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# 'NONE OTHER NAME'

When the Apostle Peter declared that salvation was to be found in Christ alone (Acts 4:12), he was echoing the express teaching of our Lord who said that he is the way to God - not that he shows the way, but that he is the way, and that there is no other way to God (John 14:6). Words could not be plainer. Christ presented himself as the alone Saviour of mankind. Consequently he also presented himself as the object of faith and not merely an example for faith. The Gospel that Christ proclaimed centred on himself and his redemptive work. His message of salvation was totally self-centred. In the New Testament as a whole the exclusiveness of Christianity is stressed. What God has done in Christ is unique. The Bible does not speak of one among several ways of salvation, but of the only way.

We need not be surprised when many liberal theologians, enamoured of the Inter-Faith Movement, virtually reject the exclusive claims of the Lord Jesus. When, however, we find a similar rejection of the truth in some allegedly evangelical circles, we are profoundly shocked. This deadly error is spreading in the body politic of modern Protestantism. It is significant that recently a 'Reformed' church in America failed to get the requisite two-thirds majority to accept a proposal requiring an annual declaration of its office-bearers that they believe salvation to be through Christ alone.

This departure from the truth strikes at the heart of Christianity. It is by no means limited to America. Such an inclusive and latitudinarian outlook either decentralises or distorts the doctrine of the Cross of Christ. The Apostle Paul gloried in that cross. Without the doctrine of the cross no one could be saved. The heathen are said to perish (Rom.2:12). 'See then', says Calvin, 'what kind of advocacy they undertake, who through misplaced mercy, attempt, on the ground of ignorance, to exempt the nations who have not the light of the gospel from the judgement of God'.

If missionary zeal is to be maintained and the Gospel faithfully preached it is of crucial importance for true evangelicals to proclaim with renewed vigour the grand doctrine of *soli Christo* - by Christ alone.

F.S.L.

# WHERE HAS TRUTH GONE?

## by W. David J. McKay

*David McKay is Professor of Systematic Theology, Christian Ethics and Apologetics at the Reformed Theological College, Belfast, and Minister of Cregagh Road Reformed Presbyterian Church, Belfast. He is the author of "An Ecclesiastical Republic. Church Government in the Writings of George Gillespie" (Paternoster Press, 1997). The following article is his Inaugural Lecture, delivered on 3 October, 1995. The oral form has largely been retained, although fuller bibliographical references have been provided.*

In the past, scholars and thinkers argued about the truth of different theories and points of view. Is the earth a flat disc or a sphere? Does our knowledge rest on experience or on reason? Is Jesus Christ God incarnate or a mere human being? They pursued truth and believed that it could be found. Although they differed widely among themselves, producing theories which flatly contradicted one another, they believed that there is such a thing as objective truth, and, apart from those with mystical inclinations, they believed that truth could be stated in propositions, using human language and comprehensible to human minds.

A sea-change in Western intellectual life, however, has been taking place in recent years.[1] In the view of an increasing number of scholars, such an understanding of truth as objective is no longer tenable. It is, they would argue, no longer possible to speak of objective truth. 'Truth' and 'falsehood' must be replaced by reference to what is 'true for me' or 'true for you', even though those 'truths' may be entirely contradictory. In a wide variety of disciplines the idea of objective truth is under vigorous attack and in some circles appears to be almost extinct.

Why should we care about such abstruse, and apparently counter-intuitive, points of view which are often deliberately expressed in well-nigh incomprehensible jargon? Can we not safely ignore these thinkers and leave them in the rarefied air of their (often French) universities? Sadly we cannot. Two considerations force these matters on our attention:

(i) These ideas do not remain quarantined in universities. In simplified forms they filter into the wider society and eventually shape the thinking of ordinary people who have never heard of such names as Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault. Thus no-one who has any contact with his culture

and the people around him can avoid some exposure to these debates. The person who dismisses your gospel witness by saying, 'You're quite welcome to believe that if you want to and if it makes you feel good, but it does nothing for me', is simply showing how these radical ideas have reached the popular level. Modern mass media have played a very significant role in this process and are themselves being shaped by many of the ideas we will be considering.

Those who are being trained for ministry must understand the world into which they are being sent today, not the world of ten, twenty or more years ago, and must be able to relate God's truth to the thinking and the questions of those whom they will encounter.

(ii) The Church is not immune to the influence of such ideas. All through its history the Church has had to combat the viewpoints and values of the world which threatened its life and witness, and all too often it has failed to prevent error from infiltrating its ranks. As we will see, the implications of this modern mindset which denies objective truth will be devastating for the Church if it does not awaken to the danger.

The Church's situation has been compared by American researcher George Barna to a frog in a kettle of water on a stove: as the temperature of the water rises, so does that of the frog - it does not notice the danger until too late and it is boiled alive.[2] If the Church unwittingly conforms to the temperature of the world around it, it will be destroyed before it realises anything is wrong.

It is vital that those who preach and teach understand both the contemporary challenges posed to Christian faith and the definitive answers provided by the Word of God. We must train students who can alert the Church to the rising temperature before the frogs are boiled.

**The Contemporary Situation**

We want now to consider some of the important influences that are shaping contemporary thought and attitudes.[3] Our concern is not to describe how we reached this point - that has been done recently by, for example, David Wells in his book *No Place for Truth*[4] which charts the demise of evangelical theology in the United States. Our aim, rather, is to describe briefly the main characteristics of the philosophical outlook which is coming to dominate a wide range of disciplines, including literary criticism, sociology, psychology and, of course, theology. Even to mention these disciplines gives some indication of how wide-ranging the effects of this outlook are.

We are dealing here with what has come to be known as POSTMODERNISM, a name which covers a broad range of ideas, rather than a distinct well-defined philosophy. In some respects it is more of an attitude of mind than a set of particular beliefs.[5] It includes such a diversity of thinkers that it is difficult to define simply,[6] but those who can be termed POSTMODERNISTS do share some common basic principles.

The very name 'Postmodernism' shows that this movement comes after Modernism, and it is indeed a conscious reaction to Modernism. Dominating the first part of the twentieth century, Modernism was built on unbounded confidence in human reason to make sense of the world and to provide guidance for human conduct. Its roots were in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century which exalted human reason and dismissed everything in religion which could not be fully grasped by the human mind. The Modernist believed that a single over-arching description of the world could be produced and would enable enlightened rational human beings to control their own destiny.

In time the futility and emptiness of this Modernist project became apparent, not least because it was a cold sterile creed that could not satisfy the longings of the human heart, longings which can in fact be satisfied only in fellowship with God. At the frontiers of modern thought, Modernism is dead.

Sinners, however, will seek satisfaction anywhere rather than in God. Amid the ruins of Modernism, the proponents of Postmodernism are at work. The contrast between the two movements is striking. David Harvey describes Modernism thus: '[it] has been identified with the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardization of knowledge and production'[7]: on the other hand he says of Postmodernism 'Fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or "totalizing" discourses...are the hallmark of postmodern thought.'[8] (It is vital to note that Christianity would be classified as one of those universal discourses against which Postmodern thinkers set their faces).

The change that has taken place in Western thought is well summed up by Gene Edward Veith:

> Faced with the inherent meaninglessness of life, modernists impose an order upon it, which they then treat as being objective and universally binding. Postmodernists, on the other hand, live with and affirm the chaos, considering any order to be only provisional and varying from person to person.[9]

Postmodernists reject all claims to provide a single comprehensive explanation of reality, whether in terms of God, human reason or anything else. To them the search for such an explanation is fundamentally misguided and doomed to failure. Thus all religions which claim to explain the meaning of life and the universe are ruled out of court from the start.

To the Postmodernist life has no meaning - the world is puposeless chaos. Drawing on the ideas of Existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Postmodernists claim that we must make our own meaning for our lives by making our own decisions. It does not matter what you decide to do - but only that you decide. Thus someone with a £100 note could decide to burn it or use it to buy food for the hungry - either decision is perfectly valid. What gives your life meaning is good for you - but it may be the exact opposite of what gives my life meaning.

It will be clear from this that Postmodernism is entirely RELATIVISTIC. Having disposed of all large-scale interpretations of reality (including Christianity), we are left only with what is true for different individuals. The Postmodernist has no room for 'metanarratives' or 'totalizing discourses'. Instead we have what Terry Eagleton calls 'the laid-back pluralism of the postmodern'[10]. Every viewpoint is equally valid, because in the end none of them makes any objective truth-claims - they can be neither true nor false, merely true-for-me or true-for-you.

With the abolition of all universal explanations of reality, there is no longer any foundation for claims to know or possess 'the truth'. All religions, philosophies, theories of science, or of any other discipline, are reduced to 'narratives' - stories that may be more or less useful but which are not to be thought of as true in any universal sense. In Eagleton's words,

> Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives.[11]

As a result, what is true-for-me may be false-for-you, but neither of us need be at all concerned.

What these thinkers fail to see, or do not wish to see, however, is that they are claiming Postmodernism is universally true. Their claim that 'There is no truth' is in fact a claim that there *is* truth. Here is a world-view that says there are no world-views. As in the case of earlier varieties of relativism, Postmodernism is fundamentally self-contradictory.

Postmodernism began in the field of literary criticism and has some radical things to say about language. The basic assumption is that language *cannot* render truths about the world in an objective way. It is argued that language is a cultural creation, arising in various social contexts, and the conclusion drawn from this is that meaning is nothing more than a social construct. We are said to be imprisoned by language which determines *what,* and even *how,* we think. We are in fact determined by the society we live in.

Many Postmodernists argue that society is basically oppressive and so uses language to oppress, for example, women or blacks. Language is said to be used to hide power relationships, and from this all kinds of radical political conclusions are drawn. Every text is political and probably justifies society's homophobia, imperialism or some other form of oppression. What language *does* not do is give us access to a realm of objective truth.

**Some Implications of Postmoderism**

The implications of this approach for every discipline and area of study are revolutionary. No longer are scholars seeking truth, since they can never find it, but at best they are advocating personal points of view. In the study of history, for example, the prime concern would no longer be to establish what events actually took place in the past, since that is an impossible goal, but rather to advance the agenda of some particular group, preferably that of an oppressed category such as blacks or women (the experience of the latter giving rise to what is sometimes designated *herstory*). There is no objective truth to be found, only 'causes' to be championed. The question to be asked is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?'[12] The triumph of Postmodernism would mean the end of scholarship as it has been pursued for centuries.

The effects of Postmodernism on theological scholarship are potentially devastating. Consider four areas:

**(i) Biblical Studies (Old Testament and New Testament)**

Postmodernism reduces the Bible to a collection of human documents thoroughly infected with the oppressive values of their ancient authors, who were themselves merely products of their (patriarchal) societies. The biblical documents should thus be approached with 'suspicion', *not* in order to hear the word of God or to learn truth *but* in order to uncover the messages of oppression hidden in the text. Such a process of 'deconstruction' will reveal what was

really going on in the writers mind, even though he may have been entirely unaware that this is what he was expressing.

Indeed it is not even possible to come to a single view of the meaning of the text: meaning is located *not* in the words or in the author's intention but in the reader's response. Such concerns are reflected in the subtitle of Walter Brueggemann's *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* - TEXTS UNDER NEGOTIATION.[13] If the postmodernist view is accepted, there are as many 'meanings' as there are readers.

This represents a fundamental change in the way in which the Bible has usually been approached in the past. Even when Liberal scholars poured scorn on fundamental aspects of the Bible's teaching, they at least conceded that the texts had a specific meaning (however unpalatable). Now the reader of Scripture is cast adrift on a sea of subjectivism with no hope of hearing an authoritative word from the Lord.

**(ii) Theology**

If Postmodernism is true, theology is meaningless. Theological statements do not contain any objective truth - whether about God, man or history: they have no reference outside themselves. What theologians are doing is engaging in a 'language game', a self-contained activity with its own set of rules and conventions, and theologians and philosophers from different traditions are engaged in their own separate games. The rival claims of different religions do not really conflict - none is either true or false. At best we may produce stories (narratives) that help some people to live a satisfying life - if it 'works' for them, well and good, but there is no reason, other than this pragmatic concern, why they should choose one theology rather than another.[14]

**(iii) Ethics**

It is hard to see how a satisfactory ethic can be built on Postmodernist presuppositions. No basis can be provided for adopting one course of action rather than another: there is no 'metanarrative' to legitimate a particular way of life, there is no universal standard of value or morality. In the ethical sphere we thus confront what Steven Connor calls 'the irreducible diversity of voices and interests'. Nevertheless Postmodernists want to struggle against oppression and injustice - they may often be very vocal in promoting particular causes - but on what basis? When a biblical text is 'deconstructed' to expose, for example, its

supposed oppression of women, on what grounds is a patriarchal social order designated 'wrong' or 'evil'? Postmodernists must produce what Connor calls 'a common frame of consent' - but without any universal framework of meaning, the search is doomed.

### (iv) Apologetics

Traditionally apologists have argued with opponents who accepted that if one world-view is true, others are false. Thus, for example, atheism and Christian theism could not both be true. Postmodernists, however, present an entirely different challenge. Any kind of universal statement of objective truth is rejected: if the Reformed faith helps us, we are free to adopt it, as long as we do not claim it is right (or true) for everyone.

Along with the most consistent disciple of Van Til, the Postmodernist will say that presuppositions are all-important for how we understand, for example, reason and knowledge, since neither of these is neutral but dependent on basic commitments. What the Postmodernist cannot concede is that one set of presuppositions is better or more true than another. Much hard thinking must be done by those engaged in apologetics in order to refine biblically-based approaches and re-orient them to face a new kind of opponent. Of course versions of relativism have had to be answered in the past, but the relativism of the Postmodernist is of a particularly comprehensive and corrosive variety.

## A Christian Response

Where has truth gone? We believe it is still to be found where it has always been. The attacks of Postmodernists cannot destroy the truth, any more than the efforts of countless unbelieving scholars of the past have done. Whatever the nature of the onslaught, the truth has remained unshaken, because it has its source in GOD, not in man.

In the face of the assaults of modern thought, the Church of Jesus Christ is called to proclaim the objective truth about God and the world, things that are true for every person, whether he wishes to believe them or not. The position of the Postmodernist can and should be refuted on its own terms, exposing the inconsistency of a truth-claim that there are no truth-claims, and there are Christian scholars with the necessary gifts to pursue this enterprise, *but* our primary task is one of positive proclamation of the truth contained in the Scriptures which, as Paul tells us, 'are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus' (*II Timothy* 3:16, NASB). This concern

must permeate our theology, our ethics, our apologetics, as well as every other aspect of our Christian service.

What precisely do we proclaim? It is to be 'the whole counsel of God' (*Acts* 20:27) which addresses every area of life and thought. In the light of contemporary challenges, however, let us focus on two areas:

(i) The divine nature

(ii) The human response.

**(i) The divine nature**

The centre of Christian proclamation, and the heart of theology, is the nature of God: we proclaim a PERSON. What kind of God is he? *Three* truths stand out as being of particular significance:

(a) A GOD WHO CREATES: the very first chapter of the Bible shows us that the universe is the creation of an infinite, intelligent, personal Being. It is not the product of chance or of impersonal forces. Of fundamental importance for our theology is the statement of *Genesis* 1:1 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. We may link this with John 1:3 'Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made', which shows that it was through the eternal Son, the second Person of the Trinity, that all things came into being. God is the source of all created reality.

The account in Genesis makes it clear that creation unfolds in a planned and ordered way, and the words of God in Genesis 1:26 'Let us make man' indicate something of the divine deliberation behind the work of creation, particularly with reference to the creation of the human race.

A key implication of the biblical doctrine of creation is that the universe, as an expression of the mind and will of God, has MEANING and PURPOSE. It is not a chaos of random events and experiences without pattern or significance. In the face of Postmodernist denials of ultimate meaning we assert that God the Creator is the source of meaning in his creation. It is significant that in John 1:1 Christ is called the 'Logos', which as well as meaning 'word' can mean 'reason' and has strong implications of rationality (cf *Acts* 10:29, 18:14). The creation is an ordered, rational unity, an expression of the purpose of a sovereign God. It is this God who determines the meaning of all things in his creation.[18]

The crown of creation is the human race, made in the image of God

(*Genesis* 1:26). As God's image-bearers we are able to understand, albeit in a limited way, the meaning and purpose which he has built into the creation, our own lives included. It is therefore possible for us, as the astronomer Kepler put it, to think God's thoughts after him. As his rational creatures we can have access to objective truth and ultimate meaning.

(b) A GOD WHO SPEAKS: the Creator-God is one who reveals himself in words as well as in actions. This was so even in Eden, before the Fall. It is all the more necessary for us because of the Fall.

As early as *Genesis* 1:3 we encounter a God who speaks: he uses human words to reveal his nature and purposes. As he acts subsequently in his creation, he provides words of explanation, sometimes before he acts, sometimes afterwards, sometimes both, (as for example in the case of the work of the Messiah).

Through the agency of the Holy Spirit, God has provided for the recording of his words in written form, so that it can be said of 'All scripture' that it is 'God-breathed' (*II Timothy* 3:16). As the Lord himself shows, human language is a suitable vehicle for the communication of truth. Whilst it is true, as Calvin points out on several occasions, that God in speaking to us, accommodates himself to our limited capacities, nevertheless he does convey truth in words.

Scripture thus speaks with the authority of God: were he to address us in audible words they could have no greater authority. This seems to be the thrust of II Peter 1:19 'We have the prophetic word made more sure' (NASB). Scripture thus requires that it be heard and obeyed.

The pinnacle of God's revelation of himself is the incarnate Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is supremely 'the Word' (John 1:1). No conflict exists between God's revelation in Christ and his revelation in the words of Scripture: they form a seamless unity, flowing from the same source. Thus we read in *Hebrews* 1:1-2 'God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his Son' (NKJV).

God has used words to reveal objective truth to us. The revelation is not exhaustive - it could not be, since we are finite - but it is true. The God who speaks has given us access to truth. Words do not imprison us in a religious language-game with no reference to anything outside itself: they are the mode by which almighty God addresses us regarding the universe he has created, and above all regarding himself.

It is this verbal revelation out of which we are, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to construct our doctrinal statements, in the assurance that insofar as they conform to the Word of God, they express objective truth. As Alister McGrath expresses it:

> doctrine claims to be grounded in God's revelation of himself, in the scripturally-mediated account of the coming of Jesus Christ. It declares that it is not a human invention, but a response to the revelation of God. God, it affirms, has permitted - has authorised - us to speak about him in this way.[19]

It is on this foundation of authorised speech about God that we build our ethics and our apologetics.

(c) A GOD WHO REDEEMS: As *Romans* 5:12 tells us 'Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned'. All are sinners and the effects of that sin are pervasive. We truly are 'dead in transgressions and sins' (*Eph.* 2:1).

In the face of human sin God responded in grace - grace that had begun to operate even before the creation as he chose out a people for himself in Christ (*Ephesians* 1:4). That eternal plan of salvation unfolded through history until its consummation in the redeeming work of the incarnate Son. He has taken the wrath and punishment due to his people on account of their sins and so, in Paul's words, 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace' (*Eph.* 1:7).

Here is the God-given means of dealing with our root problem, our sin. In Christ alone sinners may be transformed into new creatures. There is a necessary place for the work of 'destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God' (2 Cor. 10:5 NASB), but that is a preliminary to dealing with the deepest need of the human heart. No philosophy, no religion can produce the required transformation. Redemption has been accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ and our task is to summon all, Postmodernists included, to repentance and faith in him.

**(ii) The human response**

(a) FAITH: Our basic response to God's revelation is to be a faith that is joined with repentance: cf. Jesus' proclamation - 'the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news' (*Mark* 1:15). As we are made alive by the Spirit of God, we respond in faith: as whole persons, thinking, feeling, willing,

acting persons, we give ourselves without reservation to Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Thus begins a life of willing obedience to our new Master, joyfully fulfilling his commandments.

It is faith that provides the starting point for our theological thinking and study, a conviction that can be traced back in the history of theology at least as far as Augustine. We must believe *in order that* we may understand. To begin elsewhere will doom the search to failure, as is evident from II Corinthians 2:14 'The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.' In Christ, however, our minds are progressively renewed, and we are enabled to grasp spiritual truth.

We must therefore submit our minds to God's revelation and seek, with the aid of the Spirit, to understand and express its truth ever more faithfully. This is the only answer to the follies of Postmodernism or of any other man-made system of thought.

(b) LIFE: The transformation that we experience in union with Christ is to be expressed in a life that progressively shows more of our Lord to the world. Hence Paul's exhortation 'to live a life worthy of the calling you have received' (*Ephesians* 4:1). It is not enough to profess belief in the truth - we must live the truth, in our thoughts and consequently in our words and actions. Every aspect of life is to be reshaped so as to reflect the likeness of Christ.

The ethic that flows from our knowledge of the truth must be practised in every relationship of life. Abstract ethics are futile and dishonour God. We must be doers of the Word as well as hearers (*James* 1:22). This cannot be realised in isolation. We are called to live the Christian life in community - a community characterised by truth and love. It is there that the world will see the reality of our commitment to God and his truth. One of the recent trends in Christian ethics has been a renewed focus on the role of the Christian community in ethics, a trend which should be welcomed and encouraged.[21]

Where has truth gone? We may sum up by saying that the truth is to be seen alive and well in the Body of Christ, the community empowered by the Holy Spirit, shaped by the Word of God. Our goal as a college must be to train men and women to live the truth and to be able to guide others on the same path.

## REFERENCES


1. For preliminary orientation see: Madam Sarup *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism,* 2nd. edition (Hemel Hempstead, 1993); Steven Connor *Postmodernist Culture* 2nd. edition (Oxford, 1997). Briefer introductions will be found in the chapters on structuralism and postmodernism in the following: John Storey *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Hemel Hempstead, 1993); Andrew Milner. *Contemporary Cultural Theory. An Introduction* (London, 1994).
2. George Barna *The Frog in the Kettle* (Glendale, 1990).
3. Exposition and evaluation from various Christian perspectives is provided by a growing tide of books and other publications. Some of the more helpful are: D.A. Carson *The Gagging of God* (Leicester, 1996); David S. Dockery (ed.) *The Challenge of Postmodernism* (Wheaton, 1995); Stanley J. Grenz *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, 1996); Roger Lundin *The Culture of Interpretation. Christian Faith and the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, 1993); J.R. Middleton and B.J. Walsh *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be. Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, 1995); Gene Edward Veith *Guide to Contemporary Culture* (Leicester, 1994).
4. David F. Wells *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids, 1993).
5. A key pioneering text from within the movement is the work of Jean-François Lyotard, published in French in 1979, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, 1984).
6. The diversity of postmodernism is stressed even more strongly by Steven Connor in the second edition of his book (see note 1), published eight years after the first edition, such that he can speak of 'the bulging overcoherence of the concept of the postmodern' (p.ix).
7. David Harvey *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, 1990), p.9.
8. ibid
9. Gene Edward Veith, op. cit., p. 42.
10. Terry Eagleton 'Awakening from modernity', *Times Literary Supplement,* 20 February 1987.
11. ibid
12. See G.E. Vieth, op. cit., pp. 56-59.
13. Walter Brueggemann *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (London 1993).
14. It may be noted here that this postmodern approach to religion harmonises very readily with elements of the New Age Movement, with its 'do-it-yourself' construction of personalised sets of beliefs which promote individual self-realisation.
15. Steven Connor *Postmodernist Culture* 1st. edition (Oxford, 1989), p. 244.
16. ibid. That Postmodernists do not believe ethics is dead is evident from, for example, Zygnunt Bauman's work *Postmodern Ethics,* (Oxford, 1993).
17. Of some interest in this connection is the experience of John W. Cooper of Calvin Theological Seminary recorded in his article 'Reformed Apologetics and the Challenge of Post-modern Relativism' in *Calvin Theological Journal* 28.1 (April, 1993).
18. It is this truth that lies at the heart of the apologetic method developed by Cornelius Van Til. See e.g. *The Defence of the Faith* 3rd. edition (Philadelphia, 1967).
19. Alister McGrath *Understanding Doctrine* (London, 1990), p. 16.
20. This view is encapsulated in Augustine's famous statement, 'Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that you may understand.' (Sermon 124). The Lation motto summing up this approach, *Credo ut intelligam,* is also associated with the great Medieval thinker Anselm.
21. A book, not written from a Reformed perspective, which played a significant part in starting this trend is by Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, 1981). Appropriation of what is valid in Hauerwas' work and further development of the community dimension in ethics by Reformed writers is much needed.

# THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

## Comparison, Contrast, Consummation


## by Hugh J. Blair.

*For some thirty years Hugh J. Blair was Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature in the Reformed Theological College, Belfast.*


The Epistle to the Hebrews is of vital importance for the study of the Bible as a whole. It links the Old Testament and the New Testament together. That comes out very clearly in the opening words of the book:

> God who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son (Hebrews 1 : 1,2, NKJV).

There are contrasts there: between 'in time past' and 'in these last days'; and between 'the prophets' and 'His Son'. But behind the contrasts there is continuity. The continuing factor is 'God spoke'.

Contrasts are emphasised in the epistle to show that Christ as the ultimate revelation of God is better than all preceding revelations - better than Moses, a better Priest than the members of the Aaronic priesthood, a better Sacrifice, the Mediator of a new and better covenant. But always the continuity of God's revelation of himself is maintained. Christ is greater than all that has gone before, but as well he is the ultimate and perfect realisation of what is seen in shadow in the Old Testament. Christ is the perfect revelation of God. That comes out in the first chapter before the writer comes to make any comparisons at all:

> Who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (1 : 3).

There are two things there which in effect summarise the whole epistle: Christ is the perfect revelation of God, 'the exact representation of his being' (NIV), and he is the perfect atonement for our sins. All through it is his perfection that is underlined. The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Old Testament, by comparison and contrast, can help us to see that.

## I. The Son Greater than the Angels

Before giving detailed evidence that Christ as the ultimate revelation of God is better than all preceding revelations, the writer to the Hebrews declares that he is 'so much better than the angels' (1 : 4). This superiority is perhaps not directly relevant to our consideration of the relationship between the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Old Testament, for the function of angels is not specifically dealt with in the Old Testament, though there are indications in the New Testament that the law was given through the mediation of angels (Galations 3 : 19; Hebrews 2 : 2). Hebrews 1 is concerned to show the surpassing greatness of Christ as compared with the angels. It is quotations from the Old Testament - from the Book of Psalms in particular - that are used to prove that surpassing greatness, showing that the Son is infinitely superior to the angels.

His superiority as Son is quickly demonstrated. None of the angels could claim the special relationship of sonship:

> *For to which of the angels did He ever say:*
> *'You are My son,*
> *Today I have begotten You'? (1 : 5, quoting Psalm 2 : 7).*

Instead they are called to worship him, as he comes into the world (1 : 6):

> Let all the angels of God worship Him (Dead Sea Scrolls, Deut. 32 : 43; LXX of Psalm 97 : 9).

Their function is service of God as his ministers:

> *Who makes His angels spirits*
> *And His ministers a flame of fire (Psalm 104 : 4).*

Their further function is service of man as ministering spirits to his people:

> Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation? (1 : 14).

Christ is far more than a ministering angel: he sits in the position of authority at God's right hand. So Hebrews 1 : 13 repeats the challenge already put in v. 5:

> *To which of the angels did He ever say...?*

And this time it is Christ's position of authority and victory that sets him far above the angels:

> *Sit at My right hand,*
> *Till I make Your enemies Your footstool (Psalm 110 : 1).*

Chapter 2 gives further confirmation of Christ's superiority to angels:

> *For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak*
> *in subjection to angels. But... 'You have put all things*
> *in subjection under his feet'* (2: 5,6,8, quoting Psalm 8).

Quotations from the Psalms have abundantly confirmed Christ's superiority over the angels. But they do much more than that. They state the role that the Father had in mind for his Son, as exemplified in his word given in the first instance to David and his descendants. Hebrews 1 gives telling illustrations of what Christ made clear to his disciples after his resurrection when he told them 'that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and *the Psalms* concerning Me' (Luke 24 : 44). For the light that it throws on Christ in the Psalms Hebrews 1 must have a place in our study of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Old Testament.

### *Christ in the Psalms*

All the Psalms quoted in Hebrews 1 as referring to Christ rest on the basic declaration in II Samuel 7 : 14 of God's relationship to David's royal line:

> I will be his Father and he shall be my Son.

There is a primary reference in these Psalms to David and his descendants, but they could ultimately find fulfilment only in Christ.

Psalm 2, quoted in 1 : 5, described opposition to the Lord and rejection of his Anointed One. But he who sits in the heavens as Lord sees this opposition as laughable and meets it with his wrath. His king has been installed in Zion, the whole world is his inheritance and his possession, and the rebels are doomed to destruction. Historically, David had to meet such opposition. But he has been acknowledged by the Father as his son, and his victory over the nations is assured. But David's victories were no more than temporary and partial. Hebrews 1 sees the victory as the victory of Christ, declared as Son by his resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1 : 4). And Revelation 19 : 15 sees the consummation when 'He Himself will rule the nations with a rod of iron' (cf. Psalm 2 : 8,9), and have 'on His robe and on His thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS'.

Psalm 45, quoted in 1 :8, 9, speaks of the king as a bridegroom and of his royal bride. But Hebrews 1 sees the description of his divine nature, the everlasting tenure of his throne, and his divine righteousness as again pointing beyond any king of David's line to Christ:

> To the Son He Says,
> 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever;
> A sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre
> of Your kingdom'.

The royal bride may have been a king's daughter, but, since the Royal Bridegroom is the Son, the Psalm ultimately described the church, the bride of Christ, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Psalm 102, of which verses 25 - 27 are quoted in 1 : 10 - 12, at first sight does not seem to be Messianic. It portrays in the opening verses the plight of a man in sore distress, weakness and suffering, forsaken by friends, reproached and derided by enemies, and seeing all this as evidence of the wrath of God. But Hebrews 1 sees the words quoted,

> You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of
> the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands.
>
> They will perish, but You remain;
> And they will all grow old like a garment;
> Like a cloak You will fold them up,
> And they will be changed.
> But You are the same,
> And Your years will not fail,

as spoken by the Father to the Son, assuring him of his unchanging purpose of love of his people. The Son will endure weakness, suffering, the enmity of foes, even the wrath of God as he takes the sinner's place. But by that suffering the divine unchanging, unfailing purpose of salvation will be achieved. There will be mercy for Zion and the building up of Zion, God's redeemed people.

Psalm 110, verse 1, is quoted at the end of Hebrews 1 to confirm Christ's superiority over the angels, with the challenge repeated from v. 5:

> *To which of the angels has He ever said:*
> *'Sit at My right hand,*
> *Till I make Your enemies Your footstool'?*

No such words could ever come to the angels. The special emphasis of this final quotation from the Psalms in Hebrews 1 is that the Son will be seated in the place of authority at the Father's right hand and will achieve complete victory. It is quoted again in Hebrews 10 : 12, 13, at the end of the section on Christ, our Great High Priest, to emphasis the outcome of his 'one sacrifice for sins forever'.

> This Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for
> sins for ever, sat down at the right hand of God,
> from that time waiting till His enemies are made
> His footstool.

That will be the consummation of his victory.

## II. Greater than Moses

For the Jews no one could be greater than Moses, but the writer to the Hebrews directs attention away from Moses to Christ. Chapter 3 begins 'Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession Christ Jesus'. The Greek word translated 'consider' means 'pay particular attention to'. Christ is to be the real focus of attention right through the epistle. The writer says in effect, 'Look at Moses, but pay attention to Christ'. That could be a basic guide for all study of the Old Testament: Look at what you see in the Old Testament, but pay attention to Christ.

Looking at Moses, but paying attention to Christ, the writer begins with comparisons. Both Moses and Christ Jesus were appointed by God for their task, and both were faithful to the One who appointed them. Both of them had their sphere of influence in God's household, God's family. Moses was faithful *in* that household. Christ, by way of contrast, was faithful *over* that household, and indeed over the whole creation for which he was responsible (verse 3). The writer emphasises the contrast by saying that Moses was faithful as a servant in God's household; Christ was faithful over his own household - 'whose house we are' - as a Son.

To say that Christ was Son and Moses was servant is not to minimise the service that Moses gave. The Greek word translated 'servant' often refers to a servant in a position of special responsibility and in a special relationship with his master. Hebrews 3 : 2,5 is virtually a quotation from the Septuagint of Numbers 12: 7, from a passage where Moses' special relationship to the Lord is underlined. When Moses' work was done, the Lord himself spoke of him to Joshua as 'Moses my servant' (Joshua 1 : 2) and again and again in the book of Joshua Moses is identified as 'the servant of the Lord'.

The other references to Moses in the Epistle to the Hebrews indicate something of the outstanding service that he gave. It was necessarily imperfect and incomplete, but it was outstanding.

### *Leader out of Egypt*

Those who came out of Egypt did so 'through Moses' (Heb. 3 : 16). Even when the people made the golden calf in Moses' absence on Mount Sinai, and Aaron declared 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt', Moses was still identified by the people as 'the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt' (Exodus 32 : 1). Stephen in the New Testament con-

firmed that it was for that achievement that he was still remembered: 'He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt' (Acts 7 : 36).

Hebrews declares that it was the people's sin of unbelief that meant that Moses did not complete his task. They came out of Egypt *through him;* they were not able to enter in *through unbelief;* the contrast is very clearly marked in the Greek of Hebrews 3 : 16, 19. The rest that they failed to enter is still available for the people of God (4 : 9). Where Moses failed to bring his people into the rest, Christ, by way of contrast, as our great High Priest, has made it possible for us to come boldly to the throne of grace (4 : 14 - 16). Where Moses failed, Christ 'is able, perfectly and completely, to save all who come to God through him' (7 : 25).

### *The erection and service of the tabernacle*

One of the greatest achievements of Moses as the servant of the Lord was the erection and the service of the tabernacle in the wilderness. As a faithful servant he made and erected the tabernacle and arranged for its worship in strict obedience to the Lord's commands. Continually in the record it is reiterated that all that was done was done 'as the Lord commanded Moses'. Hebrews sees that earthly tabernacle erected by Moses as 'a copy and shadow' (8 : 3) of the heavenly tabernacle 'the true tabernacle which the Lord erected and not man' (8 : 2). Moses and Aaron and Aaron's sons were ministers of the old tabernacle in the wilderness, 'who served the service of the tent of meeting' (literal translation of Numbers 18 : 6, referring to the Levites). Christ, as High Priest, is described in Hebrews 8 : 2 as 'a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle'. The word translated 'minister' is the same Greek word as is found in the Septuagint of Numbers 18 : 6. Earthly priests 'serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things', the earthly tabernacle and its service. But Christ 'now has obtained a more excellent ministry' than theirs, and he has entered 'not into the holy places made with hands, which are the copies of the true, but into heaven itself' (9 : 24).

### *Copy and true reality*

The contrast between 'copy' and 'reality' is vital for understanding the Epistle to the Hebrews and for understanding the Old Testament. The principle is that everything in the world is an imperfect copy of a perfect reality; what we see points beyond itself to the reality of which it is a shadow. Hebrews illustrates that from the tabernacle. When Moses went up to Mount Sinai, God gave him a perfect pattern to follow in the building of the tabernacle. But the

tabernacle that he built could be no more than a copy, and as a copy was found to be something less than perfect.

There are comparisons and contrasts between the tabernacle set up by Moses and the heavenly reality. The contrasts are obvious. The Mosaic tabernacle was erected by man; the heavenly reality was erected by the Lord (8 : 2). The Mosaic tabernacle was on earth, 'an earthly sanctuary' (9 : 1); the reality was 'in the heavens' (8 : 1). The holy place on earth was made 'with hands' (9 : 24); the perfect tabernacle was 'not made with hands' (9 :11). The Mosaic tabernacle was 'a copy and shadow' (8 : 5 and 9 : 24); the heavenly reality was 'the true tabernacle' (8 : 2), 'the greater and more perfect tabernacle' (9 : 11).

The trouble with the people to whom the Epistle to the Hebrews was first written was that they were quite happy with the copy (the shadow) and did not want to go beyond it to the reality. An earthly sanctuary, outward forms of worship, sacrifices, an earthly priesthood, these were the things which satisfied them. But the writer insists that they must go beyond these to the reality, Christ, who has entered heaven itself, a perfect High Priest, offering a perfect sacrifice, making real atonement for sin (9 : 23ff).

We, too, must go beyond earthly symbols to the heavenly reality which is Christ, but the Old Testament shadows of the reality still have value for us as visual aids. Calvin made frequent use of an illustration to show the significance of the Old Testament types for the people of God. He said they were given for 'the childhood of the church', for those who could not yet appreciate the fulfilment that was to come. For example, 'the land of Canaan as an inheritance was not to be the final goal of their hopes, but was to exercise and confirm them, as they contemplated it, in hope of their true inheritance, an inheritance not yet manifested to them'.[1] Heavenly realities have been manifested to us in Christ, but the picture given for 'children' can still help us to understand. The picture of a man, laying his hand upon the head of a sacrificial lamb, claiming it as his substitute, and seeing it as bearing his sin, can make real and vivid the faith that trusts Christ's atoning sacrifice. The shadow has its use as a visual aid. The earthly tabernacle enshrined certain basic principles which are at the heart of our relationship with God. The first is the truth that God dwells among and with his people. God himself gave that reason for the earthly tabernacle:

> There will I meet with the children of Israel and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory...I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God (Exodus 29 : 43 - 46).

The New Testament reality corresponding to the shadow is given in I Corinthians 3 : 16.

> Do you not know that you are the temple of God; and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

A second basic principle taught by the tabernacle is that God is to be worshipped exactly as he has laid down, not according to our whims and inclinations. The tabernacle was built exactly as the Lord commanded Moses. That principle still stands. Paul wrote to Christians in Colosse who were being led into worship that was according to their own wishes (A.V., 'will worship'), derived from Judaistic and Gnostic practices, and told them that that was substituting the shadow for the reality which is Christ (Col. 2 : 16, 17, 23).

A third basic principle taught by the worship of the tabernacle is that it is only through the blood of sacrifice - 'not without blood' (9 : 7) - that there could be access into God's holy presence. The shadow was the 'blood of goats and calves'; the reality is the blood of Christ, with which 'He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption' (9 : 12). We can come in no other way (10 : 19). The shadow has value to teach the principle of cleansing by the blood: the reality is the sacrifice on Calvary.

### *Mount Zion superior to Mount Sinai*

Moses was especially remembered as the one, who, as mediator of the old covenant, brought God's law to Israel, giving to his redeemed people specific instructions for living. The setting was Mount Sinai, and the contrasts between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, graphically set out in Hebrews 12 : 18 - 24, illustrate the contrast between the old covenant and the new covenant most vividly:

> For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched, and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words...But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...

The contrasts are clearly marked. There is the contrast between something tangible and something spiritual. 'You have not come to the mountain that may be touched...But you have come to...the heavenly Jerusalem'. That is the contrast that is stressed continually in Hebrews, between what is outward and the spiritual reality that lies behind it. There is the contrast between what is inaccessible and what can be reached. Mount Sinai was tangible, but the truth was that access to it was forbidden. 'If as much as an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or thrust through with an arrow' (12 : 20). 'You have not come

to the mountain that may be touched', for coming was prohibited, the way was barred. 'But you have come to Mount Zion'. Now there is an access that is not barred. There is the contrast between dread and joy. Coming to Mount Sinai was an experience of dread. Fire, and blackness and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, meant that those who heard 'begged that the word should not be spoken to them any more'. The sight was so terrifying that even Moses said, 'I am exceedingly afraid and trembling' (12 : 21). But coming to Mount Zion was coming 'to a festal gathering' (12 : 23, NKJV, margin), 'to the church of the first-born who are registered in heaven', 'to God the Judge of all', whose judgment will vindicate his people; 'to the spirits of righteous men made perfect' with the righteousness of Christ. What the sharers in the new covenant have come to is so wonderful that the reaction must be not dread but joy.

Such marked contrasts declare that Mount Zion is immeasurably superior to Mount Sinai. But there are telling comparisons as well. There is the need of a mediator. How aware the people of Israel were of their need of a mediator!

> They said to Moses, 'You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die'.... So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was (Exodus 20 : 19, 21).

There was a mediator at Sinai. And those who come to Mount Zion find that they have come 'to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant' (12 : 24).

There must be awe in our approach. There was awe on Mount Sinai amounting to dread. We come to Mount Zion with joy. Does that mean that there is no more room for awe? Never! The last verse of Hebrews 12 reminds us still that "our God is a consuming fire'. We are still called to worship him and serve him 'acceptably with reverence and godly fear' (12 : 28). And we can do that only in one way. 'Let us have grace', given to us by the God of all grace, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom and through whom we come.

There must be the blood of sprinkling. Access to Mount Sinai was not wholly barred. In Exodus 24 we have God confirming his covenant with his people. Because of sin the people were debarred from coming near to a holy God, whose presence was symbolised by the altar erected at the foot of the mountain. Burnt offerings and peace offerings were sacrificed. Then Moses took half of the blood and sprinkled it on the altar; the other half was sprinkled on the people. The blood of sprinkling at Mount Sinai indicated that there was a way by which sinful men could come into the presence of a holy God and be united with him. They did come through their representatives:

> Then Moses went up, also Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel... and they ate and drank (Exodus 24 : 9 - 11).

Coming to Mount Sinai involved the sprinkling of the blood of sacrifice. Coming to Mount Zion involves coming to Jesus and the sprinkling of his blood, the perfect offering for sin. Mount Sinai gave a divine anticipation of the shed blood of Jesus, pointing to the blood that brings us near to God:

> Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Jesus (Ephesians 2 : 13. Cf. Heb. 10 : 19).

The contrasts between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion show how superior the new covenant is to the old covenant: the comparisons point us to the Mediator; to the requirement of awe as we draw near to a holy God; and to the blood of Christ that brings us near.

## III. God's Rest for God's people

Comparisons and contrasts between Moses and Christ are immediately followed in Hebrews by an urgent application, commencing as so often in this epistle, with the word, 'Therefore'.

> Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts' (3 : 7,8).

The point that is being made is a very straightforward one: If Christ is so supremely and uniquely great - greater than Moses - complete trust and obedience must be given to him.

Tragically there is an instance in history of people who were wonderfully blessed by God, and yet they failed to respond with the faith and obedience that were due - the people of Israel who had been delivered from Egypt. God had done great things for them, and yet at the end of forty years hardly any of them - only Joshua and Caleb - entered into the possession of the Promised Land. There was a rest that they did not enter. Another 'Therefore' in 4 : 1 warns that the same thing might happen again:

> Therefore, since a promise remains of entering his rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it.

What is in view is God's rest, both in the Old Testament and now in the Epistle to the Hebrews. That 'rest' is at the heart of the gospel, the good news

that runs throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews leaves us no doubt of that: 'For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them' (4 : 2).

*Good News of Rest*

We must be grateful to the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews for giving us a special insight into what the gospel, the good news, involves. It is good news of rest. That rest needs to be defined. It is not idleness. To the promise of rest that Christ gave in Matthew 11 : 29, He added, 'Take My yoke upon you'. Rest is not idleness. What then is it? Let this section of Hebrews tell us.

*It is the rest of faith.* 'We who have believed do enter that rest'. (4 : 3). Verse 10 defines what is involved in faith's entering into rest: 'He who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His'. Calvin's commentary on this verse puts it neatly: 'Man should abstain from his own works, so as to give place to God...He cannot work in us until we rest'. The Shorter Catechism definition of faith puts it concisely: 'Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel'. Rest is the rest of faith, the rest of relying utterly on Christ.

*It is the rest of possession.* Rest in the context of the experience of the children of Israel involved possession of the Promised Land. Moses in Deuteronomy 12 : 9 declared, 'As yet you have not come to the rest and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you'. 'Rest' and 'inheritance' are parallel to each other. Rest is the rest of possession of adequate resources for every need.

*It is the rest of security.* Deuteronomy goes on, 'He gives you rest from all your enemies round about, so that you dwell in safety'.

*It is the rest of victory.* In Joshua 11 : 23 we read, 'The land had rest from war'. The victory had been gained. For us the victory is assured, for Christ has conquered sin and death. Hebrews 10 : 12, 13 gives a vivid picture of the victorious Christ:

> 'This Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down' - His work completed - 'at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool'.

God's rest for God's people is *still available.* The people to whom it was first promised did not enter into rest because of unbelief. But it was still available centuries later when David in Psalm 95 urged his people not to harden their hearts but to enter into that rest *today.* And it is still available for the readers of this epistle: 'There remains therefore a rest for the people of God' (4 : 9). And still the way to enter that rest is by faith. 'We who have believed do enter that rest' (4 : 3).

## IV. Great High Priest

The parts of the Old Testament that deal with the details of priesthood and sacrifice may seem far removed from Christian worship. And yet almost half of the Epistle to the Hebrews is taken up with Christ's high priesthood and his sacrifice. Its central chapters speak of Christ and the salvation that is ours in him in terms of priesthood and sacrifice. Thus, for example, chapter 4, verse 14 speaks of our having 'a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.' And chapter 9, verse 26 tells us that 'He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself'. These central chapters of Hebrews make it clear that Old Testament priesthood and sacrifice have much to teach us about Christ's priesthood and sacrifice, both by comparison and contrast.

### *Comparisons between Old Testament priests and Christ our great High Priest*

We can learn from Old Testament priesthood and sacrifice the function of high priest and sacrifice. There is a definition of high priesthood, occurring twice in Hebrews, which underlines the significance of priesthood and sacrifice:

> Every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins (5 : 1).

Already, early on in the epistle, the writer has applied that function of high priesthood to Christ:

> a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the prople (2 : 17).

The parallels stand out clearly: Christ is a high priest 'in things pertaining to God', and his task is 'to make propitiation for the sins of the people', fulfilling the job-description of every high priest, 'appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins'. If high priesthood in general and Christ's high priesthood in particular, are concerned

with 'things pertaining to God' and with the only way in which 'the sins of the people' can be atoned for, we cannot ignore the Old Testament sacrificial system and the chapters in Hebrews that see its fulfilment in Christ. The basic fact in man's relationship with God is that sinners cannot come into the presence of a holy God.

> Your iniquities have separated you from your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, that He will not hear (Isaiah 59 : 2).

That fact was driven home to the people of Israel by the whole system of sacrifice and priesthood. On the Day of Atonement only one man, the high priest, could come into the holy of holies, and he could come only through sacrifice. No Israelite could be left in the slightest doubt that sin was a very serious thing and that, unatoned for, it must keep a man back from God. The first reference in Hebrews to Christ as our high priest, in 2 : 17, sees his redemptive work as 'to make propitiation' - to offer a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God - 'for the sins of the people'. Every time we end our prayers with the words 'for Jesus' sake' we are acknowledging our need of our great high priest's atoning sacrifice.

We can learn from Old Testament priesthood and sacrifice the principle of substitution. The Old Testament ritual of sacrifice makes it clear that the sacrificial animal was put to death in place of the worshipper. He identified himself with it in a very definite way by laying his hands on its head. The Hebrew word used to describe his action means leaning with a very firm and definite pressure. On the great Day of Atonement, when atonement was made for the sins of the whole nation, the high priest, representing all the people, laid both his hands leaning firmly on the head of the scapegoat, putting the iniquities and transgressions of the people on it, so that they might be put away (Lev. 16 : 21). There was a definite act of identification and substitution in all the sacrifices. The sinner deserved death for his sins, but God in his grace permitted the death of an animal to be a substitute for the death of the sinner. The Epistle to the Hebrews, summarising the significance of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament, makes it clear that without a slain sacrifice there could be no forgiveness: 'Without shedding of blood there is no remission' (Hebrews 9 : 22).

Old Testament priesthood and sacrifice showed that there was the possibility of access to God. That access was limited: only the high priest, and he only on one day of the year, could enter the most holy place, and only when sacrifice for sin had been offered. It was limited access, but it was access. There is a

significant detail in the description of the high priest's clothing. There were little golden bells on the hem of his robe. They would sound as he went through his duties in the most holy place; and the people outside, hearing them, would know that his offering on their behalf had been accepted, and that he was still alive. There was safe access into the presence of a holy God. The limited access through the Old Testament high priest and the Old Testament sacrifices gave promise of the access that is ours through Christ our great high priest and his once-for-all perfect sacrifice, so that we can 'come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (4 : 16).

### *Contrasts between Old Testament priests and Christ our great high priest*

The Epistle to the Hebrews emphasises the greatness of Christ by showing his superiority to every one and every thing that had gone before. The word 'better' is used repeatedly to stress that superiority - superiority that is underlined more clearly in the area of priesthood and sacrifice than anywhere else in the epistle. Christ is a better priest, offering a better sacrifice and giving a better access into the presence of a holy God.

### *A better priest*

The priesthood of Christ is seen as a priesthood different from the Levitical priesthood, notwithstanding the significant comparisons that we have noted and lessons that can be learned from the Old Testament priesthood:

> If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood...why was there still need for another priest to come - one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? (7 : 11, NIV).

Christ's priesthood was 'another' (the Greek word for 'another' means 'another of a different kind'); it was of a different order, the order of Melchizedek; and it stemmed not from the tribe of Levi, but from the tribe of Judah:

> It is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood (7 : 14).

The whole purpose is to show how wonderful a priest Christ is, the kind of priest we need - 'such a high priest meets our need' (7 : 16, NIV) - able to meet our need in a way that the priests of the Old Testement never could.

The argument in Hebrews 7 is based largely on the distinction between the Levitical priests and the Priest who would be 'according to the order of Melchizedek'. In what ways, then, is Christ a priest according to the order of Merchizedek?

### *Christ is a Priest-King who saves his people*

Hebrews 7 : 2 gives the meaning of the name 'Melchizedek' - 'king of righteousness' - and puts alongside that the fact that he was 'king of Salem' (Jerusalem), meaning 'king of peace'. Righteousness and peace were the things to be looked for in God's perfect High Priest and King, our Saviour. The same Messianic characteristics are noted in Psalm 72.

### *Christ is a Priest-King who succeeds where the former priesthood had proved 'weak and useless'.*

The distinction is made very clear in 7 : 15 - 19 (NIV):

> What we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life...The former regulation is set aside because it is weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

A ritual which derived its authority from ancestry was weak and useless when what was needed was the power of an endless life, Christ's power which would succeed.

### *Christ is a Priest-King who ever lives to save us completely*

In Psalm 110 : 4 the triumphant king is spoken of as 'a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek'. That is applied to Christ in 5: 6. Melchizedek did not live for ever, but in view of the fact that no reference is made to his genealogy or to his death, the writer to the Hebrews takes him as a type of the Son of God, who 'remains a priest continually'. The Levitical priests because of death could not continue in their priestly work. But Christ 'because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood' (7 : 24). That has one tremendous implication:

> Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need (7 : 25, 26, NIV).

### *A better sacrifice*

The Epistle to the Hebrews leaves no doubt about the inadequacy of animal sacrifices in themselves. 'It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins' (10 : 4). Evidence of that inadequacy is seen in the constant repetition of the sacrifices: 'Every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins' (10 :11). The endless repetition of the sacrifices could only mean that sin was never fully atoned for.

The inadequacy of the animal sacrifices is further seen in the fact that there was no real link between the animal that was sacrificed and the sins which the sinner had committed. All that an animal sacrifice could do was to make a man ceremonially clean and so admissible to worship. That comes out in a detail in Hebrews 9 : 13; 'the ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean'. The reference is to a ritual described in Numbers 19. Under Jewish ceremonial law, if a man touched a dead body or entered the tent of a dead man, he was unclean and barred from the worship of God. But there was a way of cleansing him. The body of a heifer was burnt, and the ashes were kept, ready to be mixed with water when required. Applied to a man who was unclean through contact with a dead body, they made him ceremonially clean and fit to worship. But it was merely a ceremonial requirement; it made no real change in the man. Hebrews 9 : 9 shows the basic deficiency in the sacrifices: 'The sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper' (NIV). Hebrews 9 : 13, 14 states the superiority of Christ's sacrifice very clearly:

> If the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh [that is, externally], how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

His is an infinitely better sacrifice. 'The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin' (I John 1 : 7).

### *Going outside the camp to Christ*

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews comes back in the final chapter to deal again with the inadequacy of the Old Testament system of sacrifice, and with what action is required from those who have come to see the all-sufficiency of Christ's perfect sacrifice. What he has to say in chapter 13 comes in the midst of practical exhortations for everyday living, thereby giving added weight

to this exhortation to take decisive stand with Christ:

> Therefore let us go forth to Him outside the camp (13 : 13).

Once again we are reminded that this epistle was first written to people who wanted to go back to the ritual of the Old Testament church. These Hebrew Christians missed the outward symbols that were so much a part of Old Testament worship. There is no altar, they said; there is no sacrificial meal in which we can share. But the writer answers that categorically. We do have an altar; we do have a share in worship that was impossible for those who worshipped in the tabernacle:

> We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat (13 : 10).

We have an altar; that means that we have real forgiveness. The blood of bulls and of goats shed on Jewish altars could not take away sins. But Jesus suffered outside the gate, 'that he might sanctify the people with his own blood'. The bodies of the animals sacrificed for the sin-offering were burned outside the camp, so they provided no nourishment for the priests who offered them. But we are nourished, 'by grace, not with goods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them'.

We have an altar; we have the nourishment of grace. What then must we do? 'Let us go forth to Him outside the camp'. Christ went out of Jerusalem to die on the Cross. Jerusalem with its Temple stood for what was merely external in religion. Christ turned his back on that, and we are called to do the same, whatever the cost. Leave behind the shadow and go forth to a personal relationship with him. Then we will have a sacrifice to bring, the sacrifice of praise, giving thanks to his name. And we will have a fellowship to share, the fellowship of service to one another (13 : 16).

### *A better access*

The veil between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle and in the Temple was a constant reminder to the Old Testament worshipper that access to God was limited. But in the moment of Christ's death the veil of the Temple was torn in two, vividly portraying the truth that now there was an access incomparably better than the Old Testament ceremonial could offer. Let Hebrews 10 : 19 - 22 proclaim what that means for the people of God:

> Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, his flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

Nowhere are the contrasts between Old Testament ceremonial and New Testament experience of Christ's salvation more clearly set out than in these chapters in Hebrews which deal with Christ's priesthood and sacrifice. So much so that we are led to ask, 'Were the old Testament sacrifices ineffective in making forgiveness possible and in giving access to God?' Such a question demands a brief look at forgiveness in the Old Testament.

### *Forgiveness in the Old Testament*

Hebrews 9 : 9, 10 underlines the inadequacy of the Old Testament sacrifices:

> the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings - external regulations applying until the time of the new order (NIV).

Does that mean that there was no assurance of forgiveness for the offerer of the Old Testament sacrifices, since they were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper? Does it mean that only external and ceremonial matters were dealt with? Does it mean that there was no real forgiveness for sin? The many promises of forgiveness and the many experiences of forgiven sinners in the Old Testament make that unthinkable.

The verse immediately following the verses (9 : 9, 10) proclaiming the inadequacy of the Old Testament sacrifices in themselves declares how the Old Testament sacrifices became adequate and how forgiveness was made possible:

> But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come.[2]

I take that to mean that for the worshippers of the Old Testament as well as for us Christ was the High Priest of the coming good things. He came as the fulfilment of what had been only in shadow and type in the Old Testament. The truth is that Old Testament believers were saved not by faith in the sacrifices; they were saved by faith in Christ who was to come, and who was symbolised in the sacrifices. Calvin puts it like this: Old Testament believers were 'led, as it were, by the hand to Christ, that they might obtain from Him what was lacking in the symbols' (Institutes, 4.14.20). The sacrifices, by God's appointment, foreshadowed Christ, and served the same purpose as Christ, having come, now serves for us, enabling us to believe in and to receive the forgiveness of sins.

The trouble was that the Hebrews to whom the epistle was first written were wanting to return to the symbols apart from Christ. The sacrifices, divorced

from Christ, could never take away sins, but, typical by God's appointment, and offered in faith in the Christ who was to come, they were the medium through which forgiveness was made real to Old Testament believers. They were saved by faith in Christ, just as we are. We are forgiven, as they were forgiven, because God in his mercy has accepted - and given - a sacrifice for sin. Let us never forget the greatness of that sacrifice when at the end of our prayers we say, 'Forgive us our sins, for Christ's sake'. And let the 'Amen' that we add express our thanksgiving, for it means not only 'Let it be so' but in Christ 'It is so'.

## V. Mediator of a New and Better Covenant

The writer to the Hebrews has shown that Christ is both the perfect high priest and the perfect sacrifice, giving perfect access to God. He comes to sum up his argument in 8 : 1:

> This is the main point of the things we are saying: we have such a High Priest who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.

What is he doing there? He is fulfilling a ministry, a special service (Greek, *leitourgia*). What is it?

> He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as he is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises (8 : 6).

A mediator is a go-between. When God gave the law on Mount Sinai, the people were terrified. They said to Moses, 'You speak with us and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die' (Exodus 20: 19). Moses acted as a go-between, receiving the message from God and conveying it to the people. So he was the mediator of the old covenant, when God entered into covenant with his people on Mount Sinai, confirming a saving relationship with them. Christ has perfected that saving relationship between God and man. He is the perfect priest, the perfect sacrifice, and therefore the mediator of a better covenant, the new covenant foretold by Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31 : 31 - 33:

> Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah - not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke...

The whole discussion in Hebrews 8 : 6 - Hebrews 10 :18 is bracketed between two quotations of this prophecy (8 : 8 - 12 and 10 : 16, 17). We are specifically directed to that passage to enable us to understand the nature and significance of the new and better covenant.

### *The promise of the covenant in its historical setting*

The emphasis in Hebrews of the passage in Jeremiah suggests that the circumstances when the promise of the new covenant was first given are important for our understanding of that new covenant, seen in Hebrews to have been fulfilled in Christ.[3] The historical context can be briefly summarised. King Josiah had initiated a reformation which was designed to deal with the evils which were destroying Judah. It dealt with many of those evils, but not permanently, for after Josiah's tragic death the old evils came flooding back again. In many ways Josiah's reformation had been superficial, dealing largely with externals. Jeremiah saw that something more than superficial reform was needed. He writes, 'Break up your unploughed ground and do not sow among thorns' (Jer. 4 : 3, NIV). Anything less than a radical reformation will amount to the futility of sowing on ground that has not been cleared of weeds and thorns. Something more basic was needed, and God's word to Jeremiah made very clear what that was - a new covenant.

### *The need for a new covenant*

Was there a need for a new covenant because the old covenant had been faulty? Hebrews 8 : 7 seems to suggest that that was the case: 'If that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second' (NKJV). But verse 8 goes on to put the blame squarely where it belonged: 'But God found fault with the people...' (NIV). What was their fault? It was God himself who described the old covenant to Jeremiah as 'my covenant which they broke'. A new covenant was necessary not because the old covenant was faulty or inadequate, but because the people had broken it. Many chapters in Jeremiah give the details of their breach of covenant, but their basic faults were that they had turned away from the Lord; they had disobeyed his commands; and they had put their trust in outward ritual rather than in spiritual reality. For example, Jeremiah chapter 11 identifies the people's turning away to other gods as being a breach of covenant:

> They have gone after other gods to serve them; the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken My covenant which I made with their fathers (11 : 10b).

Earlier verses in the same chapter had recognised that disobedience to God's law was the outward evidence of the people's turning away from God:

> Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Cursed is the man who does not obey the words of this covenant which I commanded your fathers in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, "Obey My voice, and do according to all that I command you; so shall you be My people, and I will be your God"... Yet they did not obey'. (11 : 3, 4, 8)

But the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews chooses to underline the substitution of outward ritual for spiritual reality as what was for him the most relevant evidence of the need for the new covenant. It is quite clear that in speaking of the old covenant he is concerned simply with its ritual and is dealing with the ceremonial law. That is why he can maintain so strongly that the old covenant would inevitably pass away, introducing his discussion of the ceremonial law in chapters 9, 10 with the words,

> In that he says 'a new covenant', he has made the first obsolete. Now that which is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (8 : 13).

Calvin thinks it was this concern with the ceremonial law which made the writer of Hebrews speak 'more opprobriously of the law' (meaning the old covenant) than Jeremiah did. He says it was 'because there were some mischiefmakers wrongly jealous for the law who obscured the clarity of the gospel by a perverse zeal for ceremonies'. But there were the same kind of 'mischiefmakers' in Jeremiah's time as well. Jeremiah 7 is an indictment of those who put such trust in the Temple building that they were convinced that their survival was guaranteed. God had to remind them of what had been done to an earlier building - Shiloh - because of the sins of a covenant-breaking people (Jer. 7 : 12, 14, 15). Trust in externals was futile and would be judged. In the new covenant the perfect sacrifice of Christ has replaced and fulfilled the sacrifices of the old covenant. That is why the argument in Hebrews about the superiority of the new covenant ends with a repetition of Jeremiah's prophecy, and the declaration that its promise of forgiveness is now assured:

> Now where there is remission of these (sins and lawless deeds) there is no longer an offering for sin.

The ceremonial offerings of the old covenant are gone: the new covenant means 'a new and living way to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus', the 'blood of the new covenant, shed for many for the remission of sins' - Christ's words in Matthew 26 : 28, underlining, as the writer to the Hebrews does in 10 : 18, that the new covenant above all means forgiveness of sins: 'There is therefore then no longer an offering for sin'. The ceremonial of the old covenant is gone for ever.

The steps in the movement from the old broken covenant to the new and better covenant are clearly marked in the words of Hebrews:

> There is no longer an offering for sin (10 : 8).
> This man offered a sacrifice for sins for ever (10 : 2).
> There is remission of these (10 : 18)
> By the blood of Jesus there is a new and living way which he consecrated for us (10 : 19, 20).
> Therefore let us draw near in full assurance of faith (10 : 22).

## VI. Old Testament Heroes of Faith and their link with us

The best-known chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews is chapter 11, which gives examples of those who by faith accomplished outstanding things. Its portrait gallery of heroes of faith makes inspiring reading. But there is a danger of thinking of this chapter in isolation from the rest of the epistle, and thereby missing much of what it has to teach us. The truth is that this wonderful chapter is closely linked with the epistle as a whole.

### *The fellowship of believers*

An immediate link between Hebrews 11 and what goes before is the exhortation in Hebrews 10: 24, 25:

> Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting (encouraging) one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

'Let us consider one another' is the link with Hebrews 11, which, as Hebrews 12 : 1 summarises it, joins us with a great company of believers to whose faith witness has been borne:

> Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...

A sign of our willingness to consider one another is 'not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together'. The customary interpretation of that is to be seen in a local coming together of Christians in the fellowship of worship, the outward evidence that they do consider one another. Such local fellowship gives compelling proof that believers do have a concern for one another. But it may be that a much wider fellowship is in view. The only other place where the noun *episunagoge* is found in the New Testament is in II Thessalonians 2 : 1: 'concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our *gathering together* to Him'. And the cognate verb *episunago,* while used of the crowds who gathered around Jesus, and of his desire to gather the people of Jerusalem together as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, is used in Matthew 24 : 31 and the parallel in Mark 13 : 27 of the gathering of the elect when the Son of Man comes 'on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory'. It seems that we must take *episunagoge* in an eschatological sense as well as in a local sense. To do so enriches the whole idea of what is happening when we are meeting together; the fellowship of a local congregation can be a microcosm of the final gathering of the Lord's people. The exhortation to 'consider one another',

coming as it does just before Hebrews 11, calls us to consider the heroes of faith who have gone before us. But, more than that, it calls us to consider the whole household of faith. To adopt this wider sense of *episunagoge* would involve taking *egkataleipontes* in its more literal sense, 'not omitting the gathering of ourselves together' - in its setting in a local congregation; and, as well, 'not omitting' in our thinking the final gathering together of Christ's people.

The exhortation not to omit the assembling of believers is reinforced by a reminder that the Day of the Lord is drawing near (10 : 25). A quotation from Habakkuk in verse 37, set in a most significant context of a promise that is still to be received (verses 34 - 36), makes the same point:

> You have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.

The promise, from the Septuagint translation of Habakkuk 2 : 3, is this:

> For yet a little while, and He Who is coming will come and will not delay.

The eschatological reference is inescapable.

The continuation of the quotation from Habakkuk makes faith the condition of receiving the promise:

*Now the just shall live by faith.*

Hebrews 11 then goes on to give Old Testament examples of that saving faith, thereby inviting us to consider our fellow-believers.

### *Postponement of the promise*

Hebrews 11 : 39 repeats the statement of Hebrews 11 : 13 that Old Testament believers did not receive the promise, and then goes on to give the reason for the postponement of the receiving of the promise:

> God having provided some better thing for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

That looks forward to the climax of the Day of the Lord. It will be a day of fulfilment which the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 and all believers will share. The coming of the Day of the Lord will mean the ultimate gathering together of all his people around his feet.

Right through Hebrews 11 faith is faith in a promise still to be received. That explains the definition of faith that is given in verse 1. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see - a limited definition, for faith in Hebrews has other aspects: faith in the promise; faith in the word preached; faith that receives righteousness; faith that produces assurance. But the definition of faith here is adequate for the Old Testament examples of faith that Hebrews 11 gives. Faith in this context is the faculty which perceives the reality of the unseen and claims a promise that is still to be received.

### *Abraham's faith in Christ*

I want to take only one example from this chapter, the faith of Abraham, for he gives a telling illustration of the link between the faith of Old Testament believers and the faith of New Testament believers, and of a faith that is finally perfected in Christ.

Abraham gives an outstanding example of faith which looks beyond what is seen and transitory to what is unseen and eternal. By faith 'he went out, not knowing where he was going' (v. 8). Faith believed God's promise of 'a land that I will cause you to see' (literal translation of Genesis 12 : 1). Even when he knew that his destination was the land of Canaan he looked beyond that to a spiritual fulfilment. Canaan was still a foreign country in which he and his descendants merely sojourned as those who were moving on. That Canaan was not their final destination was shown by the fact that they lived in tents, still nomads, for they looked forward to a 'city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God' (vv. 9, 10). If what they could see would have satisfied them, they could have returned to the land from which they had come out. 'But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country' (vv. 15, 16). Faith in the unseen looked for something better than what could be seen. Abraham and Sarah if they had looked only at what could be seen could see only the impossibility of their having a child. Faith trusted the faithfulness of God, and saw descendants, 'as many as the stars of the sky in multitude - innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore' (v. 12).

Abraham was commanded to offer up Isaac. If he had looked only at what could be seen there was nothing but the impossibility of the promise being fulfilled if Isaac was dead. Faith reckoned on the unseen power of God to raise the dead (v. 19). Sight could look only to a lonely journey back from Mount Moriah. Faith in God's resurrection power could say, 'We will come again to you' (Gen 22 : 5).

Abraham's faith was not only faith in the unseen and faith in something better still to be received. It was faith in Christ who was to come. Our Lord Jesus Christ said of him, 'Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad' (John 8 : 56). In Hebrews 1 : 13 Abraham, along with Isaac and Jacob, 'the heirs with him of the same promise', is listed among all those who 'died in faith, not having received the promises'. That is echoed in v. 39: 'All these....did not receive the promise', with this significant addition: 'God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us'. There was to be a future fulfilment that would perfect the faith of Old Testament believers, a fulfilment in Christ which Old Testament and New Testament believers will share. That was the day which Abraham rejoiced to see, the Day of the Lord.

The question must be asked, When did Abraham see Christ's day and rejoice in it? It can be argued that Abraham saw Christ's day when he was told in Genesis 17 that God would give him a son, Isaac, and establish an everlasting covenant with him and with his descendants after him (Gen. 17 : 19). Through Abraham's seed blessing would come to the nations. The Aramaic of the Talmud has 'rejoiced' for 'laughed' in Genesis 17 : 17: 'Abraham fell on his face and rejoiced'. Certainly Paul in Galations 3 : 16 has no doubt that the promise to Abraham was the promise of Christ:

> Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say 'And to seeds', as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed', who is Christ.

Two verses earlier he sees in Christ's redemptive work the means by which 'the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith'. Abraham rejoiced to see Christ's day in Isaac; and we share his joy in the redemption that is his and ours in Christ Jesus.

The Greek text of Hebrews 11 : 40 may suggest another occasion when Abraham saw Christ's day. The Greek verb *(problepomai)* in the phrase 'God having provided' is found only here in the New Testament, but it is used in Greek literature applying to a group of soldiers going ahead as an advance party to see that provision is made for those who are coming after. The basic part of the verb - *blepo* - means 'to see', which means that there is the same ambiguity here 'to see to beforehand' or 'to provide beforehand' - as in the Hebrew verb *ra'ah* in Genesis 22 : 8, 14:

> God will provide (see) for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering. And Abraham called the name of the place, The-Lord-Will-Provide (The Lord will see); as it is said to this day, 'In the Mount of the Lord it shall be provided' (seen).

It is even possible to translate the last sentence of Genesis 22 : 14; 'in the mount of the Lord he will be seen'. Abraham saw Christ's day in the provision that was made for him, and in the Lord who showed himself to him.

The name of the place - 'in the land of Moriah' - where Abraham was commanded to offer up Isaac provides additional support for the view that Abraham saw the day of Christ in that incident. S. Davidson in his Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon derives the name Moriah from the Hebrew verb, *ra'ah,* to see, linked with the name Yah, short for Yahweh - the place of 'the Lord's causing himself to be seen'. The only other place where the name occurs in the Old Testament is II Chronicles 3 : 1, identifying the place where Solomon began to build the Temple, 'where the Lord appeared (was seen) to his father David' - the incident recorded in I Chronicles 21 : 15, 16. It was the place where the Angel of the Lord was seen by David and where he was commanded to erect an altar to the Lord. Ultimately it was in the Temple built on the same sacred site that Christ declared, 'Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad'. It is not necessary to choose between the two scenes suggested for the time when Abraham saw Christ's day. There could have been two - or more - occasions when Abraham saw a vision of the One who would come to fulfil the promise and so make Abraham's faith, and the faith of all Old Testament believers, perfect.

## VII. Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith

It would be regrettable if division into chapters would hide the fact that the opening verses of Hebrews 12 point us to the supreme example of faith in the unseen, Jesus, 'who for the joy that was set before him, endured the Cross, despising the shame'. He is described as the Author, or, better, the Pioneer of Faith; and the finisher, or, better, the Perfecter of faith. By faith he, too, looked beyond what was present and visible to what was future and unseen. What he could see was the Cross with its suffering and shame. What by faith he looked on to was the joy that was set before him, the joy, as described in Hebrews 2 : 9, 10, of 'bringing many sons to glory'. That passage, strikingly parallel to Hebrews 12 : 2, also refers to him as the pioneer of salvation, perfecting it through sufferings.

The title, Perfecter of faith, takes up the situation described in Hebrews 11 : 4, where Old Testament believers had not received the promise: 'God having provided some better thing for us, that they should not be perfected apart from us'. The experience of Old Testament believers had not yet been made

perfect, but the Perfecter of faith will make their faith and their experience perfect, as happened to Abraham, described by Christ in Matthew 8 : 11 as sitting down in the kingdom of heaven. Our faith is not perfected either, but it will be made perfect for us, too, in heaven. What we must do in the meantime is to keep doing what Old Testament believers were doing before Christ came 'looking away' - like Moses in 11 : 26, 'looking away to the reward' - 'to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith'.

The link, then, which united Old Testament believers and New Testament believers is basically a faith that is 'looking away to Jesus'. They were looking from a greater distance, for Christ had not yet come, and their faith had to look forward to the Incarnation, waiting, as Simeon was still waiting just before the dawn, 'for the Consolation of Israel'. Our faith, too, is still looking forward, to his final coronation. We do not yet see all things put under him, but faith sees 'Jesus, crowned with glory and honour' (Hebrews 2 : 9). We still await the perfecting of faith by sight. That longed-for consummation, too, is foreseen in Hebrews, in a tremendous picture of the final gathering together of the Lord's people, in Hebrews 12 : 22 - 24:

> You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant.

That is the ultimate perfecting, accomplished only by Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant. To all eternity all believers will be looking to him still, in endless gratitude.

## References

1. *Institutes,* 2.11.2.
2. Reading Greek *mellonton.* A variant reading is *genomenon,* meaning 'good things that have come'. The former is better attested, and there is a parallel use in 13 : 14 - 'We seek one to come'.
3. For a fuller treatment see Hugh J. Blair, 'Jeremiah's Prophecy of the New Covenant in its Historical Context', *Reformed Theological Journal,* vol. 2, p. 38,, November, 1986.
4. *Institutes,* 2.11.7. Cf. 2.11.4: 'the Old Testament of the Lord was that covenant wrapped up in the shadowy and ineffectual observances of ceremonies...'.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

# LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE: A PROBLEM FOR THEONOMY


## by Harold G. Cunningham

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Theonomy (the view that the Mosaic law is still binding) claims to be based upon, and agreeable to the Westminster Confession of Faith. But when it comes to a study of Christian liberty and liberty of conscience, it can be shown that theonomy is at variance with what the Divines both thought and wrote on the topic. In fact, theonomy tends to ignore any positive treatment of the subject and concentrates on some of the more austere writings of the period in an effort to bolster its case regarding the application of the law. As Scottish commissioners to the Assembly, the works of Rutherford and Gillespie are an important asset to this discussion. However, after a careful reading, it is often doubtful if theonomy is interpreting them in the proper context of the whole. In what follows an attempt will be made to correct this perceived imbalance.

### The Confession of Faith

The Confession of Faith is concerned that the moral law of God should be obeyed. It is equally concerned, and this must be stressed, that the conscience of the individual should be free. In the course of a chapter on liberty of conscience it expressly states,

> God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing contrary to His Word; or beside it, in matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.[1]

These words undeniably exclude any pressure (or Old Testament penal sanctions) being brought upon an individual to conform to the Christian religion or its moral standards. Rather there is all the air of toleration. Unless one thinks that the Confession contradicts itself in other places then it is self evident that as much as the Covenanters wished for a purity of doctrine and worship, they

did not envisage embarking upon a process of persecution similar to that which they themselves had to endure. Scottish Presbyterianism combined with the struggles of so called Protestantism was to secure civil and religious liberty for all, and not to bind any to a particular persuasion either politically or ecclesiastically. Writing on this aspect of the Confession, a commentator from the last century says 'The fondest devotee and most eloquent advocate of toleration never laid down a nobler or a surer foundation on which to rear the apology for universal liberty ofconscience.'[2]

Secondly, it is against this background of the primary principle of tolerance, that the remainder of this article is to be read and understood. Some are quick to draw attention to certain passages which appear to suggest that when someone steps out of line judicial proceedings should be taken, e.g. after discussing those who maintain practices contrary to the light of nature or to the known principles of Christianity or to the power of godliness it says, 'they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against by the censures of the church, and by the power of the civil magistrate.'[3] But to what precisely does this refer? To those engaged in the 'pretence of Christian liberty', where the important word is 'pretence'. As the history of the period clearly shows there were those who sought to exploit their liberty of conscience as an excuse for lawlessness. So the Divines were aware of the necessity to guard against antinomianism. And in this respect two important points ought to be noted - (a) no attempt is made to define the actual parameters governing liberty of conscience. It is stated that there are limits beyond which the authority of God and the welfare of the community come in to restrict the right of the individual; and (b) the point is well made that the authorities 'may' intervene, not that they 'must'.

Although not written into the Confession as part of the chapter on liberty of conscience, the proceedings of the Assembly at this point reveal the tolerant spirit adopted by the Westminster Divines, and establish beyond all reasonable doubt their views on the matter, and their position regarding the ceremonial and judicial laws in particular. The minutes for Thursday morning March 26, 1646 read as follows:-

> ...the Assembly entered upon the Report of Christian Liberty, etc; and upon debate it was Resolved upon the Q., This shall be the title, 'Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience.' ... Resolved upon the Q., 'under the gospel consists, especially in freedom from the guilt and power of sin, from bondage to Satan, from the condemnating wrath of God, from the ceremonial and judicial law, and from the curse of the moral.'[4]

The major assertion they were obviously wanting to make at this stage was that there is respect for the individual conscience on the one hand and on the other there is a place for lawful authority. This is not being inconsistent but an acknowledgement that authority, whether civil or ecclesiastical, is not absolute and unrestricted, but is curtailed by the right of conscience of the individual in respect to both church and state. Similarly, the right of conscience is not absolute and unrestricted; but is subject to the authority of both church and state. In describing the civil, moral, and religious anarchy which prevailed and against which the Westminster Divines wrestled, Hetherington in his history explains their true spirit and intentions as follows,

> It is, however, true, that out of the discussions which this claim of unbounded and licentious toleration raised, there was at length evolved the idea of religious toleration, such as is demanded by man's solemn and dread characteristic of personal responsibility, and consequent inalienable right to liberty of conscience. And let it be noted, that this great idea was fully admitted by those who reasoned and wrote most strongly against the 'unbounded toleration' claimed by the Sectarians; although in their opposition to that claim, they occasionally used language which might seem to condemn what in reality they both demanded for themselves and readily allowed to others... this may be safely affirmed, that both the principles and the constitution of a rightly formed Presbyterian Church render the usurpation of power and the exercise of tyranny on its part wholly impossible.[5]

In the third place, by noting those areas of behaviour which caused concern to the authors of the Confession it is immediately apparent why they thought some means of discipline was necessary. They were concerned about crimes 'against the light of nature, against the principles of Christianity, and against the peace and order of the church'. Even the most liberally minded can instantly think of situations in society today, when it is necessary to take some form of action, e.g. against the evils of incest or child abuse; the irresponsible practice of abortion or deliberate riotous behaviour thus making freedom of worship impossible. To discipline the offender in such circumstances would be quite in keeping with the tenets of the Confession, but this is totally different from insisting that the full rigour of the Old Testament judicial law be implemented on all occasions. No right thinking person would wish to convert liberty into lawlessness, or to make conscience of licentiousness. In defending such a view, Hetherington writes,

> The Confession proceeds upon the principle that truth can be distinguished from error, right from wrong; that though conscience cannot be compelled, it may be enlightened; and that when sinful, corrupt, and prone to licentiousness, men may be lawfully restrained from the commission of such excesses as are offensive to public feeling, and injurious to the moral welfare of the community... Nothing, in our opinion, but a wilful determination to misrepresent the sentiments expressed

> in the Confession of Faith, or a culpable degree of wilful ignorance respecting the true meaning of these sentiments, could induce any man to accuse it of favouring intolerant and persecuting principles.[6]

If the world were to be ruled by theonomists, millions would be denied liberty of conscience. What has just been demonstrated is that the Westminster Confession of Faith could not be used to support or justify their actions. As clearly the Confession does not contradict itself, therefore the chapter on the Law must be taken in conjunction with the chapter on Liberty of Conscience. A basic hermeneutical principle is to understand the particular in the light of the general. Therefore no single statement can be insulated from the others, but viewed in connection with the whole doctrine in question.

## Rutherford & Gillespie

It is enlightening in this area of discussion to comment on some of the alleged views of Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie. It must only be a comment, as a detailed examination of the works of either man would be a study in itself. But as theonomy leans heavily on their writings to support its cause, they are considered of major importance.

RUTHERFORD (1600-1661) was one of the four (Baillie, Gillespie, Henderson) Scottish commissioners invited to attend the Westminster Assembly. He is famous for his letters and his classic book *Lex Rex,* in which he contends that the king is not above the law, either divine or human, and in matters unlawful, his subjects must refuse to give either passive or active obedience to the commands of the ruling power. It was a necessary work for the time, in order that the attitude assumed by the Covenanters in opposition to the civil government might be vindicated. But more specifically to the immediate matter, he wrote *A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience,* in which he is accused by some of over-reacting to the situation, while in the eyes of the theonomist he is merely calling for the due process of law in accordance with the total Mosaic legislation.

To begin with, a certain amount of leeway has to be given to the severity of language which was used. It was commonplace in Rutherford's day, and care must be taken not to allow emotive language to excite prejudice, or to cloud the real issues under discussion. He was contending with a form of individualism run mad and only sought to distinguish liberty from license by vindicating the law against the lawlessness of short-sighted enthusiasts. Again there is no evidence of any attempt to inflict the penalties of the Mosaic law, for which

Rutherford is alleged to have called. Therefore if he was serious in calling for punishment his theory was not put into practice. In criticising Goodwin, Taylor and others he maintained that 'errors in non-fundamentals obstinately held are punishable, and that only 'some far-off errors may be tolerated"',[7] but in fact the only atrocities of the time were those inflicted by the Prelatists upon the Covenanters, whose constraint was exceptional. It is difficult to tolerate what will not tolerate you and to endure in 'killing times'. Summing up the period Macpherson says,

> The Covenanters fought the fight and won the victory, and then, and not till then, came the David Humes with their essays on miracles, and the Adam Smiths with their political economies, and steam-engines, and railroads, and philosophical institutions, and all the other blessed or unblessed fruits of liberty.[8]

The writing of Rutherford, it is alleged, is an appeal for the State to adopt both 'tables' of the law and enforce them upon the nation. However, it should be noted that there is no reference as to the specific means for accomplishing this general principle. One can understand how a human government could legislate for certain elements within the law e.g. murder, theft, adultery, even blasphemy, but what of the 10th commandment where the duties required and the sins forbidden are purely spiritual: located within the soul of man, and beyond the knowledge or exercise of state control? Not to mention the spiritual and inward requirements of the first table of the law, which are definitely outside the province of the civil magistrate. This is not to say that governments never exercise authority in religious matters, because as long as they legislate for the population, many of whom have a religious faith, then it is inevitable that in condemning some act e.g. polygamy in the case of Mormons, or prescribing blood transfusions for Jehovah Witnesses, or enforcing Sabbath working upon Christians, they have condemned certain religions.

Could not Rutherford's alleged views be seen in the same light? If so, then the theonomists have greatly exaggerated, if not misrepresented the severity of his position. On the other hand, if it was the case that Rutherford was advocating politico-moral principles similar to theonomy, there is no good reason why the Confession of Faith should be interpreted by an appeal to his writings when it has been shown that there is so much evidence to the contrary. So either way, if Rutherford's actual intentions were not what they appear to be, or if his personal views were not shared by the other participants to the Confession, he has nothing to contribute by way of support to the theonomic debate. As regards the obvious gulf between Rutherford's general principle and the attempt at a theonomic application, either he had not thought himself through, a most

unlikely proposition, or the theonomists have conjectured what the application should be in order to comply with their hypothesis.

I turn now from these general observations to a more particular examination of the actual literature. Is it the case that Rutherford consistently appeals for Mosaic penology to be applied to crimes committed in modern times? It would appear not! Bannerman concedes that on occasions he went too far in suppressing the dangerous and often blasphemous evils of his time. He 'laid down positions which were indefensible', often arguing that the rules laid down for Old Testament kings are of permanent obligation for all rulers, and 'consequently that capital punishment might still be lawfully inflicted for such offences as idolatry.'[9] But is this necessarily so? In Rutherford's own words although 'some moral transgressions Moses punished with death, as Sabbath breaking, it followeth not therefore the godly Prince may now punish it with death.'[10] Far from maintaining the letter of the law, here is an open ended appeal for change in possibly both the manner and severity of the Mosaic prescription for such a transgression. And Rutherford continues

> It follows not therefore, such transgressors are made free, through Christ, of all bodily punishment, as Libertines inferre, for though the temporarines of the punishment be only in the measure of punishment; yet not in the punishment it self.[11]

Theonomists will be quick to admit that there is division of opinion within their own ranks about Sabbath observance, and the form of punishment to be given to those who breach it. Herein lies one of their major weaknesses. The failure to realize that if the full Mosaic law is still binding, then no mortal being has the prerogative to pick and choose which parts may be modified, and which must retain their original application. That Rutherford was grappling with this very problem and arriving at a non-theonomic solution is very clear from another quote of his. 'Judiciall Lawes may be judiciall and Mosaicall, and so not obligatory to us, according to the degree and quality of punishment.'[12] Put quite simply, this means :

(1) Some judicial laws were distinctively Mosaical in form.

(2) The Mosaic punishment for breachimg such judicial laws is not obligatory now.

(3) Nevertheless, there is a constant principle that breaches of them may properly be punished.[13]

To be sure this is the position the Assembly was aiming at, and in which Rutherford played a major role, when they wrote that certain elements within

the law retain a 'general equity thereof', i.e. equity demands that some element of punishment be retained for certain misdeeds; the Mosaic law prescribed fixed penalties for a fixed period, but these are no longer mandatory. Taken that here is a more balanced reading of Rutherford's thought, and one compatible with the Confession, then theonomy has lost a major prop to its argument.

However, it may still be claimed that not all interpreted Rutherford's writings in this way. That may be so, but in order to favour theonomy, the fact is often overlooked that during the last century concerted efforts were made by distinguished scholars to clarify many ambiguous statements, and in some instances, to set a discreet distance from the excesses of a past generation. For instance in 1846 the Free Church of Scotland passed a Declaratory Act which disclaims :

> intolerant or persecuting principles, and does not regard her Confession of Faith or any portion thereof, when fairly interpreted, as favouring intolerance or persecution, or consider that her office-bearers, by subscribing it, profess any principles inconsistent with liberty of conscience and the right of private judgement.[14]

In a most valuable appendix on Church and State James Bannerman sketches the history surrounding the Act of Toleration (1689), and then proceeds to cite a speech by Lord Mansfield in a famous case in 1767 in which the Act was used to determine the judgment. Bannerman describes this 'as the case which has finally settled the law of toleration for this country, and fixed its limits and application.'[15] This poses the question, how could the Covenanters legitimately deny to others what they rightfully demanded for themselves? In this same article Bannerman puts the issue very succinctly.

> Liberty of conscience is secured to the meanest citizen of the commonwealth, not because it is a civil right due to him as a citizen, but because it is a more sacred right due to him as the moral and accountable creature of God... it is not necessary for us to ask... whether an individual holds scriptural views, before we accord to him the right of private judgement and the advantage of toleration.[16]

Theonomy appears to ignore the fact that history has moved on, and the mission of the Church is not to attempt to turn the clock back; or to refuse the enlightenment which God has given through his servants; or to apply the Mosaic law in an effort to strangle the pluralist societies which God, in his providence, has permitted to develop, but rather to take advantage of such situations for presenting the teaching of Christianity. What right thinking Christian would consider it reasonable to pursue Salman Rushdie with the same venom as his co-religionists?

GILLESPIE (1613-1649) was the youngest and one of the most able among the Westminster Divines. He was the apologist for the National Covenant, and a most prolific writer for the Covenanter cause. One of his main works *Aaron's Rod Blossoming (1646),* which he dedicated to the Assembly and personally presented on 30th July,[17] was an examination of Erastianism in the light of Scripture. He also left valuable notes taken during the Assembly's debates and proceedings.

Like Rutherford, there is a severity of approach to things in many of his writings, but it can also be shown that he was not always adamant that the severity and/or form of the penalties in the Mosaic law are all of perpetual application. While presenting his case that a distinction ought to be made between the civil and the church government, similar to the model of the Jewish community in the Old Testament, he comments-

> Must all criminal and capital judgments be according to the judicial law of Moses, and none otherwise?... I know some divines hold that the judicial law of Moses, so far as concerneth the punishments of sins against the moral law, idolatry, blasphemy, Sabbath-breaking, adultery, theft, &c., ought to be a rule to the Christian magistrate; and, for my part, I wish more respect were had to it, and that it were more consulted with.[18]

From this it is surely obvious that he is separating himself in thought from those who held to the punishments for sins as laid down in the judicial law. His feelings about his community are very like many of our own at the present time. We may wish to see heavier penalties inflicted for rape or mugging of old people, but that is quite different from advocating a return to draconian measures. With Gillespie there is the expressed need for firm justice, but at the same time, under the New Covenant, there has to be a place for Christian moderation, or as the Confession of Faith puts it, 'general equity'.

'A tract, at least specific portions of it, widely distributed by theonomists, and alleged to come from the pen of Gillespie is entitled, *Wholesome Severity Reconciled with Christian Liberty.* It was never included in any of Gillespie's works, and is considered by some authorities as being of doubtful origin, nevertheless as so much dependence has been placed upon it recently, in articles such as *Give me that Old Time Theonomy*[19] it merits some investigation. In it Gillespie is examining three views of liberty of conscience. The first is that it is no sin, but good service to God to 'extirpate' all that oppose the Church and the Catholic religion. The second, 'falls short, as far as the former exceeds', in that the magistrate ought not to inflict any punishment, not even coercion, but

grant total liberty and toleration. The third, which Gillespie favours, takes the middle ground, and is stated as follows.

> The Magistrate may and ought to exercise his coercive power, in suppressing and punishing heretics and sectaries, less or more, according as the nature and degree of the error, schism, obstinacy and danger of seducing others, requires.[20]

This position is then developed using both Scripture, and examples drawn from men such as Calvin and Beza, and finally he deals with several objections. There is no doubt that the author of this text wishes the civil Magistrate to take cognizance of both tables of the law when administering justice in society, and this could involve him in punishing heretics and sectaries. His argument is based first upon the law in Deuteronomy. 13:6-9 which refers to the stoning and killing of those who entice others to 'go after other gods'. This fundamental idea is then followed through in seven sub-sections, which on the face of it, is good reason for all theonomists to want to claim Gillespie, as they assume that the punishments for crimes under the Jewish theocracy are still to be maintained by Christian governments. However, what has for some reason been overlooked is that, when Gillespie comes to gather his broad conclusion to this section, he draws a totally different picture. He commends the judicial law 'so far as' it concerns the sins against the moral law, of which heresy and the seducing of souls is a serious offence, but then he says

> yet I fear not to hold with Junias, De Politioe Mosis, that he who was punishable by death under the judicial law, is punishable by death still; and he who was not punished by death then, is not punished by death now.[21]

Here again Gillespie is in doubt about exercising the 'letter of the law' and the continuance of the death penalty in particular for those crimes so specified in the judicial law. This strikes at the heart of theonomy, as Rushdoony[22] and Bahnsen[23] are strong contenders for capital punishment in accordance with the Mosaic legislation. It also means of course, that theonomists have lost their claim on Gillespie as one of their main exponents.

Furthermore, a thorough study of this document shows that the above is not an isolated reference but that there is a gracious mixture of a strong emphasis on the need for justice and stability in the State in which anarchy must never he mistaken for liberty of conscience. At the same time the teaching and practice of Jesus Christ must have a bearing on any action which may be taken. For instance in the second section Gillespie steadily works his way through arguments taken from the Old Testament, Augustine and Paul to show how the toleration of idolatry inevitably can have an adverse effect on the State and

therefore cannot be ignored. The lessons of history ought to teach us that 'heresy and schism tend to the breach of civil peace, and to a rupture in the State.'[24] The characteristic importance of this section is the appeal to moderation, which is very much out of sympathy with theonomy. 'There are degrees of faults, and accordingly degrees of punishments,'[25] writes Gillespie, and then he cites instances of idolatry where 'Josiah did not put them to death, only he caused them to go out of all the cities of Judah, and to cease from the priest's office.'[26] It has to be noted that Gillespie does not specify what form of restraint ought to be exercised, and his guiding principle is taken from Romans 13:1-4, to which he adds -

> Those that are in authority are to take such courses and so to rule, that we may not only lead a quiet and peaceable life, but further that it be in all godliness and honesty (1Tim. 2:2)[27]

There is nothing thus far which is not generally accepted by the majority of the population even today. There were recent cases in Britain in which the authorities took action to restrain the measures used by the 'Moonies' to conscript young people against the wishes of their parents, an action strongly approved of as being in the best interests of all the citizens. Similarly, in America the police stormed the headquarters of the 'Koresh' sect because they posed a hazard to the State, and engaged in lots of questionable activities. It was extremists and excessive fanatics such as these which Gillespie and others feared might get out of control and cause damage not only to the State, but also to the young and tender plant of Presbyterianism which was just beginning to grow within the church. There is neither a sensible parallel between what Gillespie was facing and saying and the conditions which exist in society today, nor in how theonomy would wish to deal with the law breaker.

In the third place Gillespie replies to certain objections, and finally he lays down some positive distinctions. He says,[28] there are five sorts of toleration. 1. Indifference, when the Magistrate is neutral. 2. Policy, when the Magistrate is tolerant in his own interest. 3. Pretended conscience, when the 'Compassionate Samaritan' forbears all use of his power to act against the conscience of another. 4. Necessity, when in the interest of the public good, it is necessary to tolerate a lesser evil in order to avoid a greater one. 5. Charity, when there is a good hope of the people being convinced, 'or of uniting them to the Church by a safe accommodation of differences.'[29] Naturally Gillespie rejects the first three hypotheses; of the others he writes, 'these last two kinds of toleration are allowed.'[30] But his most telling statements have to do with the showing of love even to those where there is no ground of hope concerning them. He refers to

Calvin's appeal for prudence and moderation, and then Gillespie's own words can only be quoted in full!

> in Christian piety and moderation, he (the magistrate) forbears so far as may not be destructive to the peace and right government of the Church, using his coercive power with such a mixture of mercy as creates no mischief to the rest of the Church. I speak not only of bearing with those who are weak in faith(Rom.15:1), but of sparing even those who have perverted the faith, so far as the word of God and rules of Christian moderation would have severity tempered with mercy.[31]

Where is the Mosaic law, it may well be asked? If it is not excluded, it most certainly is suspended. But more likely it is superseded. How could Gillespie be said to support the death penalty for heresy, when he is willing to spare even those who pervert the faith?

Another distinction Gillespie wishes to make, concerns the punishments inflicted by the Magistrate. There can be a working from the smaller to the higher, always seeking to produce in the offender fruits worthy of repentance. He concurs with this view, which is endorsed by the Council of Nicea, and 'which made Constantine punish the heretics of his time not with death, but with banishment.'[32] Such treatment Gillespie favours as a 'wholesome medicine.'[33] However, Gillespie's moderation is evident again in the distinction he makes between a sect which could prove to be dangerous and merely allowing a number of persons to enjoy the liberty of their own consciences and practices. Pointing to the use of such a system in ancient Rome, he allows a place for what he calls, 'a tolerable toleration.'[34]

In the conclusion to this tract there is a most important feature which has been over-looked by all theonomists, i.e. the immediate history and expectation of the period, which gave a particular 'mind set' to all involved in the Solemn League and Covenant. It is without parallel in the world today. They never dreamed of a pluralist society, nor even of two churches in the nation, but were under oath to strive for a uniformity of religion in all three kingdoms. Gillespie here complains of the 'slackness and slothfulness' in working towards that end, 'while every one does what is right in his own eyes.' 'The great scandal', he continues, 'given both to enemies and friends: to enemies, who are made to think worse of our covenant, because we do not perform it.'[35] Six years after the signing of the Covenant, Rutherford expressed disgust at the English for continuing to permit doctrinal division and blames their attitude for the failure of the planned uniformity of religion. He wrote, 'You sware the Covenant in a Jesuitical reserved sense.'[36] The great idealism of a National Church governed

along Presbyterian lines has long since passed into the annals of history, and such hopes can only be kept alive by an acceptance of postmillennialism: a particular theory noted for its own difficulties, but another essential doctrine of theonomy.

An objective appraisal of this alleged document of Gillespie, after taking all the facts into consideration, lends itself to one of four possible conclusions :-

1. Gillespie is not the author. End of debate.

2. It ought to be interpreted as containing all the severity and censure as claimed by theonomy. If so, then Gillespie is contradicting his other writings, as for example in his famous work referred to earlier, *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*. This is most unlikely to be the case.

3. Gillespie has changed his theological position. This would be most strange as there is no indication of similar views in any of his other works. It is this fact that creates doubts about Gillespie being the author.

4. Here are the seeds, if not the fruits of 'general equity', as understood by the Confession of Faith regarding the judicial law. Irrespective of who the author may be, an examination of the contents would appear to make this the most sensible suggestion.

Before leaving this particular document there is corroborative evidence of a different nature. It concerns the debates which led to the formulation of the Confession of Faith, i.e. the diversity of opinions which prevailed among the Assembly Divines. Gillespie refers to this in his introduction. Certain views about the power of the Magistrate were held by the Donatists, Socinians, and Arminians. Gillespie is surprised that 'The very same is maintained in some books printed amongst ourselves in this year of confusion.'[37] Certain titles are then listed and one is of particular interest as it was co-authored by Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Sidrach Simpson, Jeremiah Burroughs, and William Bridge, and submitted to the Honourable Houses of Parliament. These names were all important theologians in the Puritan tradition. Although they reflected a diversity of ideas the Confession of Faith was able to eventually accommodate them all, but it is a false premise that there was unanimity on every issue - least of all on the place to be given to the law of God in society.

In the document presently under discussion Goodwin's views are specifically challenged by Gillespie.[38] Yet determined efforts are made by Gillespie to accommodate other views. This is evident when Rutherford, Dr.Gouge and sev-

eral eminent names were locked in debate about the 'decrees of God' and Gillespie is minuted as interjecting, 'When that word is left out, is it not a truth, and so everyone may enjoy his own sense.[39] As there are matters in which no group can claim to have a monopoly of truth, perhaps it would not be out of place if theonomists were to give a more circumspect consideration to the importance of liberty of conscience.

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# DID BEZA'S SUPRALAPSARIANISM SPOIL CALVIN'S THEOLOGY?


## by Joel R. Beeke

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'Calvin versus the Calvinists' is the battle cry in vogue with much of modern Reformation and post-Reformation scholarship. Since the 1960s many scholars have argued that the supposed Calvin-Calvinist cleavage finds its real culprit in Theodore Beza (1519-1605) - Calvin's hand-picked successor and apparent transformer of his theology. From Ernst Bizer through Johannes Dantine and Walter Kickel to Basil Hall, Brian Armstrong, Robert Kendall, and Philip Holtrop, the thesis is championed that Beza, as the father of Reformed scholasticism, spoiled Calvin's theology[1] by reading him through Aristotelian spectacles.[2] Beza's departure from Calvin has been described repeatedly as scholastic, non-Christological rigidity - not only in ecclesiastical discipline and doctrinal loci in general, but, more specifically, in the Bezan innovation of supralapsarian predestinarianism.[3]

In this article I aim to show that Beza's supralapsarian tendencies did not cause him to abandon Christ-centeredness in his theology. To reach this goal, I will first describe the most common Reformed views on the order of God's decrees in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Protestantism, after which I will focus on Beza's major treatises on predestination.

### Lapsarian Options

Though the 'lapsarian question' (lapsus=the fall) has roots prior to the Reformation,[4] it first came into focus during the Reformation. Concerned with the question of the relationship between divine predestination and the fall, first- and second-generation Reformers asked: Was the fall of man in Paradise actively willed or only passively foreseen by God in his eternal counsel and decree? Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and the majority of the Reformers argued for an active willing of God in the lapsarian question. Heinrich Bullinger and a few minor

Reformers refused to go this far, teaching instead that only God's foreknowledge could be linked with the fall. Subsequent Reformers and Puritans realized that Bullinger's reasoning could not offer a solution for the relationship between the counsel of God and sin. Eventually a Reformed consensus developed that the fall must not be divorced from the divine decree.[5]

This consensus generated additional questions: Was divine reprobation ultimately based on the mere good pleasure of God or was it an act of divine justice exclusively connected with sin? Were both election and reprobation to be considered equally ultimate as acts of pure sovereignty, or was election to be viewed as an act of divine grace and reprobation as an act of divine justice? In connection with questions such as these (i.e., questions which concerned the moral order of God's decree related to man's eternal state), the main difference between what came to be called *infralapsarianism* and *supralapsarianism* (often abbreviated as *'infra'* and *'supra'*) came more sharply into focus.

Infralapsarians maintain that the decree of predestination must morally *follow* the decree of creation and the fall, believing it to be inconsistent with the nature of God for him to reprobate any man without first contemplating him as created, fallen, and sinful. The infralapsarian proposes that God's election is in its deepest sense a loving act of grace in which God decreed to save certain individuals whom he already contemplated as created and fallen, while his reprobation is a righteous passing by of others, leaving them to their eternal rejection and condemnation. Thus, the decree of predestination must come after or below the decree of the fall (*infra* = below).

Supralapsarians believe that the decree of divine predestination must morally precede the decree concerning mankind's creation and fall. They teach that God's predestination is in its deepest sense a pure, sovereign act of good pleasure, in which God elected certain individuals and reprobated certain individuals, contemplating them in his decree as 'creatible and fallible,' but not as already created and fallen. Supralapsarians stress that everything, including all decrees, flows out of sovereign good pleasure. Thus the decree of predestination must come before or above the decree of the fall (*supra* = above).

The point at issue in the infra-supra debate is the conceptual and moral order of the decrees of God prior to creation and the fall. Neither infras nor supras support the concept of a *chronological* ordering of God's decrees. All God's decrees are from eternity; thus, it is impossible to posit a *chronologically* first or last decree. Both infras and supras agreed that predestination was 'before the foundation of the world' (Eph. 1:4), notwithstanding their different emphases.[6]

Though both decretal orders stress God's sovereign grace in Christ toward his elect, supralapsarianism places its stress on the sovereignty of God and decretal theology. Infralapsarianism accents the mercy of God and soteriological theology, in conjunction with the responsibility of man.

## Theodore Beza

Calvin's Genevan legatee, Theodore Beza (1519-1605),[7] pursued humanism, classical studies, literature, and law before he converted to Protestantism during 'a crisis of mind, heart and body' in the late-1540s.[8] He then taught Greek at the Lausanne Academy for ten years; all the while he retained close ties with Calvin, seldom, if ever, publishing anything that was not first submitted to Calvin for approval.[9]

Beza accepted a call to the new Genevan Academy to serve as its first rector (1559-63) and as professor of theology (1559-99). He moderated Geneva's venerable Company of Pastors *(Compagnie des Pasteurs)* from Calvin's death until 1580, served as chief counselor to the French Reformed churches, and produced a varied literary corpus. When he died at age eighty-six, he had outlived by decades all the Reformers who had labored to establish Protestantism throughout Europe. His long life, his position in the Geneva academy, his extensive correspondence and activity on behalf of the Reformed cause throughout Europe, his graceful style and prolific writings assured his transitional role between the turbulent era of Calvin and the new age of Protestant orthodoxy, as well as his profound influence on many seventeenth-century theologians and pastors. In this article I will examine Beza's doctrinal treatises which deal most explicitly with predestination: *Tabula praedestinationis, Confessio christianae fidei,* and *De praedestinationis doctrina.*[10]

## Tabula praedestinationis (1555)[11]

The Tabula praedestinationis, which contains Beza's influential diagram of the order of predestination, was probably written as a polemical tract to counter the arguments of Jerome Bolsec (c. 1524-1584), a French physician and opponent of Calvin. In his diagram, Beza divides mankind into elect and reprobate, and posits God's decree as foundational for such cardinal doctrines as divine calling, conversion, grace, faith, justification, sanctification, the glorification of believers and the damnation of sinners, eternal life and eternal death.

From this *Tabula* modern scholarship gathers most of its ammunition against Beza, labeling him as rigidly theocentric, coldly deterministic, and over-

whelmingly scholastic.[12] Beza is judged to be the transformer of Calvinian thought into a Reformed scholasticism that structured all theology under supralapsarian predestination, but most modern scholars have neglected to take into account two important considerations: First, Beza wrote the *Tabula* in response to severe attacks on Calvin's doctrine of predestination; consequently, Beza would naturally focus on predestination more in this work than if he had written a non-polemical work of Christian theology.[13] Second, modern scholars have erred in dwelling more on the diagram than on his exposition. Without warrant, Kickel suggests that Beza's diagram forms the base of a necessitarian system and summarizes his Christian theology.[14]

Beza's appended commentary, however, reveals that the *Tabula praedestinationis* was written with a very different emphasis. In chapter one, Beza explains why predestination must be preached: 'in order that those who have ears may hear and be assured of God's eternal gracious purpose.'[15] From the outset, Beza's concern with predestination is pastoral and consolatory; it centers upon the election of the individual. His stated purpose in preaching the 'double decree' is the elect's assurance.[16]

This strong soteriological note runs throughout the entire work, despite the implicit supralapsarianism that unfolds in chapters two and three. In fairness to Beza, note that he did not intend to set forth an explicit 'ordering of decrees' in these chapters nor anywhere else in the *Tabula.* Full-fledged seventeenth-century supralapsarianism was not yet evident in 1555. Rather, his sense of moral priority in the ordering of the decrees flows out of a recognition of the temporal reality of sin and the fall. He makes no attempt to separate an eternal ordering of God's decree to permit the fall from the actual human event of the fall. His focus is on salvation and damnation as present, temporal, and individual concerns.[17]

Though chapters two and three do not represent full-fledged supralapsarianism, they anticipate the supra position by their systematic balance between election and reprobation as proceeding from God's eternal decree. Thus, on the one hand, Beza argues that the secret 'first cause of [the reprobate's] damnation is God's decree,' while he affirms, on the other hand, that from man's perspective the reprobate are damned for their own sins and stubborn refusal to break with the yoke of unbelief.[18] He distinguishes the public promulgation of the decree of reprobation from reprobation per se,[19] which, in turn, would lead to his parallel distinction between the divine decree from eternity and its execution in time.[20] This distinction sets the stage for Beza's move from eternity to the unfoldings of God's decree in time. Beza reasons that the eternal decree

necessitated the fall of mankind into sin and disobedience. Though the decree of reprobation always leads to *just* condemnation, and the decree of election always leads to *merciful* salvation, both the decree of election and of reprobation flow ultimately out of God's sovereign pleasure.[21]

In chapter four and onward, Beza deals with the *execution* of the decree. Throughout these chapters, he, like Calvin, emphasizes Christ and the believer's apprehension of redemption offered in Christ. When he argues that the distinction between the eternal decree and its execution in time raises the issue of mediation between the holy God and unholy sinners, Beza stresses Christ as foundational in election. In chapter five he states forthrightly, 'Christ is the second heavenly Adam, the foundation and very substance of the elect's salvation.'[22] The Christocentric character of Beza's theology is crystal clear, notwithstanding the refusal of Barthian-inclined scholars to acknowledge it.[23]

Beza also argues for a larger Christological structure, capable of containing the doctrine of predestination. Therefore he denied the charge that his speaking of Christ as election's executor negated the foundational role of Christ in the decree. He resolved this tension by distinguishing Christ as Mediator on the one hand, and as Son of God on the other. Thus, Christ is both the efficient cause of predestination together with the Father and the Spirit and the first effect of predestination itself on account of those who are mercifully elected in him. As Muller points out, this formulation demonstrates Beza's soteriological impulse which offsets deterministic implications of some of his other formulations.[24]

**Confessio christianae fidei (1558)[25]**

Beza wrote his *Confessio* to persuade his father of the reasonableness of his renouncing Romanism and embracing the Reformed faith, as well as a personal statement of faith. *Confessio* represents Beza's most comprehensive and systematic theological work. It reveals the stand he took on the interrelationship of various doctrines shortly after he published his now controversial *Tabula.* In the *Confessio,* Beza arranges doctrinal heads under seven major divisions: (1) the unity and trinity of God, (2) the Father, (3) the Son, (4) the Holy Ghost, (5) the Church, (6) the last judgment, and (7) the contrast between 'the doctrine of the Papists and those of the holy Catholic Church.'

The only reference Beza makes to predestination in his first division of theology in *Confessio* deals with angels as 'messengers for the preservation of the elect.'[26] He places the doctrine of providence in conjunction with that of the Trinity but separate from predestination. He places creation, the fall, and the

decrees of God, including election and reprobation, under the third head of Christology. Though he establishes a relationship between the attributes of God, providence, and predestination under Christology, thereby making his structure somewhat more rationalistic than Calvin's, he does not draw this line out of metaphysical principles. On the contrary, he makes such connections to provide a foundational ground for the mediatorial ordination of Christ rather than to subsume predestination under providence.

Three important observations may be made at this juncture: First, in Beza's most comprehensive doctrinal treatise, predestination serves as one basic concept, not as the overarching principle of all theology. Dantine attempts to sidestep this contradiction of his basic view of Beza by noting that Beza's lack of emphasis upon predestination in *Confessio* may have risen out of fear of offending his Roman Catholic father.[28] But, as Maruyama pointed out, this theory does not explain why the entire *Confessio* is so polemically anti-Catholic nor why its Latin edition, designed for the educated, retained a non-predestinarian scheme.[29]

Second, instead of Beza parting roads with Calvin on soteriological predestination, is it possible that Beza himself influenced Calvin in the location of predestination in the last edition of the *Institutes* (1559)? Not only was *Confessio* written three years prior to Calvin's soteriological placement of predestination in the *Institutes,* but we also know that Beza discussed his work with Calvin prior to publication.[30] Though both sides of this question could be argued, one thing is certain: In the late 1550s Beza himself viewed predestination from a primarily Christological-soteriological context; otherwise he would not have placed predestination between his doctrine of the divinity of Christ and his explanation of the incarnate Lord.[31]

Finally, modern scholarship's accusations against Beza as being rigid and cold in his doctrine of predestination run contrary to even a cursory reading of *Confessio.* Throughout this treatise, Beza refuses to divorce predestination from the Christian's comfort, the walk of godly piety, and the work of redemption as a whole. One quotation will suffice:

> Seeing that good works are for us the certain evidences of our faith, they also bring to us afterwards the certainty of our eternal election. For faith necessarily depends on election. Faith lays hold of Christ, by which, being justified and sanctified, we have the enjoyment of the glory to which we have been destined before the foundation of the world (Rom. 8:39; Eph. 1:3-4). This is so much the more important because the world holds it in less esteem, as if the doctrine of particular election were a curious and incomprehensible thing. On the contrary, faith is nothing other than that by which we have the certainty that we possess life eternal; by it we know that before the foundation of the world God has destined that we should

> possess, through Christ, a very great salvation and a most excellent glory. This is why all that we have said of faith and of its effects would be useless if we would not add this point of eternal election as the sole foundation and support of all the assurance of Christians.[32]

## De praedestinationis doctrina (1582)

In this last treatise on the doctrine of predestination, Beza appears to have moved in a more supralapsarian direction. On several occasions he asserts that the elect and reprobate are predestined from a mass 'yet unshapen.' In an exposition of Romans 9, he writes:

> Paul...alludes to the creation of Adam, and rises up to the eternal purpose of God, who, before he created mankind, decreed of his own mere will and pleasure, to manifest his glory, both in saving of some whom he knew, in a way of mercy, and in destroying others, whom he also knew, in righteous judgment. And verily, unless we judge this to be the case, God will be greatly injured; because he will not be sufficiently wise, who first creates men, and looks upon them corrupt, and then appoints to what purpose he has created them: nor sufficiently powerful, if when he has taken up a purpose concerning them, he is hindered by another, so that he obtains not what he willed; nor sufficiently constant, if willingly and freely he takes up a new purpose, after his workmanship is corrupted.[33]

Nevertheless, even this treatise does not prove that the doctrine of predestination was the central dogma of Beza's thought or theological method.[34] Interestingly, Maruyama attributes an increasing rationalization of predestination in Beza's writings more to his 'traditionalism' than to his 'scholasticism.'[35]

## Conclusions

Four major conclusions about Beza's supralapsarian predestination may be drawn from his writings:

First, Beza's supralapsarianism can easily be overestimated. Bangs's charge that Beza went beyond supralapsarian is irresponsible; rather, Kendall's observation that he showed supralapsarian tendencies which would later emerge into full-fledged supralapsarianism is more accurate.[36] These tendencies are most apparent in his polemical writings in which Beza felt obliged to defend Calvinian predestination in the arena of theological debate, and ultimately moved increasingly into supralapsarian thought. Interestingly, supralapsarian tendencies are wholly absent in his eighty-seven extant sermons, which are consistently Christological, soteriological, and anti-speculative. Beza's sermons, which emphasize Christology and soteriology significantly more than theology

proper, are further evidence that his theology was not subsumed entirely under supralapsarian predestination. Nor did Beza hold supralapsarian views so narrowly that he could not unite with infralapsarians in authentic communion. The infralapsarian *Confessio Gallicana* was adopted by the Synod of La Rochelle in 1561 without objection from its chairman, Theodore Beza.[37] Cunningham summarizes the issues well:

> The fuller discussion which this important subject [of predestination] underwent after Calvin's death, led, as controversy usually does when conducted by men of ability, to a more minute and precise exposition of some of the topics involved in it. And it has been often alleged that Beza, in his very able discussions of this subject, carried his views upon some points farther than Calvin himself did, so that he has been described as being *Calvino Calvinior.* We are not prepared to deny altogether the truth of this allegation; but we are persuaded that there is less ground for it than is sometimes supposed, and that the points of alleged difference between them in matters of doctrine, respect chiefly topics on which Calvin was not led to give any very formal or explicit deliverance [such as the supra-infra debate, JRB], because they were not at the time subjects of discussion, or indeed ever present to his thoughts.[38]

Second, Beza's departure from Calvin can be easily overestimated. Neither Calvin nor Beza had an inkling of any differences between them. Nor did the sixteenth-century Reformers. In England, for example, O.T. Hargrave notes:

> After those of Calvin, the works of Theodore de Beza were the most important for the Calvinist predestinarian movement in England. As with Calvin, Beza was also widely read by Elizabethan Englishmen, something over forty separate editions of his various works seeing publication during the period. And in a number of those Beza was led to expound upon the doctrine of predestination and related topics, on which points he was one of the ablest defenders of the Calvinist position, going even further if anything than Calvin himself.[39]

Here lies the key to the Calvin-Beza debate: *going further than Calvin himself.* Beza was prone to lean toward supralapsarianism, scholasticism, and rationalism to a greater extent than Calvin; nevertheless, the times and the defense of the Reformed faith called him to take this route. Increasing pressure was placed on the second- and third-generation Reformers to expound questions relative to God's decrees and will. Beza's interest in expounding such questions does not apply to his whole thought but only to a few treatises, and even those treatises manifest no greater interest in that subject than shown by other sixteenth-century Calvinist theologians, such as Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563), Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562), and Girolamo Zanchi (1516-1590).[40]

In no case does Beza's theology differ *qualitatively* from Calvin's; in fact, a quantitative distinction is the only cleavage an accurate historian could safely place between them. It is most remarkable that the work from which modern scholarship builds its case against Beza, the *Tabula,* was not published without Calvin's approval.

Third, Beza's attempt to move from a Christological to a trinitarian framework was not mere speculation, but a serious attempt to make an improvement upon, and enlargement of, Calvinian theology *in toto.* Beza did not forfeit Calvinian Christology by moving to a more thorough trinitarian framework; on the contrary, he always insisted that predestination must be treated in connection with salvation in Christ and with the comfort of the believer.[41] His theocentrism does not deny Christocentrism. Rather, one could argue that Reformed soteriology remained Christocentric as a fruit of insisting on a theocentric causality, in contrast to Arminian soteriology which fails to be Christocentric as a result of insisting on an anthropocentric causality.[42]

Finally, some of the confusion of scholarship's widely varied interpretations of Beza's thought must be charged to Beza himself, for, as Muller notes, 'Beza is by turns polemical and homiletical, rigid and flexible, speculative and soteriological.'[43] Tension does exist in his theology. For example, on the one hand Beza is prone to start his theology with predestination; on the other hand, he earnestly desires to be Scriptural. Rather than being inconsistent in this tension, however, he walks the tightrope of Scripture. He does not start with predestination merely because it is a handy springboard for theology, nor because it provides him with a metaphysical and abstract starting point; rather, when he does begin with predestination he is motivated by his core belief that predestination is foundational in Scripture.

Beza warns against a metaphysical use of predestination. If reason contradicts Scripture, he is adamant that reason must be sacrificed. Like Calvin, he maintains that not only the will but also human reason has been seriously impaired by the fall — so seriously that he even calls reason 'blindness.' Consequently, he warns against vain speculation about predestination. 'The secrets of God,' he writes, 'are to be highly reverenced, rather than to be searched into deeply.' Following Calvin's hermeneutical principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture, Beza spells out the limits of theology: 'We may go no farther than God's Word limits us in setting forth a doctrine of Scripture in a spirit of edification.'[44]

## References

1. Ernst Bizer, Frühorthodoxie und Rationalismus (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1963), pp. 6-15; Johannes Dantine, 'Die Prädestinationslehre bei Calvin und Beza' (Ph.D. dissertation, Göttingen, 1965) and 'Les Tabelles sur la Doctrine de la Prédestination par Théodore de Bèze,' *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 16 (1966):365-77; Basil Hall, 'Calvin Against the Calvinists,' in *John Calvin,* ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 25-28; Walter Kickel, *Vernunft und Offenbarung bei Theodor Beza: Zum Problem des Verhältnisses von Theologie, Philosophie und Staat* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1967); Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. xviii, 38-42, 128-33, 158ff.; R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: University Press, 1979), pp. 1-41 and 209ff., and 'The Puritan Modification of Calvin's Theology,' in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World,* ed. W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), pp. 199-216; Philip Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, from 1551-1555* (Lampeter: Mellen, 1993).

   For responses in defense of Beza, see Richard Muller, 'Predestination and Christology in Sixteenth Century Reformed Theology' (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1976), revised as *Christ and the Decrees: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988); Herman Hanko, 'Predestination in Calvin, Beza, and Later Reformed Theology,' *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal,* X/2 (1977):1-24; Ian McPhee, 'Conserver or Transformer of Calvin's Theology? A Study of the Origins and Development of Theodore Beza's Thought, 1550-1570' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1979); Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982); Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Richard Gamble, 'Switzerland: Triumph and Decline,' in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World,* pp. 55-73; Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 78-104. These contemporary responses augment William Cunningham's careful study of the relationship of Calvin and Beza which has never been answered (*The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* [1862; reprint London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967], pp. 345-412).

   For a mediating response on the Calvin vs. Beza thesis, see Jill Raitt, *The Eucharistic Theology of Theodore Beza: Development of the Reformed Doctrine* (Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion, 1972); John Bray, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination* (Nieuwkoop: B. DeGraaf, 1975); Tadataka Maruyama, *The Ecclesiology of Theodore Beza: The Reform of the True Church* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978); Peter White, *Predestination, Policy and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge: University Press, 1992).

2. Kickel, *Vernunft und Offenbarung bei Theodor Beza,* pp. 46-68. Kickel's attempt to prove that the influence of Aristotelian philosophy on Beza's thought was all-pervasive is fraught with problems: (1) his sources are limited and inherently prejudicial in scope, neglecting Beza as preacher and pastor; (2) his zeal to dichotomize Calvin and Beza has led him beyond the historical fact that any substantial deviation from Calvin in Beza must be thought of as a gradual development which went unrecognized in Beza's lifetime; (3) he fails to integrate theology and history properly in his analysis of Beza's theology, not recognizing that Beza lived in a different theological and historical milieu than Calvin. (Cf. Lynne Courter Boughton, 'Supralapsarianism and the Role of Metaphysics in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 [1986]:63-96.)

3. Gamble, 'Switzerland,' p. 66; Hanko, 'Predestination,' p. 3; Maruyama, *Ecclesiology of Beza,* p. 139.
4. E.g., Charles Hodge speaks of Augustine's infralapsarianism. Though the terminology of supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism can only be utilized anachronistically prior to the Synod of Dordt, 1618-1619 (Carl Bangs, *Arminius* [New York: Abingdon, 1971], p. 67), the heart of the debate hearkens back to the origins of the Christian church.
5. Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), pp. 254-77.
6. The arguments against supra and infra are well-known (cf. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* trans. George Musgrave Giver, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. [Philipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1992], 1:418; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* vol. 2 [New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1877], pp. 318-19; John W. Beardslee, III, 'Theological Development at Geneva under Francis and Jean-Alphonse Turretin, 1648-1737' (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1956), pp. 400ff.; William Hastie, *The Theology of the Reformed Church in its Fundamental Principles* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark], pp. 242-252; G. H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics,* vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], pp. 126-30; Berkouwer, *Divine Election,* pp. 254-77; Joel R. Beeke, *Jehovah Shepherding His Sheep* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], pp. 62-65).

   Less known are the *positive* claims of supra and infra, which can be summarized as follows: Supras assert supralapsarianism to be: (1) the position of Scripture (Prov. 16:4; Is. 10:15; Eph. 3:9-11; Rom. 8:29, 9:21); (2) the position that best promotes the absolute sovereignty, omniscience, omnipotence, and glory of God; (3) the position that holds a proper teleological method of God as divine architect who always knows His end from His beginning; and (4) the position that is most consistent with God's dealings with the angels, i.e., if God dealt with the angels in a supralapsarian manner, why not also with man? Infras assert that their view is: (1) the position of Scripture (Dt. 7:6, 8; Eph. 1:4-12); (2) the position that best upholds the righteousness and goodness of God; (3) the position that best protects Reformed theology from the charge of divine authorship of sin; and (4) the position that does not artificially separate the election of the elect from the election of Christ, and thereby avoids a 'hypothetical Christ.'
7. For Bezan biography, see Friedrich C. Schlosser, *Leben des Theodor de Beza* (Heidelberg: Mohr und Zimmer, 1809); Johann Wilhelm Baum, *Theodor Beza,* 2 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmann'sche Buchhandlung, 1843-1851); Heinrich Heppe, *Theodor Beza, Leben und ausgewahlte Schriften* (Marburg: R. G. Elwet'scher Druck und Verlag, 1852-61); Henry Martin Baird, *Theodore Beza: the Counsellor of the French Reformation, 1519-1605* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1899); Paul F. Geisendorf, *Théodore de Bèze* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1949); Bray, *Predestination,* pp. 22-44; David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings* (reprint Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).
8. Raitt, *Eucharistic Theology,* p. 2; Baird, Beza, pp. 32-33.
9. *Correspondence de Théodore de Bèze,* 1:169-72; 2:72-73.
10. For a bibliography of Beza's writings, see Maruyama, *Ecclesiology,* pp. xvi-xix.
11. For a translation of the diagram, see Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics,* trans. G.T. Thomson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), pp. 147-48. The full work was first published in English as *A Briefe Declaration of the chiefe points of the Christian religion, Set Forth in a Table,* trans. William Whittingham (London: Dauid Moptid and John Mather, 1575), but became better known in a subsequent translation of John Stockwood as *The Treasure of Trueth, Touching the grounde works of man his salvation,* and *Chiefest Points of Christian Religion* (London: Thomas Woodcocke, 1576).
12. E.g., Steinmitz epitomizes this view when he writes: 'Predestination becomes in the hands of this speculative theologian a form of philosophical determinism scarcely distinguishable from the Stoic doctrine of fate' (*Reformers in the Wings,* pp. 168-69).

13. Bray, *Predestination,* p. 71.
14. Kickel, *Beza,* p. 99; cf. Bray, *Predestination,* p. 72.
15. *Tabula,* i, 1.
16. Ibid, i, 2. This is not to say that Beza was not specific concerning the proper order. In a 1555 letter to Calvin he describes both the infra and supra approach, and opts for the latter (*Correspondence,* I, 169-72).
17. Muller, 'Predestination,' p. 206.
18. *Tabula,* ii, 3, 6.
19. Ibid, ii, 2.
20. Bray feels that this distinction became Beza's 'most significant original contribution to the question of predestination' (*Predestination,* p. 91). Cf. *White, Predestination, Policy and Polemic,* 1992), pp. 17-19.
21. *Tabula,* iii, 1-3.
22. Ibid., v, i.
23. Cf. Hanko, 'Predestination,' p. 21.
24. Muller, 'Predestination,' p. 213.
25. *Confessio Chistianae fidei, et eiusdem collatio cum Papisticis haeresibus* (Genevae: Eustathium Vignon, 1587); translated into English from French by James Clark as *The Christian Faith* (Lewes, East Sussex: Focus, 1992).
26. *Confessio,* ii, 3.
27. Muller, 'Predestination,' pp. 219-27; Bray, *Predestination,* pp. 74-75.
28. 'Les Tabelles,' pp. 374-75.
29. Maruyama, *Ecclesiology,* p. 140n.
30. Muller, 'Predestination,' p. 211. Though *Confessio* was not published until 1558, it was written at Lausanne in 1556.
31. *Confessio,* iii.
32. Ibid., iii, 19.
33. Translated by John Gill in his *Sermons and Tracts,* vol. 3 (London: H. Lyon, 1815), pp. 408-409. Cf. *De praedestinationis doctrina et vero usu tractatio absolutissima. Excerpta Th. Bezae praelectionibus in nonum epistolae ad romanos caput* (Geneva: Evstathivm Vignon, 1582).
34. Muller, 'Predestination,' pp. 199-200.
35. Maruyama, *Ecclesiology,* p. 141.
36. Bangs, *Arminius,* p. 67; Kendall, *English Calvinism,* p. 30.
37. Dijk, *De Strijd over Infra- en Supralapsarianisme,* p. 284.
38. Cunningham, *Reformers,* p. 349. Though attempts have been made to classify Calvin as supra (Hastie, Kersten) or infra (Good, Bray), Calvin himself never addressed the lapsarian question (cf. Fred Klooster, *Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977], pp. 55-86).
39. 'The Doctrine of Predestination in the English Reformation' (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1966), p. 204.
40. Muller, 'Predestination,' p. 196.
41. Hanko maintains that all of the Reformed scholastics are free of this non-Christological charge ('Predestination,' p. 21).
42. Muller comments: 'It is no longer possible to view Arminius' doctrine as a Christological piety opposed to a rationalistic, predestinarian, metaphysic of causality. . . . Arminianism is a theological structure at least as speculative as any of the Reformed systems' ('Predestination,' p. 438).
43. Ibid., p. 219.
44. Quoted from Beza on Job and Song of Solomon respectively (Richard Gamble, class notes, Westminster Seminary, 8 March 1983).

# THE USE OF ILLUSTRATION IN PREACHING

## by Peter Brumby

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In all the gallery of great preachers our Lord Jesus Christ has the chief place. When preachers are wanting to know how to preach, they cannot afford to ignore this supreme model. In the work of preaching we are Christ's servants and followers, right down to the detail of method and skill in the use of words. This most basic fact opens the door into our subject. Jesus was first among preachers and first among illustrators.

Preachers are also the servants of their hearers, with the duty of being as helpful to them as possible when they assemble to hear the Word of God. It is beyond question that the majority of people are helped by the proper use of illustration. An occasional exception to this rule which may have occurred in our experience or in the history of preaching must not be allowed to overturn the rule.

Preaching is in crisis today even in the Reformed constituency which values it so highly. Great and exemplary preaching is scarce. Many are asking - why? Is the gift not there? Is there something wrong with training? Is the Spirit of God withdrawn? Is it all a matter of divine anointing? Can anything be done? Are we to resort only to prayer, or can homiletics be taught?

Without minimising the Spirit's enabling and anointing, there is need to examine the use of illustration in preaching. Preaching may be much more than illustration, but we cannot afford to overlook so vital a component. Too much preaching fails to involve the hearer in an experiential way. People are present when preaching takes place, they hear it, but are not participants in it. For want of pertinent illustration there was no way into the sermon. Much can be done to remedy this sad deficiency if preachers remember - 'He is the best preacher who turns people's ears into eyes'.

### The Case for Illustration

Most of the Bible is narrative. It is God's book of examples. The dynamic of truth is illustrated in life-situations. In the Bible fundamental truths are

accompanied by working models. In Psalm 51 David teaches that penitence leads to forgiveness and restoration. That great penitential Psalm is also accompanied by the story of what happened to David. Similarly, Jesus repeatedly said, 'The kingdom of heaven is like....'. Then follows the most thoughtfully crafted illustration. This method of teaching never disposes of profundity, but rather serves and secures it. Someone has calculated that the parabolic content of Luke's Gospel is 52%, and that the illustrative content of all Jesus' teaching is 75%.[1] The apostolic letters, containing hardly any narrative, are nevertheless full of illustrative material. In the space of four verses, Paul pictures a soldier, an athlete and a farmer.[2] In the space of three verses James pictures horses, ships and a forest fire.[3] The witness of Scripture is that propositional truth is served by pictures of truth. Effective communication of truth needs this balance.

The witness of history, much beloved of the Reformed Faith, speaks with the same voice. The Westminster divines pose the question,

Q. 159. How is the Word of God to be preached by those called thereunto?

A. ....wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers....

That this emphasis on being as helpful as possible to the hearers, would lead them to the use of illustration, is confirmed by the Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God under the section, Of the Preaching of the Word, where they affirm,

> The arguments or reasons are to be solid, and, as much as may be, convincing. The illustrations of what kind so ever, ought to be full of light, and such as may convey the truth into the hearer's heart with spiritual delight.

Of John Bunyan, in the same century, reference hardly needs to be made. He likens doubt to a castle; difficulty to a hill; assurance to a scroll carried close to the heart. His *Pilgrim's Progress* is a world of illustrations, many of which remain useful in preaching today.

George Whitefield's preaching dominates the 18th century and deserves to be noticed as one of the most remarkable achievements in the history of verbal communication. His first biographer, John Gillies of Glasgow, who knew him well and heard him often, has recorded,

> The grand sources of his eloquence were an exceedingly lively imagination, which made people *think they saw* what he described.[4]

> As to Mr Whitefield's telling stories in the pulpit, some perhaps may find fault; - he had an uncommon fund of [such] passages, proper enough to be thus told, and a peculiar talent of telling them; it was certainly, a means of drawing multitudes to hear him, who would not have attended to the truths of the gospel, delivered in the ordinary manner.[5]

The struggles of most who have tried to preach confirms the need for illustration. Sometimes we have toiled away with words which lacked illustration, as though building a house without windows, and became lost in the darkness. Then by means of a well chosen picture from everyday experience have found that the subject was helpfully illuminated by a window of light, and it became much more comprehensible.

It is also worth noting the findings of secular research into verbal communication, because preaching must take account of how the mind functions. There is rational function and experiential awareness as the mind works to receive communications presented to it. These two levels of response to verbal communication are integrated by the mind in the learning process. For example, the abstract proposition 2 + 2 = 4 involves a rational function. The same truth is assimilated by experiential awareness when 2 apples are added to 2 more in a visual manner to demonstrate that there are four. In the same way, rational function is involved when we are informed that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; and experiential awareness comes into play when we are told that a shepherd went out to find his lost sheep. In this way profound meanings and values are communicated by life situation narratives through which we gain access to abstract concepts. Very often an illustration is the door by which the mind enters upon a truth vaster by far than the illustration itself. As Bryan Chapell argues, metaphors are the main building blocks of verbal communication, while a narrative is the master metaphor.[6] Illustrations earth a sermon in life as we know it.

> Everyone loves a story. Stories are universal and timeless. They can bridge the gap between people of different ages, social backgrounds and cultures. They don't just inform the mind, they engage the heart.[7]

Earlier this century, an admired and influential Methodist preacher, W.E. Sangster, contributed two books to the business of preaching, *The Craft of Sermon Construction,* and *The Craft of Sermon Illustration.* These titles have sometimes been somewhat ridiculed when it was thought that preaching was being treated as a literary art. However there are wise words in both of these volumes from an exceptional communicator and earnest soul winner,

> People are convinced more by what they see than what they hear.[8]

In the same vein a more recent communicator, Jay E. Adams, of Westminster Theological Seminary, California, reminds us,

> Story-telling is the life blood of the message.[9]

## Reasons for the Neglect of Illustration

It is rightly recognised that there are dangers of misuse and excess. Regrettably, some have employed stories just for the sake of it. Excess has sometimes led to an artificial discourse, which may have held a congregation's attention, but did little more. The pulpit can be turned into a stage and the church into a theatre. The preacher has sometimes, alas, turned entertainer and showman. Reacting against this abuse of such a sacred task, some have resolved never to use a story for fear of these dangers.

Some have thought that Scripture is so inherently efficacious that nothing more is needed than to read it, supplying some commentary on the text with cross references to other texts. Surely, they believe, God will own his Word so faithfully adhered to! However, as well as failing to help many hearers, this practice fails to do justice to the task of preaching as taught in the Bible itself. The New Testament verbs to preach, to teach, to witness, require something very much more than a mere speaking the words of Scripture.

At the same time it is suspected that a well illustrated sermon must, of necessity, lack depth. It is feared that human stories reduce spirituality. Since superficiality must be avoided, it is assumed that illustration must be avoided too. But this view falls away when it is remembered that Charles Spurgeon, Thomas Watson and John Owen were famously skilled at illustration as they conformed their ministries to Christ's example. The present writer can never forget first coming upon John Owen's illustration of the provisions of the New Covenant in which he describes the Believer passing through a wide field.[10]

In some branches of the Reformed church there may be a mentality that church services are normally dull, and that orthodoxy requires the preacher to conform to this norm! Having never experienced anything else in living memory, it is thought that true preaching addresses only those who are advanced in theology, and makes no concessions to those whose minds have not yet been taken captive by the Gospel. A preacher who went about to make the truth interesting would, perhaps, be suspected of rebelling against a Reformed tradition!

A further reason for the neglect of illustration is that it is not unknown for preachers to blame their hearers for failure to learn. Such accusations may sometimes be warranted, but a sensitive, humble preacher will sooner look to himself than blame his hearers. The mistaken notion that the fault is always in the pew, will certainly lead to neglect of carefully crafted illustrations.

It is to be feared that some measure of laziness may also lead to neglect. After the primary exegetical work has been done in sermon preparation, the well judged choice and placement of illustrations is an extra demand upon the preacher's readiness to work hard early and late.

## The Use of Illustration has Theological Warrant

The present article does not call for, or allow, a detailed theological analysis. It is appropriate however, to make some reference, almost in passing, to the biblical doctrine of revelation. In this connection we unreservedly affirm our belief that God has spoken in the form of verbal propositions. Revelation is oracular, out of God's mouth. The divine self-expression is verbal. Though this is fundamental to our view of revelation, it is not exhaustive. It is significant that God first began to reveal himself by making something which can be seen. In the beginning he created the heavens and the earth. Since the creation of the world his invisible attributes have been clearly seen.[11] It is also significant that the biblical revelation concludes with the book of The Revelation, which is largely concerned with what the apostle John saw. We conclude that the revelation of God in what he has directly spoken, is complemented by what he has put on view. The same exquisite balance is present in good preaching. What the people are asked to hear may also be shown in suitable word pictures.

Basic reference may also be made to the doctrine of the incarnation. The fourth gospel, with breath-taking announcement, introduces our Lord Jesus Christ as the Word, who eternally existed from the beginning in the mystery of the triune Godhead. In due time he became flesh and entered the experiential realm of time and space where his glory was seen.[12] In this momentous way Jesus Christ has made known to us the unseen God. The phrase, 'made known', literally means, 'drawn out in narrative'.[13] When Jesus confronted people there was something both to hear and see. Likewise, in good preaching, the fundamental statement of God's Word should be fleshed out and made experiential by human, life-situation examples and illustrations, which assist the hearer in visualising what is being said.

## Guidelines for the use of illustration

Truth must always be the master, and illustration the servant. Preachers know the temptation to reverse this order. Especially those preachers with a vivid imagination and a natural gift of story telling, can get carried away with an illustration, to the extent that the illustration becomes a subject in itself, separate from the truth being expounded. Biblical exposition must always have the dominant place in a sermon. The Word of God must go forward, while illustrations are used to advance its progress and not hinder or divert it.

Illustrative forms of speech should be scattered throughout the sermon, 'tenderising the joint without reducing the meat'.[14] W.E Sangster's observation is certainly true,

> Fresh and vivid figures of speech can be most useful miniature illustrations.[15]

The sermon's introduction may be well served by the early inclusion of an illustration. Some sermons wait too long before the imagination of the hearer is captured. Then each section of the material should normally include at least one illustration. Passages within the sermon identifiable as dealing with a more difficult and demanding point of teaching, especially require to be illustrated. The average sermon, of three main divisions, will then have aproximately five illustrations as minimum requirement, some of them more, some of them less, substantial in size.

Our Lord's example, permits us to use some dramatic details, and even an element of suspense, in the illustrative pictures we use. When he described the father's welcome to the returning prodigal son the picture used is very dramatic,

> But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck, and kissed him.[16]

Of course, this has its dangers. Too much illustrative detail becomes distracting. The preacher needs very good judgment to know where the limits are. This is an area of homiletics in which we who preach are learning all our days. The skill is to achieve something like a change of gear when an illustration is introduced, but not a change of direction. A smooth transition is needed here. A phrase like, 'I have found it helpful to think of it this way....', may be appropriate.

Illustrations should always be dignified, sensitive, and harmonious with the truth being illustrated. They should never become a separate, detached point of

interest. An illustration taken from an area of life known to be controversial would almost certaily be a distraction. Stories about accidents, illnesses, hospitals, surgery, death, or anything liable to distress should be very carefully handled. Stories told at anyone's expense, apart, perhaps from the preacher's own expense should be avoided. Anything of a private nature, no matter how well it illustrates a point, is not allowable. Illustrations from marriage, home and family are usually good, but the preacher should always remember that not all his hearers are married, and not all who are married have children.

Illustrations should make good use of the vocabulary of the subjects being illustrated. When illustrating the doctrine of justification it is good to go to the law and use its forensic terms. When illustrating the spiritual building of the church it is good to go to the world of building with its building terms. When illustrating the covenant of grace it is good to go to marriage with its covenantal language.

In the choice of illustration the preacher will be well advised to avoid areas in which he has no competence. A man largely ignorant of physics may make a fool of himself by attempting an illustration from this realm, and likewise other realms of very sketchy knowledge. Illustrations which involve self reference should be used very sparingly. The preacher will become distracting if he too frequently selects illustration from the area of his own passionate interest. Anyone who has a keen sporting interest in soccer, golf or cricket etc. will be tempted to overdo references to these areas. To make a study of two world wars will furnish the preacher with a nearly limitless supply of illustrations, but these must be used with careful restraint. Too much reference to television programmes is another area of danger to be avoided. The whole range of everyday life and experience should be used in a balanced way which enhances the sermon by a diversity of pictures.

## Additional benefits of Illustration

It is a mystery to us why God should chose to make known his Word through the instrumentality of preaching and thus involve a human relationship between preacher and hearer in the process. Probably every preacher has at some time wished that the human dimension of his personal relationship to congregation could be disposed of and God be left to communicate in purer ways. Some men strive to efface themselves totally, but it cannot be done. Other men over indulge the human aspects of their preaching ministry. The middle way between these extremes is surely part of the preacher's calling. He is a servant of the

Word with an indispensible part, but always conscious of his place as only a servant.

A congregation is bound to get to know something of its preacher's humanity and experience as it listens to him. The preacher cannot avoid communicating something of himself. The aims of a preaching ministry are greatly assisted if the human relationship between preacher and people engenders respect, affection, trust and co-operation. People can only truly receive a preaching ministry when this is so.

It is undoubtedly the case that something of the preacher as a Christian man is communicated, quite legitimately, through his choice of illustrative material for his sermons. Our narratives reveal how much we are alive and what is the tenor of our experience. We reveal our interests, human compassion, wisdom, what moves us, what provokes our indignation and how much we care, in the stories we tell. When these wider aspects of the preacher's life, experience and work are in wholesome and good order his pulpit ministry will have an enlarged potential. Conversely, the lack of a fellow-feeling and shared experience of life between preacher and people will impoverish the preaching.

Preachers yearn before God to be both faithful and effective. The question - Is there anything more that I could do? - regularly breaks out. The use of illustrations in preaching is not the main thing, but it is an important component. Preachers of exemplary faithfulness to the Word of God, may yet become more effective by the development of the illustrative skill, so conspicuously seen in Christ's preaching work.

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones expressed a real concern when he said,

> We have all become so scientific that there is but little room left for the imagination. This, to me is most regrettable because imagination in preaching is most important and most helpful....what it does is make the truth lively and living.[17]

## References


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3. James 3.3-5
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# THE COLUMCILLE PILGRIMAGE

## by A. C. Gregg.

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Uncertainties abound in relation to Columcille. So much is hidden in the mists of time; so little comes down to us that is definitely reliable. Adequate sources simply do not exist. The title of a recent book, 'In Search of Columba', is significant. Diligent search must be made for every scrap of information and the search will often prove frustrating and futile. Nevertheless some things are clear enough. Columcille did exist. He was born and grew up in Ireland in the 6th century A.D. and in the mid-time of his life emigrated to Iona in Scotland. Undoubtedly he was a towering figure in his day and achieved a great deal. Among his limitations was the fact that he became embroiled too frequently in politics for the good of the cause that was nearest and dearest to his heart - the kingdom of God. One area where there is good information relates to dates. There appears to be almost universal agreement that he died in 597 A.D. and even that the exact date was 9th June. Accordingly the year 1997, the 1400th anniversary of Coluncille's death, has witnessed a revived interest in the man. A number of new books have been written on his life and work. Similarly there is general agreement that the year of Coluncille's removal to Iona was 563. The celebrations of that event in 1963 extended to a thirteen-man crew sailing a curragh from Londonderry to Iona. The other major events in the life of Columcille can also be dated with reasonable confidence. However, when it comes to details, the picture is not encouraging. The most that can be attempted is an outline of the pilgrimage of Columcille and even that at times is difficult. The term 'pilgrimage' has the meaning not only of 'the journey of life' but also that of a particular journey or new direction in life taken for religious purposes. In the case of Columcille, 'pilgrimage', in the restricted sense, is used of the thirty-four year period of his life that he spent on Iona, away from his native land, where he lived as a peregrinus, a stranger, a wanderer, a pilgrim for God.

### I Sources

The great limitation in sources of information resides less in their quantity than in their quality. A number of early writings include the following:

(i) A book by Cuminius, or Cuimine, Abbot of Iona about half a century after Columcille. Although he could have had contact with people who knew his subject personally his contribution is of little value;

(ii) A Life of St. Columba (Vita Sancti Columbae) by Adomnan, ninth Abbot of Iona, about a hundred years after Columcille;

(iii) References in the Ecclesiastical History of the English People by the Venerable Bede, about two centuries after Columcille;

(iv) The Old Irish Life of St. Columba, preserved in such works as the Leabhar Breac (the Speckled Book), compiled near the end of the fourteenth century. 'The title is highly misleading, however, for it is no more than a twelfth-century commemorative sermon, which some scholars now more accurately call the Middle Irish Life'.[1]

There are some writings that have been attributed to Columcille himself. These include two poems, the Altus prosator (the High Creator) and the Adiutor laborantium (Helper of workers). 'He may have been the scribe of the Cathach, a psalter in Irish Latin script dating from about the end of the sixth century'.[2] The name Cathach, (the 'Battler'), 'dates from the later medieval period when it was encased in a silver shrine and carried into battle to ensure victory'(!).[3] Some have believed that the famous Book of Durrow ('an illuminated gospel book') was copied by Columcille, but this is unlikely. 'Adomnan refers to a hymn book in Columba's hand, but there is no trace of it today'.[4] Even if Columcille was the author of these writings they tell us almost nothing about the man as they contain 'no biographical detail'. And the truth of the matter is that 'there is no surviving manuscript which we can definitely ascribe to Columba'.[5]

Of the available early writings the Life of Adomnan (Abbot of Iona, 679 - 704) is by far the most important, even if it is 'a curious, bewildering work'. Lesley Whiteside writes,

> Adomnan's Life of St. Columba is not a biography in the modern sense of the term. In fact, Adomnan was uninterested in the historical details of Columba's life. What did concern him was to present Columba as the home-grown equivalent of those continental saints whose lives were eagerly read and emulated in the Celtic church of the late seventh century. Adomnan was writing not biography but hagiography, and for this reason he was far more interested in Columba's visions and miracles.[6]

Nevertheless Adomnan and similar authors are not to be discarded as valueless. Ian Finlay rightly points out that,

> Those ancient hagiologies were set down as paeans of praise, sometimes deliberate 'writing-up' for political ends, but they are not to be swept aside as unfounded. The man they are all about was real enough, and much that looks as if it must be true can be sifted from them.[7]

Useful research has been carried out on Columcille in recent decades and the ' Columcille 1400' celebrations in 1997 gave a fresh impetus to study of the man and new publications have appeared.

## II Early Life

It is accepted almost universally that Columcille was born at Gartan, meaning 'a little field', in County Donegal. However, it was not until the writing of the late document known as the Old (or Middle) Irish Life that Gartan was identified as the birthplace. Indeed, Whiteside maintains that,

> Gartan lay outside the area controlled by Columba's family and is, therefore, an unlikely place for Columba to have been born.[8]

Others do not appear to have any doubts about the matter. At least there are no competing claims from other locations for the honour.

Adomnan states that Columcille was seventy-five when he died, which would indicate that he was born in 521 or 522. There are authorities that give years varying from 518 to 523 but most maintain confidently that the birth-year was 521 and even that the day and date was Thursday 7th December. The exact dating is based on the belief that Columcille's birth coincided with the day that St. Buite, the founder of Monasterboice departed this life. One remains to be convinced.

Columcille's father was Fedhlimidh mac Ferguso (Phelim Mac Fergus). He was 'a close cousin of the rulers of Cenal Conaill, who were among the most powerful kings in the sixth-century Ireland'.[9] Cenal Conaill was one of the branches of the Ui Neill (O Neill), of which there were Northern and Southern dynasties. Later tradition holds that Columcille's mother, Eithne, came from a ruling family in Leinster but this must remain uncertain. What is clear is that he was of aristocratic stock.

More than one name was associated with the child. Finlay writes as follows,

> Cruithnechan the presbyter had been given the child to baptise and to foster. He baptised him Colum, which in Latin becomes Columba, the dove; but later writers say he was also called Crimthann, the fox,..... According to the Leabhar Breac, his constant visits to the little church of Tulach-Dubhglaise (Temple Douglas), close to his birth-place, to read his psalms, brought the local children to nickname him Columcille, Colum of the church, and it is as Columcille he became known all over Ireland. The practice of putting out a small child for fosterage may seem to us strange, but it was not unusual in the ancient world and in pagan Ireland it was normal procedure, especially among the ruling classes. ..... Both sons and daughters were fostered. Boys of the upper classes were instructed in manly sports and the use of arms..... That Column was given into the charge of a priest implies that he was intended for the priesthood from the start..... For a family of the blood-royal to commit their son to the church from birth seems a surprising decision, but none of the early writers discusses the issue or betrays any doubts about the way things went.[10]

## III Education

Following his upbringing and elementary training by Cruithnechan, Columcille's education continued under Finnian (or Findbarr) at Moville at the head of Strangford Lough in County Down. Finnian founded his ecclesiastical school in 540 and Columcille must have been one of his first students. Little is known about his time here apart from the fact that he was ordained a deacon at this stage. Adomnan says that at Moville he was 'learning the wisdom of Holy Scripture'.

Regarding the next stage in his education, Finlay writes,

> Still a deacon, Columba left Moville to be tutored by an aged man called Gemman in Leinster, a man described by St. Finnian of Clonard (not to be confused with Finnian of Moville) as a 'Christian bard'. This is interesting, for it seems to imply a time of study of Irish literature and rhetoric, a very sensible preparation for preaching, as we should think.[11]

Then Finlay tells of the final stage,

> Now came the move which completed Columba's training for his vocation. He went to Cluain-Erard, otherwise Clonard in Co. Meath, where the more celebrated of the two St. Finnians had founded a great monastic school about the year 520.[11]

This 'campus' had around 3,000 students. According to the Old (or Middle) Irish *Life*, Columcille referred to Clonard as a 'city'. 'His studies with the two

Finnians might be interpreted as giving him, in terms of our own day, the equivalent of courses at two universities'. Having completed his preparation he was ordained as a priest by Bishop Etchen of Clonfad, Co. Westmeath.

## IV Work in Ireland

While Lesley Whiteside states bluntly, 'We do not know what he did between his training and his departure for Scotland', others write confidently and even in some detail of his labours in Ireland.

Assuming the accuracy of the available information, Columcille's first centre of work was Glasnevin, now a suburb of Dublin. Here, 'St. Berchan Clarinech, usually called Mobhi, also from Clonard, had set up a monastery and school'[13] attended by fifty students. His stay at Glasnevin was not lengthy. It was cut short by the appearance of 'the Buidhe Chonnaill, the Yellow Plague, which took its name from the colour of the skins of its victims.....Gibbon relates that pestilence was rife throughout all Europe in those years (about 543-4)'.[14] 'Mobhi had to send his students back to their homes for their own safety'.[15]

Leaving Glasnevin, Columcille came north to Cenal Conaill, 'which is to say he returned to the lands of his people in Ulster'. Now began Columcille's career 'as a leader of the church, as a founder of monasteries and a missionary'. Finlay writes,

> The king, Aedh, son of Ainmire, was his cousin-german and Columba must have sought him as soon as he arrived in the north, for Aedh offered him as a place to build his church the royal dun or hill-fort at Derry, the name of which then was Daire Calgach, the oak wood of Calgach..... This first of Columba's many foundations took place in 546. The site is in what is now called Long Tower Street in Londonderry, and is occupied by St. Columba's Church..... We are told Columba loved the 'city' of Derry very much.[16]

Over the following sixteen or seventeen years Columcille founded many churches and monasteries. One of the most renowned of these centres was Durrow, the plain of the oaks, in Co. Offaly. Others included Kells in Co. Meath, Moone in Co. Kildare, Swords and Lambay in Co. Dublin, Raphoe and Drumholm in Co. Donegal and Drumcliffe in Co. Sligo. Some of these may well have been established later and merely belonged to the Columban family of foundations.

Much attention is focused on the sequence of events preceding Columcille's departure from Ireland. The story, reliable or not in its details, has been fre-

quently told. It begins with a copyright dispute between Columcille and his old teacher, Finnian of Moville. Columcille made a copy of a book, either a Psalter (the Cathach?) or a copy of the gospels, owned by Finnian. Finnian claimed the copy and when no agreement could be reached the matter was referred to Diarmait mac Cerbaill, the high king at Tara. The decision went against Columcille when Diarmait gave his famous judgement, 'To every cow its calf, to every book its copy'. Columcille was incensed, maintaining that the book had not been diminished by being copied and that it was wrong 'to extinguish a Divine thing or prevent anyone copying, reading and circulating it'.[17]

About the same time a second source of contention arose between Columcille and the high king. A son of the king of Connaught, Prince Curnan, was being held as a voluntary hostage at Tara. The prince accidentally caused the death of a competitor at athletic games (hurling?). He sought sanctuary with Columcille but was pursued, dragged away and killed. Diarmait was also implicated in the slaying of another prince of Connaught, Aed Guaine, who had taken sanctuary with Ruadhan of Lorrha.

The outcome of these outrages was that a bloody battle was fought between the Northern Ui Neill and the Southern Ui Neill at Cul Dreimne (Cooldrummon) in Co. Sligo in 561. The battle resulted in a crushing defeat of Diarmait and 3,000 men are reputed to have been slaughtered. One source says that the battle was won by the Northern Ui Neill 'through the prayers of St. Columba'. However, religious leaders of the time believed that Columcille's involvement was not confined to intercession. Accordingly, a synod held at Teilte (Teltown), near Kells in Co. Meath made charges against him which resulted in his excommunication. The sentence was later revoked but the crises meant that Columcille's work in Ireland was effectively at an end. Finlay writes,

> The traditional verdict of the synod is well known. Columba was enjoined to convert as many pagan souls as the number slain in the battle, and St. Laisren, his confessor, laid upon him the penance of perpetual exile from Ireland, on which he was never to set foot or look again.[18]

The Old (or Middle) Irish Life 'gives the simple explanation for Columba's wish to leave Ireland at this time as the spirit of pilgrimage'.[19] Adomnan says that 'his leaving Ireland was the outcome of his desire to preach the Gospel among the heathen'.[20] John Tunney writes,

> This makes him the archetype for the 'peregrini Christi' - wanderers for Christ - those Irish Missionaries who were to bring the word of God to continental Europe over the succeeding centuries.[21]

None of this is inconsistent with an imposed exile. However, almost certainly there was a political element involved in the choosing of the place for his 'exile', as Tunney goes on to show,

> As is often the case with Colmcille however, his action can be seen to have temporal as well as spiritual motives. In this case they are bound up with the situation of the Irish colony in Scotland. Sometime between the middle of the 5th and the early 6th centuries the Irish of Dal Riata, in North-east Ulster, invaded Scotland. Perhaps filling a vacancy left by the withdrawal of the Roman Legions they easily occupied Islay, Lorne and Kintyre and set up their capital at Dunadd. For the first fifty years or so they lived in peace with their warlike neighbours to the north, the Picts, but this situation changed when in 557 A.D., less than three years before Cul Dreimhne, Brude MacMaelcon, king of the Northern Picts, smashed the Irish in battle and slew Gabran their king. Another defeat on this scale would have led to the colony being over-run. There was a chance that a mission led by a prince of one of the leading Irish dynasties could both steady the nerve of the colonists and ease the pressure on them by diplomatic intervention.[22]

## V 'Exile' in Scotland

Whatever the reasons and motivations, Columcille departed from Ireland in 563, in a 'form of voluntary exile (which) became known in the Irish church as "white martyrdom"'. Adomnan gives a simple description of the event:

> In the second year after the battle of Cul Dreimne, in the forty-second year of his age, Columba sailed away from Ireland to Britain, wishing to be a pilgrim for Christ.

It is said that he was accompanied by twelve companions, a number of them being relatives of Columcille. This destination was Hy or Iona, a small island about three miles north to south and half that distance at its widest. Probably the Island was granted to Columcille by 'Conaill, King of the Scots in Dalriada'.

Here Columcille established a religious centre that 'soon became the leading Irish monastic settlement'. Tunney writes that,

> The life of the monks on Iona was dedicated to prayer, study and physical work such as ploughing, sowing, reaping and work in the dairy and the kitchen.[23]

He continues,

> The number of monks increased to one-hundred-and-fifty and they were divided into three classes. The seniors were older monks who copied manuscripts and looked after religious services. The working brethen were responsible for the monastery's physical work. Finally, came the juniors, who were young monks under instruction.[24]

Nothing was more important than the copying of manuscripts. One writer says,

> The monastic scholar par excellence was the scribe, and Colum Cille and Baithin, the first two abbots of Iona, laid the foundations of a scribal art which with its later illuminative elements, formed one of the greatest glories of Irish monasticism.[25]

Columcille himself was committed to this task right to the end of his days. Whiteside writes,

> Such was his own enthusiasm that Columba, though an old and weary man, was still in his hut copying the psalms on the night he died. Knowing that the end was near, when he reached Psalm 34:11 (10) and had written the words: 'Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing', he laid down his pen and said, 'Here at the end of the page I must stop. Let Baithene (Baithin) write what follows'.[26]

Columcille's interests were not confined to the welfare of his community on Iona. Tunney says,

> Soon after his arrival in 563 A.D. Colmcille turned to the business of his mission and undertook the dangerous 150 mile journey across sea, bog and mountain to king Brude's court near what is now Inverness.[27]

The confrontation with Brude and his druids marked the beginning of Columcille's mission to the Picts. How successful did that mission turn out to be? Tunney says that, 'It is as difficult to document Colmcille's mission to the Picts as it is impossible to demonstrate its success'.[28] Bede surely oversimplifies when he says that Columcille,

> arrived in Britain in the ninth year of the reign of the powerful Pictish king, Brude son of Maelchon; he converted that people to the faith of Christ by his preaching and example.[29]

There was considerable success however. Tunney goes on to say,

> The main evidence we have of the success of the saint's mission is the list of early ecclesiastical foundations which he is known to have founded or which bear his name. They numbered at least fifty.....[30]

Brian Lacey details some of these locations:

> Besides Iona, Colum Cille and his monks established a number of dependent monasteries on some of the other islands in the Hebrides and on the adjacent west coast of Scotland. One of these was at a place called Campus or Mag-Luinge (Soroby?) on the island of Tiree, where there were at least two further monasteries,

> Artchain and Bledach. There was a monastery on the unidentified island of Elena and another at Cella Diuni near Loch Awe on the mainland. A monastery which figures several times in Adomnan's Life, and which was founded before 574, was at the unidentified place called Hinba.[31]

F. W. Fawcett goes so far as to say that,

> The islands were evangelized in turn. The Orkneys and Shetlands, the Hebrides and the Faroes heard and accepted the Gospel. On distant Iceland missions were established and even within the lifetime of its great founder Iona was able to send forth missionaries to the Kingdom of Northumbria, to the Isle of Man and to South Britain.[32]

Never one to believe in the separation of Church and State Columcille, 'much as one might expect, did not confine his attentions to ecclesiastical matters'. The death of Conaill, king of Dal Riata, in 574 led to Columcille 'playing a central role in the kingdom's political development'. Conaill's likely heir was Eoghan, his cousin. However, Columcille's preferred candidate for the kingship was Eoghan's brother, Aidan, 'who for some years had campaigned with the Britons of Strathclyde and had shown considerable military aptitude'.[33] Columcille's intervention led to a brief civil war in which 'Aidan defeated his opponents and secured the crown'. Tunney adds,

> Colmcille brought him to Iona to have him consecrated king and thus.....began the long tradition of having kings of Scotland crowned at Iona.[34]

More was to follow, as Tunney goes on to relate,

> This was not Colmcille's only excursion into politics at this stage and the year after Aidan's coronation he acted as the new king's negotiator at the famous convention of Drum Ceatt, held in 575 A.D. on the banks of the river Roe, near Limavady in Co. Derry. Over the centuries a great deal of legend has become attached to this convention which was called to sort out several important political questions.[35]

Once more Columcille the statesman, 'the king maker', was at work. (Incidentally this was only one of several trips back to Ireland from his place of 'exile', in spite of the claim that his spiritual advisor had said that he was not to set foot on his native land again.)

Tunney concludes the story of Columcille's life,

> After Drum Ceatt Colmcille devoted himself to building up his foundations as centres of evangelisation, prayer, learning and art. Mostly he lived a quiet life on Iona. Finally in 597 A.D., worn out by the strain of an arduous life he collapsed

> before the altar of Iona's little church and on June 9th he died... But while the founder of the paruchia of Columban monasteries was dead, his influence and that of the Columban church had by no means reached the zenith of its achievements.[36]

## VI After Columcille

What happened over the first hundred years is summarized by Tunney,

> Just over a century separates the death of Adamnan and the death of Colmcille, but they were momentous years for the monastery and for the Columban Church in general. The major achievements of the Columban monks are bound up with the expansion of their missionary work into England and the establishment of an important centre for evangelisation at Lindisfarne in Northumbria. Up until then the Anglo-Saxons had proved to be the most stubborn opponents of Christianity in Britain, but where St. Augustine failed, St. Aidan of Lindisfarne and his Celtic monks succeeded.[37]

At the same time others were pressing on into continental Europe. One writer says,

> Colum Cille's mission inspired his namesake Columbanus to go further afield a generation later and England, France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Italy would soon re-echo to the tramp of Irish monks.[38]

That was the great period of Irish Christianity. With a mixture of pride and poignancy James Carney has written, 'For the first and so far the last time in her history, Ireland became the most vital civilising force in the West'.[39]

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# PROPHECY IN THE CHURCH TO-DAY, AN ASSESSMENT OF THE POSITION OF WAYNE GRUDEM IN HIS BOOK 'THE GIFT OF PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND TO-DAY.' *

**by W. Norris Wilson.**

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Broadly speaking, up until the publication of this challenging work, with regard to prophecy, we could speak of a Reformed consensus view which runs more or less as follows:- The prophetic Word was an infallible revelation of God to his people. In all essentials it functioned in the N.T. church as it did in the O.T. The dawning of the new administration of the Covenant of Grace was accompanied by much prophetic activity. The Lord, through his servants the N.T. prophets, attested to and explained the crucial fulfilment complex of redemptive events accomplished by Christ which culminated in his once-for-all pouring out of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Many prophets were active, yet, out of that abundance, the Lord chose an apostolic corpus of written prophetic words to serve as the sure, once-for-all, foundation of the New Covenant church's life and ministry. He then sovereignly guided his church to set aside this corpus as the N.T. canon. This climactic episode in the history of redemption having been completed the stream of prophetic utterance in the church dried up. From then on the church's prophetic task has been the expounding and applying of this fully completed canon of God's Word. One of the main reasons why this Reformed view does not feel the need of, or seek for, fresh prophecy to-day is its strong insistence on the doctrine of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Grudem's work, however, presents a strong challenge to this view.

Grudem's central thesis is as follows:- He claims to have found a 'middle ground' (p.14) between the 'charismatic' believer who claims the gift of prophecy as a direct 'word from the Lord' (p.13 - what we might call the 'high view continuationist' position) and the Reformed believer who views the gift of being able to speak God's very words as threatening the unique authority of Scripture (what we might call the 'high view cessationist' position). This 'third' (p.14) position is what we might call the 'low view continuationist'. He argues that the gift of prophecy in the N.T. is essentially different from O.T. prophecy. For Grudem the equivalent of the O.T. prophet in the N.T. was the apostle, who

likewise, spoke with unique divine authority. This apostolic office was foundational and has ceased in the church. However, 'ordinary prophets in local N.T. congregations' (p.14) were different. There, 'prophecy was not equal to scripture in authority, but was simply a very human - and sometimes partially mistaken - report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone's mind' (p.14).

This 'low' view of prophecy deals with the concerns of the opposing camps. The cessationist concern to preserve a closed canon and the sufficiency and unique authority of Scripture is not undermined. The charismatic's concern to preserve the continuing use of prophecy (now properly understood) is not undermined. Thus the peace-making plea of the book is for both Reformed cessationists and charismatics to modify their 'high' views of the nature of prophecy to-day and come together on Grudem's 'middle ground'. Grudem presses his case. If God intends prophecy to be used until Christ returns and 'all Christians are given permission to prophesy in church if God so prompts them', then our churches should be making provision for the use of prophecy 'by both men and women' (p.147). Indeed his closing chapter gives practical suggestions as to how prophecy can be encouraged and regulated in the church to-day. As he says, 'Just as prophecy functioned simultaneously with the actual presence of living apostles in the churches and did not compete with or pose a challenge to the unique ruling authority of the apostles, so to-day prophecy can exist and function simultaneously with the presence of the completed, written Scripture in our churches without challenging or competing with the unique ruling authority which Scripture alone has in our lives' (p.250).

So the challenge to the Reformed community is clear:- Can we move with Grudem onto his 'middle ground' where the rift between cessationists and charismatics can be healed? Despite the nobility of such an aim and despite aspects of the book that are commendable (e.g. his curbs on extremes and dangers of the charismatic movement) it is the considered opinion of the present writer that we cannot. This conclusion is based on an examination of the exegetical foundations on which his argument is based.

**1. His early attempt to downgrade the role of prophecy in the N.T. is not persuasive.**

In chapter 2 Grudem argues that the counterpart of the O.T. prophets were N.T. apostles alone and not N.T. prophets. He attempts to cut the link between O.T. and N.T. prophets - 'N.T. prophets are never connected with O.T. prophets

as apostles are' (p.26). Even Christ is connected with the O.T. prophets as an apostle (Heb.1: 1-2; 3: 1).

But surely we can say in reply that the N.T. makes clear that Christ was the 'great prophet' who came in line with the O:T. prophets (Matt.13: 57; Acts 3: 22; 7: 37)? Grudem asserts that there is no instance where N.T. prophets are associated with O.T. prophets. But what of John the Baptist (Matt.11: 9-14)? What of Christ's words in Matthew 10: 41 and 23: 30-37? Obviously Christ sees an unbroken succession of prophets in the new administration as there was in the old (cf. John in Rev.16: 6; 18: 24; 22: 9).

Grudem argues that 1 Corinthians 14: 37-38 shows us the N.T. apostle asserting authority over the lesser N.T. prophet. However, while it is true that Paul writes to regulate the practice of prophetic activity in the N.T. (much as Moses did so in the O.T.), is he not just saying here that one who has the true prophetic gift will know that this regulation of things is from God. This does not mean a lessening of prophetic authority.

Why then were N.T. apostles not called prophets? Grudem's answer is that Joel predicted that prophecy would be available to all believers (Joel 2: 28-29). However this is surely missing the point of the passage which is that every believer will receive the outpoured gift of the Holy Spirit, an event that will be marked by various special manifestations, prophecy amongst them. This is not saying prophecy will be available to all believers (as Paul also teaches in 1 Cor.12: 28-30).

Grudem then attempts to show that the word 'prophet' has, by N.T. times, become debased coinage. However the evidence he presents appears to be somewhat contradictory. He goes on to make the following claims - the 'choice of a new term ....prevented much understanding ...not just from secular uses of the word, but even from the O.T. itself (p.35)'... 'when the N.T. writers ...use the word "prophet"...it will often be in contexts dealing with the ...prophets of the O.T...but that does not tell us what prophet will mean when it is applied to people other than these O.T. prophets (p.38)...the new term "apostle" was necessary as it did not conflict with "O.T. expectations" or "misleading (O.T.) implications (p.41)"'. Quite apart from begging the question here just what does Grudem mean when he speaks of the O.T. causing misunderstanding or misleading us when we come to determine the meaning of a word by letting Scripture interpret Scripture?

Finally in this regard Grudem turns to the Book of Revelation as 'the largest example in the N.T. of a 'prophecy' (p.43)'. However as 'high' view prophecy this teaches us nothing about how prophecy functioned among 'ordinary Christians in first century churches (p.45)'. Grudem asserts that in that context, 'ordinary Christians...in the worship service of some local group (gave)...brief prophetic words to meet the need of the moment in some local church (p.44)'. Apart from the fact that Grudem is assuming conclusions about prophecy before he has established them, we need to take note of Revelation 22:6,9. If the prophecy of Revelation is what one of a whole brotherhood of prophets to whom revelations are being made, received, why then should Grudem insist that Revelation tells us nothing about what prophecy was like in the N.T.church? Paul, numbering himself with the Corinthian prophets (1 Cor.13:8), defines prophecy in 1 Corinthians 13:2 as to its purpose and in 1 Corinthians 14:3-4 as to its effect. To us the Book of Revelation is a prime illustration of prophecy so defined. Thus the Book does inform us as to what the gift of prophecy was like in the N.T.church.

**2. His handling of the key texts, Ephesian 2:20 & 3:5, is not persuasive.**

The usual interpretation of Ephesians 2:20 is that Paul distinguishes two groups in the N.T.church, apostles and prophets, who together were foundational and thus temporary. Grudem admits that if the reference to prophets as foundational applies to all N.T. prophets then he would have to concede that they had, 'a unique "foundational" role in the N.T.church and...we would clearly expect this gift to cease once the N.T. was complete (p.46)'. Grudem, however, argues that only one foundational gift is being referred to here - that of 'apostles who were also prophets' (according to his understanding of prophet). In opposing Grudem's arguments here we can only focus on the stronger points in his argument.

Grudem argues that his interpretation ('apostle-prophets') is possible grammatically and is consistent with the construction in 4:11, sometimes interpreted 'pastor-teachers'. However his case is weak here. For one thing in 4:11 Paul plainly lists apostles as a group distinguished from prophets as a group. For another though Grudem gives several grammatical parallels to justify his interpretation, only 4:11 is a true grammatical parallel (i.e. having two plural nouns) D. B. Wallace in a thorough study of this construction[1] concludes that while the interpretation Grudem adopts is theoretically possible it is the least likely. He suggests that here we have apostles and prophets as two distinct groups united by their function as foundation stones of the church. This is also the considered

opinion of R.Gaffin, '"prophets" designates those who in their frequent or regular exercise of the gift of prophecy are a distinct group within the church, distinguished also from the apostles, who likewise exercise prophetic functions'.[2] This view is shared by the great majority of commentators.

Next Grudem tries to argue that prophets in the N.T. were a lesser breed since it was apostles rather than prophets who received the major revelation that Gentiles were to be included in the church. Yet surely the N.T. prophets James (Acts 15:13ff) and Agabus (Acts 11:28) speak to the whole matter of Gentile inclusion.

Grudem then asserts that the foundation metaphor of Ephesians 2:20 fits better with apostles than prophets for, 'if the foundation consists of all those who had the gift of prophecy in all the N.T.churches...then it would have to be a foundation that is continually being changed and added on to (p.54)'. However we feel Grudem is putting too much restriction on Paul's metaphor here. Paul is speaking of a stage in redemptive history he is living through when apostles and prophets are still active in laying the foundation and building is also ongoing.

Grudem also asks, 'if these foundational authoritative prophets existed then where are they and why is there no record of their divinely authorised words'? In answer we ask - What about John the Baptist, Luke, Jude etc? Anyway just because inspired revelations by prophets did not make it into the canon does not mean they lacked the full authority of the Word of God as written by an apostle (other inspired letters of Paul did not make it into the canon also. 1 Cor.5:9; Col.4:16).

Next Grudem asserts that Revelation 21:14 emphasizes the unique foundational role of the apostles alone since only their names are mentioned on the twelve foundations of the city. However John's purpose is different from Paul's here as he gives a vision of a perfect cube. In actuality we know there were thirteen apostles when Paul was added. So just because, in the interests of symmetry John does not include him here does not mean he wishes to exclude him as an apostle. Anyway we know about John's view of the foundational importance of N.T. prophets from the next chapter (22:6,9).

Grudem then tries to establish that the prophets of Ephesians 4:11 are non-foundational prophets in local congregations, whereas those mentioned in 2:20 and 3:5 are foundational. However it seems clear that both verses are in the larger context of 2:11-4:16, 4:7-16 merely being an expansion of 2:11-22. Given this contextual connection between the two it is surely most unlikely that without any explanation Paul would use the word 'prophet' in two different senses.

Following on from this Grudem presents no real argument for dealing with the 1 Corinthians 12:28 parallel, where again apostles and prophets are distinguished.

Finally, after another couple of inconclusive points, Grudem urges that if we are not persuaded by his arguments and must still see two groups in the texts then we may do so as long as we do not make prophets here refer to all N.T. prophets! This may be referring to prophets with equal authority to apostles but we must still allow for, '...ordinary prophets scattered through many congregations (p.62)'. In effect he is admitting that there were unique foundational prophets who ceased as soon as the N.T. was written. To give ground on such an important text as Ephesians 2:20; 3:5, which speaks to the whole church on the place of prophecy, and opt to put more stress on the Corinthian passage where Paul writes to regulate a local situation is a step that weakens Grudem's case considerably (especially in light of his statement on the crucial importance of these verses for his position at the beginning of his discussion of them).

### 3. His treatment of 1 Corinthians 12 - 14 is not persuasive.

From these chapters Grudem considers five passages seeking to establish his 'low' view of prophecy, namely that, '...the prophets at Corinth did not speak with a divine authority of actual words and were not thought by others to speak with an absolute divine authority...(their) prophecy...while it may have been prompted by a "revelation" from God, had only the authority of the merely human words in which it was spoken. The prophet could err, could misinterpret and could be questioned or challenged at any point (p.87)'.

First, in 1 Corinthians 14:29 where 'the others' are to 'weigh carefully what is said' by a prophet, Grudem argues that this is not a discerning of true versus false prophecy but a discerning of true and false elements in the prophecy. Thus, '...the prophets at Corinth must not have been thought to speak with divine authority attaching to their actual words (p.79)...each prophecy might have both true and false elements in it (p.78)'. Paul, he says, is not speaking of testing the prophets as he is referring to familiar well-attested prophets who do not require testing again and again as to their genuineness. In reply we ask, could not at least some of the prophets have been itinerants passing through? Surely also accredited apparently genuine prophets could prove to be apostate. Did Christ not warn of unbelievers who would profess to practice the gift? So we ask, Is it not the case that Paul, envisioning a plurality of prophetic oracles being heard, is preparing the church to be ready to sort out the false prophecies

from among the many they might potentially hear. Is this not the 'distinguishing between spirits' of 1 Corinthians 12:10? Is not all this in line with 1 John 4:1-6 and tying in with the judging of O.T. prophets? Grudem says the verb *diakrino* means 'to make distinctions'. He envisages each member listening to the prophecy and '...distinguishing what he or she felt to be good from the less good, what was thought to be helpful from the unhelpful, what was perceived to be true from the false (p.77)...accepting some of the prophecy as good and helpful and rejecting some of it as erroneous or misleading (p.74)'. However Paul uses the verb in 1 Corinthians 6:5 to mean 'passing judgment one way or another'. Also the absolute polarity between true and false prophecies that is to be distinguished by hearers of prophecy in 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 leaves no room for the more subtle distinctions Grudem suggests. Thus we feel his view on the judging of prophecies, introduced to rob the true, accredited Corinthian prophets of divine authority attaching to their very words is to be rejected.

Second, 1 Corinthians 14:30. Here he argues firstly that Paul's instruction means that the prophecy of the first speaker who sits down to give way to the second could be lost for ever, thus showing that he could not be speaking the very words of God. In reply we would argue that surely Paul is writing here to regulate a chaotic situation where various apparently authentic prophets are all speaking at once in a disorderly way and he simply asks them to take turns. One speaker making way for another does not entail the words of God being lost. The first speaker could wait until the second was finished and then resume, or the second could carry on with and develop the prophecy of the first.

He then argues, secondly, that the word 'revelation' here does not imply divine authority on the part of these prophets since, in reporting the revelation, the prophet may use his own words and not the actual words of God. He argues from four other uses of the word 'revelation' in the N.T. (Phil.3:15; Rom.1:18; Eph.1:17 & Matt.11:27) that the people reporting the revelations in these instances would not be speaking infallibly, so the prophets of 1 Corinthians 14 would not be reporting infallibly. In reply we note that more than once Grudem states that a word does not have to be used to refer to the same thing every time it is used in Scripture. Is he not guilty of infringing his wise rule here? It can be clearly shown that each of the four references quoted is not using the word 'revelation' in the sense of a new prophetic word from God as it is being used in 1 Corinthians 14:30. Thus Philippians 3:15 is expressing the confidence that God would make the truth already revealed clear; Romans 1:18 is clearly dealing with general revelation; Ephesians 1:17 uses a term descriptive of the Holy Spirit ('the Spirit of prophecy') in expressing the desire that he would help

believers to know the Father better (not give prophetic revelations) and when Matthew 11:27 speaks of the Son revealing the Father to the elect so that they come into a saving relationship with him it is speaking of sovereign illumination (whereas v.25 does speak of prophetic revelation, but this is through Christ himself).

The point must be made here that in Scripture a revelation comes in words and giving a revelation is giving the words as God gave them (Deut.18:18-20). It is not a matter of the prophet trying to express an idea brought to his mind and not doing a good job of it, as Grudem proposes. To talk about the implications of a revelation from God or do a rough summation in one's own words is one thing - to give the revelation in the words God gave is quite another. It seems gratuitous to assert that the Corinthian prophets were in effect doing the former. For Grudem prophecy here is, 'purely human words (p.80)' where, 'the prophet could err, could misinterpret and could be questioned or challenged at any point (p.87)'. It, 'is imperfect and impure and will contain elements which are not to be obeyed or trusted (p.110)'. It includes, 'leadings, insights, hunches, premonitions (p.109)', 'a sense (p.111)'. Yet these are still revelatory messages received from God (p.87), inspired by the Holy Spirit (p.111)! God gives a revelation which is a mixture of truth and error! The dangerous implications of Grudem's position with regard to our doctrines of God and Scripture should be obvious.

Third, 1 Corinthians 14:36. He argues that as Paul says, 'the word of God did not go forth from them', the Corinthian prophets were not speaking with divine authority. In reply we would argue that here Paul uses the term 'word of God' to refer to the gospel message that came from Jerusalem. He is speaking to women who are speaking out in church contrary to accepted practice shaped by the Word and so he tersely reminds them that the church does not begin and end with them.

Fourth, 1 Corinthians 14:37-38. This Grudem takes to mean that the Corinthian prophets had less authority than Paul the apostle. We have already answered this under point one.

Fifth, 1 Corinthians 11:5. Grudem says that since Paul speaks of women prophesying here and yet forbids them to speak in 14:34, the 'type of prophecy done by women at Corinth did not involve authoritative speech (p.86)'. In reply we would note that Grudem is mixing two separate issues here. In Chapter 11 Paul deals with the head covering a prophetess must wear when prophesying authoritatively, while Chapter 14 deals with women speaking in the public ser-

vice, not necessarily prophesying. Even if this is prophesying here, Paul's regulation that it not be done in the public service need not necessarily undermine the authority of the Corinthian prophetesses.

**4. His attempt to downgrade N.T. prophecy by using the example of Agabus is not persuasive.**

First, Acts 11:28. Even though we have here a word from God predicting something that came to pass, Grudem says this is prophecy with 'vagueness...imprecision...not reported in divinely authoritative words (p.90)'. But surely the opposite is the case! Do we not have here something of the authority of Elijah in 1 Kings 17?

Second, Acts 21:10-11. Grudem asserts that since Agabus gave, 'an inaccurate prophecy' by O.T. standards, 'he would have been condemned as a false prophet (p.96)'. Agabus' mistakes were his saying that the Jews would bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles whereas in actual fact it was the Gentile Romans who bound him having rescued him from the Jews' murderous intentions. Thus Agabus (like the Corinthian prophets) got a 'revelation from God and reports it in his own words (p.99)'. In reply we feel this interpretation should be rejected. Notice the introductory prophetic formula with which Agabus begins (as with O.T. prophets), then the prediction accompanied by symbolic action. Here is N.T. prophecy in continuity with O.T. prophecy. Deuteronomy 18:28 does not require the pedantic wooden precision of exact, literal detailed fulfilment Grudem says it must, as a close study of O.T. examples will show (e.g. Amos 9:11 cf. Acts 15:16-17). Paul, in speaking of this event later, specifically says he was, 'handed over to the Romans' (Acts 28:17)). He also spoke of how he himself bound believers before his conversion (Acts 24:4). Did he himself do the binding? We would conclude therefore that this example does not help Grudem to draw a link between N.T. prophecy and that which is occurring in present day charismatic circles.

**5. His efforts to argue that prophecy is a gift available to all Christians are not persuasive.**

In Chapter 10 Grudem argues that N.T. prophecy is not a clearly defined right or responsibility limited to a publicly recognized group. It is merely a function which, he argues from 1 Corinthians 14:1,5 & 39, Paul encourages all believers to seek and Grudem urges believers to take positive steps to do so. However Grudem seems to have forgotten some controlling principles Paul lays

down in 1 Corinthians 12, where he states that God has given the gift of prophecy to some (1 Cor.12:10, 28-29 cf. Rom.12:6; Eph.4:11). Thus when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:1 '...eagerly desire...the gift of prophecy', it cannot mean he urges all to seek the gift. Rather we take him to mean, 'Desire that the gift be manifest among you in those to whom the Lord will sovereignly give it'. Likewise when he says, 'I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophecy', it cannot mean all without exception. It is more a case of, 'It would be great if you all could, but obviously you all cannot. You all *think* you can - 'everyone has a revelation', v.26!), but only two or three prophets (i.e. not those sporadically exercising a common gift, but those recognized as such) are to speak'. Thus the instructions concerning prophecy in chapter 14 relate to the special, formally recognized group of prophets in Corinth, recognized according to 1 Corinthians12:10; 14:29. Moreover we would contend from Paul elsewhere that prophecy is a gift whereby one can fathom or know 'mystery' (1 Cor.13:2) and 'mystery' refers to that which God sovereignly discloses by inspiration and which has to do with the salvation revealed in Christ. This, Paul says, is now made known by the foundational apostles and prophets (Eph.2:20; 3:4-9). The revelation granted to the prophets in Corinth, as in all the N.T., is one with the inspired revelation granted to and made known by the apostles. Like their O.T. counterparts the N.T. prophets 'foretold' (Acts 11:28; 21:10) and 'forthtold' (Acts 15:32; 1 Cor.14:3) the words of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus we reject Grudem's position that N.T. prophecy is a gift available to all believers to-day.

**6. His argument that 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 clearly teaches that prophecy will continue and function until Christ's return is not persuasive.**

Grudem says, 'In 1 Cor.13:8-13 Paul tells the Corinthians that prophecy will continue until but not beyond the time when Christ returns (p.252)....that prophecy will last among believers until that time. This means that we have a clear biblical statement that Paul expected the gift of prophecy to continue through the entire church age and to function for the benefit of the church until the Lord returns (p.233)'. But is this quite as clear as Grudem asserts? If the 'now...then' comparison of v.12 refers to the present age versus the post second-advent situation does this mean the believer will not see Christ face to face and be fully known by him at the point of death?

Is Paul indeed speaking of the post-resurrection state in vs.10 and 12? In v.10 the neuter noun often translated 'perfection' literally means 'the completed or whole thing'. Used eighteen times in the N.T., it never once refers to the

second coming and the consummation that follows it. Significantly however it is twice translated 'mature' as opposed to 'childish' (1 Cor.2:6; 14:20). Thus vs.9b-10 could be rendered as follows, 'for we (note how Paul includes himself with these Corinthian prophets) prophecy in part (or our prophecy is partial), but when that which is whole (or complete) comes the partial will cease (be abolished)'. Is Paul not repeating his statement of v.8, 'prophecies will cease (be abolished)'? Thus Paul is speaking of the completion of the revelatory process. In the 'now' of the revelatory process the prophet only has part of the whole picture. It is like being a child, but when the child is mature he will see the full picture. It is like seeing things as in a mirror that are fragmentary, blurred, unclear. But in the 'then' of the completed revelatory process we shall have the full picture, it will be 'face to face' (cf. Moses in Num.12:6-8), we shall have full knowledge. The three revelatory gifts mentioned in v.8 we take to be the ones whereby God has revealed to us his supernatural, authoritative, infallible truth. Obviously from our vantage point in the history of redemption the completion of the revelatory process came with the completion of the canon, which we hold to be utterly sufficient revelation for all our needs as we await the second advent.

Crucially important is the presupposition concerning the meaning of 'prophecy' one brings to 1 Corinthians 13. If we have established that prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is prophecy in the sense of inspired words from God then, when Paul says that prophecy shall cease, is he not making explicit what was implicit in the foundation metaphor of Ephesians 2:20; 3:5?

Finally, in the passage here Paul contrasts the things that will cease (the three revelatory gifts - prophecies, tongues, knowledge) with the things that will remain (the three graces - faith, hope and love). In Grudem's interpretation, if the revelatory gifts remain until the second advent then the three graces must remain after the second advent. Yet how, we ask, will faith and hope remain after that? Surely in heaven faith becomes sight and as for hope, does Paul not say, 'Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? (Rom.8:24)'. Our interpretation allows us to see these two latter graces as remaining in this life after the revelatory gifts cease.

**Conclusion.**

We therefore hold Grudem's thesis to be based upon unsound exegetical foundations. It involves a dualistic understanding of revelation. Thus there is canonical apostolic revelation for the whole church that bears on our salvation

and there are private prophetic revelations for individuals that bear on our individual life situations and needs. Commenting on this point R. Gaffin, whom Grudem has argued against all through his book, says this, 'Such an understanding of revelation is in irreconcilable conflict with what the Bible itself shows to be the covenantal, redemptive-historical character of *all* revelation. God does not reveal himself along two tracks, one public and one private. As long as revelation is viewed in the first place as God's Word to me as an individual and as given to provide me with specific, explicit directions and answers to the particular concerns and perplexities of my individual life situation, it is fundamentally misunderstood and a sense of the inadequacy of the Bible alone as a guide for life is almost inevitable'.[3] We would agree. It is hard to escape the conclusion that if, as Grudem asserts, additional prophecy since the close of the canon (be it ever so 'low'!) is not only possible but necessary to the church's life, then the Reformed doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is seriously undermined. Thus we are driven back to the Reformed consensus view that we mentioned in the beginning which is that prophecy in the true biblical sense has ceased. It is this view we believe that is clearly set down in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter one.

## References

# This is a shortened version of a paper given at the International Conference of Reformed Churches in Zwolle, The Netherlands, in September 1993. The full version is found in the published 'Proceedings' of the above Conference, pp.116-135.

1. D. B. Wallace, *Grace Theological Journal*, 1983.
2. R. B. Gaffin, *Perspectives On Pentecost*. p.95.
3. R. B. Gaffin, Op. cit, p.97.

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell,* Thomas F. Torrance, T & T Clark 1996, Hb, 330pp. £24.95

Professor Torrance taught Christian Dogmatics at Edinburgh from 1952-79, and is well known as an expositor of the theology of Karl Barth, an ecumenist, and a creative thinker in the area of the relationship between theology and science. Therefore a volume from him on the history of Scottish theology warrants careful attention.

The purpose of the book is to give 'brief soundings in the thought of some of the most notable and influential theologians in the Kirk.' (ix) The nine chapters present reflections on such writers as John Knox, John Forbes, Samuel Rutherford, Robert Leighton, Thomas Boston, John Brown of Haddington, Thomas Erskine and John McLeod Campbell.

The author selected the theologians to be discussed partly by the books which were on his shelves. More significantly, the choice was made because of his interest in the particular issue which shapes the discussion in every chapter: the doctrine of limited atonement, and its relation to the gospel offer and assurance.

The central perspective of this book is that the history of Scottish theology was characterized by conflict between two traditions: the older, evangelical Calvinism brought from Geneva by John Knox, which was dynamic rather than scholastic, which began with the infinite, unconditional love of God for the whole of mankind as revealed in Christ, regarded assurance as belonging to the essence of faith, and 'wedded evangelical passion with the sacramental life of the Church.' (55) This was soon eclipsed, according to Torrance, by a form of Calvinism derived from Beza, 'a rigidly scholastic and rationalistic form of Calvinism in which logico-causal relations tended to replace ontological relations.' (60) Belonging to this new form of Calvinism was the federal theology which was later incorporated in the Westminster Standards.

Professor Torrance's hostility toward the Westminster theology is evident throughout the book. It is that theology, along with the influence of the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant, which is responsible for the 'divisive elements and unfortunate features in Scottish theology.' (xi) What is particularly offensive is the Confession's doctrine of limited atonement, with the associated notion of double predestination. This stems, in the author's view, from a sub-Christian view of God: '...the doctrine of God, thus presented with-

in the framework of the Confession, is strictly not a fully Christian doctrine, that is, of God the Father made known to us definitively through Christ and his Spirit in the Gospel.' (133) He quotes with approval the judgment of George Hendry that the Confession 'ends in describing another God, who is unrevealed, and who lacks the attributes of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' (135)

On the other hand, theologians who advocate the universal scope of the atonement, and God's unconditional love for each and every sinner, are hailed as those who are returning to the good old ways of the original Reformers. This is especially evident in the discussion of Thomas Erskine and John McLeod Campbell.

It is not to be expected in a book of this kind that interpretation of particular theologians would be supported by extensive evidence, but the evidence which is given ought to be accurate. It is surprising to read here that Calvin rejected double predestination and taught universal atonement! Torrance gives as evidence the fact that Calvin disagreed with the formula sufficiently for all, efficaciously only for the elect in reference to the intent of the atonement. (64,107,196) He cites *On the Eternal Predestination of God, IX.5.* A careful reading of that whole section, however, reveals that Calvin in fact *accepts* the formula: '...only he is reckoned in the number of God's children who will be a partaker of Christ. The evangelist John sets forth the office of Christ as nothing else than by His death to gather the children of God into one...Hence we conclude that, though reconciliation is offered to all through Him, yet the benefit is peculiar to the elect.' (Calvin's purpose in all of Section IX is to refute Georgius' attack on the doctrine of election and reprobation!) In his commentary on I John 2:1, Calvin explicitly affirms his acceptance of the formula in question.

Other examples could be given of the misunderstanding or misuse of quotations by the author in his zeal to defend his belief in unlimited atonement. His description of the theology of Calvin, Knox, and Westminster should be treated with great caution.

The primary value of *Scottish Theology* is in the introduction it provides to several little-known Scottish theologians. It is also valuable in showing how a theologian deeply influenced by Barth uses that perspective to interpret the history of theology. Professor Torrance gives us more understanding of *contemporary* Scottish theology than he does of the theology of the First and Second Reformations in Scotland.

**Wayne R. Spear**

*Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation.* Alan J. Torrance (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1996, pp.xii+388, £24.95).

There is long-standing academic convention that one does not review a book written by a colleague. My friend Alan Torrance and I happen to have adjoining offices at King's College, London, so when I was asked to review this book I asked him about this. He generously responded that as far as he is concerned anything in the public domain is fair game.

The first thing to be said about this book is that many will find it dauntingly academic. From a standpoint that is very sympathetic to the theological approach of Karl Barth the book provides a sustained conversation with both Barth and his continental and other successors - such as Pannenberg, Moltmann and Jıngel - about fundamental questions of theological method. Anyone with such interests will find much in this book to ponder and to engage with, but an Anglo-Saxon philosopher comments on this material with a certain amount of trepidation.

But perhaps a flavour of the book as a whole, as well as a basic source of difficulty with it, is to be found in its starting point. It is a fundamental tenet of Barth's theology, and one that is endorsed by Dr. Torrance, that Christian theology must concern itself wholly and solely with God's revelation, and that this revelation is God himself. Christian theology cannot find its starting point in any other source - not in human reason or religion, not in anything that is distinct from God in his Act of revelation.

Dr. Torrance is emphatic in repeatedly insisting that what this account of revelation means, for Barth and for himself, is that no distinction can be made between God's revelation - himself - and the reception of that revelation. 'We are always speaking of the way in which the Word of God is so said to this or that man that he must hear it' (Barth, cited on p.33). 'If God always speaks concretely a Word of personal address then its being heard is integral to the same act of God' (Torrance, p.32). According to Dr. Torrance this connection between revelation and its reception is not a logical connection, but is grounded in the work of the Holy Spirit.

Such a connection raises two sorts of difficulties. The first is that the writers of the New Testament countenance, and indeed stress, the opposite. God reveals his grace in Christ, and on being confronted by it some reject that revelation just as some accept it. How else are the various reactions to the apostolic preaching as recorded in Acts to be understood? The apostles ascribe the receiving of the

revelation to the work of the Spirit, just as they account for its rejection in terms of the hardness of the human heart. And even if we, in Barthian fashion, restrict revelation to God's revelation of himself, how is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ to be understood except as a rejection of God's revelation?

The second difficulty is that if revelation and its acceptance are so closely tied together, then it would seem to follow that whenever men and women reject Christ, the person they reject cannot be Christ but must be someone else. Since if it were truly Christ that they reject, then they could not reject him since Christ is God's revelation and must be accepted. But this, besides raising difficulties about human responsibility and accountability, appears to go flatly against Christ's own testimony about himself; in John 3.18, say.

These difficulties about the idea of revelation are compounded in Dr. Torrance's case because he uses his idea of revelation to offer a critique of that Reformed tradition of which Barth (and he) are heirs, in particular to argue that in separating creation from redemption the Reformed tradition has missed the point about the identity of revelation and its reception (p.58). (The connection appears to be that since God's sole revelation of himself in Christ is redemptive, any doctrine of creation must be developed through that redemptive revelation alone and not constructed from separate materials.) The *bêtes noires* here are covenant theology (with its *ordo salutis* of law and grace) and natural theology, as these (according to Dr. Torrance) emerge in the Reformed tradition. What these developments have in common is a tendency to see 'God's will inscribed in the created order to be perceived by natural reason through the universal *sensus moralis,* that is, the moral conscience' (p.60).

Time would fail us to go into all the details of covenant theology, but as for the *ordo salutis,* the covenant theologians (and not only they) simply followed what they took to be the order of John the Baptist, or of Christ himself, or of the apostolic preaching. And in their expositions of the Fall, theologians of the Reformed tradition were emphatic that what the first pair disobeyed was not their *sensus moralis,* but the explicit command of God. But on the other hand such theologians also had regard to the idea of general revelation, which they derived from Romans 1 and 2 and from elsewhere in the New Testament. Yet the 'natural theology' which they (say, Francis Turretin or John Owen) developed as a result was very rudimentary, hardly going beyond what Calvin had said about the *sensus divinitatis* in the early chapters of the Institutes. Is Dr. Torrance not in danger here of endorsing, in the name of Christ, an a priori method for Christian theology which he then imposes on the only reliable data we have of what Christ and his apostles actually said and did?

The remainder of the book is concerned to re-locate the Barthian starting point in God himself more consistently than Barth did and to understand creation as a central aspect of redemption, as the creation of communion (p.64) which can only come about through the sacramental life of the church (p.365) and which echoes the communion of the three divine persons. 'God recreates us.....in order to be taken to participate in the "mutuality" of the intra-divine communion' (p.222). Much attention is given to the issues of language raised by this proposed re-location, and to the justification that there is for calling the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit 'persons'.

This is a rich and demanding book which a short review can do scant justice to.

**Paul Helm**

*Princeton Seminary: The Majestic Testimony 1869 - 1929,* David B. Calhoun, Banner of Truth Trust Hbk 560 pages £14.95.

This eagerly awaited second volume of the history of Princeton Seminary completes the story up to the watershed year of 1929. In this part of the story we 'encounter the great Hodge lineage, the broad scholarship of B.B. Warfield, the brilliance of Geerhardus Vos, the emergence of the young J. Gresham Machen'. Again as in volume 1 the story of the Seminary is inextricably bound with the men who held positions of leadership within it. This is not however a story which provides the Reformed reader with a happy ending. The cold winds of modernism which were freezing the life out of American Presbyterianism at the turn of the century eventually found some cracks in the Princeton edifice and by 1929 the warm hearted evangelicals knew it was time to leave.

The title of the book is taken from words of Caspar Winstar Hodge, the last of the great line to teach at the Seminary. His comments reflect the spirit in which the Old Princeton men sought to carry on their work, 'The majestic testimony of the church in all times is that its advances in spiritual life have always been toward and not away from the Bible and in proportion to the reverence for and power of realizing in practical life the revealed Word.'

Many issues of continuing importance emerge in the story of Princeton. One which came to the fore in the middle of the nineteenth century was that of

the relation between science and the Bible. The Princetonians, as true Calvinists, were keenly interested in science. Not suprisingly the publication in November 1859 of Charles Darwins' book 'On the origin of Species by means of natural selection' did not go unnoticed at Princeton. The Seminary Professors did not fear this book for they believed that science and theology were allies in establishing the truth. They taught that the Bible properly interpreted could not conflict with the facts of nature properly understood. As Hodge wrote 'God in nature can never contradict God in the Bible and in the hearts of His people.' Princeton's reputation for scholarship and piety proved a strong and increasing attraction for men who were seeking a good training for the pastoral ministry. In the ten years from 1885 to 1895 enrolment increased from 140 to 250. One significant fact is that the 97 men who entered first year in 1895 came from twenty American states and ten foreign countries (eleven came from Ireland). These students however found themselves in a Seminary which was increasingly isolated. Its firm adherence to the Reformed confessions and to the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture meant that Princeton was regarded by many at the turn of the century as antiquated and outdated. With many others however 'it enjoyed the reputation of being a Gibraltar of Orthodoxy'. The author of this volume shows how gradually, and at times almost imperceptibly, Princeton's defences were weakened. At last the modernist majority in the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church succeeded in capturing this 'Gibraltar of Orthodoxy'. Some men could see what was happening and left to regroup and form another school which would be faithful to the legacy of Old Princeton. This new Westminster Theological Seminary included on its staff J.G. Machen, O.T. Allis, R.D. Wilson, C. Van Til and a year later John Murray.

This difficult period of struggle presents us with several valuable lessons. One is the need for courage and discernment in identifying the real issues at stake in the church. Another is that the church must always remember that it is extremely difficult when fighting necessary ecclesiastical battles to keep everything else in balance. During this time the author concludes 'attention to some very good things was lessened. Sturdy Biblical exposition, great preaching and more evangelistic and missionary zeal - along with its defence of the faith - would have strengthened Princeton's cause'.

This volume is certainly a 'Majestic Testimony'. The author's style is clear and appealing. He writes with insight and warmth and gives numerous telling anecdotes about the life of Professors and students. The message of the book is a timely one for the church at the end of the twentieth century. It reminds us of

the inseparable union, always stressed at Old Princeton, between learning and piety. When A.A. Hodge was elected as associate Professor of Didactic Theology in 1877 he was addressed by William Paxton, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New York. 'Give them learning', Paxton told the new Professor, 'but give it to them warm'. Preachers and Professors today must do nothing less. This book merits a wide readership and is highly recommended.

**Knox Hyndman**

*The Rev Nevin Woodside and The Pittsburgh and Ontario Reformed Presbyterian Presbytery 1883-1910,* Eldon Hay, published by the Presbyterian Historical Society of the Upper Ohio Valley, 1996, 55 pages. Available from Rev Dr Reid Stewart, 2859 Espy Avenue, Pittsburgh, P.A., U.S.A., 15216-2219. No price.

This spiral bound manual is a fascinating biography of Nevin Woodside. Not only does the monograph cover the details of Mr Woodside's life but also provides insights into developments within Reformed Presbyterianism in North America during the latter part of the 19th century.

The monograph has an Irish dimension in that Nevin Woodside was born at the Stroan, Dervock, Co Antrim in the year 1834 and was baptised into the Dervock Reformed Presbyterian Church. Those were days of debate and division within the Irish church. When the Eastern presbytery seceded in 1840 to form the Eastern Reformed Presbyterian Church the Woodside family left Dervock and joined the Eastern R.P. congregation in Ballymoney, Co Antrim.

Eldon Hay traces the spiritual and educational development of young Nevin Woodside in remarkable detail. From grammar school in Ballymoney this Dervock lad furthered his philosophical and theological studies in Belfast and Edinburgh and for a brief time served as an assistant tutor to certain members of the Royal family in London. By this time Woodside's brother John was in North America and an ordained minister with the Reformed Presbyterian Church (General Synod). This denomination had been formed when several ministers and congregations had seceded from the parent Reformed Presbyterian Synod in 1833 over the question of political dissent. With much encouragement from his brother Nevin went to North America in 1865, completed his theological education and was ordained to the ministry of the

Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1867. The monograph then outlines Woodside's ministry, which began with a successful pastorate in Brooklyn, New York, and continued with a remarkable ministry in Pittsburgh.

Eldon Hay, showing much skill as a biographer, traces the story of Woodside's ministry in Pittsburgh. After his acceptance of the Call in 1879, which was far from unanimous, determined opposition arose from the leadership of the congregation within a matter of months. This opposition resurrected a fama clamosa (rumour of scandal) which had led to disciplinary proceedings to be taken up against Woodside in 1874. Upon this charge the young Irish minister was suspended from the ministry and his name removed from the role of the General Synod.

Woodside always maintained his innocence and, with the majority of his congregation, purchased a church building on Grant Street, Pittsburgh and therewith effectively began the third Reformed Presbyterian denomination in North America. With the accession of Dr George Ormond to the Grant Street congregation in 1883 a Presbytery was formed called Pittsburgh Reformed Presbyterian Church.

Another interesting twist to this story is the fact that the Presbytery developed in Canada rather than in the USA. Congregations were formed in Toronto, 1886, East Williams, 1889, Teeswater, 1891, Ripley, 1892. The Presbytery was renamed, Pittsburgh and Ontario Reformed Presbyterian, to reflect this Canadian connection.

This Presbytery had never more than three or four ministers on its roll at one time. The strength of the Presbytery lay in Woodside's dynamic leadership and charismatic ministry. The congregation in Grant Street grew to over 800 members. The history of this 'rogue' Presbytery, as Hay calls it, practically closes with the death of Woodside in 1901. His congregation was received back into the General Synod in 1917 and is now a congregation of the Presbyterian Church of America.

This monograph is a fascinating read for anyone interested in the development and fragmentation of Reformed Presbyterian witness in North America. For those interested in church planting this historical account provides examples of nineteenth century models as well as the importance of unity in relation to the doctrine and discipline of the church.

**Robert McCollum**

*The Chignecto Covenanters: A Regional History of Reformed Presbyterianism in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, 1827-1905.* Eldon Hay, McGill - Queen's University Press, 1996. Hbk. 214 pp. $31.50

This is the historical account of Irish Reformed Presbyterian Mission work in the Chignecto Isthmus region of north-western Nova Scotia and south-eastern new Brunswick, two of the Maritime provinces of Canada. The author displays painstaking research as he outlines the success which accompanied the missionary labours of two Ulster Reformed Presbyterians, Rev Alexander Clarke (Kilrea) and Rev William Somerville (Co Down). Clarke was licensed for the gospel ministry on the same day as Thomas Houston (Knockbracken) 24th May 1827. On this same date Clarke was also ordained to become the first overseas missionary of the Irish Church, setting sail for St. John in June 1827. He was joined by William Somerville, who was ordained for mission work by the Southern Presbytery in May 1831 and he arrived in St. John in August the same year. The labour of these two men, and others who joined them later, was responsible for the establishment of 14 congregations and 7 mission stations in the Chignecto region.

The tensions and divisions which were affecting Reformed Presbyterians in other parts of the world also crept into Chignecto. Somerville maintained the principles of the church in which he was nurtured in the new world whereas Clarke imbibed New Light views. This led to a lack of co-operation between these two pioneer missionaries as early as 1838. Eventually Somerville separated from Clarke to work in the Annapolis and St. John River Valleys where he established congregations in the Old School Covenanter tradition. The Irish church eventually disciplined Clarke in 1848. This led Clarke and the Chignecto Covenanters to decline the authority of the Irish Synod and join the New Light Reformed Presbyterian Synod of North America, called the General Synod. The most of Hay's book is preoccupied with the story of these Chignecto Reformed Presbyterian congregations from 1848 until their virtual assimilation into the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1905.

This volume not only outlines the historical development of Reformed Presbyterianism in the Maritimes but also analyses the human factors which first of all contributed to the spectacular growth of the church and then the changing cultural, political and religious milieu which led to its decline.

This book will have a strong appeal for church historians and Reformed Presbyterian church members who have an interest in the missionary labours of

Irish Covenanters in Canada. This material should also prove useful to the present generation of Reformed Presbyterian pastors and missionaries. Not only is there much in this volume to inspire but also many lessons to learn as we seek to extend the witness of Reformed Presbyterianism into the 21st century both in Ireland and around the world.

**Robert McCollum**