from a subordinate to primary place. The second problem is: a major part of systematic theology (presenting revelation in its canonical and historical form and context) is moved to biblical theology. Taken to extremes, systematic theology drifts from Scripture and devolves into a logical analysis of the text. While Vos argues that the same scriptural data comprises both the circle and the line, the impression one gets is that he must categorize various biblical texts as either fitting in circles or lines, thus either Warfield or Vos, but not both.

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98 Webster, “Principles of Systematic Theology,” 70.
Instead, Webster rightly counters, “Scripture must be the *terminus ad quem* of systematic theological analysis, not merely its *terminus a quo*.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, Scripture is both the starting point and goal for systematic theology. Or, systematic theology is both ontological and redemptive-historical; conversely, biblical theology is both historical and systematic-theological. We should not choose between Warfield or Vos but need both. The eternal Son of God enters the world and is inaugurated as the mediator in redemptive history. While one may use Vos’s circle versus line analogy to distinguish the systematic from the redemptive-historical, he must not press the analogy too far. We can wonder if part of the reason why Vos and Warfield did not see eye-to-eye on Romans 1:3-4 is that they were looking at Paul’s text refracted through the lens of the recently created discipline of biblical versus systematic theology and thus pressed their interpretations to different ends. To avoid this false dilemma, we must recognize that Scripture is doing the theological work and not merely providing raw data to construct proofs for doctrines in a non-scriptural idiom.¹⁰¹ Rather, the same Word who was with God and was God, is also the same Word who became flesh in the midst of history and tabernacled among us (John 1:1, 14).

**Conclusion**

Placing Vos within the wider and narrower contexts of the history of interpretation and Princeton Seminary provides the background to assess properly the evolution of his exegesis of Romans 1:3-4. Vos was not the first exegete to highlight the redemptive historical aspects of Paul’s text, as Luther was arguably one of the first and who also informed the German scholars that Vos consulted. At the same time, one need not choose between an ontological versus biblical-theological reading of Romans 1:3-4 based on two factors: the significance of Paul’s terms, i.e., Christ as the son of David and son of God, and the history of exegesis. Aquinas, Melanchthon, Cocceius, Lange, Bengel, and Forbes all underscored

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¹⁰⁰ Webster, “Principles of Systematic Theology,” 70.

¹⁰¹ Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology," 70.
horizontal aspects of Romans 1:3-4, and Vos’s own explanation of the terms Son of Man and Son of God point to the fact that, if pressed, Vos would have likely held both together. Thus, this essay proves that one need not choose between Vos the systematic versus biblical theologian, as he is both.
On Bavinck, the Beatific Vision, and Theological Practice

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Reformed theology at its best seeks to apply as broadly as possible a theocentric approach to Christian faith and practice. In that sense it is catholic both in its concern about all things and its reliance on this creedally Christian commitment to be God-centered. That has been the genius of Reformed Christianity, and it remains a helpful measure of its limits or missteps through the ages. We ought to ask regularly: has it maintained that theocentrism in a biblical and coherent way or has it sometimes fallen short of its own commitments? Reformed Christians will also expect that such limitations or lacks will arise, because we do not have an Edenic notion of the church. So we are not surprised at the existence of theological mistake or limitation; it fits our view of the Christian life.

We need to be willing, when necessary, to move from principled statements to specific cases. Hans Boersma and I have both written about dangers within modern Reformed faith and practice that would sideline the typical theocentrism intrinsic to that theological tradition. In particular, we have both warned that many Neo-Calvinist or Neo-Calvinist influenced thinkers have placed theocentric tenets like the beatific vision (the blessed vision of God in the eschaton) at the margins of Christian eschatology or, worse, have maligned the doctrine altogether as being spiritualist. Eventually, these moves can so focus on other emphases that they render churches susceptible to secularism. In varied and overlapping ways, each of us also identify the failure of the great Dutch Reformed dogmatician Herman Bavinck to offer a healthy or robust account of the beatific vision in his rightly praised *Reformed Dogmatics*. Both of us respect Bavinck immensely, which is precisely what prompts our alertness to this seeming inconsistency in his theocentric practice. While his theology in that *magnum opus* is generally a remarkable challenge to secularism, his eschatology is not consistently fixated upon God and the presence of God in a way that would help avoid what I’ve called “eschatological naturalism.”

In the last year, three capable Bavinck scholars have addressed our claims. The subject plainly matters to all three, though their perspectives don’t line up exactly. First, in his recent, much-celebrated biography of Bavinck, James Eglinton has pushed back on those criticisms by Boersma and me. In a section of his

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1 Thanks to Scott Swain, Gray Sutanto, and Steve Duby for feedback on this brief essay.

2 See Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), see esp. 33-41; and Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), see esp. 6, 61-63. I should emphasize that the two books share many judgments and concerns, but they do not agree at all points.

biography discussing Bavinck’s essay “The Future of Calvinism,” Eglinton includes this lengthy parenthesis:

“(In the same article, Bavinck sets Calvinism’s “deep vein of mysticism” in contrast with the “worldly Christianity” produced by liberal Protestantism in its failure to recast this life in light of the hereafter. On this point, the caricatures of the Neo-Calvinist tradition, and of Bavinck in particular found in the writings of Michael Allen and Hans Boersma—as “this-worldly” and unspiritual, and having “sidelined the beatific vision,” in contradistinction to the apparently more mystical Kuyper—do not suggest close familiarity with Bavinck’s biography or oeuvre.)”

The response seems to suggest that further study shows there’s nothing to see here: Bavinck proves his heavenly-minded bona fides elsewhere, and so our criticisms are wrong. Further, questioning here is a sign of ignorance of who he was and unfamiliarity with what else he wrote. Even more recently, one of Eglinton’s former doctoral students, Cory Brock, has published a whole essay length response to Boersma’s argument. This second response fills out Eglinton’s reply by showing places in his writings where Bavinck does comment (even if briefly) on a theocentric eschatology before then arguing that there’s a reason for his general reticence around the topic, namely, his conviction that scripture is underdetermined regarding what can be said of the vision of God. And, third, a still further doctoral student of Eglinton and now colleague of mine, Gray Sutanto, has written a forthcoming essay on the topic as well. His essay draws on strands of Bavinck’s teaching elsewhere in the Reformed Dogmatics to show what his doctrine of the beatific vision would be if synthesized from adjacent texts, thereby showing it would actually be quite companionable to the proposals of Boersma and me.

Each of them makes distinct moves, and they each need to be considered discretely regarding what they say of the claims of Boersma and me, what they point to in Bavinck’s writings, and what they might prompt in contemporary Christian (especially Reformed) theology. In this brief post I want to describe what seems to be an occasionally overlapping and also a varied set of responses and to engage them each on their own terms. I hope not only to clarify the immediate point but also to use this exchange as an occasion for reflection about theological practice itself, in particular, how we can best engage a historical figure like Bavinck.

**Engaging the Varied Responses**

Each response warrants a unique reply, noting its varied arguments and trying to engage each with its specific claims. First, James Eglinton suggests in his

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biography that criticisms of Bavinck’s teaching on the beatific vision manifests a lack of awareness of his biography and his wider works. In particular, Dr. Eglinton points to Bavinck’s significant essay “The Future of Calvinism” and its mystical streak as standing against such criticisms. His biography shows the value of reading Bavinck whole and reading his texts in their varied contexts. That’s an important point, and that’s why I too talked about Bavinck’s overarching theocentrism in my *Grounded in Heaven* before pointing out how that theocentrism isn’t consistently manifest in the eschatology present in volume 4. More specifically, that’s why I quoted from that exact essay, “The Future of Calvinism,” at even greater length than Eglinton does to show the wide-ranging theocentrism of which Bavinck is so capable. I suppose one could say that the essay wasn’t interpreted aright or that its implications weren’t fully appreciated in my book, but it is somewhat ironic to cite the very text which I discuss at length as evidence that I have not read the *Reformed Dogmatics* in light of Bavinck’s wider corpus. Indeed, my assessment arises precisely because Bavinck’s other writings suggest he could and would have done more than he actually does in the relevant section of the *RD*. Given Bavinck’s widespread theocentrism (on which I take him to be perhaps the leading modern Reformed model, matched only by the writings of the late John Webster), the inconsistency raises a number of questions – of biographical interest – regarding why he went silent about God and the experience of seeing God in just this place, given that so much of his principles and practice would lend itself to a theocentric account here. More on those potential questions arises below.

Second, Cory Brock argues (mostly against Boersma) that Bavinck really does have a doctrine of the beatific vision and that Boersma’s criticism simply doesn’t stick. In doing so he turns to texts beyond the *Reformed Dogmatics* (such as the *Wonderful Works of God*). Even more interestingly, Brock argues that Bavinck’s tight-lipped response is owing to his belief in the underdetermined character of the beatific vision. Because we have been told rather little, he says little. I suspect that Brock’s answer on this point is at least partially correct (or, I dare say, it is most likely a leading explanation for that reticence in the *RD*). That is, Bavinck thinks we ought to say less because we are told less. (I myself talk about the limits of our knowledge here and thus of the necessarily underdetermined character of our doctrine of the blessed vision in *Grounded in Heaven*, chapter two, so I am amenable to that posture and perhaps, therefore, more than a little eager to accept this explanation.) But here’s the thing. Bavinck has talked about medieval arguments that we understand the beatific vision this way or that. He doesn’t argue thereafter that we can’t know what Thomas and Bonaventure say. He doesn’t show that we lack resources to speak to the issue. He simply goes quiet. There’s an underdetermination to theological practice that marks our understanding on every topic, but it isn’t the same as simple silence. Underdetermination and mystery are products of wrestling through an issue, not a replacement for doing so. Now Bavinck

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himself greatly appreciates that element of mystery in theology (which is emphasized early and poignantly in RD 2:29) but he does not argue for its significance here. Therefore, while there are a number of accurate observations rendered, Brock’s essay doesn’t focus on what’s distinctive or surprising about Bavinck’s eschatology here, that is, his actual reticence regarding the vision of God in the RD relative not only to the wider ecumenical tradition but also relative to his own thoroughgoing theocentrism.

Third, Gray Sutanto’s forthcoming essay takes a different tack in turning to this area. He surveys the writings of Boersma and Brock and then he reads across Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics to show – quite effectively, I might add – that Bavinck has all the building blocks in place to affirm the beatific vision in a distinctly Reformed (largely Owenian) manner. In so doing, he shows that Bavinck’s approach would be quite similar in broad strokes (if not every detail) with the development of the doctrine in Boersma’s Seeing God and my Grounded in Heaven. Sutanto’s essay leans heavily on Christological teachings in volume three, chapter six, and it helpfully shows how Bavinck’s understanding of mediation should inform his beliefs regarding the beatific vision. It is still forthcoming, so I’ll be brief here. Suffice it to say that I think it’s a capable guide of adjacent arguments that would shape the development of a Bavinckian doctrine of the beatific vision or, better, show how Bavinck’s view would likely look like that of other, earlier Reformed theologians and would surely be expressed with a few contextually and polemically pertinent emphases. In both regards, it is a real achievement of a thought experiment that remains engaged with the real claims and silences of the Reformed Dogmatics. When it appears, we should all study it carefully.

Returning to Theological Practices

Thankfully, Bavinck studies looks still to be on the rise for the next extended season, given that there’s a range of primary sources recently translated and others yet to be translated, alongside a still relatively underdeveloped secondary literature. There’s lots of blue water there for the theologian to study today and for several years yet to come. I hope students of mine, as well as others, will continue to turn to Bavinck, so I have vested interest in productive methods and principles being employed in analysis of his texts. I want to engage these responses in that spirit, namely, as a way of thinking more carefully about Bavinck and, in so doing, reflecting on wise theological practices. Hopefully so doing clarifies a bit about how we might think about what he does (not) say regarding the beatific vision, but considering the discussion itself may also bring to light the importance of at least a couple methodological commitments which should have much wider significance.
for theological practice (especially by those of us committed to the task of retrieval as a key aspect of our work).

No one denies that Bavinck has resources in his theology that would allow for the exposition of a mature doctrine of the beatific vision that is both catholic and also distinctly Reformed. Sutanto has traced the varied themes through the RD that would provide a framework for what we might call Bavinck’s implicit doctrine of the blessed vision. But here’s the thing: it’s an implicit doctrine in his *magnum opus.* When we read the eschatology in *Reformed Dogmatics* volume four, Bavinck affirms the existence of the beatific vision and briefly sketches the debates about its character that have marked earlier eras. He then simply moves on without saying what he thinks and why or why he thinks the questions are moot and/or unanswerable. If Bavinck has resources to develop a Reformed, Owenian approach, then why doesn’t he do so? If his textbook and his wider *oeuvre* suggest a principled theocentrism, then why not express that here? Boersma and I have raised these questions precisely because of his broader instincts and other writings.

I want to conclude by pointing to two broader methodological observations. First, we need to avoid the general instinct to defend a beloved figure at every point. The Fifth Commandment does have consequences for theological method. Loyalty is a virtue. Inability to attend thoughtfully to the texts of our forebears and heroes precisely where they may seem inconsistent, or understated, or even plain wrong is nonetheless not. The First Commandment always has axiomatic primacy and governs the Fifth. Therefore, far from Bavinck being my favorite nineteenth century theologian somehow stopping me from being alert to his weaker spots, that favored status should actually lead me to be especially attuned to those spots where his remarkable witness might falter or fall silent (in hopes that I’ll find help from others before, or alongside, or after him at those points). His own eclectic use of a catholic range of sources ought to model this necessity for us, and it needs to be applied here.⁹ We do not want Bavinck studies to become a more orthodox variant of Barth studies, where the propensity has existed to argue that a single, solitary scholar somehow provides an unassailable answer to everything. Organicism doesn’t solve every quandary, and the *Reformed Dogmatics* doesn’t say everything just right. We should read the whole corpus, but do so cognizant that it surely didn’t get everything whole. Let’s engage Bavinck’s writings with the maturity that he modeled so often, not with anything marked by defensiveness or parochialism.

Second, a more particular methodological concern should be named. There’s a difference between showing how something is underdetermined after one has wrestled with a long-standing debate, on the one hand, and simply going effectively silent, on the other hand. For whatever reason, Bavinck’s eschatology in the *RD* just

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⁹ Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed eclecticism: On catholicity, consciousness and theological epistemology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70, no. 3 (2017), 310-332. This essay helpfully draws out a principle of eclectic use of figures and movements in the Christian tradition that does not involve one in an unprincipled or arbitrary (and perhaps consumeristic) approach, thereby differentiating the authority of a figure like Augustine or Thomas or Calvin or Bavinck or Barth from that of a creed or a confession. In so doing, I think it helpfully goes beyond the explicit arguments of Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), albeit in a companionable manner.
goes mostly silent (in constructive terms) regarding the major debates pertaining to the beatific vision. And we should ask: why? I suspect that he’s simply got other polemical and principal concerns to the fore at that point (for some understandable reasons) given his (appropriate) worries about mysticism and about dispensationalism. Those are conjectures based on his biography and other works (which Eglinton rightly calls us to remember). But we need to deal with his actual texts and what they do and do not say. Further, I think we need to acknowledge where his focus shifts, and why it might do so (so far as we can surmise), so we can make our own judgments in our own day about how best to present a proportionate eschatology that addresses the real challenges of our own day without failing to give voice to the whole counsel of God. And when we think an older argument that has marked the tradition isn’t actually answerable (in other words, that it’s scripturally underdetermined), we ought to show why that’s the case. We have to earn that silence by showing why we cannot say more (a position which we’ll often reach at one point or another, given the mysterious and infinite glory of the Christian God whom we study).

So that’s a lingering set of questions that still exist even if one acknowledges that Bavinck has a mostly implicit doctrine of the beatific vision, that he elsewhere presents a theocentric eschatology, and that his views on Christological mediation should set up a strongly Reformed approach to the blessed vision. In point of fact, they are actually questions that emerge precisely because of those realities, not in spite of them. And they are questions that ought to help prompt deeper biographical analysis. Retrieval and respect should not hinder but should encourage such probing inquiry. But asking those questions also shouldn’t hinder us from exploring how Bavinck’s resources and dogmatic impulses implicitly suggest a potential account of the topic that remains underexplored in the Reformed Dogmatics. Gray Sutanto’s essay helpfully shows that last point about what resources might help us extrapolate an implicit account of the vision of God from Bavinck’s Christological and trinitarian resources, and that’s most important from a constructive, positive perspective. At the end of the day, that’s the ultimate goal, namely, that, made more competent through careful examination of the work of others, we might be ready to account for the hope we have and better able to work as theologians. If we can’t talk about what might need improving, then we’re all less likely to press onward.
What Counts as "Biblical" Philosophy? Reflections from Dru Johnson's Biblical Philosophy

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When I first encountered the title of Dru Johnson's book, my interests were piqued. Most of my research has been occupied with the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition, known for its emphasis on drawing out implications for every area of life from Scripture. Philosophy, too, was no exception to this. Scripture has leavening implications for philosophy, even though it might not be a philosophical manual per se. As such, Scriptural claims should be taken as a key resource for philosophical construction and investigation.

Dru Johnson thus makes a welcome contribution in showing that Scripture should be taken seriously as presenting a philosophy. "We can detect a philosophical style by their use of logic, rigor, second-order reasoning, and advocating such reasoning." This approach recognizes that Scripture records the way in which the authors reasoned through revelation, and hence rejects the view – quite popular among philosophers today – that Scripture is philosophically (or metaphysically and epistemologically) underdetermined. Further, Johnson shows that philosophy should be taken rather broadly – conclusions and principles are drawn not merely from syllogistic or linear forms of argumentation, but through narratives, poetry, law, and authority. The history of philosophy itself attests to this – from the Socratic dialogues to Voltaire's Candide and Confucius's Analects, what counts as 'philosophy' is remarkably broad, and one should not be surprised that the Bible itself models a philosophy.

Johnson's work is a masterful examination of the ways in which attentiveness to the granularity of the text showcases an advocated philosophy. I learned much from his exegetical reflections.

Moreover, though Johnson notes that the philosophical rigor of the Hebraic texts are more akin to the rigor of Hellenism than its Egyptian or Mesopotamian counterparts, one should study Hebraic philosophy on its own terms, and not succumb to the temptation that it should only be taken seriously insofar as it mirrors another style. Indeed, this 'should also serve to reinforce that fact that Greek philosophy is not the standard by which all other traditions are measured.'

The neo-Calvinist tradition would have added a hearty agreement to all of these observations, and would have echoed that theologians and philosophers alike should ensure that they develop a properly biblical theology or philosophy. However, one might detect a difference in that the neo-Calvinist tradition, more or less, affirmed that this is exactly what theologians and philosophers throughout the broad Catholic tradition has been doing. The main difference between past Christian theologians and the neo-Calvinists, Kuyper and Bavinck thought, was that the latter were more methodologically self-conscious about this task. Sure enough, some figures here and there, in their judgment, veered too


2 Johnson, Biblical Philosophy, 34. Emphasis original.
much toward biblicism or syncretism, but as a whole, church tradition has proceeded precisely as an attempt to take seriously the philosophical and theological claims of Scripture. Hence, while Johnson is right that we often baptize our contemporary ideas by an appeal to Scripture to our peril, such a charge cannot be easily sustained against the broad Catholic tradition(s) of the church – which includes Augustine’s critical deployment of Plotinus, Bonaventure’s use of Plato, or, more recently, Bavinck’s own use of romantic phenomenology. One might argue that one or the other does a better job in employing the biblical material – but none can be charged with lacking a desire for a biblical philosophy. So, when Johnson argues that ‘some in Christian philosophy and theology fund their ideas primarily from the discourses of their traditions and then secondarily find Scriptures that seem to support them’, one might have questions. If tradition here refers to the creedal and confessional heritage of Catholic Christianity, I wonder if Johnson misses that the tradition itself is nothing other than the history of biblical exegetical reflection. To employ tradition, then, is to stand upon a deployment of Scripture’s philosophical and theological resources.

Hence, if Johnson’s book begins with the task of broadening our sense of what counts as philosophy, my task here is to reflect on what counts as biblical philosophy. Is biblical philosophy limited to advocating the Hebraic mind, as Johnson describes it, or can one remain biblical even if one does not follow the same?

My argument is thus a direct response to Johnson’s call at the end of his book. Here is the call, or, perhaps better, challenge:

IF the Hebraic philosophical tradition is as robust and rigorous as anything found in Hellenism, 
AND IF this biblical philosophy explains the real world more adequately to embodied humans, 
AND IF we no longer need to accommodate the Scripture to the theological philosophies of Hellenism, 
THEN should we not think, to some extent, about the work of theology and philosophy as a retrieval of biblical philosophy?

To the three premises and conclusion above: I say yes indeed, we should think about the world of theology and philosophy as a retrieval of biblical philosophy. However, I ask: when have theology and philosophy in the broad creedal and confessional tradition of the church been something other than a retrieval of biblical philosophy? In other words, I wonder if Johnson implies that the tradition’s theologies and philosophies should be raised as an alternative to, rather than an extension of, biblical philosophy – but this is an assumption that needs to be proven, not assumed.

The rest of my reflections here follows three steps. Firstly, I shall argue that a catholic (creedal and confessional) dogmatics has been and is in fact consonant with Johnson’s own criteria of what makes a philosophy biblical: that it is pixelated and networked in its mode, and mysterionist, creationist,

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3 Johnson, Biblical Philosophy, 34.

4 Johnson, Biblical Philosophy, 321.
transdemographic and ritualist in its convictions. Because I am most acquainted with the Reformed tradition, I shall argue that the Reformed orthodox are in line with these criteria. Secondly, I suggest that even when particular theologians or philosophers use non-Hebraic terminology and patterns of reasoning, they can still remain within the bounds of a biblical philosophy. Biblical philosophy, in other words, is broader than merely emulating the philosophical style of the bible, and can be considered as an extended reflection on those second-order principles discovered by attending to its narrative and communitarian logic. Along the way, I shall discuss the importance of principled philosophical eclecticism, the doctrine of creation, and subversive fulfillment for the construction of a biblical philosophy. Hence, a rejoinder to Johnson: to the extent that one limits biblical philosophy to the Hebraic mind, I wonder if we would be restoring a new kind of classism – the very classism that Johnson rightly rejects – for only those who imitate the Hebraic mind can be considered truly biblical. I suggest that if grace restores nature, and if a diversity of philosophical styles are embedded in the creation of human beings as God's image bearers, than the more diversity displayed in biblical philosophy, the better.

I. Biblical Philosophy and Reformed Theology

A biblical philosophy, in Johnson's understanding, is pixelated and networked in style, and mysterionist, creationist, transdemographic, and ritualist by conviction. In brief, to be pixelated and networked in style means that the particular advocated philosophy in question will be argued for by developing narratives, analogous examples, lists, that shore up similar traits to hammer a particular principle. Mysterionism embraces the finitude of the human mind and one's epistemological dependence on God; creationism recognizes YHWH as the creator and sustainer of all reality, such that the flow of history is pivotal for a proper understanding of that reality; transdemographic and ritualized convictions mean that this philosophy is available to all who apply themselves to the community and the skilled practices prescribed therein by its authorities, for the corporate good. These traits are meant to contrast the Hellenistic style, which is linear and autonomist, and Hellenistic convictions, which are domesticationist, abstractionist, mentalist, and classist. (I will return to these Hellenistic traits below).

For the sake of space, I can only pick out four (or so) examples in which the confessional Reformed tradition(s) meets this criterion, and should thus be counted as exemplifying a retrieval of biblical philosophy: the distinction between archetypal/ectypal theology, the theoretical-practical definition of theology, reformed catholicity, and covenant theology.

Firstly, the distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology showcases the tradition's mysterionist and creationist convictions, and dovetails well with Johnson's discussion of creation and knowledge, which draws from particular texts in Genesis and Deuteronomy. In Johnson's analysis, these texts convey that one should not reason from created items to God in a univocal fashion. These 'bottom-up' approaches, so to speak, misses the point that there is

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5 The terms pixelated and networked (literary), mysterionist, creationist, transdemographic, and ritualist, are Johnson's own identity markers for biblical philosophy, in Biblical Philosophy, 84.
none like God (Deut. 4:35), and that though creation reflects God, and God acts in creation, Israel is dependent on God to give her ears to hear and eyes to see Him through creation (Deut. 29:2-4). Further, the things revealed to her still preserves the mysteries of the divine realities disclosed (Deut. 29:29).⁶

Franciscus Junius reasons from similar passages (and the book of Job) in developing the distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology. Archetypal theology is the ‘divine wisdom of divine maters...we stand in awe before his and do not seek to trace it out’, while ectypal theology is fashioned from archetypal theology, rendering it communicable and communicated to finite creatures, ‘according to the capacity of created things themselves.’⁷ This distinction recognizes that human knowledge of God is dependent on God himself, and that the things revealed do not domesticate the realities disclosed. God alone knows all things, and theology has its starting point in God’s revelation, as he accommodates this knowledge to finite creatures. God deploys creaturely analogies throughout history so that human beings can have communion with him by grace. God alone has archetypal wisdom. Relatedly, the recognition in the scholastic tradition of the lack of composition in God between genus and species is a further implication of what Johnson sees as the concern to guard against false worship in the biblical witness. There is none like God, and hence God does not belong in a category – all inferences to the effect that God is like a created image is to domesticate God, missing his utter uniqueness.⁸

Secondly, the classical Reformed tradition also showcases an aim for the practical ends of theology – living unto God and the pursuit of wisdom, which dovetails well with Johnson’s emphasis on knowledge as ritualized and skilled. Junius defines theology as ‘wisdom concerning divine matters’, which means it is ‘the most complete starting point of all sciences both theoretical and practical, and the wisest judge of all actions and reasons, greater than every limitation.’⁹ Junius goes on to admonish those who divorce skill from intellectual reason: ‘our definition of theology encompasses all of these simultaneously. It includes the intellect of first principles, the knowledge of conclusions and ends, and I is the most beneficial skill of our work, by which we strive toward God.’¹⁰ This conviction is carried through by later Reformed scholastics – Peter van Mastricht, to take one example, further defines theology as theoretical and practical, or more precisely as the ‘doctrine of living for God through Christ’.¹¹ These emphases on wisdom and of doctrine as directing one’s self toward God show that the scholastic emphases on doctrinal precision and fine distinctions

⁶ Johnson, Biblical Philosophy, 157-63.


⁸ ‘On composition from genus and difference, we deny this of God very easily because God is not in a category, nor does the notion of genus and difference properly pertain to him.’ Gijsbertus Voetius, ‘God’s Single, Absolutely Simple Essence,’ trans. Ryan Hurd, Confessional Presbyterian 15 (2019): 15.

⁹ Junius, Treatise on True Theology, 100.

¹⁰ Junius, Treatise on True Theology, 101.

were never meant to be ‘mentalist’ or ‘abstractionist’ in principle, but were rather geared to aid believers in pleasing God. Indeed, the organization of Mastricht’s *prolegomena* performs this in distilling the exegetical, dogmatic, and practical dimensions of each particular locus under discussion. As he writes, ‘theology must be taught according to a certain method, and I must be the kind of method in which theory and practice always walk in step together.’\(^{12}\) Notice, that though the terms ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ are taken from Aristotle’s taxonomy of the sciences, they are put to service in a theological direction, and the theoretical is not elevated above the practical.

Thirdly, current recognitions of Reformed and Protestant catholicity further shore up the emphasis on knowing as communal and ritualized.\(^{13}\) Reformed catholicity recognizes that doctrine is known through, in Johnson’s words, ‘embodied social structures’ and ‘embodied processes that disposes the subject to apprehend.’\(^{14}\) Tradition is not a barrier to biblical exegesis, but is rather that communion of saints through which one is apprenticed to read the biblical material well. Thus, to read Scripture through the creeds and confessions of the church is not succumbing to Hellenism or an abstracted exercise, but is rather to sit with that normed social and ecclesial location of the people of God. This is a task that finds its warrant in a reading of the biblical material – from one generation to another, the people of God will praise God’s name and works (Ps. 145:3-5); and the church will be known by its teaching of a pattern of sound words (2 Tim. 1:13). To read within creedal and confessional bounds is akin to reading the Word in the context of the local church – it recognizes that the church extends itself to the past and to the present. This emphasis on catholicity also witnesses to the transdemographic availability of biblical philosophy and wisdom: anyone at any point of time, regardless of gender, class, and race can receive the means of grace provided by the church catholic in order to nurture their own obedience unto God.

Finally, though the development of the doctrines briefly discussed above do depend on pixelated and networked readings of the biblical material, this pixelated and networked style is perhaps most apparent in the development of covenant theology. Codified in confessional texts like the Westminster Standards, the Reformed tradition recognizes that a ‘representational principle’ exists in the biblical narratives.\(^{15}\) The people of God are represented by particular prophets, patriarchs, kings, and priests, which all foreshadow the representative work of Jesus Christ. Covenant theology infers from the way in which God condescends to promise rewards and administer curses on the basis of a people’s obedience through a federal representative. Moreover, it draws inferences from the networked events and rituals throughout biblical history: from the signs and seals of circumcision and baptism, the Lord’s supper, and the prophetic claims


\(^{15}\) D. Blair Smith, ‘Post-Reformation Developments’, in Guy Waters, Nicholas Reid, John Muether (eds.), *Covenant Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 251-78. See also Part 1 of this volume on the biblical covenants.
themselves, the pixelated and networked material of the Bible form the overarching distinction between the covenant of works (made with Adam), and the covenant of grace (with Christ, the second Adam).¹⁶

Though much more can be said, these brief examples show that the Reformed tradition, as a permutation within the broader catholic church with its creeds and confessions, should indeed be considered as a retrieval of biblical philosophy.

II. Biblical Philosophy: On Creation and Linear Reasoning

If the previous section suggests that the Reformed tradition fits the bill with respect to the criteria of biblical philosophy, this section asks the question: what if a particular philosopher develops a linear and autonomist mode of reasoning, that is, modes of philosophical argumentation that Johnson argues mark out Hellenistic philosophy? Would such a way of doing philosophy automatically cast one out of the bounds of a biblical philosophy? Though I believe that the classical traditions of the church have never been other than a retrieval of biblical philosophy, I want to suggest that even if the church adopts a so-called Hellenist style of philosophy (for the sake of argument), it can still be considered biblical.

To keep in mind Johnson’s discussion of these terms, it is worth rehearsing Johnson’s terms for describing Hellenistic philosophy. He defines a linear form of argumentation as that which is ‘traceable’ and ‘deductive’ – ‘As in Socratic dialogue and Aristotle’s description of forms, readers can directly trace the single flow of the argument backward from conclusion to premises.’¹⁷ And by autonomist, Johnson does not mean the kind of purported neutrality with respect to reason characteristic of Enlightenment convictions, but the mode of philosophical reasoning that can treat arguments in relative isolation from other arguments or historical events – like the analysis of whether a particular premise within a syllogism is true or false, or a consideration of the form of the individual argument itself. Here: ‘Inductions, empirical evidence, and deductions are employed as stand-alone units toward a grander argument.’¹⁸

If the style of Hellenistic philosophy is linear and autonomist, its convictions are domesticationist, abstractionist, classist, and mentalist.¹⁹ Briefly, domesticationism sees knowledge of reality as comprehensively attainable rather than imbued with mystery; abstractionism sees reasoning as independent from the flow of history and its events; mentalism sees the task of argumentation as a mental process with a psychological, rather than a social and corporate, goal; classism sees the task of philosophy and its goals as available only to a particular class of people.


¹⁷ Johnson, Biblical Philosophy, 41.

¹⁸ Johnson, Biblical Philosophy, 42.

¹⁹ Johnson, Biblical Philosophy, 154-6.
I submit that a philosophy that advocates for a form of linear and autonomist reasoning (so defined) can still indeed be counted as biblical, and need not be seen as contradicting biblical modes of pixelated and networked argumentation. To defend my claim, I offer two arguments: (1) that linear and autonomist reasoning need not be taken as uniquely Hellenistic contributions, but as a systematized version of ordinary and creational reasoning and (2) that linear and autonomist reasoning might be employed to envision the logical connections and overall systematic shape of the second-order principles discovered in the biblical literature. To be sure, much of the convictions of Hellenism are incompatible with Hebraic convictions – domesticationism must give way to mysterionism, and classism to transdemographic catholicity, but there are ways in which the boundaries are porous.20 An investigation on how Christians can use the linear and autonomist forms of argumentation will display these porous boundaries.

Firstly, then, linear and autonomist reasoning need not be taken as a peculiarly Hellenistic innovation, but rather as systematized versions of ordinary creational modes of reasoning. That is, instead of claiming that these modes of argumentation is particularly Hellenistic, we should look at these as creational first, and that the Hellenistic philosophical literature is one instantiation of developing creational/ordinary ways of reasoning into a systemic mode of philosophical discourse.

Here, I am following William Wood's defense of analytic reason and its concern for propositional analysis and argumentative parsimony (not unlike the concerns of Hellenistic scholasticism). Wood offers a helpful analogy: just as the empirical sciences and their employment of the inductive scientific method are really a highly systematized and ordered version of ordinary inductive reasoning, so is analytic reason a highly systematized version of ordinary reasoning in general. In Wood’s words: ‘The hyper-precision that features in analytic thought is different in degree but not in kind from ordinary “person in the street” demands to say exactly what we mean (no more, no less).’21 Indeed, Wood offers an analogy from the forager who eats small bites of fruit to determine whether the fruit is safe to eat as an ordinary way of inductive reasoning – a scientist is really doing a highly critical and systematized version of that.

To give an example, suppose I learn, say, from watching the endings of the movies A Quite Place and Avengers: End Game, that the proposition ‘self-sacrifice

20 Though even these two points can be further nuanced – one can form an argument, I believe, to the effect that the analogous forms of reasoning that Johnson points to in his analysis of the biblical material is one sort of domestication (e.g. Biblical Philosophy, 106-8). That is, they seek to communicate lofty and heavenly realities in terms that are pedagogically useful and comprehensible to the everyday listener (e.g. the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed). To be sure, there is still mystery involved, such that to offer an analogy is not to render all of reality comprehensible to human reason. Further, there is a sense in which pastoral and scholarly training is necessary for the teachers of the church to be competent. Knowledge is available to all, but there are parameters that mark out a learned ministry – this is not to revive a sort of classism, but a recognition that knowledge is mediated by authorities (as Johnson himself recognizes: Biblical Philosophy, 239).

21 William Wood, Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 101. On the same page, Wood shows that this defense extends to the common practice in analytic theology of offering ‘what-if’ thought experiments: ‘We do something similar every time we wonder about the future.’
is beautiful’ is true. And then I might ask the question ‘Why is self-sacrifice beautiful?’ – why was I so moved by watching the endings of these films? Then, later that day in my daily devotions, I read John 15:13: ‘Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.’ I then deduce that self-sacrifice is beautiful because it is a loving act. Self-sacrifice is beautiful because love is beautiful, and self-sacrifice is an instantiation of love in action.

Notice that I inferred a second-order principle about the nature of reality from a pixelated and networked form of reasoning. I knew that self-sacrifice is beautiful because I saw two narrative exemplifications of it in the two movies I saw. I then reflected autonomistically by isolating that proposition, and traced that proposition to another from John’s Gospel, and deduced yet another proposition: that self-sacrifice is an instantiation of love. Ordinary Christians, I think, do this all the time, and I submit that they are not being unbiblical by doing so. These convictions, it is worth emphasizing, are predicated not on the generic goodness of reasoning in the abstract, but on the Christian doctrine of creation. Hence, linear and autonomist modes of reasoning need not be considered a peculiarly Hellenistic way of reasoning, but rather as rooted in creational rationality. Furthermore, the momentary abstractionist and mentalist exercise of seeking the cognitive comfort of figuring out why self-sacrifice was moving to me was for the sake of a ritualized end: incorporation into one’s own devotional life in the community of the church.

This leads to my second point: linear reasoning can be used to reflect upon the logical and metaphysical implications of the second order principles discovered by pixelated reasoning. This is what the church fathers tend to do in their defense of Jesus’s divinity, for example. A pixelated and networked reflection on the biblical literature, say, points to three principles: that ‘YHWH alone is God’, that ‘YHWH alone deserves all glory and worship’ and that ‘Jesus receives glory and worship’. These principles/propositions form further inquiries about the connections between them, and creedal orthodoxy was the result of a sustained philosophical (linear and traceable) reflection on their logical and metaphysical relations. The question here is: how can Jesus receive worship if YHWH alone can rightly receive worship? Who is Jesus in relation to YHWH? It is a reflection on these kinds of propositions and their logical relations that the patristics concluded for the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son – the Son shares in the glory of the Father because they share the same divine substance: [The Son] must share in the glory of the uncaused, because he stems from the uncaused.22 While Johnson describes the early church as comprising a host of ‘synthetic-Hellenist Christian’ apologists, what I’m suggesting is that what is happening is not a Hellenizing of Christianity but rather a Christianizing of Hellenism – that is, of the tools discovered by Hellenism.23

This is what systematic theologians are doing when they are drawing from church tradition and making ‘speculative’ (better, reasoned) judgments about the nature of God, creation, and any other loci in Christian theology by an exercise of the sanctified intellect. Tradition is the history of biblical exegesis that cumulates the conclusions of the church’s best exegetes, and the task of

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22 Gregory of Nazianzus, On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Press, 2002), 79.

23 Johnson, Biblical Philosophy, 46.
theology surely presupposes exegesis – that pixelated and networked mode of reasoning Johnson notices the biblical literature performs. But it also builds on those conclusions and inquiries into the logical and metaphysical implications of those second order principles discovered by attending to the biblical material.

Hence, I would quibble with Johnson’s description of Augustine, for example, as an instance of a ‘Hellenistic Christian’ – sure enough Augustine was using and polemicizing against Hellenistic material, but in his judgment the Greeks were actually the ones depending on prior Christian revelation. When Augustine treats the use of (Hellenistic) syllogistic reasoning, for instance, he said this:

> These valid rules of logic, however, have not been instituted by human beings, but observed and noted down by them, so that they can either learn or teach them, because they are inscribed in the permanent and divinely instituted rationality of the universe. Just as those, after all, who tell the story of successive ages do not themselves but those ages together, and those who point out the facts of geography, or the natures of animals or plants or stones, are not pointing out things instituted by human beings, and those who show us the stars and motions are not showing us something instituted by themselves or anybody else; so too the one who says ‘When the consequent is false, the antecedent must be false too,’ is saying something very true, and does not make it to be so himself, but is only pointing out that that is how it is.

My strategy is inspired by Augustine’s: linear reasoning that focuses on the logical relations between propositions is not indicative of Hellenism but rather of the rational order of creation, on which the Hellenists depend. To say that linear and autonomist reasoning is Hellenistic is to give them too much credit. Augustine, likewise, attributed these to God’s providence, and the Hellenists are depending upon the one true God that they deny: ‘All this is like their gold and silver, and not something they instituted themselves, but something which they mined, so to say, from the ore of divine providence, veins of which are everywhere to be found.’ To use a phrase commonly found in later neo-Calvinism: the Hellenists were living on borrowed capital.

To be sure, my defense here is not to say that Hellenism possesses the perennial or natural handmaiden to theology, but rather that Hellenistic thought merely reflected upon a feature of the rationality of God’s creation. Other people everywhere, too, did this, and did so in a diversity of ways. Johnson recognizes this well when he argues that the Bible maintains ‘a stable and discernible philosophical style despite the employment of philosophical vocabulary and constructs from surrounding cultures’ – in fact, this is what the Church catholic has been doing.

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26 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 160 (Bk. 2. 60).

creation in their philosophy, so are other philosophies on offer throughout history, and if the biblical authors can utilize the philosophical vocabulary of their contemporaries, so can Christian theologians and philosophers utilize the philosophical vocabulary of our contemporaries. Grace restores nature: and nature manifests itself in a diversity of ways due to its richness and human finitude, so Christianity restores the many philosophies on offer today by way of subversive fulfillment.28

In other words, biblical philosophy is not uniform, but diverse: there are biblical (or biblicised) analytic philosophies, Aristotelian philosophies, phenomenologies, romantic philosophies and so on.29 This is a properly transdemographic conviction – if Christianity is truly catholic, it can leaven any philosophical tradition, for every philosophical tradition itself arises from human beings made in God's image, living under common grace, immersed in general revelation and dwelling in God's creation.30 To limit Christian philosophy to a 'Hebraic' mode of reasoning is, I am suggesting, to erect another form of classism – the very classism that Johnson identifies with Hellenism and so rightly rejects.

III. Conclusion: For Eclecticism and Against the Hellenization Thesis

To bring this essay to a close, my reflections here suggest that Johnson's insights are best utilized in a 'both-and' approach, rather than an 'either-or' – the Hebraic philosophy that he has ably shown is best used as a launching pad to critically engage with and positively utilize other philosophical traditions, rather than as a way of castigating other forms of philosophy. Further, I argued that this is in fact what the church catholic has been doing in her theological and philosophical reflections. The alternative to this, I worry, is a renewed sort of biblicism that erects a new classism – only the few that repristinates the Hebraic style is considered truly biblical. I also at times worry, that Johnson's insistence on the Hebraic style over 'synthetic' thinking funds an incipient Harnackian spirit – the sort of false narrative that says that there was a pure, original Hebraic philosophy that has been infected by Greek thought as the Christian tradition develops. Johnson’s book, of course, does not go in that direction, but I do wonder if it might be utilized to nurture that narrative.

The ‘both-and’ approach I am prescribing here is a sort of principled Christian eclecticism. Other writings have shown that this sort of posture can be found in Bavinck's modus operandi.31 When discussing Christianity's use of

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28 On subversive fulfillment, see Daniel Strange, Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), and Scott R. Swain, ‘God, Metaphysics, and the Discourse of Theology,’ Pro Ecclesia 30 (2021), 279-90.


philosophy, he argued that no one philosophical system should be prioritized over any other: ‘The question here is not whether theology should make use of a specific philosophical system. Christian theology has never taken over any philosophical system without criticism and given it the stamp of approval.’ Rather, Christian revelation provides its own criteria – the basic parameters of a philosophy and worldview, so to speak, and Christian theologians and philosophers stand on that criteria in order to put to use whatever they find useful in any given non-Christian philosopher. The oft-quoted statement is as follows:

Still, theology is not in need of a specific philosophy. It is not per se hostile to any philosophical system and does not, a priori and without criticism, give priority to the philosophy of Plato or of Kant, or vice versa. But it brings along its own criteria, tests all philosophy by them, and takes over what it deems true and useful. What it needs is philosophy in general. In other words, it arrives at scientific theology only by thinking. The only internal principle of knowledge, therefore, is not faith as such, but believing thought, Christian rationality. Faith is self-conscious and sure. It rests in revelation.

Hence, my argument is not that Christianity ought to become Hellenistic, but again that Hellenism, like any other philosophical tradition, ought to be critically utilized while standing on revelation, for in the Christian tradition, the best of the other philosophical milieus find their organic home. Biblical philosophy is diverse, rather than uniform.


Presuppositionalism in the Dock: A Review Article

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Three things are certain in life: death, taxes, and debates over Cornelius Van Til. For many, the Dutch professor is a hero of the Protestant tradition—a brilliant reformer in the mold of John Calvin who sought to further the work of the Reformation in the areas of Christian philosophy and apologetics. For others, he is more of a villain—an innovator beguiled by unbiblical idealist philosophy who led a large faction of the Reformed church in a dubious if not dangerous direction. And then there are those who fall somewhere between the two wings, acknowledging that Van Til was on the side of the angels, and that he made some positive contributions to Christian thought, but nevertheless finding significant faults in his more distinctive and provocative claims about natural theology, philosophy, and apologetic methodology.

*Without Excuse*, a multi-contributor volume edited by David Haines, professes to align for the most part with the third camp.¹ The book is the fruit of the Davenant Press, the publishing arm of the Davenant Institute, which, according to its own mission statement, “seeks to retrieve the riches of classical Protestantism in order to renew and build up the contemporary church.” The Davenant Institute is well known (and well regarded) as an advocate for the classical Thomist stream of the Protestant tradition, and this volume is no exception. *Without Excuse* is pitched primarily as a critique of the presuppositionalism of Van Til and his followers, and secondarily as a defense of natural theology in the Thomist tradition. As the back cover explains:

> Although Cornelius Van Til developed presuppositional apologetics as an attempt to remain faithful to timeless Christian truth as the Reformed tradition expresses it, he sacrificed the catholic and Reformed understanding of the use of natural revelation in theology and apologetics in the process. ... *Without Excuse* seeks to grapple with [the apostle Paul’s indictment in Romans 1:20] and show how Van Til’s presuppositionalism fails as an account of natural revelation in light of Scripture, philosophy, and historical theology.

Fourteen authors are marshalled for this endeavor, supplying a preface and thirteen main chapters. Notably, while the Davenant Institute itself is committed to confessional Reformed Protestantism,² fewer than half of the contributors to this book (as best I can ascertain) would ascribe to confessional Reformed theology. I mention this not to poison the well—after all, a cogent criticism will be cogent

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² [https://davenantinstitute.org/about/](https://davenantinstitute.org/about/)
regardless of its source—but only to observe that Reformed critics of Van Til share more theological common ground with him than non-Reformed critics, and the latter are less inclined to appreciate how Van Til’s presuppositionalism is motivated by distinctively Reformed doctrines of God, revelation, and the noetic effects of sin. The book would have been strengthened had that point been given its due weight.

A great deal could be said about the arguments offered in Without Excuse, but life is short, and thus this review will be limited in its aims. In what follows, I will summarize the main argument of each chapter and offer a few critical comments in response, before concluding with some remarks on whether the work as a whole succeeds in its goals.

The book opens with a short preface by Joseph Minich that establishes an admirably irenic tone. Although the volume is “quite critical” of Van Til’s philosophy, the various authors offer their criticisms “in the spirit of theological sons to a father,” acknowledging Van Til’s positive influence on them and the wider church. Minich proceeds to summarize ten ways in which “the Van Tillian movement served the church during the complex twentieth century” (viii). Despite its critical emphasis, then, the book is offered as an in-house iron-to-iron sharpening exercise.

Dan Kemp (“The Bible, Verification, and First Principles of Reason”) launches the first volley with an argument that “if the Christian Scriptures constitute or form the basis for all human knowledge, attempts to verify the Christian Scriptures are not epistemologically profitable” (1). Kemp restates the target of his argument throughout the chapter: “Scripture forms the basis of all knowledge” (2); “the Bible is the source and standard of all knowledge” (3); “the Christian Scriptures are the first principle of reason” (7); “the Bible is the first principle of all knowledge” (9); and so on in the same vein. Kemp’s main argument can be summarized as follows: first principles of knowledge must be self-evident and indemonstrable, but the Bible itself teaches that its claim to be the Word of God can be tested and verified on the basis of extra-biblical sources (Exod. 4 and Deut. 18); therefore, the Bible cannot be the first principle of knowledge. The argument is problematic in various respects; for example, Kemp’s strictures about first principles of knowledge cannot be justified on their own terms and invite skepticism about the external world. But the main shortcoming is that the argument targets a view that Van Til doesn’t hold. Van Til nowhere says that the Bible is the source of all knowledge or that the Bible is the (sole) first principle of reason. If he had, he would have been conspicuously at odds with his own confessional standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith. Rather, he holds that all knowledge is based on divine revelation—which includes both natural and special revelation. What Van Til emphasizes is that these two forms of divine revelation are complementary, mutually dependent, and equally authoritative. There’s nothing idiosyncratic about that view within the Reformed

3 Page numbers in parentheses refer to the book under review.

4 See WCF 1.1.

tradition. Van Til clearly affirms that there are multiple sources of knowledge, some ‘natural’ and some ‘supernatural’, which work together to give us a saving knowledge of God and the gospel. Kemp’s argument is aimed at an uncharitable caricature of Van Til’s epistemology. (Similar points apply to Kemp’s criticisms of John Frame, who also affirms multiple basic sources of knowledge in his book *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.)

Kurt Jaros (“Faith and the Natural Light of Reason: How Van Tillian Anthropology Fails”) takes aim at Van Til’s doctrine of man, more specifically, his “doctrine of inability.” Van Til purports to offer a third way between the positions of Abraham Kuyper and B. B. Warfield on the question of apologetic methodology, but in reality (so Jaros argues) Van Til ends up in the same place as Kuyper, denying that there is sufficient epistemological common ground for believers to reason fruitfully with unbelievers. Jaros is certainly not the first to be perplexed by the strong statements Van Til makes about the epistemological antithesis between the believer and the unbeliever. But Jaros himself isn’t clear about what he takes Van Til’s actual position to be. For example, he writes:

> Van Til says that man’s rebellion is ethical, not intellectual. He believes there are no metaphysical differences between the natural man and the believer, only epistemological differences. (43)

So, Van Til believes there is an *epistemological* antithesis, but no *intellectual* rebellion? That hardly sounds right. Jaros proceeds to argue that Van Til does in fact think there are “metaphysical differences” between the unbeliever and the believer, namely, that unbelievers are “literally, unable to reason about the things of God” (47). Yet even that is not the whole story, Jaros acknowledges, because Van Til says that in practice the unbeliever isn’t consistent with his anti-Christian interpretation of the world, and thus the believer can reason with him (48). At this point, Jaros thinks there are grounds to charge Van Til with an *explicit contradiction*, namely that his method is “both effective and ineffective for reasoning with the natural man” (51; cf. 47).

This is uncharitable to say the least. An explicit contradiction involves affirming both P and non-P in the same sense. Does Van Til ever do that? Does he explicitly say that his method is “both effective and ineffective” *in the same respects*? Of course not. As John Frame has noted, Van Til’s view of the knowledge and reasoning abilities of the unbeliever is “actually very complex,” and though he is fond of “extreme antithetical formulations,” these are tempered by various concessions and qualifications that he makes. Frame is critical of some of Van Til’s statements on this front, but at least he recognizes there are plausible readings of Van Til that avoid attributing “explicit contradiction” to him. Greg Bahnsen’s *Van Til’s Apologetic* includes a lengthy chapter on “The Psychological Complexities of

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Unbelief,” noting Van Til’s oft-applied distinction between “speaking epistemologically” and “speaking psychologically” about the unbeliever’s position. In any event, no one could read Van Til fairly and conclude that he denied the utility of apologetics, the existence of meaningful common ground between believers and unbelievers, and the ability of unbelievers to reason and acquire knowledge of the world. Before charging an author with outright contradiction, one ought to make a good-faith attempt to find a plausible consistent reading of his claims. Regrettably, no such attempt is made by Jaros, who seems eager to secure a first-round knockout. One is reminded of those critics who charge Calvinists with logical inconsistency for saying both that “unbelievers are unable to come to Christ” and that “Christ invites unbelievers to come to him.”

John DePoe (“The Place of Autonomous Human Reason and Logic in Theology”) targets Van Til’s repudiation of “autonomous human reason.” DePoe argues that Christians should affirm the use of autonomous reason in apologetics for three reasons: first, the Bible itself endorses it; second, it’s self-contradictory to deny it (because one must employ autonomous reason to argue against it); and third, there are real-life examples of unbelievers who have accepted Christianity “as a result of their intellectual endeavors” (63). The fundamental flaw in the presuppositionalist position is that in practice “all apologetics must appeal to autonomous human reason, and thereby it cannot be avoided even in following the presuppositional method” (63). The triumphalist tone of the chapter is rather off-putting: the presuppositionalist stance is “undeniably mistaken, as this essay will show” (55) and is afflicted with a “glaring internal contradiction” (59). DePoe’s critique is peppered with cartoonish depictions of presuppositionalism. But the main problem is that the entire argument deploys a bait-and-switch: having been told that presuppositionalists reject “autonomous reasoning,” we’re then presented with arguments that establish only (i) that the Bible endorses the exercise of human reason and discernment, (ii) that one would have to use reason to argue against reason, and (iii) that apologetic arguments can be effective in leading unbelievers to faith. Of course, presuppositionalists can and should accept all three points. None of this counts as an argument against autonomous reasoning as Van Til conceived of it, viz, treating fallen human reason as an independent and ultimate epistemic authority that can stand over God’s Word as a judge of its veracity. It doesn’t seem to occur to DePoe that he might be attacking a caricature of the position he purports to refute.

Nathan Greeley (“The Structure of Knowledge in Classical Reformed Theology: Turretin and Hodge”) sets his sights not on Van Til directly but on Scott Oliphant’s criticisms of Aquinas’s understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology. I have little to say about this chapter, directed as it is at the specific claims of one author rather than Van Tilian presuppositionalism in general.

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9 One illustrative example: “In other words, presuppositionalists are asking people to draw the conclusion that they shouldn’t draw their own conclusions” (59).
will merely note that the few direct references to Van Til in this chapter reflect the simplistic misrepresentations that typify the volume as a whole, such as the notion that Van Til denies that unbelievers possess any genuine natural knowledge of God or the world. Indeed, in the section outlining Turretin’s position on the unbeliever’s knowledge, I could not identify any claim that Van Til does not also affirm in his own writings. The attempt to drive a wedge between Van Til and the Reformed tradition is unsuccessful.

The chapter by J. T. Bridges (“Moderate Realism and the Presuppositionalist Confusion of Metaphysics and Epistemology”) is a curious inclusion, not least because the reader will search in vain for any demonstration of “the presuppositionalist confusion of metaphysics and epistemology” (as the title promises). The bulk of the chapter is taken up with a defense of a “systematic realist theology” based on “existential Thomism,” the Thomism in question having been decoupled from Roman Catholic ecclesiology and recoupled with a Protestant doctrine of Scripture. Although Bridges’ argumentation is obscure, it’s clear that Cartesian dualism and contemporary analytic metaphysics are the principal whipping boys. Just as one begins to wonder what any of this has to do with presuppositionalism, a section appears with criticisms of Scott Oliphint’s book on Aquinas, his use of Ralph McInerny’s interpretation of Étienne Gilson, and his analysis of divine simplicity. There are no citations of Van Til or any other presuppositionalists, or indeed of any of Oliphint’s writings that speak more directly about apologetic methodology. The chapter closes with a summary of “the connection between a moderate-realist metaphysics, direct realist epistemology, classical theism, and evangelical theology” (129). How any of this serves as a critique of presuppositionalism as an apologetic methodology is anyone’s guess. One suspects that the chapter is largely repurposed material with the section on Oliphint’s *Aquinas* inserted to justify its addition to the volume.

Winfried Corduan (“Presuppositions in Presuppositionalism and Classical Theism”) attempts to get to the root of the disagreement between the approaches of presuppositional and classical apologetics. The first two thirds of the chapter are taken up with a discussion of presuppositions and systems, the conclusion of which is that the division between the two camps does not lie in the fact that presuppositionalists alone recognize the necessity of presuppositions in reasoning and the need to contrast Christianity with competing systems of thought. Classical apologists can agree with presuppositionalists on these points to a significant extent. Rather, the difference lies “in the degree to which it is possible for two people with different systems to communicate, and, more specifically, for a Christian to communicate with a non-Christian” (147). Accordingly, Corduan contrasts the two approaches as follows:

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10 The chapter title is indicative of an error represented throughout the volume, viz., conflating classical apologetics with classical theism. All classical Thomists are classical theists, but not all classical theists are classical Thomists. Van Til was clearly a classical theist insofar as he affirmed the historic Reformed doctrine of God as reflected in the Westminster Standards.
The presuppositionalist believes that he is looking at a theological impasse. There is, as we said, neither neutrality nor common ground between Christian and non-Christian. Thus, it is impossible to build up a case for Christianity step by step. (148)

The classical apologists may accept the fundamental theological truths mentioned above, but does not believe that, therefore, apologetics has to be limited to presenting the entire system alone. ... Whether [the classical apologist] wants to describe the connection between Christian and non-Christian as “common ground,” “common grace,” or “general revelation,” he finds that two people with different world views can communicate. (151)

If Corduan imagines that presuppositionalists deny any common ground or communication between the believer and the unbeliever, it's no surprise that he favors the alternative of classical apologetics. But those familiar with Van Til's writings will immediately recognize this as a caricature of the presuppositionalist position. Corduan—like so many of Van Til’s critics—makes the mistake of conflating common ground and neutral ground, interpreting Van Til’s repudiation of the latter as a rejection of the former. Van Til doesn’t deny common ground or make the absurd claim that Christians cannot communicate with non-Christians. He does deny, however, that the common ground can be religiously neutral ground. On the contrary, the common ground must be understood as Christian ground—more precisely, as Christ’s ground—and the task of the apologist, through a presuppositional critique of the unbeliever’s position, is to show that the non-Christian has been depending on the truth of a biblical worldview all along. Had Corduan said that the distinction between the two approaches lies in whether the argument for Christianity can proceed from a religiously neutral starting point, he would have been on safer ground. As it is, Corduan doesn’t seem to grasp the distinctive claims of Van Tilian presuppositionalism and thus ends up tilting at windmills.

Thomas Schultz (“Presuppositionalism and Philosophy in the Academy”) focuses on “the academic philosophical impact on the development of presuppositionalism,” and seeks to counter the claims of some presuppositionalists that their methodology is rooted in Scripture and theology rather than philosophy. Schultz identifies “three ways of connecting a later thinker to an earlier source”: (i) direct connection, (ii) indirect connection, and (iii) “parallel thinking” connection. He then proceeds to apply these three “methodological tools” in an attempt to show multiple lines of “linkage” between Van Til’s apologetic system and various philosophers: Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Ludwig Wittgenstein, William James, and Søren Kierkegaard. It would take a separate essay to document all the missteps and misrepresentations in Schultz’s argument. But the entire strategy is flawed at

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11 A couple of examples. First, it is erroneously implied that Van Til shared David Hume's skepticism about causal reasoning (168). Second, a "linkage" is suggested between Van Til's apologetic and Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of "language worlds" (170) even though Van Til was teaching his approach at
the outset. Schultz can demonstrate virtually no points of direct influence, and therefore relies heavily on the second and third kinds of “linkage.” His “parallel view” arguments are extremely weak and inconclusive; the mere fact that two thinkers hold similar views on some issue is not enough to establish influence from one to the other, let alone a problematic kind of influence. Moreover, his general scheme for identifying indirect connection (157) is fallacious: if A influenced B, and B influenced C, it doesn’t thereby follow that A influenced C in any significant or interesting fashion. It depends on the form and content of the influence in each case.\footnote{12}

In any event, after claiming to show that Van Til’s presuppositionalism “has some direct, indirect, and parallel linkage to some important schools of thought in the philosophical academy,” Schultz’s somewhat anticlimactic conclusion is that this “does not necessarily show presuppositionalism to be wrong” (182). Indeed so. As best I can tell, there is nothing in this chapter that begins to show that Van Til’s apologetic program is flawed or misguided. If the considerable influence of Aristotle upon Aquinas does not discredit Thomistic classical apologetics—as the contributors to this volume presumably hold—then why think that the insights Van Til draws from Kant should count against presuppositional apologetics? One can plunder the Egyptians without embracing their gods.

Manfred Svensson (“The Use of Aristotle in Early Protestant Theology”) aims to set “the record straight about the role played by Aristotle in earlier Protestant thought” (184). Van Til is known for being fiercely critical of Aristotelian philosophy and of Thomism for its appropriation of Aristotle. While Luther and other early Protestants appear very hostile toward Aristotelianism, subsequent Protestant scholars took a more moderate and nuanced view, Svensson argues, neither rejecting Aristotle outright nor embracing his philosophy uncritically. Evaluating Svensson’s claims is beyond my expertise, and I have no reason to doubt his analysis. But how it bears on the virtues or vices of presuppositional apologetics is left unaddressed. It’s a shame that neither Svensson nor his co-authors engage with Van Til’s specific criticisms of Aristotelian philosophy or Thomas’s use of it. Furthermore, historical claims about Protestant thought are (from a Protestant perspective!) descriptive rather than normative. The evaluative question remains: Were the Protestant scholastics correct in their stance toward Aristotelianism?

The contribution by editor David Haines (“The Use of Aquinas in Early Protestant Theology”) also turns out to be only tangentially related to the volume’s advertised concern. After noting that Francis Schaeffer and Scott Oliphint follow Van Til “in his criticism of Aquinas as the Catholic theologian who introduced the autonomy of reason in Christian theology,” Haines launches into a qualified defense of “Reformed Thomism.” As he declares:

\footnote{12}{A simple example will illustrate the point. Ite Van Til (Cornelius’s father) influenced Cornelius Van Til, and Cornelius Van Til influenced me. By Schultz’s lights, there turns out to be an “indirect connection” between Ite Van Til and me. I doubt that much of interest follows from that conclusion.}

Westminster Theological Seminary as early as 1929, while Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations was not published until 1953.
Our purpose is not to prove that [the early Protestant theologians] were Thomists, but to show (1) that there was not as much overt opposition to Aquinas as has been suggested, and (2) that many of their doctrinal claims agreed with distinctively Thomist positions. (203)

Haines argues that “a thinker may be broadly classified as a Thomistic thinker when their approach to philosophy and theology is molded by broadly Thomistic categories” (207). With this definition in place, Haines surveys the “philosophical positions” and “theological positions” of a selection of Lutheran, Anglican, and Calvinist scholars before concluding that “many early Protestant thinkers not only adopted positions which are clearly in agreement with the distinctive claims of Thomas Aquinas, but that some of them actually turned to Aquinas as both an inspiration and an authority” (233). Thus, we should recognize the place of “Reformed Thomism” in the history of Protestant thought.

Much could be said about Haines’ argumentation in this chapter, but I will restrict myself to a few observations. In the first place, “Thomist” is defined so elastically, and the bar set so low, that it’s hardly surprising that many Protestant thinkers turn out to be “Thomistic.” If one is a realist rather than a nominalist about natures, that’s evidence of Thomism (215). If one distinguishes between essential and accidental properties, that’s evidence of Thomism (216). If one thinks that natural reason is “not entirely effaced by the fall” and is capable of discerning truths about God and morality, that’s evidence of Thomism (225). By this reckoning, many presuppositionalists—including your humble reviewer—turn out to be closet Thomists. But even if one concedes (as one should) that there was significant Thomist influence on early Protestant theologians, how would that bear on the case for or against Van Tilian presuppositionalism? Would it follow that Van Til’s criticisms of Thomism are mistaken or misguided? Not at all. Why not interact directly with Van Til’s critique of Aquinas, rather than defending historical claims that are only tangentially related to the questions of theological and apologetical method? Haines’ chapter is an example of the lamentable tendency in Thomist circles to treat historical theology as a proxy for systematic theology and philosophical theology.

Andrew Payne (“Classical Theism and Natural Theology in Early Reformed Doctrines of God”) argues that Aquinas and Calvin were in substantial agreement regarding the doctrines of God, man, and predestination. Calvin was not hostile toward classical theism and natural theology; indeed, “classical theism resides at the very heart of Calvinism” (256). Once again, a presuppositionalist could grant all this while wondering how it functions as a critique of Van Til, who (it will come as no surprise) also concurs with Calvin on those points. Like many of the contributors to Without Excuse, Payne appears to labor under the misapprehension that Van Til was hostile to classical theism as such. The problem here may be that Thomists have been strongly conditioned to suppose that classical theism just is Thomism, and that anyone who deviates from the Thomistic package is ipso facto rejecting classical theism. But that needs to be argued, not merely assumed.

John R. Gilhooly (“Van Til’s Transcendental Argument and Its Antecedents”) offers one of the more interesting and thoughtful contributions to the book.
According to Gilhooly, Van Til claims that his “transcendental argument” (TA) for Christian theism offers a “unique methodology” for defending the faith. However, Van Til’s argument turns out to be structurally similar to transcendental arguments offered by prior thinkers such as Aristotle and Kant. Gilhooly argues that the distinctiveness of Van Til’s TA lies not in its structure or form, but in the boldness of its “transcendental premise,” viz., that the existence of God is a necessary precondition of the rational intelligibility of the world. Yet there are problems here, Gilhooly suggests. If Van Til’s TA is construed as a deductive argument it begs the question, because the only reason Van Til has for thinking the transcendental premise (TP) is true is his conviction that Christianity is true (271). Van Til needs to provide an independent argument in support of TP, but fails to do so (270). The alternative route would be to construe Van Til’s TA as an abductive argument—an inference to the best explanation—but this would downgrade the argument’s conclusion to mere probability rather than absolute certainty, thus raising the concern that it isn’t a genuine transcendental argument after all. Gilhooly closes by noting what he takes to be a major difference between Kant’s transcendental argument and Van Til’s: Kant’s TA assumes a “shared sphere of activity” or “shared territory” between the arguer and his opponent, whereas Van Til denies any such common ground between the Christian and the atheist (276–77).

Gilhooly is to be commended for seeking to grapple seriously with Van Til’s use of transcendental argumentation in defense of Christian theism. I agree with him that there is nothing unique about the structure or form of Van Til’s TA. He is also correct about the ambitious nature of Van Til’s TA. He is mistaken, however, in his claim that Van Til offers no philosophical justification for the transcendental premise of the argument. One might conclude on examination that his proffered justification falls short, but to think that he makes no effort at all to explain why biblical theism is a necessary precondition of the rational intelligibility of the world would be to overlook almost everything Van Til wrote about the history of Western philosophy and the failures of non-Christian epistemologies. I also note that Gilhooly—like several of his co-authors—mistakenly conflates common ground with neutral ground. Van Til’s transcendental argument doesn’t deny common ground; on the contrary, it presupposes common ground, specifically, the premise that the world is indeed rationally intelligible (an assumption shared by both believer and unbeliever).

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13 Gilhooly also discusses whether Van Til’s argument is supposed to be indirect rather than direct. I will merely register my agreement with John Frame that any “indirect” or “negative” argument can be reformulated as a “direct” or “positive” argument, and thus the direct/indirect distinction is a red herring when it comes to Van Til’s transcendental argument. John M. Frame, Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief, ed. Joseph E. Torres (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 83–84.

14 There should be nothing surprising about this, for if a transcendental argument is a distinctive type of argument, then Van Til’s TA must fall under that type, and therefore it must share the typical features of other TAs.

Bernard James Mauser (“A Tale of Two Theories: Natural Law in Classical Theism and Presuppositionalism”) addresses presuppositionalist criticisms of the Thomistic natural law tradition. Mauser argues that natural law has held an important position in the Christian tradition and rebuts three “popular arguments” against natural law (none of which, it transpires, are sourced from the writings of presuppositionalists). Mauser then turns his sights on John Frame, responding to nine reasons Frame gives for thinking that natural law alone is insufficient to govern culture. Unfortunately, many of Frame’s points are misunderstood or misrepresented in this section. (Readers can confirm this for themselves by reviewing the two Frame articles cited by Mauser.) In any case, Mauser’s essay makes no reference to any of Van Til’s writings and offers no criticisms of Van Tilian presuppositionalism. The reader is left to discern how these topics are to be connected.16

Finally, Travis James Campbell (“Van Til’s Trinitarianism: A Reformed Critique”) levels two charges at Van Til’s explication of the doctrine of the Trinity: first, it departs from Reformed orthodoxy in its provocative claim that God is “one person”; and second, it abandons “sound reason” by implying that the doctrine of the Trinity is “formally contradictory.” Consequently, Van Til’s trinitarianism “leaves the Christian bereft of a sound apologetics for the faith” (296). Scott Oliphint, though a follower of Van Til, is summoned as a witness for the prosecution because he takes Van Til “to his logical conclusion” by “explicitly affirming the Kantian gulf” between the reality of the triune God and the “phenomenal world” of divine revelation (312). Campbell drives home his critique by reproducing an example dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim from Oliphint’s Covenantal Apologetics and extending it to show how the Muslim could wield Van Til’s claims about the Trinity to vindicate his own unitarian theism.

Van Til’s “one person” statement is undoubtedly a hard saying and naturally invites questions about its orthodoxy at first glance. Moreover, I would take issue with some of Oliphint’s claims about the relationship between God and logic. Even so, it is not easy to capture in measured words quite how uncharitably Van Til and Oliphint are treated in this chapter. The opening sentence of the chapter serves as an omen of what follows:

For reasons of which we are not quite sure, Cornelius Van Til believed it was necessary to depart from the understanding of the Trinity traditionally expressed in the Reformed tradition. (295)

Not only is this highly prejudicial (Van Til did not consider his views a departure from Reformed orthodoxy) it also invites little confidence in Campbell’s analysis. How can one reliably evaluate Van Til’s claims without appreciating the rationale for them? Despite quoting Van Til at length (material in which Van Til explains the meaning of his “one person” claim and the justification for it) Campbell makes no good-faith attempt to engage with the reasoning behind Van Til’s statement. Since

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16 As Mauser himself remarks, “I will leave it to another to decide whether the reason for [Frame’s skepticism about the sufficiency of natural law] lines up with other tenets of presuppositional apologetics” (289).
this review is already lengthy, I will simply offer brief rejoinders to each of Campbell’s two main charges.

Concerning the charge of deliberate departure from Reformed orthodoxy, I would point out (again) that Van Til subscribed to the Westminster Confession, including its statements on the triunity of God (WCF 2.1–3). Nowhere in his writings does Van Til deny or dispute any point of that orthodox trinitarian theology. He affirms the standard formula: God is “one in substance” and “three in person.” What he does argue, however, is that more needs to be said about the unity of the Godhead; specifically, we should affirm that this unity is a personal rather than an impersonal unity. The reason is not merely that Scripture and the ecumenical creeds are comfortable using singular personal pronouns to refer to the Godhead (although that surely counts for something). Since interpretations of reality can only be grounded in a personal source, and the ultimate basis for the unity of reality is the unity of God, it follows that there can only be a unified interpretation of all reality if the unity of God is a personal unity. As Van Til explains (in the very sections quoted by Campbell):

We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person. ... We are compelled to maintain this in order to avoid the notion of an uninterpreted being of some sort. In other words, we are bound to maintain the identity of the attributes of God with the being of God in order to avoid the specter of brute fact. ... Over against all other beings, that is, over against created beings, we must therefore hold that God's being presents an absolute numerical identity. And even within the ontological Trinity we must maintain that God is numerically one. He is one person. When we say that we believe in a personal God, we do not merely mean that we believe in a God to whom the adjective “personality” may be attached. God is not an essence that has personality; He is absolute personality. Yet, within the being of the one person we are permitted and compelled by Scripture to make the distinction between a specific or generic type of being, and three personal subsistences.17

Now, one might argue that Van Til's position here is mistaken or misguided, but to depict it as a deliberate abandonment of Reformed orthodoxy is simply unfair. Ironically, Campbell goes on to criticize Van Til for saying that God is “tri-consciousness” because that seems to imply “three centers of self-awareness” in God and “veers in the direction of Tritheism” (307–8). Campbell is happy to affirm with Charles Hodge that “God is one consciousness” (307). As it turns out, he is just as concerned as Van Til to insist that the unity of God is a personal unity; he just doesn’t care for the way Van Til expresses that point. But the real objection here, as

17 Cornelius Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), 229–30, emphasis added. Note that in this section Van Til unequivocally affirms not only monotheism but the doctrine of divine simplicity. Campbell’s complaint that Van Til “veers in the direction of Tritheism” is entirely without merit. Indeed, it seems that Campbell cannot quite decide whether Van Til is guilty of modalism (“one person”) or tritheism (“tri-consciousness”).
the chapter’s footnotes reveal, is that Van Til doesn’t fall neatly in line with the Thomist explication of the Trinity.

What about the second charge, that Van Til’s trinitarian theology is “formally contradictory”? Let us first note that Van Til never uses the term “formal contradiction” with reference to the Trinity. Moreover, the term itself is ambiguous. It could refer to a contradiction merely at the verbal level, i.e., in the form of a set of claims as opposed to their substance. In that sense, there is indeed a “formal contradiction” in Van Til’s position: God is “one person” but also “three persons.” Yet a contradiction at the verbal level need not be a real contradiction at the logical or metaphysical level. As Campbell acknowledges, Van Til explicitly renounced the idea of real contradictions (312). Hence the most charitable reading of Van Til is that he believed the doctrine of the Trinity to be a merely apparent contradiction—a theological paradox arising from divine incomprehensibility. Nevertheless, Campbell proceeds to employ the term “formal contradiction” as though Van Til considers the Godhead to be genuinely illogical (303, 305, 307). Once again, a more generous interpretation of Van Til is well within reach, but for some reason is left untouched. 18

As the foregoing chapter summaries indicate, Without Excuse is a mixed bag in terms of content and quality of argument. It seems the book can’t decide whether it’s primarily a critique of Van Tilian presuppositionalism or a defense of Thomistic natural theology, and consequently it fails to satisfy on either point. Some chapters hardly interact with Van Til at all, while those that do engage directly with his writings misunderstand and misrepresent them in ways that could have been easily avoided by more careful attention to primary and secondary sources. 19 The strongest contributions turn out to be those with least relevance to the central thesis of the book. No serious effort is made to understand the driving motivations behind Van Til’s presuppositional methodology and to evaluate it charitably on its own terms. This is not to suggest that Van Til is beyond criticism, or that his work does not need refinement, correction, and even rejection at points. Like any original and provocative thinker, Van Til’s ideas invite criticism—indeed, they deserve criticism. But they also deserve more rigorous scrutiny that one will find, for the most part, between the covers of this book.

18 For a more responsible discussion of Van Til’s trinitarianism, see Frame, Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought, 63–78. For an extended defense of the claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is paradoxical but not really contradictory, see James N. Anderson, Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007). The latter is not a direct defense of Van Til’s position, but reflects a plausible interpretation of it. I would also argue that Campbell’s view of the Trinity turns out to be as paradoxical as Van Til’s, since he embraces “the real distinction between the divine persons sans any real distinction between the divine persons and the divine essence” (295). If there is a “real” identity between each divine person and the divine essence, Campbell has to deny the transitivity of identity (in the face of our basic logical intuitions) to avoid the conclusion that there is a “real” identity between any two divine persons.

19 Campbell’s chapter stands alone in citing John Frame’s Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought. It’s regrettable that the other authors didn’t engage with—or even show familiarity with—Frame’s sympathetic but critical assessment of Van Til’s contributions.

The principal goal of my worship course is to prepare pastors to lead worship at their first church. To be ready on day one, they will need a biblical theology of worship, a knowledge of its elements, and an understanding of what takes place when God meets with his people in the assembly of worship. A second goal, is that they be able to take what they have learned in the classroom and use it to instruct their congregations in the basics of Christian worship and how to prepare for it. Jonathan Landry Cruse’s What Happens When We Worship will be an asset in reaching both goals.

The book’s three parts – a (brief) theology of worship, the anatomy of a worship service, and preparing our hearts – are content rich, concise, and accessible, making it valuable for both seminary and Sunday School classroom instruction. This review will comment on each part.

Regarding the “(Brief) Theology of Worship,” Cruse's premise is straightforward: "something is happening when we worship. Something happens to us, something happens between us and the people we worship with, and, most importantly, something happens between us and God" (1). Of all the activities we undertake, worship of the true and living God is of foremost importance (15). Mankind was created by God with an innate desire to worship (15). Although the fall distorted that desire and directed it to sinful ends, it nonetheless remains. In the present age, God seeks worshipers (19, see John 4:23-24). This worship is not an individual pursuit, but the activity of people who have been "corporately and collectively separated from the world, and . . . united to one another" (70).

Worship exposes our hearts, revealing what we cherish most. Worship is powerful, and molds us into the likeness of what we worship (28). We are faced with critical questions: "Do our services of worship shape us to be like the Creator or like the creation? Are we being fashioned for earth or for heaven?" (35)

For these reasons, Christian worship must be approached with care. The temptation to creature-centered worship – enlivened by entertainment, on the one hand, or by liturgical pageantry on the other – is ever present. The author designates these as aesthetics of entertainment and mysticism (2ff). Reformed worshipers must surrender to neither; God alone must be at the heart of worship.

The very simplicity of Reformed liturgy keeps the Lord at the heart of worship. Although liturgy refers to the work of the people, “the primary work of worship is done by God Himself” (65). He calls his people to assemble and meets with them corporately to renew his covenant with them through the covenantal Redeemer, Jesus Christ. He cleanses and consecrates them, communes with them, and commissions them (54).
The author is correct when he asserts that every church employs a liturgy, a structure that orders its services of worship. Liturgies must be approached thoughtfully and biblically. In chapter 6 - “We Submit to God’s Agenda” - the author makes a spirited case for worship that includes only those elements that God has commanded. Ministers and their congregations must critically evaluate their orders of worship. God cares about the way he is worshipped and prescribes in scripture its non-negotiable elements (64).

“The Anatomy of a Worship Service” takes readers to those non-negotiable elements: the call to worship, invocation, and greeting; the reading of God’s law, the confession of sin, and the declaration of God’s pardon; the ministry of the word and sacraments; and the benediction.

One of the most appealing features is way the Cruse treats these elements. Certainly, his descriptions of the elements are lucid. But he gives us more than the content we would find in, say, a theological dictionary. His descriptions are accompanied by earnest exhortations to receive all that God has intended in true worship. I’ll provide two examples. First, on preaching:

God loves preaching. He loves it because He loves saving sinners, and this is how He saves them. We can despise preaching all we want. We can replace preaching with productions, play movies instead of opening the Bible, or do whatever we think is going to win people – and indeed it might bring in more numbers, but it won’t win more souls. So, we too should love preaching. We should love it when our pastor steps into the pulpit to deliver God’s word because it’s a moment of salvation for God’s chosen people. We should be pleased with preaching because it pleases God. (113-114)

Second, on the Lord’s Supper:

We need to know what is going on when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. We are communing with Christ Himself! The Bread and wine are not quaint tokens commemorating a bygone era. . . . Trust me, you don’t want a mere memorial meal. Ultimately, that can do nothing for your soul – it cannot strengthen you, sustain you, or save you. You want Jesus. He is the all and all. (135-136)

Contemporary Christians are frequently confused about the place of singing in Christian worship. Cruse captures the true place of communal singing in worship when he reminds us that “God has gifted us with song that we might have a fitting way to praise Him for His work, pray to Him with our deepest needs, and proclaim to one another the sanctifying truths of the gospel” (150). He provides a needed corrective to the view that the benefits of music in worship are primarily entertaining, inspirational, or performative.

The many benefits of a sound theology of worship and solid grasp of its elements will be forfeited if the believer is not prepared for worship. Cruse provides this instruction in the book’s final section, “Preparing Our Hearts.”

A crucial component to preparation is proper expectations. This means embracing God’s design for worship. Its content must include only the elements God prescribes — its rhythms include weekly corporate worship in which those elements are repeated — its
simplicity distinguishes it from worldly entertainment and pageantry. Such worship can correctly be designated as ordinary, but it is in ordinary worship that the extraordinary takes place: believers meet with God and are transformed.

Helpful counsel is provided on cultivating the proper attitude toward anticipating worship — joy! Habits must be cultivated that will lead to entering the worshiping assembly in the proper frame of mind: thinking ahead on Saturday about such practical details as the clothes children will wear, breakfast, and retiring early on Saturday evenings. Many churches post bulletins online earlier in the week, so why not review what will take place in worship at some point during the week? Leave time to stay after the service to enjoy conversations with fellow worshippers. All of these practical suggestions are framed within the Christian’s larger duty of honoring the Sabbath, walking closely with God in holiness, and committing to living in peace and unity with fellow believers.

I trust that this book will find a wide readership. Seminarians, congregants, and pastors will all benefit. The author’s prayer is that his book will show Christians why they should devote time and energy to the act of worship (10-11). That is my prayer, too.

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Has the Reformed community erred by following the theological psychology of John Calvin as opposed to the theological psychology of Thomas Aquinas? This important question drives Matthew A. LaPine’s new The Logic of the Body, a scholarly title in Lexham Press’ Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology Series.

LaPine’s work is driven by a concern for people in the church who struggle with anxiety, OCD, and a host of other emotionally-laden troubles. He suggests that the broad stream of modern Reformed theology has overlooked the importance of the body in spiritual formation by relying on an oversimplified picture how we operate as human beings. Rather than viewing human beings holistically, Reformed theology has improperly embraced a dualism where body and soul are only tenuously connected. LaPine’s project of theological retrieval seeks to remedy this by reaching back into medieval theology’s more complex anthropology, as “medieval theologians accounted for how the body qualifies agency better than many modern theologians have” (39).

The Logic of the Body begins by questioning “emotional voluntarism,” the teaching that “we are responsible for emotions as intrusive mental states that show what we truly believe. Moreover, the illicit desire or false belief may be overcome by applying the gospel through voluntary mental work” (24-25). The suggested problem with emotional voluntarism is that it creates too much space between body
and soul, leaving the body as inconsequential to personal trouble and growth. Tiered psychology offers a more robust and true-to-life model of human functioning by taking into account the body as a factor in human change. After all, “thinking itself takes place within physical constraints” (38).

For those steeped in the Reformed tradition, Aquinas’ psychology is joltingly complex compared to that of Calvin and his ideological descendants. LaPine does a masterful job of surveying and explaining Aquinas’ dense, and often alien, theological psychology. Particularly helpful is his analysis of Aquinas’ entanglement with Galenism (or humoral theory). Although Aquinas’ understanding of human functioning leans on a theory long consigned to the dustbin of history, his tiered psychology integrates well with modern concepts such as plasticity. Aquinas is “better positioned to integrate the discoveries of contemporary neuroscience than contemporary Reformed theology” because he “integrated the body into his psychology, however the body's actual workings may be described” (42).

Aquinas’ theological psychology is based on the human person being a composite (a hylomorph) rather than two independent substances (dualism). The soul is the form of the body, and the soul has powers as its accidents. The relationship between the powers of the body and the powers of the soul are quite complex, with the “higher powers” of the soul (such as intellect) ruling over the “lower powers” of body (such as passions). The lower powers are more “conjoined to the body,” while higher powers are more independent. They body thus significantly impacts our functioning as human persons, as its separate powers create categories for personal weakness and internal conflict.

The theological psychology of Calvin stands in marked contrast to that of Aquinas. Calvin primarily connected the imago dei with the soul and, by doing so “assum[ed] that the body plays little to no role in Christian formation” (190). Rather than intrapersonal conflict arising from quarrels between the lower and higher powers, Calvin saw conflict being a product of the “contrary movements of sin” or a conflict between one’s intellect and will (190-191). By charting a course towards emotional voluntarism, Calvin overlooked the significance of habit for virtue formation. Modern Reformed theologians largely followed Calvin’s simplified approach, with certain Puritans and Bavinck being mild exceptions to the rule.

The remainder of LaPine’s work surveys important topics related to an embrace of a Thomistic tiered psychology: questions of body and soul, biblical testimony on the body, commanded emotions, and the interaction of emotion and intellect in Romans 6-8.

The Logic of the Body is impressive in its depth and scholarship. LaPine presents a compelling argument for a psychological system that has long been left unconsidered within Reformed theology. LaPine’s modern update of Aquinas’ tiered psychology takes seriously the role of the body in human functioning, which is a welcome corrective to wholly voluntarist approaches to spiritual development. Those who find Aquinas’ theological psychology as more faithful to Scripture and reality will find LaPine’s work a go-to resource. Even those who may disagree with LaPine’s overall thesis will benefit from this works’ careful scholarship and helpful analysis.
The centrality of faculty psychology to explain inner conflict raises one important question for LaPine’s work. Thomist theological psychology is dependent upon the soul being comprised of “compartments,” as internal conflict is largely a product of friction between the lower and higher faculties. Reformed theology has progressively moved away from a strong faculty psychology since the Reformation, highlighted by the work of James Pettigrue Boyce, Anthony Hoekema, John Frame, and Jeremy Pierre.

Much of the disagreement between LaPine and these theologians centers around the use of the term “heart” (שֵּׁבֶת, καρδία) in the Scriptures. LaPine notes the wide semantic range for these terms and concludes that the “term does not neatly map on any traditional categories of faculty psychology” (358). Those who deny the concept that the heart/soul is composed of different compartments would certainly agree, as they would see this failure to cleanly map onto the categories of faculty psychology as proof that faculty psychology is an unbiblical notion. For LePine, “heart” is not an equivalent of “soul,” but rather stands for the whole human person, which includes the body. Hoekema and Pierre’s doctoral dissertations explore at length linguistic and theological evidence in favor of restricting “heart” to the immaterial aspect of man.

In LaPine’s view, faculty psychology is necessary to explain inner conflict: “[I]f there are no separate compartments (functions) within the human psyche, then internal conflict is impossible” (216). This dilemma can be resolved through acknowledging that human beings are not monolithic in their thoughts, desires, and choices, but rather can hold more than one in their hearts at a time. While these two points do not automatically disqualify LaPine’s embrace of Aquinas’ theological psychology, they do demonstrate that modern Reformed theology has within itself the resources to explain internal conflict without a tiered psychology.

Regardless of whether one follows of LaPine’s retrieval project or the historic Reformed view, The Logic of the Body is a welcome discussion partner in the field of theological psychology. LaPine’s presentation of complex theology is excellent, and his handling of historical sources exemplary. The Logic of the Body is an academic read, but will reward those who devote the time to grasping its argument and its implications.

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