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REFORMED THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

REV. PROFESSOR EDWARD DONNELLY, B.A., M.Th.

REV. PROFESSOR FREDERICK S. LEAHY, M.Th.

REV. PROFESSOR R.L.W. McCOLLUM, B.Agr., M.Th.

REV. PROFESSOR W.D.J. McKAY, B.A., B.D., M.Th., Ph.D.

REV. PROFESSOR W.N.S. WILSON, M.A., M.Th.

REV. C. KNOX HYNDMAN, B.A.

REV. DR. H.J. BLAIR, PROFESSOR EMERITUS

REV. DR. A. LOUGHRIDGE, PRINCIPAL EMERITUS

VERA CROMIE, *Librarian*

by

EDWARD DONNELLY

C. KNOX HYNDMAN

FREDERICK S. LEAHY

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CONTENTS

COVENANT THEOLOGY APPLIED TODAY by Rev. Prof. W. David J. McKay	5
PREACHING FROM 1 JOHN by Andrew Stewart	23
ROBERT MURRAY M'CHEYNE by Gareth Burke	40
THE SOCIETY PEOPLE by C. Knox Hyndman	50
HAPPILY DASHING BABYLON'S INFANTS AGAINST THE ROCKS THE USE OF IMPRECATION IN THE PSALMS by W.N.S. Wilson	57
INTRODUCTION TO HOLOCAUST THEOLOGY by John S Ross.	66
UNION AND COMMUNION WITH CHRIST IN THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN OWEN by Peter de Vries	77
BOOK REVIEWS	
Edward Donnelly, PETER: EYEWITNESS OF HIS MAJESTY by Frederick S Leahy	97
C.E.B. Cranfield, ON ROMANS by Edward Donnelly	98
Norman Richardson, A TAPESTRY OF BELIEFS: CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND by Edward Donnelly	100
Greg L Bahnsen, VAN TIL'S APOLOGETICS. READINGS AND ANALYSIS by David McKay	102
EX LIBRIS	105

KEEPING OUR NERVE

The church today is passing through a crisis of confidence. The Word of God is no longer trusted as a sufficient instrument for the accomplishing of the work of the kingdom. It needs, we are told, to be supplemented by human ingenuity.

Many theological colleges are reducing the biblical content of their courses in favour of instruction in management techniques or counselling procedures. The minister is becoming more of an executive than a prophet. Relational skills seem more important than a knowledge of God and a heart for people. The pastor, significantly, works now from an office instead of a study.

Good men, who have both a message and ability to proclaim it, are, in our own country, turning from a focus on preaching to the fashionable spectacle of 'contemporary worship'. The long-term results of this will be disastrous. As David F Wells has written: 'Contemporary evangelicalism places a premium on being amused and, like a petulant consumer, makes its sales people in the pulpit tremble'. The consumer after all is always right. 'Unless it recovers some spiritual gravity, some seriousness, the substance of classical spirituality, the evangelical Church will rapidly become an irrelevance in the modern world'.

We need to keep our nerve and maintain our trust in the power of God's Word, for it is still true that he is pleased through the foolishness of what is preached to save those who believe (1Cor.1:21). As several articles in this issue of the Journal demonstrate, nothing is more compellingly relevant than the Bible. Our college remains steadfastly committed to teaching and exemplifying the centrality of Scripture in the life and work of the Church.

Martin Luther's testimony points the way to true ministerial effectiveness: 'See how much He has been able to accomplish through me, though I did no more than pray and preach. The Word did it all'.

E.D.

COVENANT THEOLOGY APPLIED TODAY

Rev. Prof. W. David J. McKay

(Professor of Systematic Theology, Ethics and Apologetics at the Reformed Theological College and Minister of Cregagh Road Reformed Presbyterian Church, Belfast.)

A fuller version of this material was first delivered as a lecture at the Summer School in Theology of the Free Church of Scotland and subsequently at Korea Theological Seminary, Pusan, South Korea. It has appeared in Korean translation in a Festschrift for Dr Sun Gil Hur, 'The Way of Reformed Church', edited by H. M. Yoo, Korea Theological Seminary Press, 1999, and an excerpt was published in the Banner of Truth Magazine in October, 1998.

The subject of this article is truly vast in scope. Everything that God has revealed about himself is related in one way or another to the doctrine of the covenants. As far as man is concerned, we may say, borrowing a phrase from the novelist Henry James, *all human life is there*¹. The ramifications of Covenant Theology are endless and its applications infinite.

The scope of our study must therefore be severely restricted if it is to be confined to the space available. This will *not* be an exposition of Covenant Theology, and the biblical basis for its main elements will generally be assumed rather than proved. (The standard text books provide all the proof that should be necessary.)

Our focus will instead be on '*Applied Today*'. We will be considering the application of some key aspects of Covenant Theology to important contemporary issues. In the process we will demonstrate that in the theology of the covenants (ie biblical theology) we find the God-given answers to the problems and questions of the world in which the Lord has placed us in order to serve him. Far from being an outdated relic of seventeenth century Reformed Scholasticism, Covenant Theology is of the utmost contemporary relevance. Some of the applications will be to the spiritual life of the individual child of God, but our main concern will be to address the significant trends in theology, philosophy and general culture which presently challenge the Church throughout the world.

Defining terms

We begin by ensuring that we are clear in our own minds as to what the Covenant theologian means when he refers to ‘covenants’. A full definition is provided by Francis Turretin in his *Institutes*:

covenant denotes the agreement of God with man by which God promises his goods (and especially eternal life to him), and by man, in turn, duty and worship are engaged (certain external signs being employed for the sake of confirmation). This is called two-sided (dupleuros) and mutual because it consists of a mutual obligation of the contracting parties: a promise on the part of God and stipulation of the condition on the part of man.²

To state this in even shorter form, we may use the definition of the grandfather of Scottish Covenant Theology, Robert Rollock in his 1597 work *A Treatise of God’s Effectual Calling*:

The covenant of God generally is a promise under some certain condition.³

Although controversy has raged in Reformed circles of late regarding the word ‘condition’, the great Covenant theologians of the past have generally felt able to use it (carefully defined) without compromising the supremacy of God’s grace in the covenants.

Two other points may be made with reference to terminology:

(i) The term *Covenant of Works* is used throughout to designate the covenant made by God with Adam, without implying that man could by his own efforts place God in his debt. Another common term is *Covenant of Nature* (in eg Turretin).

(ii) The term *Covenant of Redemption* is used to designate the agreement between Father and Son, made before the beginning of time, which provides the basis for God’s dealings with his people in the *Covenant of Grace*. This terminology has been adopted by most Covenant theologians, although rejected by eg Thomas Boston in his work *A View of the Covenant of Grace*⁴. It may be accepted and used as long as we bear in mind the words of W. G. T. Shedd:

Though this distinction is favoured by the Scripture statements, it does not follow that there are two separate and independent covenants antithetic to the covenant of works. The covenant of grace and that of redemption are two modes or phases of the one evangelical covenant of mercy.⁵

Covenant Theology and the Uniqueness of Christianity

If, as we believe, Covenant Theology is a fundamentally faithful summary of biblical Christianity, a Covenant theologian can and must hold that the Christian faith is absolutely unique. Covenant Theology shows that at every significant point - the nature of God, of man, of salvation - Christianity's claims are incompatible with those of any other religion or belief-system. They are not duplicated anywhere else. If Covenant Theology is true, all non-Christian religions are false.

It may seem to be needlessly stating the obvious to make this point, yet contemporary application of Covenant Theology requires that we do so. One of the most significant challenges to be faced by the Church in the coming years will undoubtedly be that of *pluralism* with its associated denial of the uniqueness of Christianity. Whilst the theories differ - some asserting the equal validity of all religions, others claiming that all religions are fundamentally the same - they are united in dismissing the claim of Christianity to be the only way to God.

Such a view is summed up in this quotation from Mahatma Gandhi:

*The soul of religion is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms. My position is that all the great religions are fundamentally equal.*⁶

From the professedly Christian side, and at a more scholarly level, we may cite the ground-breaking collection of essays entitled *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, edited by John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, the papers from a conference of theologians and philosophers held in 1986 at Claremont Graduate School. According to Knitter, the participants were

*exploring the possibilities of a pluralist position - a move away from insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways. Such a move came to be described by participants in our project as the crossing of a theological Rubicon.*⁷

Since then many have crossed that Rubicon and it has become commonplace to find religions described as different paths to the top of the same mountain or different tributaries flowing into the same river. Such trends have also been encouraged by the relativism characteristic of both the New Age Movement and Postmodernism (to which we will return subsequently). The views of Karl

Rahner on 'anonymous Christians' have also exercised a powerful influence far beyond Roman Catholic circles. Even professed evangelicals show sympathy for such views.⁸

Various responses to pluralism are possible. As Harold Netland points out, most religions are in fact exclusivist in the sense that each

*maintains that its own central affirmations are true, and that if the claims of another religion appear to be incompatible with its own claims, the former are to be rejected as false.*⁹

In addition, careful comparison of the tenets of different belief-systems quickly shows that the Christianity expressed in Covenant Theology is absolutely unique. This is a fact that must be held tenaciously and proclaimed fearlessly in an increasingly hostile environment which exalts tolerance as the supreme virtue. Covenant Theology has at its heart the God who says,

I am the Lord, that is my name; I will not give my glory to another, nor my praise to graven images.(Isaiah 42:8).

Covenant Theology and the Nature of God

In Covenant Theology we find a summary of much of the richness of God's revelation of himself in Scripture. We have space to consider only a few aspects of his nature.

(i) God is PERSONAL

By its very nature, a covenant must be established by personal agents, even when they act in a representative capacity. The covenants of Scripture constitute personal relationships: God and Adam (and his descendants) in the Covenant of Works; Father and Son in the Covenant of Redemption; God and his redeemed people in the Covenant of Grace.

Among a multitude of personal activities, the God of the covenants is a God who speaks (eg to Adam, *Genesis* 2:16-17), who promises (eg to Abraham, *Genesis* 17:4ff) who loves (eg David, *Psalms* 89:24,28), who chooses (eg his people in Christ, *Ephesians* 1:4). Those who are brought into covenant with the Lord relate to him in a personal way: *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:5, cf Matthew 22:37, which shows that God is as personal as the neighbour who is*

to be loved, according to v39). This relationship expresses itself in prayer, obedience, repentance, and other activities which require a personal object.

The emphasis of Covenant Theology on God as personal (and indeed the source of all that is personal in his universe) is a necessary antidote to all attempts to depersonalise God. Historically this was the (perhaps unintended) outcome of Deism. As apologist James Sire says of the 'god' of Deism, *he is really not a he, though the personal pronoun remains in the language used about him ... He has no 'personal' relation to [his creation] at all.*¹⁰ At the popular level many people operate with a vague idea of a God who is less than fully personal, more akin to a cosmic force. Such an outlook has been strongly reinforced by some of the religious strands interwoven into the complexity of the New Age Movement (NAM).

In part NAM draws on the varieties of Eastern philosophy which are rooted in Pantheism. In such a worldview God is an impersonal force and all personality is ultimately an illusion. NAM has subtly adapted Eastern thinking to make it more palatable to Western tastes, emphasising that each individual is the creator of his own reality, each person in a sense is the cosmos *and* the cosmos-maker. It is put in this way by actress and leading NAM figure, Shirley Maclaine:

If I created my own reality, then - on some level and dimension I didn't understand - I had created everything I saw, heard, touched, smelled, tasted...I was therefore responsible for all there was in my reality. If that was true, than [sic] I was everything...I was my own universe...To take responsibility for one's power would be the ultimate expression of what we called the God-force."

Two years earlier she stated it thus: *Know that you are God, know that you are the universe.*¹²

Aside from the arrogant blasphemy of such statements, closer inspection reveals that this 'God' is in fact an impersonal force, one with whom we can have no relationship, one who leaves us to make of life what we can. It is a view that feeds our sinful egocentrism, yet leaves us alone, lost and confused.

(ii) God is TRIUNE

In recent years the doctrine of the Trinity has received considerable attention

from theologians and it is no longer as unfashionable as it once was to be a Trinitarian. Much that is written, however, must be adjudged unacceptable when evaluated by Scripture, the 'Trinity' of many theologians being something very different from the Triune God of the Bible. It is also evident that many modern theologians are in fact Unitarians (however much they may speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and at the popular level most people who have a belief in God are likewise Unitarians.

As we proclaim the Triune God revealed in Scripture, one God eternally existing in three equal Persons, we can turn with confidence to Covenant Theology since it is thoroughly and consistently Trinitarian. In the view of Malcolm Watts, this is one of the reasons for the appeal of this theology, which shows that in the Unity of the Godhead there is a Trinity of Persons working out redemption. As he states the matter, *It presents God redeeming fallen man to Himself, by Himself, and through Himself.*¹³

The same stress on the role of the Trinity is to be found in Hugh Martin's consideration of Covenant Theology in relation to the atonement wrought by Christ. In his work *The Atonement* Martin shows that in order to explain the oneness of Christ and his people, it is necessary to go behind such truths as regeneration by the Spirit, the Incarnation and Christ's suretyship and substitution, even behind the decree of God, so that we properly honour the Trinity. It is the Covenant of Grace, he argues, that especially recognises the distinct Persons of the Trinity, and he goes on to say,

*There is no revelation of the Trinity in Godhead comparable to that which is afforded by the Covenant of Grace. To 'us men' and in 'our salvation', the doctrine of the Trinity is commended, as at once revealed and precious, as placed in clearest evidence in the distinct actings of the persons of the Godhead in that Divine compact which is the spring and fountainhead of our eternal hopes.*¹⁴

He even states that the outworking of this covenant will be a supreme demonstration of God's triune nature to the 'principalities and powers'.

If Hugh Martin is correct, and we believe he is, Covenant Theology provides a substantial bulwark against anti-Trinitarian views. The God of the covenants is necessarily a triune God.

It may be added that there is an important link between the triunity of God and his personality. As John Frame has pointed out recently in his book

Apologetics to the Glory of God, unitarian views generally tend to undermine the personality of God. This happens because God can be defined (if he is not a Trinity) only in contrast to his creation. As Frame says, *if God is defined merely in terms of his creation, then he is relative to creation...it leads to a God who is relative to the world, rather than the sovereign Lord of Scripture.*¹⁵ Taken to its logical conclusion, Frame says, Unitarianism's view of God *leads to a blank 'One' rather than the absolute personality of the Bible.*¹⁶ The slippery slope is steep and fatal.

(iii) God is SOVEREIGN

The God of the covenants is the God *who works all things after the counsel of his will* (*Ephesians* 1:11). Thus it is he alone who determines the content of each covenant, laying down the terms upon which man may be in a covenant relationship with him.

This is evident in Eden, where God establishes the Covenant of Works with Adam without any debate or negotiation from man's side. God sets the terms: it is for man to accept. The promises and the penalties are the fruit of the infinite wisdom of God alone.

The sovereignty of God is also clearly and beautifully seen in the Covenant of Grace by which he provides for the salvation of a people for himself. The very first gospel promise in *Genesis* 3:15 is sufficient to establish this fact. God states what will take place: *I will put enmity...He shall bruise...* There is no question that the Lord will accomplish redemption and raise up a covenant people for himself.

The same pattern is found all through biblical revelation. To take but one example, in *Genesis* 17:1ff the Lord proclaims that he is *God Almighty*, he commands Abraham's obedience (*Walk before me...*) and states *I will establish my covenant between me and you*. This high privilege is the sovereign gift of God. As described in the 'golden chain' of *Romans* 8:29-30, each stage of salvation in the Covenant of Grace, from foreknowledge to glorification, is the work of God.

Even with reference to the condition attached to the Covenant of Grace, namely faith, it is by the enabling of this sovereign God that the elect fulfil the condition and exercise saving faith in Christ. *Ephesians* 2:8-9 is only one of a multitude of texts showing that this is so. As Turretin says, *the conditions themselves depend upon the grace of God and pass over into promises,*¹⁷ and

Wilhelmus à Brakel is correct when he emphasises in *The Christian's Reasonable Service* that all influences of the Holy Spirit with reference to God's people proceed from the Covenant of Redemption.¹⁸

The sovereignty of God, especially in relation to salvation, lies at the heart of Covenant Theology and has been the subject of bitter controversy throughout the history of the Church. We have space to mention here only one important modern threat to this biblical truth, namely what its proponents term 'the open view of God'.

This view has been expounded and defended by theologians and philosophers such as Clark Pinnock and William Hasker in *The Openness of God* (1994).¹⁹

It presents a wide-ranging challenge to much of what the authors term 'the traditional understanding of God'. The God of these theologians is one who is within time, is ignorant of the future and, although almighty, does not exercise sovereign control over all things. This is how Pinnock states his view:

*The all-powerful God delegates power to the creature, making himself vulnerable. In giving us dominion over the earth, God shares power with the creature. The fact of sin in history reveals the adverse effect that disobedience has on God's purpose. God allows the world to be affected by the power of the creature and takes risks accompanying any genuine relatedness.*²⁰

Omnipotence, according to Pinnock, means that God can deal with any circumstance that can arise, not that nothing contrary to God's will can take place. He further claims, *The idea that it means a divine decree and total control is an alarming concept and contrary to Scripture.*²¹

The views of Pinnock and his associates need to be examined carefully and thoroughly biblical responses must, and can, be given. We cannot give up belief in the absolute sovereignty of our covenant God. No other God can save sinners. As Turretin says of the Covenant of Grace,

*[God] is so its author that the glory is to be ascribed wholly to himself alone, nor did any impelling cause out of himself move him to institute it - neither the merit nor the misery of man.*²²

(iv) God is HOLY

A vital part of God's revelation of his nature is to be found in the call of the seraphim: *Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts (Isaiah 6:3)*. The God of the covenants is a God of radiant holiness, a God who is separate from all evil. Hence *Habakkuk 1:13 Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and you cannot look on wickedness with favour*. That holiness is expressed for his covenant people in his Law, which portrays the holiness of God translated into terms of human life.

Covenant Theology follows Scripture in seeing no contradiction between love for God and obedience to his Law. Those who have a place in covenant with God show their devotion to him by obeying the Law which expresses his holiness. Hence Christ's words in *John 14:15 If you love me you will keep my commandments*.

Even in Eden, in the Covenant of Works, obedience to God's holy Law was necessary, a Law epitomised in the command regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (*Genesis 2:17*).

The Law is found equally clearly in the Covenant of Grace since the Lord's goal in Christ's redemptive work is *to purify for himself a people for his own possession, zealous for good works (Titus 2:14; see also eg Ephesians 2:8-18)*. God's command to his covenant people is *You shall be holy for I am holy (1 Peter 1:16)*, and love for God is expressed in willing obedience - *1 John 5:3*. As John Murray sums it up (with reference to the Mosaic Covenant): *The holiness which is demanded by the covenant fellowship is expressed concretely in obedience to the divine commandments.*²³

An emphasis on the holiness of God expressed in his Law is essential to the presentation of Covenant Theology in a lawless age. In a sense lawlessness is characteristic of every age since the Fall, but late twentieth century western society could well adopt as its motto the words of poet Walt Whitman penned in 1860: *Resist much, obey little.*²⁴ Some of the most powerful trends in contemporary thought, which have come to be labelled 'Postmodernism', have cast men adrift on a sea of relativism.

Drawing on the work of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, who believed that each individual must make his own values and who virulently hated Christianity and its 'slave morality', Postmodernists deny the possibility of any single over-arching explanation of reality. As one critic says, it is char-

acterised by *fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or 'totalizing' discourses.*²⁵ The concept of absolute truth is abolished - there is only 'truth-for-me' - and so also are absolute moral values. In the moral realm all that is left is what Steven Connor calls *the irreducible diversity of voices and interests.*²⁶

Such a philosophy is ultimately self-contradictory and self-destructive, but at present its influence is great, not least because it allows everyone to do what is right in his own eyes. The Church is by no means immune from such forces and a clear proclamation of the holiness of our covenant Lord, the righteous Lawgiver, is urgently needed. The husks of Postmodernism satisfy no-one and we may be surprised at who will be willing to listen to us.

(v) God is LOVING

We live in a society that craves love yet often has little idea where to find it. That should not surprise us since we are made in the image of God who is love (*I John 4:16*) yet have turned our backs on him. Our world needs to hear of the God of love who is described so beautifully and gloriously in Covenant Theology. The love that expresses itself in grace is the sinner's only hope.

Scripture abounds with testimonies to the love of the Lord for his covenant people. Note the covenant language of *Jeremiah 31:3 I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness.* The awe and joy of the apostle John are audible in *I John 3:1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are.* Such truths have stirred Covenant theologians to their greatest heights of eloquence.

It should be noted that the love and grace of God are evident in the Covenant of Works. Louis Berkhof speaks of it as *prompted by God's love and benevolence.*²⁷ Francis Turretin makes the point in these terms:

*By his own right, God could indeed have prescribed obedience to man (created by him) without any promise of reward. But in order to temper that supreme dominion with his goodness, he added a covenant...*²⁸

As far as the Covenant of Grace is concerned, Berkhof indicates three ways in which God's love is demonstrated: in allowing a Surety, in providing the Surety in his Son and in his enabling man, by grace, to live up to his responsibilities.²⁹ In every respect this covenant displays the love of God.

It is in describing the Covenant of Redemption, however, that the older Covenant theologians most warm to their task. Only two can be heard here. First John Flavel in *The Fountain of Life*:

judge the antiquity of the love of God to believers; what an ancient Friend he hath been to us; who loved us, provided for us, and continued all our happiness, before we were, yea before the world was. We reap the fruits of this covenant now, the seed whereof was sown in eternity.¹⁰

Then from the Dutch tradition, Wilhelmus à Brakel:

...this covenant reveals a love which is unparalleled, exceeding all comprehension. How blessed and what a wonder it is to have been considered and known in this covenant, to have been given by the Father to the Son, by the Son to have been written in his Book, and to have been the object of the eternal, mutual delight of the Father and the Son to save you!¹¹

So much for caricatures of Covenant Theology as cold and hard, with no heart.

Covenant Theology and the Nature of Man

If we would understand *ourselves* properly we may turn with confidence to the biblical truths summarised in Covenant Theology. Two fundamental aspects of the nature of man may be singled out.

(i) The DIGNITY of Man

Man in the Covenant of Works was made in the image of God. Man in the Covenant of Grace is being restored to the fulness of that image which was marred and defaced by the Fall. There has been much debate as to what precisely constitutes the image of God, different theologians pointing to, for example, man's rationality, his moral capacities or his original righteousness. Calvin had a broad understanding of the image of God as extending to *the whole excellence by which man's nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures.*¹²

One aspect of the image of God, if not that which is constitutive of it, is man's capacity for a relationship with God. Created in the image of a God who is a Trinity of Persons in mutual relationships, man is made to enjoy fellowship

with God. Thus he must be a rational and moral being who is righteous either by original creation or by the gracious gift of God in salvation. This awareness is reflected in the famous words of Augustine, *you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.*³³

This is the true dignity of man - made in the image of God to have fellowship with his Maker and Redeemer. Such fellowship is constituted by the covenants which God makes with man: the relationship is always a covenant relationship. Consonant with the glory of God, their supreme goal, this fellowship is the purpose of both the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace.

In this vein, Herman Witsius in *The Economy of the Covenants* sets out a comprehensive description of the state of man at creation. This included,

whatever contributed to the acquiring an intimate and immediate union with [God]; delighting in the communion of his God; which was now allowed him, panting after further communion...This is, as Elihu significantly expresses it, Job xxxiv.9, 'delighting himself with God'.³⁴

The link between communion and covenant is stated by Turretin in these terms:

As God wished in every age to have a church in which he might dwell and which might cherish communion with him for the fruition of happiness, so it pleased him to institute that communion in no other way than that of a covenant in which there is a mutual approach of the contracting parties to each other and a close and familiar union.³⁵

Thus with reference to the elect in the Covenant of Grace, he can speak of

the extraordinary dignity to which the grace of God exalts them, that from the lowest depths of misery they should be admitted to the communion and glory of God blessed forever.³⁶

So also in his work *The Death of Death* John Owen speaks poetically of God's gathering a Church

that should be brought unto him, and certainly fed in full pasture, and refreshed by the springs of water, all the spiritual springs of living water which flow from God in Christ for their everlasting salvation.³⁷

Many people today are hungry for a relationship with God. The exponential growth in the market for books on 'spirituality' bears testimony to that fact. Within the Church too many are seeking living fellowship with God and sadly are not finding it. As a result all kinds of alien spiritual paths are being considered sympathetically even by professing evangelicals. Techniques of meditation that owe more to pagan eastern philosophies, for example, can readily be found in Christian books today.

With the riches that we have in our Covenant Theology we should be seeking to feed this hunger and direct people to the place (or rather the Person) where they can find true satisfaction, in covenant communion with God. Within the Church, our correct doctrine must be linked inextricably with vibrant Christian experience of God.

We must also be prepared to repulse contemporary attacks on the dignity of man. Only two can be mentioned briefly here:

(a) Some radical ethicists, especially those associated with the extremes of the Green Movement, wish to make animals and human beings ethically equal. This is done, for example, by Peter Singer in *Practical Ethics* (1993) where he argues that the criterion for ethical significance is sentience. As he says,

To mark this boundary by some characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary way.³⁸

Thus to favour sentient human beings above sentient animals is to be guilty of 'speciesism'. Indeed, on this view, a mentally handicapped human being is of less value than an animal with greater self-awareness.

(b) Developments in computer technology and artificial intelligence, which have given rise to what is termed 'cyberculture', have raised profound questions about what (if anything) distinguishes human beings and human minds from machines. The debate is currently raging, with some asserting that ultimately computers will duplicate all the functions of the human brain. What then becomes of concepts like 'mind' or 'soul'? More radical speculation considers the possibilities of constructing man/machine hybrids and entirely artificial 'people'. The questions are profound and Covenant Theology supplies the foundation for answers.

(ii) The DEPRAVITY of Man

As well as setting forth the dignity of man, Covenant Theology deals fully with the biblical data regarding the depravity of man. Adam, the representative head of the human race, disobeyed his covenant Lord, set himself up as his own standard of right and wrong, and broke the Covenant of Works. As the *Shorter Catechism* Q16 states, *all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him and fell with him, in his first transgression*. The supporting scriptural evidence is abundant, particularly in *Genesis 3*, *Romans 5:12ff* and *I Corinthians 15:22* (in Adam all die).

It is the covenant perspective which shows the true heinousness of sin. It is at root rebellion against the God of the covenant, the one who created man in perfection, provided for his every need, promised even richer blessings and in love and condescension bound himself in covenant with his creature. To sin against such a God merits eternal punishment without remission.

The terrible condition in which we are now by nature is made all the more clear by that which Christ bore as our Surety in the Covenant of Redemption. That which he endured in his life and death, his active and passive obedience, is the measure of the depravity into which man has fallen. As Thomas Boston says,

ye are apt to think light of the sin ye were born in, and the corruption cleaving to your nature; but know that God does not think light of these. It behoved to be an article of the covenant, that Christ should be born holy, and retain the holiness of human nature in him to the end; else the unholy birth and corrupt nature we derived from Adam, would have staked us all down eternally under the curse.³⁹

The gravity of the sins committed by those brought into the Covenant of Grace is also displayed to the full when it is remembered that the offences are not against an impersonal set of laws but against the gracious God of the Covenant who lavishes such great blessings on his people. Not a shred of excuse for sin remains.

In the past we have been accustomed to answering attacks on the biblical doctrine of the depravity of man the covenant-breaker from the proponents of Darwinian evolution. Such attacks, in ever more sophisticated forms, must still be reckoned with. Thus the Oxford evolutionist zoologist Richard Dawkins,

author of works such as *The Blind Watchmaker*,⁴⁰ has a deep-seated loathing of the Christian faith. From the other side of the Atlantic there is the evolutionary optimism of Daniel Dennett with regard to ethics, expressed in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*:

*we have the mind-tools we need to design and redesign ourselves, ever searching for better solutions to the problems we create for ourselves and others.*⁴¹

Such belief in human potential has now received a new twist in the writings of various thinkers within the New Age Movement. Convinced of the innate goodness of human beings, NAM adherents seek ways of releasing our god-like potential (as noted earlier in this study). One very popular work is James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*, a novel based on New Age philosophy. Its climax has people who are sufficiently enlightened passing over into a higher spiritual realm, allegedly following the example of Jesus.

Such Satanic deception can be faced only with the glorious gospel proclaimed in Covenant Theology.

Covenant Theology and the Work of Christ

The atoning work of Christ lies at the heart of the Covenant of Redemption and of the Covenant of Grace. The link is made explicitly in Jesus' words at the Last Supper, *This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you (Luke 22:20)*. To consider Covenant Theology's understanding of the work of Christ would require at least a book, so rich is the subject.

To take but one example, a proper understanding of the covenants solves the problems that are often raised, and that may at times trouble believers, regarding the fairness of the atonement. Can it be just to punish the innocent (Jesus) for the sins of the guilty (ourselves)? The natural inclination of many is to give a negative answer. As Hugh Martin points out helpfully, however, the doctrine of the covenants,

*teaches us to regard Christ and the Church collectively in their relation to God, as virtually one and indivisible, so far as regards their legal standing and responsibilities.*⁴²

As far as the fairness of the atonement is concerned, Martin says correctly,

The death of Christ is then seen to be the infliction of the originally threatened curse. No-one considered as innocent suffers, and no-one continuing guilty escapes.⁴³

We must, however, be extremely selective in the matters covered here, and so only two aspects of Christ's work will be considered, with the emphasis on application to ourselves for our own encouragement.

(i) The BLESSINGS provided

There is no limit to the blessings which God has provided for his covenant people, although Covenant theologians have sought to draw up summaries in general categories. Meditation on these blessings will provide great uplift and strength for any child of God.

As we are reminded by Thomas Goodwin, *all blessings which God in time bestows are said to be given in Christ, ere they are actually to us.*⁴⁴ In the Covenant of Redemption we find *God's riches in glory* which are supplied to us in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).

Turretin in his *Institutes* considers that four principal benefits are promised to the people of God:⁴⁵

1. Reconciliation and communion with God.
2. Communion of good things: *He cannot be our God without all things belonging to him becoming ours; and as all things belong to God, ours also are all things in heaven and on earth.*⁴⁶
3. Conformity of God by a participation in the divine nature and transformation into the image of the Lord.
4. Constancy and eternity of divine love and of our union with him: *as long as God will be God (and he will be so for ever), he will also be our God that we may forever enjoy his communion and happiness.*⁴⁷

The abundance of such passages in the writings of Covenant theologians again serves to answer critics who see in this system nothing but gloom rigidity and harshness. At its best, Covenant Theology throbs with the warmth of God's love and grace, and should stir the heart of any child of God.

(ii) The SECURITY guaranteed

In *Philippians* 1:6 the apostle Paul expresses his confidence that *he who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus*. The ‘golden chain’ of *Romans* 8:29-30 contains the last vital link *those whom he justified, he also glorified*. Christians often struggle with assurance and we all need to be reminded of these great certainties. We must make every effort to persevere in the faith, but the outcome is ultimately in the hands of our covenant God.

Covenant theology captures the note of joyful and humble confidence that the goals of the Covenant of Redemption and of the Covenant of Grace will be fully realised. Salvation and all its accompanying blessings are secure. As Malcolm Watts puts it, *covenanted promises guarantee the believer’s perseverance in grace and his eternal security*.⁴⁸

It is particularly to the Covenant of Redemption that Covenant theologians turn their attention when addressing these matters. Thus John Flavel can say,

*God’s single promise is security enough to our faith, but his covenant of grace adds further security; both these, viewed as the effects and fruits of this covenant of redemption, make all fast and secure.*⁴⁹

On this basis he can speak of *the abundant security God has given his people for their salvation*.⁵⁰

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PREACHING FROM 1 JOHN

by Andrew Stewart

Andrew Stewart is minister of Geelong Reformed Presbyterian Church, Australia. This article is a modified version of a paper delivered at the Free Church of Scotland Summer School in Theology, September 1997.

The Johannine writings of the New Testament are amongst the best known and best loved in the whole Bible. Although the sheer size and depth of John's Gospel has made it a moulding influence upon the lives of many Christian people and the centrepiece of Johannine studies, John's first Epistle too has a treasured place in our hearts.

It provides us with some classic statements of Christian doctrine, which we value because of their precision and pithiness. There is the definition of sin in 3:4; 'sin is lawlessness'; the famous summary of God's nature and character in 4:8; 'God is love'; the pointed gospel challenges of 1:7,9, 2:1. These verses have had a deep influence on Christian piety and we often hear them echoed in the prayers of believers. Pastors frequently turn to John's first letter to find a word to help those struggling with doubt, 5:13; indwelling sin, 3:2-3; false doctrine, 4:1; and a loveless spirit, 3:16-8. A good working knowledge of this epistle is invaluable to the Christian minister.

In the light of this I can remember with sorrow a comment made at an evangelistic meeting for students. The subject under consideration was *The Reliability of the Gospels*. At the question time afterwards a student with a marked antipathy for evangelical Protestantism asked, 'Why do you people always distribute the gospel of John, why not Mark, for instance?' The point that he was trying to make was that to him the writings of John were a closed book, whereas he could relate better to the stories and the drama of Mark's gospel.

Two things struck me. One was the depth of love for John's message that exists amongst believers - it is an opened book to them. The other thing was the difficulties that many people have in understanding John, the most eastern of New Testament writers. There is the possibility that our very familiarity with John and his writings might lead us to assume that we understand John's message better than we actually do. Whether we approach John's gospel or epistles, we will find that he was a profound and challenging theologian, with a very dis-

tinctive message. I want to arrange this paper around some of the challenges that face one who would preach on 1 John.

1. The Textual Challenge.

The first task of the exegete is to establish the authentic text to be studied. This point does not need to be laboured, because the text of John's first Epistle is well established and the vast majority of variations are minor, not materially affecting the exegesis of the text. Two verses call for comment in passing.

i. 1 John 3:1. Here the UBS and the NA texts include the words *kai esmen* after *tekna theou klethomen*. The NASB translates these words, 'and such we are'; the NIV, 'and that is what we are.' This reading is included on the authority of Alexandrian and Western manuscripts, some versions Patristic sources (including Augustine). Here is a rare example of the MT having a more concise reading.

ii. 1 John 4:3. Here are two textual variants. The first centres on the words *me homologei*. In Latin versions of the second century onwards, as well as in Irenaeus (2nd century) and Lucifer of Calaris (4th century) these are replaced by the *luei* - to uncouple. This is a badly attested but interesting reading as it reflects the attempt by later heretics seeking to uncouple the two natures of the person of Christ.

The second variant concerns what ought to be confessed. Alexandrian and Western text types as well as a large selection of Patristic quotations confess *ton Iesoun*, whereas Codex Athous Laurae (mixture of Alexandrian and Byzantine readings) and some versions include the words, *ev sarki eleluthota*. It is probably best to regard this as an expansion of the original text seeking to harmonise the negative statement of v.3 with the positive statement of v.2. Both variants seek to strengthen the teaching that Jesus is God's Son come with a human nature. They indicate that the arguments which prompted John to write his first letter were important ones and continued to rage in the Church, influencing the transmission of the letter.

While these variants are of passing interest and few preachers may want to make open reference to them, there is one textual variant that no preacher can afford to overlook, and that is 1 John 5:7-8, the *Johannine Comma*. As a variety of Bible versions will be in use in many congregations, it is important that the preacher consider what is either a significant omission or addition. It is not advisable to bewilder congregations with issues of textual study, but this is

one of the four in the New Testament passages (the others are the doxology of the Lord's Prayer, the account of the woman caught in adultery, and the conclusion to Mark's gospel¹) where some (brief) explanation is called for, because the passages are well known and the variation is significant.

In the case of the *Johannine Comma* the issues are most straightforward, and (in the opinion of the present writer) the evidence does not warrant its inclusion. The section in question is an account of three heavenly witnesses, (*ho pater, ho logos kai to hagion pneuma*) who confirm the message of the three earthly witnesses that Jesus is God come in the flesh. This account is found in no Greek manuscript that can be dated prior to 1400. Most notoriously it is to be found in Codex Montfortianus or Britannicus which was copied in Oxford about the year 1520. It was upon the authority of this manuscript that Erasmus included the comma in his third (1522) edition of the New Testament in Greek (not having included it in the first two editions published in 1516 and 1519).

Bruce Metzger takes up the account of how Erasmus came to include it:

In an unguarded moment Erasmus promised that he would insert the *Comma Johanneum*, as it is called, in future editions if a single Greek manuscript could be found that contained the passage. At length such a copy was found - or was made to order! As it now appears, the Greek manuscript had probably been written in Oxford by a Franciscan friar named Froy (or Roy), who took the disputed words from the Latin Vulgate. Erasmus stood by his promise and inserted the passage in his third edition (1522), but he indicates in a lengthy footnote his suspicions that the manuscript had been prepared expressly in order to confute him.²

The earliest appearance of the Comma was in a fourth century work entitled *Liber Apologeticus* by Priscillian. Priscillian lived in southern Spain where he founded his own sect, and was executed in AD 385 for heresy and magic. Priscillian was a modalist who read the comma thus, 'Father, Word, and Holy Spirit; and these three are one [in Jesus Christ]'. From Priscillian and other writers in North Africa and Spain the *Comma* made its way into Latin commentaries, then to the Vulgate, and then to very late Greek manuscripts.

With such a history it should be no surprise that the *Comma* was absent from Luther's first version of the New Testament in German; or that Zwingli rejected it; and that Calvin accepted it only with reluctance. Only Erasmus' grudging inclusion has guaranteed it a place in modern (that is post mediaeval) Greek texts. Moreover the wider paragraph focuses on the person of Christ - John's key doctrinal test. Reference to the Trinity does not fit easily into the train of John's thought. John Stott comments,

Some tidy-minded scribe, impressed by the threefold witness of verse 8, must have been made to think of the Trinity and so suggested that there was a threefold witness in heaven also. Actually, his gloss is not a very happy one, as the threefold witness in verse 8 is to Christ; and the biblical teaching about testimony is not that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit bear witness to the Son, but that the Father bears witness to the Son through the Spirit.³

2. The Theological Challenge.

Here we want to ask what is the distinctive message that John seeks to communicate in this epistle. To answer this question we need to consider the relationship between John's Epistle and the fourth Gospel. Because John's Gospel is so familiar, we tend to see the Epistle through a glass coloured by its thought and teaching. We need to pause and consider why John, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote both Gospel and Epistle, and how they both form essential parts of the canon of Scripture. The critical study of both books has often focused on the differences between Gospel and Epistle and this has produced many theories about their relationship. As this paper is about preaching, it is not within its remit to describe those theories, but the following working assumptions have been made.

- a. Both Gospel and Epistle are complete literary units and were written by one and the same man.
- b. The author of both books was John, the beloved disciple, who was a member of the inner core of our Lord's disciples.
- c. John's Gospel was written during the last years of the first century. (According to Irenaeus, John lived into the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan, who came to the throne in AD 98. John is traditionally reckoned to have died shortly afterwards.) The gospel is the product of mature reflection as a pastor and as a theologian over sixty years, but it was finalised within a much shorter period. Just as one minister who was asked how long it took him to prepare a sermon that he had just preached, replied, 'forty years', so it took John a lifetime to prepare the account of our Lord's life and teaching that we have in the fourth Gospel.
- d. John's Epistle was written within this same period. We might possibly be more specific and date it within the last decade of the first century. The reason being that the Epistle is full of polemic against a false teaching that can be identified with the heretic Cerinthus.

According to Irenaeus, Cerinthus was a heretic who gathered a following in Asia. He seems to have been active in Ephesus at the same time as John. The story is attributed to Polycarp that one day as John was going to bathe at the

bathhouse in Ephesus he learned that Cerinthus was inside and cried, 'Let us fly, let even the bath house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth is within.'⁴ Raymond E. Brown dates the peak of Cerinthus's influence in the 90's.⁵

John Stott gives a very helpful summary of the information to be gleaned from patristic sources about Cerinthus's teaching.⁶

- a) *Christological*. He separated the human Jesus from the divine Christ. The Christ remained impassible, and it was Jesus who suffered. Irenaeus summarises his teaching, 'the Son of the Creator was, forsooth, one, but the Christ from above another, who also continued impassable, descending upon Jesus, the Son of the Creator, and flew back again into His *Pleroma*'. Hence John's emphasis on a true witness to Christ.
- b) *Ethical*. According to Irenaeus the error of Cerinthus was 'disseminated among men... long time previously by those termed Nicolaitans.' The gist of his teaching was indifference to righteous behaviour. Hence John's emphasis on doing righteousness.
- c) *Epistemological*. Cerinthus claimed that those who followed his (gnostic) approach to knowing 'the deep things' of God were a spiritual aristocracy far above the ordinary type of believers. There was a tendency to spiritual pride, whereby the uninitiated were despised. Hence John's emphasis upon true assurance coming from the ministry of the Word and Spirit.

To summarise, we should read John's first letter as a work of polemical theology, written to address the challenges facing the Church in Ephesus in the last years of the first century. This dates its writing to the same period as the finalising of John's gospel, and explains the obvious differences between the two books. Those differences can be summarised as follows.

- a) *Length*. The gospel is approximately four times longer than the first letter.
- b) *Style*. The gospel is composed of selected narratives that lead into extended discourse passages. The epistle reads more like a collection of sayings or aphorisms.
- c) *Vocabulary*. Key words in the gospel are not found in the letter, e.g., cross, crucify, disciple, glory, seek, sign. Key words in the epistle are not found in the gospel, e.g., fellowship, propitiation, anointing, lawlessness, antichrist. Key words in the gospel are used with a different slant in the epistle, e.g., *logos, parrhesia*.

- d) *Declared aim*. The declared aim of the gospel is to present Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world. John 20:31. The epistle is aimed at believers under assault, to assure them that their faith well founded, 1 John 5:13.

The Gospel is an introduction to the gospel and is directed against unbelief. The Epistle aims to strengthen believers in their grasp of the gospel and is directed against false belief. It is important to remember that in spite of these obvious differences, both proclaim the same Christ-centred theology. Westcott summarised it as follows, 'the theme of the Epistle is *the Christ is Jesus*; the theme of the Gospel is *Jesus is the Christ*'.⁷

The differences between Gospel and Epistle have been explained in a variety of ways. Some have put it down to a *large time gap* between the composition of the Gospel and Epistle, so that by the time John wrote the Epistle betrayed the 'infirmity of old age' (S.G. Lange) or a 'tone of childlike feebleness' (Baur).⁸ C. H. Dodd prefers to explain the differences in terms of *cultural setting*. The Gospel reflects a Palestinian background while the Epistle betrays a strong Hellenistic influence.⁹ James D. G. Dunn argues that the Epistle was written to *correct an imbalanced gnostic/docetic interpretation* to which the Gospel was vulnerable.¹⁰

The differences between Gospel and Epistle can best be described as those that distinguish a 'summa theologia' from a pamphlet prompted by the needs of the moment; rather like the differences between Martin Luther's 'Table Talk' and 'The Bondage of the Will', or Calvin's Letters and his 'Institutes of the Christian Religion'. This analogy helps to explain both the strength of the common themes and the significant differences.

Common Themes.

Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria (mid-third century) wrote of the fourth Gospel and John's first letter:

The Gospel and the Epistle agree with each other. They begin alike... and he deals with his whole matter by way of the same topics and terms... To characterise them generally all through, one may observe one and the same complexion in the gospel and the epistle."

The themes that run in common through Gospel and Epistle are the basic truths of the gospel. They are like the girders that give strength and shape to a building. These themes give Gospel and Epistle their distinctive Johannine ethos.

- a) They describe the lost condition of humanity. In their unredeemed condition men are 'of the devil', (epistle) 3:8/ (gospel) 8:44; 'of the world', 4:4/8:23; therefore they sin, 1:8, 3:4/8:34; and they walk in darkness, 1:6/8:12.
- b) They present salvation that is to be found only in God, and rooted in the love of God manifested in Christ, 4:9-10/3:16.
- c) They present the uniqueness of Christ as 'the only begotten Son', 4:9/ 3:16, 1:18. Yet the Divine Son came in human flesh, 4:12/1:14; and 'laid down His life', 3:16/10:11-18.
- d) They call sinners to respond to God's saving initiative by exercising personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour, 3:23/1:7, 3:16, 20:31.
- e) They describe the privileges of those who enjoy this salvation. They are children born into the family of God, 3:1/1:12, 12:36; they know God, 2:3, 5:20/17:3; they abide in God, 2:6, 2:28/15:4-10.
- f) They enjoin upon those so privileged the duty of obeying God by keeping His commandments, 2:5, 3:22/14:15; and the supreme commandment is to love one another, as God has loved us, 2:8-10, 3:16/13:34-5.

There are many more parallel expressions, but these are examples of the common themes that run through both books. An understanding of these common themes can be of great help when the preacher comes to interpret individual texts, because they give an insight into the theological context of a text being exegeted. Many texts in the Epistle are written in a terse and aphoristic style. Law has compared them to the parallelistic forms of Hebrew wisdom literature.¹² The Gospel gives the preacher material with which to expand upon, illuminate and apply these sayings. Below are some examples:

- i. 1 John 1:7, 'But if we walk in the light' and our Lord's description of himself as the 'light of the world' during the feast of the Passover in John 8:12; followed by the healing of the man born blind in John 9:1-34.
- ii. 1 John 3:8, 'He who sins is of the Devil' and our Lord's encounter with the Pharisees in John 8:42-47 who were 'of their father the Devil.'
- iii. 1 John 3:16, 'By this we know love because He laid down His life for us' and our Lord's demonstration of love to His disciples in the upper room in John 13:4, 'rose from supper and laid aside his garments.'

Moreover when the preacher faces the exegetical options presented by a text the strength of these common themes can be a useful guide. Again here are some examples.

- i. 1 John 2:25. Here is the promise of eternal life. Commentators on this verse point out that the benefit held out by it could be future (enjoyed in the life

to come) or present (enjoyed in our earthly lives). In favour of the first view it could be pointed out that the Epistle has a strongly eschatological emphasis on what will become of the believer when the Lord returns. See 3:2-3. Against this there is the distinctively Johannine teaching that 'eternal life' is enjoyed in the present experience of the believer. Support for this is found in the Gospel, 8:12, 20:31, and in the Epistle, 3:14, and ought to be decisive in support of the second interpretation of the text.

ii. 1 John 3:9. Here is a guarantee of purity for the believer, 'for His seed remains in Him, and He cannot sin, because he has been born of God'. Interpreters of these words fall into two groups. Those in the first take 'His seed' to refer to God's offspring, while those in the second group take the words to refer to the work of transforming grace. Amongst those who fall into the second camp there is disagreement about what aspect of transforming grace 'His seed' refers to. Some see it as referring to the gospel, some the word of God, and some to the indwelling Spirit.

Two references in John's gospel give us some help. In John 5:38 our Lord described the unbelief of the Pharisees, 'But you do not have his word abiding in you, because whom he sent, Him you do not believe'. Then in John 3:6 the spiritual nature of the new birth is described as a lasting spiritual influence, 'that which is born of Spirit is spirit'. Taken together these verses shed light on the working of God's grace in the hearts of his children, for it is the Word coming in the power of the Holy Spirit that transforms the lives of sinners. The Spirit plants the seed of the Word, the Word is the sword of the Spirit. The ministry of both keeps the believer from sin.

iii. 1 John 5:6. Plummer describes this verse as the 'most perplexing' in the Epistle, and the phrase that has attracted most attention from commentators is the claim that Jesus Christ came 'by water and blood'. Three interpretations of these words have become popular. Luther and Calvin saw in them a reference to the two sacraments of the gospel. Augustine saw links with the water and blood that came from our Lord's side when the spear was thrust into it after his death on the cross. The significance of this link is strengthened by the fact that John is the only evangelist to record this incident in John 19:34-35. Yet John's purpose in recording the fact is most probably historical, rather than providing a platform for allegorical speculation. Tertullian explained 'water and blood' as a reference to our Lord's baptism by John and his death on the cross. One marked the beginning of his public earthly ministry and the other its climax, and on both occasions the Spirit's ministry was a testimony that Jesus was the Son of God.

There is evidence from John's Gospel to back up this interpretation. In John 3:5 Jesus told Nicodemus 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.' William Hendriksen comments, 'The evident meaning, therefore is this: being baptised with water (by John) is not sufficient. The sign is valuable indeed, but the sign should be accompanied by the thing signified'.¹³ The reference was to John's baptism. In itself John's baptism was insufficient to give Nicodemus everlasting life.

Light is also shed on the word blood by the teaching of the Gospel, especially the passage where blood is mentioned most frequently, John 6:53f. In these verses Jesus taught that apart from his blood shed and his body broken - on the cross - there could be no enjoyment of eternal life. Jesus came to fulfil all righteousness, and he did so by dying sacrificially on the cross.

Distinctive Emphases.

The faithful expositor of John's first Epistle will also need to give due weight to those themes in the Epistle that are not found in the Gospel. The preacher will be alerted to these themes by several words and phrases that are peculiar to it. Some words are not found in the Gospel, but have an important place in the Epistle.

- *Angelia.* 1 John 1:5, 3:11. This is the announcement that God has made through his Son to his apostles, and through them to the Church at large. John is very conscious of the importance of this message - and he proclaims it with authority.
- *Koinonia.* 1 John 1:3,6 and many other references. This is what God shares with us, thus bringing into being a relationship with the Father and the Son. As a result we are to share what we have received with others. God has loved us and sent his Son to redeem us, therefore we love those who also walk in the light of salvation, 1:7. Thus gospel truth and brotherly love are thoroughly integrated.
- *Hilasmus.* 1 John 2:2, 4:10. The meaning of this word has provoked much debate. Westcott and Dodd argued that it ought to be translated by the English word 'expiation', referring to the removal of sin. The overwhelming majority of evangelical commentators translate the word as 'propitiation', referring to the turning back of wrath. The word conveys the imagery of sacrifice. The distinctively biblical message is that God offered up such a sacrifice so that his wrath might justly be appeased.

- *Chrisma and sperma*. We take these together. Chrisma is the anointing of 2:20; sperma is the seed of 3:9. The first guarantees adherence to the truth, while the second guarantees progress in holiness. They express John's concern to strengthen believer's assurance that when God has begun a good work in his life, that work will not prove to be deceptive or futile.
- *Parrouisia* (linked with the verb phaneroo). 1 John 2:28, 3:2. In 1 John 4:17 there is reference to *hemera tes kriseos*. John's emphasis in the Gospel is on the present reality of the age to come. This is sometimes called a 'realised eschatology'. In his Epistle John acknowledges that 'the true light is already shining', 2:8, but his emphasis is upon a coming day of crisis and fulfilment - the parousia. This is sometimes called a 'popular' or 'primitive' eschatology. It brings home to its hearers the importance of being in a right relationship with God now. For 'this is the last hour', and the Lord could come at any moment. John's purpose is ethical.

Then some words are used in both the Gospel and the Epistle, but with different emphases.

- *Logos*. In John 1:1f the logos is personal - the second person of the Godhead. In 1 John 1:1 the logos is impersonal. It is the life-giving message to which John bears a convincing apostolic witness. The emphasis is on the trustworthiness of the message proclaimed and received 'from the beginning'.
- *Parakletos*. We are familiar with the distinctive reference to the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete in John 14:16,26, 15:26, 16:7. Interestingly John 14:16 refers to the Holy Spirit as 'another comforter', the one who would take the place of the Saviour present with them. 1 John 2:1 develops this theme a little further by asserting that in Jesus 'we have a Paraclete with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.' Christ Jesus is the paraclete! The scene moves from the situation of troubled believers, to the court of Heaven; and the emphasis moves from encouragement to intercession. This is an important point to notice for the Epistle ministers assurance by focusing on objective truth.
- *Parresia*. Here is the fruit of that assurance, confidence before God; 1 John 2:28, 3:21-22; 5:14. This is a use peculiar to the Epistle (and Hebrews 10:19f.). Most frequently the word describes confidence before men, for example John 7:4,26 and Ephesians 6:19. It stems from the powerful Greek idea of free speech in debate. Here it speaks powerfully of the assurance that John sets before believers, see 3:21-22.

How can we summarise the distinctive theology of the Epistle so that we might convey it accurately in our preaching? In my opinion it is best to describe the theology of the first Epistle as a harmonising or integrating theology. One of

the greatest challenges that we often face is keeping balance. Heresy arises when one truth is decoupled from others. Heresy is disintegrating in its effect. John was writing a tract against heretics who were separating what ought not to be separated, the person and work of Christ; theology and ethics; objective truth and subjective experience.

1. The Person and Work of Christ. Constantly John emphasises that Christ the Saviour is Jesus of Nazareth. We can have no fellowship with the Father without also having fellowship with Jesus Christ, 1:3. John's creed is 'Jesus is the Christ' (2:22-23), a creed explicitly denied by the antichrists. Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh, 4:2-3. But he is also righteous, see 2:1 which was an anathema to the gnostics. Yet John emphasises this truth because only the Son of God come in human flesh could cleanse us from the guilt of our sins, by shedding His own blood, 1:7.

Smeaton points out the importance of the sacrificial vocabulary of 1 John: 'The greatest mistakes of expositors have arisen from not keeping in view the sacrificial vocabulary, and allusions to ancient worship'.¹⁴ The significance of these references to Old Testament worship (1:7, 2:1, 3:5, 4:9&10) is that they could only apply to Jesus if he offered a sacrifice far superior to the sacrifices of bulls and goats; and that could only be true if he were the Son of God come in human flesh. His work as redeemer is impossible, unless he is what John declared him to be.

2. Theology and Ethics. Jesus Christ lived a righteous life in the flesh. That was a radical challenge to the gnostics. To them such an idea was preposterous. After all the flesh was evil, created by the power of darkness. The spirit was what mattered. So long as the soul was initiated into the deep mysteries of God, it mattered little how one conducted one's life in the flesh. Against this John objects that the Son of God is concerned about righteousness in the flesh.

This is also a radical challenge to believers. The righteous life of Jesus Christ shows that humanity *per se* is no bar to moral perfection. In fact in the day of Christ's return believers 'shall be like Him' 3:2. This is the ideal upon which believers are to set their hearts all through their earthly lives. For this very reason the Lord Jesus was manifested, 3:5. The blessings of salvation are powerful incentives towards holiness; the new birth in 2:29, 'everyone who practises righteousness is born of Him'; hope in 3:3, 'and everyone who has this hope purifies himself'. As a result purity serves as nothing less than a test of spiritual life, 2:3-4, 'Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep his commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him'.

The ethic that John teaches is an ethic of brotherly love. Love is the great commandment, 2:7-8. Just as God loved us, so we ought to love one another, 4:7. Love is inseparable from believing on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, 3:23. Love amongst believers is the ethic that manifests the gospel in our world, 3:16.

3. Objective Truth and Spiritual Experience. The gnostics believed that they had a special gnosis or knowledge of God which they derived from mystical experience. By definition this could not be subjected to external scrutiny. Their claims are echoed in 1:6, 2:4 and possibly 2:20. Yet, according to John, their claims did not stand up to scrutiny in the light of the apostolic message. They denied the truth by their teaching and lifestyle. John does not hesitate to pronounce that their experiences are spiritually bogus.

Neither is John too timid to pronounce that the spiritual experiences of believers are genuine. He mentions some in 1:4,7; 2:3; 3:21; 4:12,17-18. Here are joy, boldness, and love in subjective expression. This is heart religion. The subjective and emotional aspect of Christian piety is alive and well and John encourages it. More than that, he explains why it is a sign of health amongst believers.

It rests on solid foundations. The piety of God's children is fed by the truth of the gospel (the *angelia* and the *logos*). It holds the historical certainties of the Gospel - Jesus Christ died for our sins, and he will come again. His death is an atonement completed - a *hilasmos*. Presently he intercedes in heaven as our *Parakletos*. The present earthly ministry of the Holy Spirit is not a licence for any spiritual experience or excess - he is the *chrisma* from the Lord Jesus to confirm our knowledge of the truth, 2:20. He is also the *sperma tou theou* who keeps us from sin. He is an objective witness to the truth and to the visible fruit of holiness in the life of the believer. 'By this we know that He [God] abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us' 3:24b.

3. The Homiletical Challenge.

The challenge that faces those who would consider preaching systematically through 1 John is that of avoiding a repetitiveness whereby a few basic themes are recycled in each sermon. One way of avoiding this danger is to preach thematically through the Epistle. Possible themes are 'knowing God' or 'Love'. Another possibility is to gather into a series those texts which contain the words '*from the beginning*'. Here we are pointed to certain *unchanging* truths in the Epistle.

1:1	the message of life
2:7 & 3:11	the commandment to love one another
2:13-14	the Father who is to be known
2:24	the gospel which we have heard
3:8	the sinfulness of the Devil

The preacher who commences a systematic exposition of the Epistle ought to have already clearly in his mind the bigger picture of how John develops his theme. Otherwise he may find himself saying the same things week after week. Of course John's Epistle is accused of being a constant repetition of Johannine sayings, with little sense of plan or structure. The comment of C.H. Dodd is typical of many:

The argument is not closely articulated. There is little direct progression. The writer 'thinks around' a succession of related topics. The movement of thought has not inaptly been described as 'spiral', for the development of a theme often brings us back to the starting-point; almost, but not quite, for there is a slight shift which provides a transition to a fresh theme; or it may be to a theme which had apparently been dismissed at an earlier point, and now comes up for consideration from a slightly different angle. The striking aphorisms which are the most memorable things in the epistle do not usually emerge as the conclusion of a line of argument. They come in flashes, and their connection with the general line of thought is sometimes only hinted at.¹⁵

Amongst those who attempt to outline a structure for the Epistle there are two groups. The first group sees the Epistle as a collection of sayings (possibly sermon notes hastily gathered) with little formal structure. A representative spokesman might be I.H. Marshall;

It seems preferable to regard the Epistle as being composed of a series of connected paragraphs whose relation to one another is governed by association of ideas rather than by a logical plan. This does not mean that John is illogical, but rather that the Epistle is not meant to be divided into large sections on a logical basis.¹⁶

Marshall suggests the following outline.

Prologue - the word of life	1:1-4
Walking in the light	1:5 - 2:2
Keeping His commandments	2:3 - 11
The new status of believers and their relation to the world	2:12-17
A warning against antichrists	2:18 - 27

The hope of God's children	2:28 - 3:3
The sinlessness of God's children	3:4 - 10
Brotherly love as the mark of the Christian	3:11 - 18
Assurance and obedience	3:19 - 24
The spirits of truth and falsehood	4:1-6
God's love and ours	4:7 - 12
Assurance and Christian love	4:13 - 5:4
The true faith confirmed	5:5 - 12
Christian certainties	5:13 - 21.

The value of what Marshall and others have to say is that they warn the preacher against imposing too neat a structure upon the text. It is true that material on one topic is not neatly gathered in a single passage, and within a paragraph John moves quickly from one idea to the next. John often leaves a theme to digress into another area and then return to his first theme. When preparing a sermon on a text or paragraph, we often struggle to break it down into memorable and digestible segments, and at the same time show our hearers the connections between one truth and another. The weakness of the 'random ideas' theory, however, is that it misses a very important series of repetitions in the Epistle.

A second group of commentators hold to what Marshall calls the 'classical view' that the Epistle breaks down into three major sections, each of which is a cycle within which John describes three essential qualities found in the life of the believer. The best description of this view is found in Robert Law's book, *The Tests of Life*.¹⁷ Here is his outline:

The Prologue	1:1 - 4
First cycle - fellowship with God is walking in the light	1:5 - 2:6
	tested by attitude to sin - 1:5-2:6
	tested by love - 2:7- 7
	tested by belief - 2:18-28
Second cycle - fellowship with God is Divine sonship	2:29 - 4:6
	tested by righteousness - 2:29-3:10
	tested by love - 3:10b- 4a
	tested by belief - 3:24b-4:5

Third cycle - closer

correlation of righteousness,
love and belief

4:7 - 5:21

genesis of love - 4:7-12

synthesis of belief and love - 4:13- 6

effect, motives and signs of love - 4:1- 5:3a

the contents of Christian belief - 5:3b-12

the certainties of Christian belief - 5:13-21

This approach is adopted (and modified) by John Stott in his commentary on *The Epistles of John*. He describes John's three tests of spiritual life as - obedience, the moral test; love, the social test; and belief, the doctrinal test. In each of the three cycles John employs three tests in different settings. In 1:5-2:28 they test the believer's claim to know God. In 2:29-4:6 they test the believer's claim to be born again into the family of God. In 4:7-5:13 John shows that these tests must not be made to stand on their own. The ultimate test is combining love, orthodoxy and moral purity in our daily lives. So we see that there is a very significant development in John's thought and the application of his message. This is what makes this letter so searching. Just as we have examined our lives in one area, John says, 'do not become complacent just because you are strong in one area - are you strong in this other area as well?' John challenges us to be rounded Christians, and for those of us who preach to be rounded in our ministry.

Encouragements to Preach on 1 John.

So far we have faced the challenges of preaching on 1 John. It is not as simple as those familiar phrases and simple vocabulary might seem to suggest. But now for some encouragements.

It is a pastor's epistle. It is a good book to read when your heart grows cold in your work. It breathes a warmth of pastoral love for the flock. This is no circular letter. How often John refers to his readers as 'my little children' 2:1; 'brethren' 2:7; 'beloved' 3:2, 4:1 - even as he is setting forth strong doctrine. It reminds us of what our concerns ought to be as pastors. It is evangelistic, didactic, pastoral (addressing doubt and confusion), it addresses the body life of the family of God.

This is an evangelist's epistle. Although its thrust is to protect believers from false belief, it furnishes us with passages that focus our thoughts on the

core of our faith. As preachers we are given the advice, 'be most in the main things'. John focuses our thoughts on the main things - the person of Christ, the atonement, the reality of sin, the necessity of repentance and the call to personal faith, the importance of holy living, and the comforts of gospel assurance.

This is a timely word of certainty. John Stott makes a very perceptive application of the Epistle's main theme:

The middle and end of the twentieth century are an epoch of fundamental insecurity. Everything is changing; nothing is stable. New nations have constantly been coming to birth. New social and political patterns are constantly evolving... These external insecurities are reflected in the world of the mind and of the spirit. Even the Christian Church which has received 'a kingdom that cannot be shaken' and is charged to proclaim him who is the same yesterday today and forever, now often speaks its message shyly and without conviction. There is a widespread fear of dogmatism and a preference for agnosticism or free thought. Many Church members are filled with uncertainty and confusion.¹⁸

According to Daniel 11:32, 'the people who know their God shall be strong and carry out great exploits'. D.W. Bebbington links the tremendous energy of the eighteenth century preachers of revival to their new found emphasis upon the doctrine of assurance. This was assurance not just of what they believed, but of their 'personal interest' in Christ. 'Without assurance the priority for the individual in earnest about salvation had to be its acquisition; with it, the essential task was the propagation of the good news that others, too, could know the joy of sins forgiven.'¹⁹

John shares that concern. It had sprung from a dogmatic conviction of the truth of the message he had been given to preach, and from the inner conviction that he enjoyed fellowship with the Father and the Son. He knew God, and knew that he knew God! That conviction did not make him harsh or arrogant in presenting the truth. Instead it reminded him that his message is a message of life for sinners. It is a message that changes lives and simply must be heard. Would that we might share his confidence, for this is a timely message for those of us who preach the gospel in today's world.

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16. I.H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* p.26.
17. Law was minister of Laurieston Place Church in Edinburgh. The book is not a formal commentary, but a thematic study based on the Kerr Lectures which he delivered in 1909.
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ROBERT MURRAY M'CHEYNE

by Gareth Burke

Gareth Burke is minister of Knock Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Belfast.

On 25th March 1843 Robert Murray M'Cheyne died. He was only twenty nine years of age and yet he was used mightily by God during his short life and his influence upon many Christians over the years since 1843 has been very great indeed. Andrew Bonar, his close friend and colleague in the ministry of the Word of God, within a few months of his friend's death had written his biography and gathered together a number of his letters and sermons. These were published under the title of 'The Memoir and Remains of Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne'. This book has had a profound impact upon many of the Lord's people throughout the years. It is surely one of the great Christian classics.

His early life

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was born in Edinburgh on 21st May 1813. As a child he was considered to be pleasant and placid and he had an obviously clear and gifted mind. When he was four years old, while recovering from an illness, he studied the Greek alphabet to amuse himself and was able within a short time to write all the letters on a slate. He had a good memory and was able, even as a child, to recite large portions of Scripture.

M'Cheyne was also gifted with a good voice, and music, poetry and painting were among his interests as a youth. In 1821 he entered Edinburgh High School and in 1827 he entered the University of Edinburgh. In 1831 he commenced the study of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh with a view to entering the ministry.

However, we must pause for a moment at this point and consider his conversion. In considering the conversion of M'Cheyne we should notice that he himself never spoke or wrote of an exact moment and day when the Lord called him out of darkness. There is no doubt that he was 'in Christ', but the men of his generation, especially in Scotland, were not given so much to placing emphasis on the exact date and time of conversion but rather preferred to focus their attention on the evidence of grace to be found in the life of the professed believer.

M'Cheyne, we believe, was brought to faith through the death of his older brother, David. David was twenty six years of age when on 8th July 1831 he fell asleep in Jesus. Robert, writing to a member of his congregation on 8th July 1842 said: 'This day eleven years ago I lost my loved and loving brother and began to seek a brother who cannot die'.¹ A particular bond existed between David and Robert and the eminent piety and godly example of his older brother left a profound impression on Robert. From this time on he became more serious in his whole outlook on life and he began to regularly examine his own spiritual state and to record his thoughts in his diary.

In his studies for the ministry he proved to be a diligent student with very considerable ability in the original languages especially Hebrew. Whilst at College he became involved, along with several other students, in regular visitation in the poorer districts of Edinburgh. The suffering and poverty that he saw there alarmed him but his primary concern remained the presentation of the Gospel of Christ to these needy souls, rather than the alleviation of material deprivation. He taught a Sunday School class in the Canongate district of Edinburgh and was involved in regular evangelistic visitation among these people.

Having considered then his early life we must now reflect on his ministry.

His ministry

Whilst M'Cheyne is normally associated with the congregation of St. Peter's Dundee, we must also in our consideration of his ministry reflect upon his work as an assistant in Larbert prior to his call to Dundee as well as considering the most significant visit that he made, with others, to Palestine.

Larbert

M'Cheyne was licensed to preach the Gospel on 1st July 1835 and, a little time afterwards, he became the assistant to Rev. John Bonar, in the congregations of Larbert and Dunipace. He was very active in both preaching and visitation. Indeed, he established a pattern of ministry at this time which he followed to a large extent on going to Dundee. He would visit in a particular district during the day and then in the evening he would gather the families together and preach to them. Also during this time of assistantship he developed the practice of writing letters to his people, a practice that was going to be an important feature of his future ministry. M'Cheyne did not have a strong constitution and during his time in Larbert he had some health problems especially with his lungs.

Whilst in Larbert he also became very interested in the work of God's kingdom overseas. He was impressed by the missionary zeal and enthusiasm of Dr. Alexander Duff and on one occasion, having heard Dr. Duff preach on a missionary theme in Stirling, M'Cheyne said: 'I am now willing, if God shall open the way, to go to India. Here am I, send me!'

Dundee

In August 1836 he was approached by the congregation of St. Peter's Dundee and asked to preach 'with a view' to filling their vacancy. The congregation decided to call him to be their pastor, having heard him preach on at least one further occasion. He was ordained in St. Peter's on 24th November 1836. During the closing months of his work in Larbert and the opening months of his ministry in Dundee the Lord blessed his labours in a particular way and souls were saved.

Dundee was a hard place spiritually. The parish over which M'Cheyne had oversight had around 4000 people living in it and on the Lord's Day he would have had about 1000 at the worship services - although these people came from all over the town. He established a weekly prayer meeting in the church as well as several Sabbath Schools and a young people's meeting. M'Cheyne was a faithful pastor and teacher. One cannot help but be struck by the great involvement which he had with his people and his diligence in caring for their souls. Here is a typical comment from his diary:

September 26, 1838. Good visiting day. Twelve families; many of them go nowhere. It is a great thing to be well furnished by meditation and prayer before setting out; it makes you a far more full and faithful witness. Preached in A.F.'s house on Job, 'I know that my redeemer liveth'. Very sweet and precious to myself.²

M'Cheyne also believed in the importance of making himself readily available to his people and encouraged those anxious about spiritual matters to call at the manse. Andrew Bonar states the following:

Often, after a toilsome day, there were inquirers waiting for him, so that he had to begin work afresh in a new form. But this was his delight; it was a kind of interruption which he allowed even on a Saturday, in the midst of his studies. He was led to resolve not to postpone any inquiries till a future time, by finding that having done so on one occasion at a pressing moment, the individuals never returned; and so alive was he to the responsibilities of this office, that he ever after feared to lose such an opportunity of speaking with souls when they were aroused to concern. Busy one evening with extra parochial work, he was asked if any

person should be admitted to see him that night. 'Surely - what do we live for?' was his immediate reply. It was his manner, too, on a Saturday afternoon, to visit one or two of his sick who seemed near the point of death, with the view of being thus stirred up to a more direct application of the truth to his flock on the morrow, as dying men on the edge of eternity.³

Many examples of M'Cheyne's preaching are available to us today but Bonar says:

It is difficult to convey to those who never knew him a correct idea of the sweetness and holy unction of his preaching ... there are no notes that give any true idea of his affectionate appeals to the heart and searching applications. These he seldom wrote; they were poured forth at the moment when his heart filled with his subject; for his rule was to set before his hearers a body of truth first - and there was always a vast amount of Bible truth in his discourses - and then urge home the application. His exhortations flowed from his doctrine, and thus had both variety and power.⁴

M'Cheyne delighted in preaching Christ: 'It is strange how sweet and precious it is to preach directly about Christ, compared with all other subjects of preaching.'⁵ He was fully committed to the doctrines found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, not least to the doctrine of election. 'He saw no inconsistency in preaching an electing God, who "calleth whom he will", and a salvation free to "whosoever will"; nor in declaring the absolute sovereignty of God, and yet the unimpaired responsibility of man. He preached Christ as a gift laid down by the Father for every sinner freely to take.'⁶

M'Cheyne, it must be noted was very active not only in Dundee but all over Scotland. He preached throughout the week in many different places and he took an active interest in the work of the Church of Scotland. He regularly attended the meetings of the presbytery and spoke forthrightly concerning the great issues of the day. These were truly momentous times for the Scottish church. A great struggle was going on within the Church of Scotland between Moderates and Evangelicals. M'Cheyne identified himself fully with the Evangelical party and was resolutely opposed to Moderatism. He was present at the Edinburgh Convocation of November 1842 — a significant gathering of the Evangelical party — and it is evident that had his life been spared until May 1843 that he would have been among the great company who gathered together in the Tanfield Hall, Edinburgh, to form the Church of Scotland, Free.

M'Cheyne also placed great stress in his ministry on the importance of church discipline. He stated:

When I first entered upon the work of the ministry ... I devoted all my time, and care, and strength, to labour in word and doctrine. When cases of discipline were brought before me and the elders, I regarded them with something like abhorrence. It was a duty I shrank from: and I may truly say it nearly drove me from the work of the ministry among you altogether ... but I saw that if preaching be an ordinance of Christ, so is church discipline. I now feel very deeply persuaded that both are of God — that two keys are committed to us by Christ, the one the key of doctrine, by means of which we unlock the treasures of the Bible, the other the key of discipline, by which we open or shut the way to the sealing ordinances of the faith. Both are Christ's gift, and neither is to be resigned without sin.⁷

These early days of his ministry in Dundee were blessed by the Lord — especially the communion seasons — but greater days were to come. However, before we reflect upon the days of revival we must consider his visit to Palestine in 1839.

Palestine

At the close of 1838 M'Cheyne had to rest from his labours for a time due to ill health. He was suffering from violent palpitations of the heart and was at times very seriously ill. However, in 1839, with the approval of his doctors, he undertook a visit to Palestine in the company of Andrew Bonar, Dr Keith and Dr Black. The purpose of this mission was to visit the land of Palestine to ascertain the spiritual condition of the Jewish people. Then, on return, the Scottish brethren were to stir up the church at home to pray for the Jews. M'Cheyne was an historic premillennialist in terms of his eschatology. He believed that Israel — that is the land and nation of Israel — were still 'beloved for the father's sake'. He stated that 'we might anticipate an outpouring of the Spirit when our church should stretch out its hands to the Jews'. Details of this fascinating visit can be found in 'Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews from the Church of Scotland in 1839'.⁸

It was while M'Cheyne was on his visit to Palestine that it pleased the Lord to pour out his Spirit in a wonderful way in Dundee. During his absence M'Cheyne had arranged for the pulpit to be supplied by William Chalmers Burns who was later to become a missionary in China. In August 1839 the Lord poured out his Spirit in a mighty way upon the congregation. Revival was taking place in other parts of Scotland — notably at Kilsyth — but now the Lord was at work in Dundee.

Bonar recounts:

On Thursday ... at the close of the usual evening prayer meeting in St. Peter's and when the minds of many were deeply solemnized by the tidings which had reached them he (Burns) spoke a few words about what had for some days detained him from them, and invited those to remain who felt the need of an out-pouring of the Spirit to convert them. About a hundred remained; and at the conclusion of a solemn address to these anxious souls, suddenly the power of God seemed to descend, and all were bathed in tears. At a similar meeting, next evening, in the church, there was much melting of heart and intense desire after the Beloved of the Father; and on adjourning to the vestry, the arm of the Lord was revealed. No sooner was the vestry-door opened to admit those who might feel anxious to converse, than a vast number pressed in with awful eagerness. It was like a pent-up flood breaking forth; tears were streaming from the eyes of many, and some fell on the ground groaning, and weeping, and crying for mercy. Onward from that evening, meetings were held every day for many weeks; and the extraordinary nature of the work justified and called for extraordinary services. The whole town was moved.⁹

This mighty work of God continued in St. Peter's upon M'Cheyne's return and he was able to enter into these days of blessing. It is significant to note, however, that although this revival broke out during his absence, his attitude towards William Chalmers Burns is a reflection of the true godliness of M'Cheyne. Bonar notes 'He (M'Cheyne) had no envy at another instrument having been so honoured in the place where he himself had laboured with many tears and temptations. In true Christian magnanimity, he rejoiced that the work of the Lord was done, by whatever hand'.¹⁰

M'Cheyne continued to travel around preaching the Word in many different places often speaking on behalf of the newly founded Jewish Mission. In connection with this cause he visited Belfast in 1840 and was present at the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. In 1841 he visited Ireland again and many were stirred by his preaching especially a sermon on Song of Solomon 8 : 5 & 6.

M'Cheyne was not destined to have a long ministry. He himself, throughout his life, seemed conscious that his life would be short. He once told a friend: 'I do not expect to live long. I expect a sudden call some day — perhaps soon — and therefore speak very plainly.' On 13th March 1843 he took ill at a church meeting and twelve days later on 25th March 1843 he died. Great was the sorrow felt in the congregation of St. Peter's. Indeed, great was the sorrow felt throughout the church in Scotland.

His relevance

The life of Robert Murray M'Cheyne is relevant for us today in many difference ways. His concern for the souls of men, especially his passionate interest in the conversion of the Jews, is a challenge to our evangelistic zeal and vision. As we look at his ministry and see the way in which he pastored his people we who are 'pastors and teachers' today have to re-examine our commitment of biblical church discipline, our concern for the spiritual development of the young, and the extent to which we are making ourselves available to our people. There are three areas of M'Cheyne's life and ministry which I think are worthy of closer consideration — areas where we have much to learn from this man of God.

The Sabbath

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was absolutely clear on his commitment to the Sabbath day. when travelling to Palestine, on passing through Europe, he was grieved by the desecration of the Sabbath which he witnessed on the streets of Paris. In a letter he exhorted his friend, Rev. R. MacDonald, of Blairgowrie:

Stand in the breach, dear friend, and lift up your voice like a trumpet, lest Scotland become another France. You know how many in our own parishes trample on the holy day. They do not know how sweet it is to walk with God all that holy day. Isaish 1Viii. 11-14 is a sweet text to preach from, Exodus xxxi. 13 is also very precious, shewing that the real sanctifying of the Sabbath is one of God's signs or marks which he puts upon his people. It is one of the letters of the new name, which no one knoweth but they who receive it.¹¹

In his own personal life he was punctilious in his Sabbath keeping. In another letter to his friend, Rev. R. MacDonald of Blairgowrie, he said: 'I am almost tempted to send this tonight to the Post-office; but it is not right to encourage the Sabbath mail, so will defer it till Monday.'¹² Whilst distressed by Sabbath breaking and careful about Sabbath observance it would be wrong to convey the impression that the Sabbath was in any sense a negative day for him. No, for M'Cheyne the 'Sabbath was truly a delight'. It was for him a day in which we are especially reminded of the glory of heaven. He states:

When a believer lays aside his pen or loom, brushes aside his worldly cares, leaving them behind him with his week-day clothes, and comes up to the house of God, it is like the morning of the resurrection, the day when we shall come out of the great tribulation into the presence of God and the Lamb. When he sits under the preached Word and hears the voice of the shepherd leading and feeding his soul, it reminds him of the day when that Lamb that is in the midst of the throne

shall feed him and lead him to living fountains of waters. When he joins in the psalms of praise, it reminds him of the day when his hand shall strike the harps of God —

Where congregation ne'er break up,
And Sabbaths have no end.

When he retires, and meets with God in secret in his closet, or, like Isaac, in some favourite spot near his dwelling, it reminds him of the day when 'he shall be a pillar in the house of our God, and go no more out'.

This is the reason we love the Lord's day. This is the reason why we 'call the Sabbath a delight'. A well-spent Sabbath we feel to be a day of heaven upon earth.¹³

Theological controversy

It is often maintained that those who are serious about the pursuit of holiness will steer clear of any kind of theological controversy or doctrinal dispute. No one will dispute the godliness of Robert Murray M'Cheyne yet it is worth noting that when the truth of God was at stake he was not reluctant to speak out and to identify with those who were defending the faith. Reference has already been made to his clear identification with the Evangelical party and his attendance at the Edinburgh convocation of November 1842. Indeed Bonar tells us that:

Mr. M'Cheyne was never absent from any of the diets of this solemn assembly. He felt the deepest interest in any matter that came before them, got great light as to the path of duty in the course of the consultations, and put his name to all the resolutions, heartily sympathizing in the decided determination that, as a Church of Christ, we must abandon our connection with the State, if our 'Claim of Rights' were rejected ... none present will forget the affecting solemnity with which, on one occasion, Mr M'Cheyne poured out our wants before the Lord.¹⁴

Throughout his letters one receives clear indications as to where his sympathies lay in the struggle with Moderatism: 'You don't know what Moderatism is. It is a plant that our Heavenly Father never planted and I trust it is now to be rooted up'. Writing from the Holy Land to Rev. John Roxburgh he says:

When the liberties of our Church are infringed, and the arm of unhallowed power is raised against her, you perhaps think a moment, 'How will our traveller bear this?'

Again in another letter from the Holy Land to the same friend he states: 'I was happy to hear of Dr. Chalmer's success. Dismayed at the decision of the

Lord Chancellor, but “Jehovah nissi” — the Lord is our banner.’

It is not only liberal Protestantism that caused M’Cheyne grave concern, he was also resolutely opposed to Romanism. Bonar, who accompanied him on his travels through Europe, states:

The abominations of popery witnessed in Austrian Poland, called forth many a prayer for the destruction of the Man of Sin. ‘The images and idols by the way-side are actually frightful, stamping the whole land as a kingdom of darkness. I do believe that a journey through Austria would go far to cure some of the popery-admirers of our beloved land ... These are the marks of the beast upon this land.’¹⁶

Holiness

When we think of Robert Murry M’Cheyne we instinctively think of a holy life. He was absolutely obsessed with holiness — this was his great pursuit. He was exceedingly disciplined in his lifestyle; systematic and thorough in his study of the Word of God. Many have profited from and continue to use his Bible reading plan which he produced in January 1843 whereby the whole Bible could be read in one year. He would spend most mornings in private devotions, studying the Word and seeking the Lord in prayer. He held to the rule ‘that he must first seek the face of God before he could undertake any duty’. Often he would say a Psalm as soon as he arose to stir up his soul — three chapters of the Word were his normal morning portion. He was involved regularly with neighbouring ministers in gatherings for prayer. ‘But’, says Andrew Bonar, ‘whilst he did occasionally set apart seasons for special prayer and fasting the real secret of his souls’ prosperity lay in the daily enlargement of his heart in fellowship with his God’.¹⁷

He had a great concern that men would not idolize him and if he felt that people were making too much of him and seemed to be more committed to him personally than to the doctrines he was preaching then he deliberately distanced himself from those people. His holiness shone forth from him. The testimony of Andrew Bonar in this regard is very striking for Bonar knew him so very well. Commenting upon their travels together to the Holy Land Bonar said:

I was often reproved by his unabated attention to personal holiness; for this care was never absent from his mind, whether he was at home in his quiet chamber, or on the sea, or in the desert. Holiness in him was manifested, not by efforts to perform duty, but in a way so natural, that you recognized therein the easy outflowing of the indwelling Spirit.¹⁸

His life was marked out by a beauty of holiness. He himself said in October 1840, 'It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.'¹⁹ He also said: 'What a man is alone on his knees before God that he is and no more.'

Shortly before he died a letter was delivered to his house — a letter which he never read because of his ill condition. This letter, from a stranger, was opened after his death. The words the unknown correspondent penned to Robert Murray M'Cheyne so long ago seem to be appropriate ones with which to conclude this article. This short letter in many ways sums up his wonderful life and, I believe, will cause those of us who are currently serving the Lord in the work of the ministry to examine the quality of our Christian lives.

I heard you preach last Sabbath evening and it pleased God to bless that sermon to my soul. It was not so much what you said as your manner of speaking that struck me, I saw in you a beauty of holiness that I never saw before.

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THE SOCIETY PEOPLE

When Covenanters had no ministers

by C. Knox Hyndman

Knox Hyndman is minister of Newtownards Reformed Presbyterian Church, Co. Down, and Lecturer in Church History in the Reformed Theological College, Belfast.

In common with those churches which subscribe to one of the Reformed Confessions of Faith, Reformed Presbyterians place a high value on the office of the minister. Entry into this office is carefully guarded and training is carefully given. Since Reformed Presbyterians have such a high view of the minister's office how would they cope if no men were available to exercise this ministry? Would it prove to be an insurmountable obstacle to the work of the church? Would it threaten the very existence of a local congregation? For Reformed Presbyterians these were crucial questions which had to be answered not in a detached way, but in the crucible of testing circumstances. In this period without a regular ordained ministry the church continued to live and work through what became known as the Societies.

The Emergence of Societies

In the period following 1680 in Scotland there was an absence of an ordained ministry. When episcopacy was established by law in the land, Presbyterians found themselves in a dilemma. Was it possible for them to continue their ministry? The only way they could legally do so was by signing the Indulgence. Several forms of this were presented and each one was rejected by Covenanting ministers. In June 1679 a third indulgence for ministers had been published following the battle of Bothwell Brig where Covenanters had suffered a crushing defeat. Two of their ministers John King and John Kid had been hanged and around twelve hundred were barbarously treated and confined in Greyfriars Churchyard.

Not surprisingly these Covenanters were not inclined to accept the Indulgence published by the Government, especially as there were conditions attached which, if accepted, would have meant a compromise of their firmly held biblical convictions.

The Indulgences

Charles 2nd issued three and James 2nd issued four Indulgences. The first was issued in 1669 and all had a basic similarity. Under the terms of the Indulgence some ejected ministers were granted permission to return on condition that they obtained recognition from the patron and the bishop.

The basic opposition to the Indulgence by the Covenanters was that they proceeded from the king's alleged supremacy over the church. To accept the Indulgence then would, they believed, have meant accepting that Erastian supremacy. This was not just a Covenanters' perception, but was in fact a condition of the Indulgences. The very first one in 1669 insisted that the minister must not preach against the doctrine that the king is supreme in all ecclesiastical causes. Since Covenanters could not sign such an Indulgence the church went underground. Alexander Peden's famous description gives us the Covenanting view at the time 'Where is the church of Scotland at this day? It is not amongst the Government clergy. I will tell you where the church is. It is wherever a praying young man or young woman is at a dykeside in Scotland; that is where the church is'.

It was at this time that the Covenanters became known as the Society people. These Societies were groups which met each week under the leadership of gifted and godly men for fellowship and worship. Societies did not however immediately burst into bloom. The root of the Societies lay much deeper. Thomas Houston sees their origins as being in the memorable period of the First Reformation. From the death of Patrick Hamilton till the organization of the Church under John Knox, believing men and women being without a faithful ministry met together in fellowship groups. So roots can be traced back to 1556 when a number of Christians in Scotland met together for religious conference, the reading of the Scripture and prayer. This might be said to be the beginning of the evangelical church in Scotland. These groups however were not loosely formed. They were not left open to the danger of conflicting powerful personalities who might appear within them. Nor were they a vague kind of democracy where strong willed individuals could dictate to all the rest of the members. There was to be an orderliness in the Society as in church.

Dr. McCrie in his 'Life of John Knox' says 'Convinced of the necessity of order and discipline in their Societies, and desirous to have them organized so far as within their power, agreeably to the institution of Christ, they proceeded to choose elders to whom they promised subjection and deacons for the collection and distribution of alms to the poor.

Then a little later, during the lengthy persecution which followed the adoption of the Perth Articles in 1618, people again met in Societies for mutual support and encouragement. So Societies formed in the period after 1680 were following a pattern established many years before. We would say of course that they were putting into practice principles taught clearly in the Word of God where believers are exhorted to encourage one another, build one another up, pray for one another, stimulate one another unto love and good works.

The existence and value of Societies did not mean that Covenanters were losing their desire for ordained pastors. 'We will hear all ministers, whether in houses or fields, who will preach according to the Word of God, our Covenants, Confession of Faith and Catechisms Shorter and Larger'. No ministers accepted this call. Accordingly the Quarterly meeting in 1682 decided to educate four young men for the ministry. Among them was James Renwick who was to be the last Covenanting martyr. In 1683 Renwick having returned from Holland accepted the call from the Societies and became their pastor. At the time of his martyrdom in 1688 James Renwick was heard to say 'Farewell sweet Societies'.

It may seem that the position maintained by the Covenanters had been vindicated at the Revolution Settlement. In some ways that is true, but the Settlement itself was a disappointment to them and Covenanters remained outside the Revolution church. For a further sixteen years they were without a minister and organized into numerous societies with a total male membership of seven thousand. In 1706 Rev J MacMillan joined from the Church of Scotland. He accepted the appointment as minister to the scattered Covenanting Societies and was their only pastor for the next thirty seven years.

In Ireland, too, Societies had been formed. These Irish Societies kept a close link with their Scottish brethren and in the period 1679 - 1681 they had the assistance of Rev Alexander Peden in Kells and Glenwherry.

The Organization of Societies

The Societies adopted a strict list of rules drawn up for the purpose of guarding entry and for assessing the attitude of those who wished to join.

Some of those rules were an evident reflection of the spirit of the age and of the issues which Covenanters identified as crucial. No-one could be a member for example, who 'took any of the bonds tendered by the Government, paid cess, locality or militia money to the civil authority or stipends to the curates or indulged clergy; made use of a Government pass, voluntarily appeared before

any court of law, supplied commodities to the enemy, allowed another to do any of these things in his name, or who in any form recognized the ministry of the indulged or silent Presbyterians’.

This makes the Societies sound like a political pressure group. Certainly they were censured for exclusiveness but as J.D. Douglas comments this ‘also shows their determination to have nothing to do with those who for other than religious reasons might have a grudge against the Government’. They were not a collection of disgruntled men and women.

Spiritual concerns were always at the heart of these Societies. This is well illustrated when we consider just a few of the questions which were to be put to those who applied for membership.

1. Everyone shall be required to declare the ground, causes and motives which induce him to join your fellowship.
2. That he be required to declare what moved him to separate from those with whom he formerly associated.
3. If he is a stranger, that a testificate be required of him, from the Society to which he formerly belonged or due enquiry made and satisfaction got of the soundness of his principles and uprightness of his conversation. That no person who maintains errors or is chargeable with any scandal may be admitted.

The applicant was then asked to give his judgement on several issues covering both doctrine and practice, concerning the work of reformation, the Prophetical, Priestly and Kingly offices of Christ.

The purpose of the Societies was stated to be ‘the glory of God, the exercise of our duty according to His commands, increase of knowledge and growth in grace and edification of one another’s souls’. ‘We betake ourselves to God and seek unto Him relying on Him alone for support. So we frequent apply ourselves to Him in the Name of Jesus Christ both publicly and privately’.

A long list of commitments was made including those to make Scripture the only rule of life; to attend on public worship; to seek unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace - ‘we will not entertain in evil in our hearts nor take up groundless prejudice against one another. Neither falsely to accuse nor rashly to give ear to reports and misrepresentations of any of our number till trial be made in a Gospel manner’. ‘Better to speak to a Christian before their face than to speak of a Christian behind their back’. There was also a commitment to help financially and practically any who were in poverty.

Missionary vision was not lacking within the Societies. Walter Smith, executed in 1681, drew up a set of rules for Society meetings. 'Rules and directions anent Private Christian meeting for prayer and conference to mutual edification and to the right management of the same'. Rule 23 stated that members should 'pray for Israel that the promised day of their ingrafting again by faith may be hastened, that the Lord's written and preached Word may be sent with power to enlighten the poor pagan world living in bleak perishing darkness without Christ and the knowledge of His Name'. J.G. Vos rightly comments, 'The times and circumstances forced them to stress their testimony against particular evils but behind all this was true Christian faith and unfeigned piety'.

Practice within the Societies

The Societies followed a simple form of worship comprising praise, reading and prayer. In 1782 the Reformed Presbytery in Scotland prepared a document entitled 'A Short Directory for Religious Societies'. The direction given in this document was received and practised in Ireland too. Adam Loughridge points out that 'the strength and continuity of the RPC in the 18th century depended largely on the Society meeting and the Presbytery adopted a list of rules for the guidance of leaders and members of the Society'.

A Society could exist with only two or three members but the directory suggested that eight to twelve was a suitable number. Children were to attend and special attention was to be given to them 'by catechizing and special instructions adapted to their capacity'. Members should regard the time set apart for this ordinance as sacred. They were to attend punctually and discover during the exercises deep, heartfelt interest in the proceedings. The length of time spent was not to exceed two hours. When members came in they were not to engage in what was described as 'common niceties of conversation'. They were to settle down and not look around with curiosity to see who was there.

As well as devotions the meeting itself was to include discussion of a 'subject of religious converse'. These were to be wisely chosen on the basis of both doctrine and practice. The subject should be proposed in the form of a question at one meeting and discussed at the following meeting. Each member, male or female, had the privilege of submitting such a question. 'The subjects should be selected to promote godly edifying not to indulge curiosity or strife'.

Remember that those who formed these Societies were Presbyterian by conviction and so Societies did not see themselves as isolated bodies nor as

independent. There was a sense of mutual care and responsibility. Societies in a district had delegates who met together. If one Society found there was an issue raised which it could not answer it was able to seek counsel of a neighbouring Society.

In 1681 Societies were united in a 'general correspondence' with a delegated meeting to be held four times yearly. This served as substitute for church organization for the Covenanters from 1681 - 1743 when the Reformed Presbytery was organized.

The Legacy of the Societies

William Hetherington speaks enthusiastically about the place of Societies in the life of the church. 'During the period of lengthened persecutions they adopted no extreme or heterodox opinions. They maintained pure evangelical truth and preserved strict discipline, thus affording a striking instance of the value of associating in private prayer meetings'. Adam Loughridge concludes that 'These Societies were the root from which the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland grew'. After the death of David Houston in 1696 Covenanters in Ireland maintained their distinct organization and found spiritual encouragement through their Societies and there was frequent contact between Scotland and Ireland. The Societies in Ireland were represented at some of the important gatherings in Scotland including the Covenant renovation services. Apart from a brief period in 1707 when Rev John McMillan visited Ireland, Covenanters in Ireland crossed to Scotland for baptism and marriage and to participate in services of communion. However as the church increased and regular ministry came into being the local society Meeting was retained and used mainly for spiritual edification.

J.C. McFeeters comments, "In these meetings the elders became as ministers in the knowledge of Christ and the people became like elders. When social worship of God characterizes the church the people will take on strength and be able to stand amidst the spiritual landslides and general defection that characterizes the times in which we live'.

R.J. George addressing the first International Convention of Reformed Presbyterian Churches in 1896 makes this perceptive comment, 'There are no people in the world that honour their ministers more than do Covenanters, nor are there any people more independent of their ministers' service. In the prayer meeting the minister takes his place as one of the brethren. He presides over it when it

is his turn. The meeting goes on when he is absent just the same as when he is present. This characteristic is a noble one. It has been stamped upon the Covenanter Prayer meeting by its history'.

Reformed churches around the world should demonstrate two vital characteristics. There should be clear and faithful preaching of the whole counsel of God combined with a warm and loving fellowship among the people. The legacy of the Societies is that they impress on us the importance of both.

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HAPPILY DASHING BABYLON'S INFANTS AGAINST THE ROCKS? THE USE OF IMPRECATION IN THE PSALMS

by W.N.S. WILSON

Norris Wilson is Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature in the Reformed Theological College, Belfast.

'I just cannot enter into the spirit of Psalm 137 vs. 8-9. How could I feel happy picturing myself dashing innocent babies to pieces on rocks? How can that be a blessed action?' So ran a conversation I once had with a person brought up in a Psalm-singing tradition and it illustrates the 'problem' people often have with imprecation in the Psalms. By imprecation we mean a formal cry to God for his judgment upon, for the falling of his curse upon, the implacably wicked who are threatening the people of God. Various expressions are used such as, 'blot them out', 'make them desolate', 'put them to shame', 'utterly destroy them' etc. Some thirty-six Psalms are often earmarked as 'the Imprecatory Psalms' because of their 'extreme' language - 35:4-6; 58:6-10; 59:11-14; 69:22-28; 83:9-18; 109:6-19; 137:7-9.

What is often underlined as particularly 'problematic' is the attitude of the righteous when the curse falls on the wicked - 'The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked' (Ps. 58:10); or, 'O Daughter of Babylon... happy is he... who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks' (Ps. 137: 8-9). The 'problem' is well stated by Albert Barnes, 'Perhaps there is no part of the Bible that gives more perplexity and pain to its readers than this; perhaps nothing that constitutes a more plausible objection to the belief that the psalms are the productions of inspired men than the spirit of revenge which they seem to breathe and the spirit of cherished malice and implacableness which the writers seem to manifest'.¹

Setting the 'problem' in proper perspective

Firstly, to speak of 'the Imprecatory Psalms' implies that this is the chief element in them, but this is not so. Often we are speaking of a mere couple of verses in a Psalm, even in the seven cited above. It is better to speak of 'imprecation in the Psalms'.

Secondly, we must recognize that all the Psalms are part of the inspired Word of God (2 Sam. 23:1-2; Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21; 3:15-16). This being so it follows that the reader cannot use as a criterion for determining the canonicity of a certain passage his own sense of what is right or wrong. Many commentators however fall into this error when speaking of imprecation. For example Peter C. Craigie writes of such passages that though they are, 'the real and natural reactions to the experience of evil and pain... the sentiments are in themselves evil... the psalmist may hate his oppressor; God hates the oppression... the words of the psalmist are... not always pure and good... these Psalms are not the oracles of God'.² C.S. Lewis famously went even further, 'The hatred is there - festering, gloating, undisguised - and also we would be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it, or, worse still, used it to justify similar passions in ourselves... (such cries) are indeed devilish'.³ Altogether more commendable are the comments of C.H. Spurgeon (on Ps. 109), 'Truly this is one of the hard places of Scripture, a passage which the soul trembles to read, yet as it is a Psalm... given by inspiration, it is not ours to sit in judgment upon it, but to bow our ear to what God the Lord would speak to us therein'.⁴ It is worth noting in this regard that Psalms containing imprecation are frequently cited in the New Testament (a strong testimony to their plenary authority), e.g. Psalm 69 is quoted no less than five times.

Thirdly, it must be borne in mind that of all the passages that offend some are actually prayers. The English verb 'imprecate' comes from the Latin *imprecari* (to invoke by prayer). Thus in no way are they threats of or desire for personal vengeance. Rather, in their trouble and persecution we find the psalmists coming to God, leaving the situation to him and asking him to deal with it according to what he has already revealed. Notice how the psalmist in Psalm 74:18-23 pleads in terms of God's covenant.

Fourthly, we have to say that ultimately these are the prayers of Christ. Behind David someone else is praying in a way he could not have, as an examination of Psalm 18:20-24 or 22:16-18 will show. The New Testament reveals this to be Christ whom we hear speaking the words of the Psalms as his own words (Ps. 31:5; 22:1; 69:21; 22:31). Likewise the writer of Hebrews tells us that it was Christ who spoke the words of Psalm 40:6-8 (Heb. 10:5) and of Psalm 22:22 (Heb. 2:11-12). Thus, ultimately, the 'I' of the Psalms is Christ, a point grasped by Augustine when he said, 'We ought to recognize his voice in all the Psalms'.⁵ As Prof. F.S. Leahy rightly says, 'The imprecatory psalms... remain psalms of Christ's holy judgment upon the impenitent in the manner defined in the New Testament'.⁶ So when we read the words of Psalm 69:23-28

we need to hear these words as coming from the lips of Christ who will one day make this prayer a reality as he says in Matthew 25:41. Thus the prayers of vengeance in the Psalms are Christ's alarm to the unconverted who are, as such, his enemies and these passages should be preached and sung as such. As Bruce Waltke has said, 'We conclude, then, that the Psalms are ultimately the prayers of Jesus Christ, Son of God. He alone is worthy to pray the ideal vision of a king suffering for righteousness and emerging victorious over the hosts of evil. As the corporate head of the church, he represents the believers in these prayers. Moreover, Christians, as sons of God and as royal priests, can rightly pray these prayers along with their representative Head'.⁷

Fifthly, we must always bear in mind the covenantal context of the Psalms. The 'moral indignation' aroused by imprecation in the Psalms, one senses, may well be due to a failure to appreciate this. In Deuteronomy 26-30 we find equal weight being given to both the blessings on covenant-keepers and the curses on covenant-breakers. It is these curses that David invokes on the enemies of the Lord's Anointed in his day. It was these same curses that would fall on unrepentant Israel and Judah later in their history. Since, as we have established, all the Psalms look forward to Christ (Luke 24:44), then the life of 'the blessed one' of Psalm 1 is only fully realized in Christ, the one who *never* 'walked in the counsel of the ungodly or stood in the way of sinners or sat in the seat of mockers'. Only in this way can the covenant curses of verses 4-6 be avoided. So then the Lord's Anointed who writes the Psalms prays consciously in the context of the covenant. Thus the defence of imprecation in the Psalms is really only a small part of the defence of covenant or true biblical theology.

Explanations therefore to be rejected

Firstly, it follows from this that the view that these are cries for personal vengeance which Scripture records but does not endorse is to be rejected. The 'we' of these portions is used only as we are in Christ, who is praying with us that his enemies and those of his church be dealt with in accordance with the covenant. Also, of course, the words of imprecation were not, strictly speaking, spoken in the heat of the moment, but were carefully composed poetry written in the calm after the incidents they record.

Secondly, we reject the view that such prayers 'reflect a lower standard of morality that belonged to the Old Testament dispensation' (or as C.I. Scofield said that they are a 'cry unsuited to the church').⁸ Not only do we find parallel prayers in the new Testament (e.g. 1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8-9; 5:12; 2 Tim. 4:14;

Rev. 6:10; 18:20; 19:106), but, equally with the New Testament, the Old Testament teaches the duty of love (e.g. Lev. 19: 17-18), the hatred of God for violence (Ps. 5:6) and that the believer must return good for evil (Ps. 7:5; 35:12-14. note how this sits beside the imprecations in these Psalms) and reject vengeance (Deut. 32:35; prov. 20:22). Also in almost every case the prayer of imprecation sits alongside evidence of true spirituality (e.g. ps. 71:13 must be set alongside vs. 2-7; Ps. 139:19-22 must be set alongside vs. 1-18). The point is that Christ as the mediator of the covenant of grace pronounces its blessings on those who bow in submission to him and its curses on those who reject him. Compare the blessings pronounced on the children of his kingdom in Matthew 5:1-12 with the curses pronounced on his enemies, the children of the evil one, in Matthew 23:13-33. The Psalms that speak of God's wrath on the wicked make us understand more fully what happened on the cross (Gal. 3:13 cf. Deut. 28). All who reject Christ reject the only way of escape from the curses of the covenant and will have to endure them, just as certainly as Judas did (Ps. 41:8-10 cf. Matt. 26:23-24). Christ has authority on earth not just to forgive sins, but to execute judgment on his enemies and both are included in the gospel message of the Psalms.

The proper approach: What these prayers reveal about Christ and the Christ-like believer

Firstly, they reveal a longing for the vindication of God's righteousness. This is seen, for example, in Psalm 58 where the imprecatory section that begins in verse 6 with a call to break the teeth of the wicked who are acting with violence and injustice (i.e. acting like fierce animals tearing innocent prey) and ends with the anticipation of the righteous being glad to bathe their feet in their blood (i.e. the threatening 'animals' have themselves been hunted down and their threat eradicated), is followed by verse 11, 'Then men will say, 'Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth'. In other words God's judgment on the wicked redounds to the glory of his justice. As John Wenham rightly comments, 'The enemies of God are implacable. It is necessary for the vindication of God's authority and God's goodness that just retribution should not be long delayed. He prays for it, not shutting his eyes to the horror which it involves. There is no sadistic pleasure in seeing his enemy suffer, no sense of getting his own back, but simply a deep desire that the world would see that God is just'."

Secondly, they reveal a burning zeal for God and his kingdom. When David was writing these prayers God's kingdom on the earth existed as a theocratic

monarchy. When God's people came into the land they acted, under their leaders, as the agents of God's just wrath against God's enemies. In the days of Moses God had said, 'The Lord will be at war with the Amalakites from generation to generation'. (Ex. 17:15). David was God's representative ruler on the earth, therefore his enemies were not private and personal enemies, but the enemies of God's cause and kingdom on the earth. Under the new administration, of course, God has not given swords to the representatives of his kingdom on the earth, but keys. It is the same zeal for the kingdom that makes Paul cry, 'If anyone love not the Lord Jesus Christ let him be anathema' (1 Cor 16:22) and which moves the office-bearers of the church to use the keys to exclude apostates from their fellowship who would 'subvert the truth in unrighteousness'. Tremper Longman makes a valuable point here when he says, '...since our warfare is against Satan and the spiritual forces of evil, we may call down our curses upon them. Perhaps the most dramatic way we can pray against Satan is to pray for the conversion of unbelievers. Indeed, evangelism is the primary form of Christian Holy War against the powers of darkness... We should also know that when we pray for Christ to come again we are praying for the final destruction of Satan and his followers, both human and spiritual'.¹⁰ However, in praying Revelation 22:20 we must not forget that this involves asking for the events of 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10.

Thirdly, these prayers reveal a true abhorrence of sin as embodied in the implacably wicked. Those whom David prays against were not simply public enemies or even enemies of God's cause in general, they were the active plotters and schemers who gathered around men like Saul and Absalom to incite them to evil. As Chalmers Martin says, 'Doeg and Cush and Ahithophel are types of those vile men in which falsehood, treachery, cunning, greed, hate, cruelty, arrogance and pride had come to their perfect fruit... they were, in the psalmist's view, fearful embodiments of wickedness'.¹¹ We know, of course, who lay behind these enemies of God, urging them on as his agents in his desperate bid to overthrow the mother-promise of Genesis 3:15, Satan himself (Rev. 12), and there is surely no imprecation in the Psalms that we would not be willing to apply to him. David's enemies show that they are Satan's children, e.g. Psalm 5:10. 'Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you'. This is why David can say in Psalm 139:21-22, 'Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them my enemies'. As Cornelius Van Til has said, 'It is at all times a part of the task of the people of God to destroy evil. Once we see this we do not, for instance, meanly apologize for the imprecatory Psalms but glory in them'.¹²

Fourthly, therefore, these prayers reveal a realistic anticipation of God's attitude to and judgment upon impenitent and persistent enemies of his kingdom. David makes clear in the Psalms that God will judge evil. David knows that if God is not a sovereign God and a just God then he is not God. It is interesting to note that David nowhere invokes upon God's enemies anything more terrible than what he has already said will happen to them. When he prays that they 'be as chaff before the wind' (Ps. 35:5) we are reminded that he has already said, 'the ungodly... are like the chaff which the wind blows away' (Ps 1:4). When he prays, 'break their teeth' (Ps. 58:6) we are reminded that he has already said, 'Their feet are caught in the net they have hidden' (Ps. 9:15). David never wants anything that is not just, that is not consistent with the principle of fairness that was at the heart of Israel's law (*lex talionis*). As Robert L. Dabney has said, 'Righteousness retribution is one of the glories of the divine character. If it is right that God should desire to exercise it, then it cannot be wrong for his people to desire him to exercise it'.¹³

In applying the experiences of the Psalmist to the evils of the present day, John R.W. Scott is surely right to say, 'I do not find it hard to imagine situations in which holy men of God do and should both cry to God for vengeance and assert their own righteousness. Since God is going to judge the impenitent, a truly godly person will desire him to do so, and that without any feelings of personal animosity'.¹⁴ We can think here, for instance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, suffering under the jackboot of Hitler's Nazis, fearlessly applying these passages in his preaching in the days before he was martyred. As J.A. Motyer has said, 'Possibly... our sense of offence at the imprecations arises not so much from Christian sensitivity as from our general inexperience of persecution and our failure to make common cause with Christians under the lash'.¹⁵ Have we indeed sat where the believers under Idi Amin and his present day imitators in Africa have had to sit? As Hubert Richards has said 'The victory of God cannot be had without the crushing of evil. It is an absurd sentimentality to want one without the other'.¹⁶ Imprecation in the Psalms then expresses the justice of Christ, his indignation against all injustice and his compassion for victims of injustice. When, conscious of the life and death struggle that is being waged between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, we ask that God's kingdom may come we are, with a holy hatred of it, having seen its ravages, asking that the kingdom of darkness may be utterly destroyed.

The use of these prayers in preaching and in praise.

Firstly, their use in preaching. Here we may take as an example the words of

Psalms 137:8-9 with which we began. We must remember the biblical-theological significance of Babylon in Scripture. From early in Genesis to late in Revelation it represents human autonomy and self-sufficiency, all that is hostile to God. Notice that Babylon is referred to as already 'doomed to destruction'. This sends us back to Isaiah 13:16 where the prophecy specifies the dashing of her infants to pieces. The psalm shows that this in particular had been what Babylon had done to the infants of Judea and of course behind this again we see the efforts of the evil one to destroy the Seed of the woman. Thus the psalmist is crying out not just for mere justice, but for the destruction of this particular embodiment of the kingdom of darkness. We must notice also that the word mistranslated 'infants' here (ollel) means child in the sense of relationship without specifying age (cf. The expression 'a child of the sixties'). Thus we could say that it is all the followers of the evil kingdom who are to be dashed to pieces.

It is also interesting that the word translated 'rocks' is actually singular. Does this not point us to the words of Christ in Matthew 21: 42-44, where he speaks of himself as the rock which will either be accepted as the capstone or serve as the rock on which those who reject him will be dashed to pieces? Thus the curses that will fall on anti-Christian Babylon will fall on all who reject Christ, turning their backs on the City of God, for verses 5-6 pronounce God's curse on all such. It is surely significant that verse 9 was repeated by Christ in Luke 19:44 as he lamented over physical Jerusalem which inherited the curse because of its rejection of him. In Psalm 137, however, what the psalmist is longing for is ultimately the final unveiling of the victory of Christ over the kingdom of darkness. When this comes there will be great rejoicing. This is why the psalmist says in effect, 'Happy is he who participates in that final overthrow.' This word translated 'happy' is used twenty-six times in the Psalms and is always used of the happiness of those who are trusting in God. It is this rejoicing that is highlighted in Revelation 18:20,24; 19: 1-7. All who are trusting in God will be happy in the victory in which they will share as sons and daughters of the victorious Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, their use in praise. As we sing these portions prayerfully we must beware of applying them in our minds to our own personal enemies, people who may be our enemies for our fault as much as theirs, people to whom we should rather be going to seek for reconciliation. Christ reiterates the message of the Old Testament that we should never pray out of a spirit of personal vengeance, that we are to love our enemies. To sing the imprecations prayerfully is to surrender all rights for personal vengeance to God and say 'Your kingdom come and your will be done.' At the same time we pray for justice to be done and to be

seen to be done and we pray that evil will be vanquished. This involves the destruction of God's enemies, ultimately when Christ returns.

However, while we are still in the day of grace we are praying for conversions. Psalm 83:16 is instructive here, 'Cover their faces with shame so that men will seek your name O Lord.' It is right to pray that God would shake up lives, that they would experience his hand of discipline, so that they would be brought to their senses and flee his hand of judgement. 'Make them like tumbleweed' the psalmist had said in verse 13. Was not this the experience of even Nebuchadnezzar of very Babylon itself so that eventually, a broken man in the best sense, he gave in and acknowledged the sovereign hand of God (Dan.4: 34-35)? In the words of Martin Luther, 'We should pray that our enemies be converted and become our friends, and, if not, that their doing and designing be bound to fail and have no success and that their persons perish rather than the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ'.¹⁷ We must remember that, as Paul explains in Romans 9, God is glorified in the conversion of sinners and in the judgement of the wicked. Maybe the problem is that in much of our prayers we are more concerned for our need than for God's glory.

Conclusion

Here we feel we can do no better than echo the well chosen words of Johannes G. Vos, 'God's kingdom cannot come without Satan's kingdom being destroyed. God's will cannot be done on earth without the destruction of evil. Evil cannot be destroyed without the destruction of men who are permanently identified with it. Instead of being influenced by the sickly sentimentalism of the present day. Christian people should realize that the glory of God demands the destruction of evil. Instead of being insistent upon the assumed, but really non-existent, rights of men, they should focus their attention upon the rights of God. Instead of being ashamed of the Imprecatory Psalms, and attempting to apologize for them and explain them away, Christian people should glory in them and not hesitate to use them in the public and private exercises of the worship of God'.¹⁸

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INTRODUCTION TO HOLOCAUST THEOLOGY

John S. Ross

John Ross is Chief Executive of Christian Witness to Israel. He is the European Co-ordinator of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism.

It is impossible to over estimate the impact of the Holocaust on the Jewish people. Not since the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. has there been an event that has given rise to so much heart-searching and questioning. We may be familiar with some of the questions Jewish people often ask. Where was God when six million Jewish people perished? Where was the Christian church? What is a Jew? What is the meaning of Israel's election? What of Jewish survival? Could it ever happen again? So utterly devastating was this event that it required a new term to express the abject horror of destruction and loss - it became known as *Yom ha-Shoah*, or The Day of the Tempest, a tempest which has chilled to the core the soul of every Jew alive today.

Fifty years later the Holocaust continues to be a living force. It cannot be relegated to the history books for it moulds Jewish thought and behaviour five decades after the destruction of the death camps. One Jewish writer observes, *'It is a defensible assumption that the echoes, reverberations, and repercussions of the Holocaust operate in almost everything that happens in Jewish life.'*

Today every effort is made to keep the memory alive. Israel's Holocaust memorial museum, Yad Vashem, works to collect and publish all available data. The publication of countless books, such as Martin Gilbert's monumental work *The Holocaust*, give ready access to the facts and their interpretation. Through the medium of such films as *Shoah* and *Shindler's List* there has been a powerful portrayal of the grim suffering and courageous heroism of a tortured nation.

Jews attempt to understand the holocaust

How do Jewish people make sense of the calamity of systematic and scientific genocide? Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok in his very helpful books *Holocaust Theology* (Lamp, 1989) and *The Crucified Jew — Twenty centuries of Christian anti-Semitism*. (Harper Collins, 1992) mentions a number of approaches possible to Jewish thinkers.

1 Jewish deaths in the Holocaust were redemptive

One biblical concept underlying this idea is that of *churban*. Dan Cohn-Sherbok sees *churban* as 'a catastrophe which ends an old era and inaugurates a new period of renewal as it achieves progress through sacrifice.'² In language reminiscent of Isaiah chapter 53, the leading proponent of this view, British Jewish theologian Ignaz Maybaum, speaks of Israel as God's suffering servant and sacrificial lamb. In principle Cohn-Sherbok suggests that Maybaum sees Auschwitz as the analogue of Golgotha:

Jews suffer in order to bring about the rule of God over the world and its peoples; their God appointed mission is to serve the course of historical progress and bring mankind into a new era.³

2 The Holocaust demonstrates God's will that his ancient covenant people shall survive

This seemingly contradictory view has been suggested by thinkers such as Emil Frackenheim who have asserted that faith can never be called into question by events of history. Jews must hold fast to belief in the traditional covenant God who, as Lord of history, was present even in the Holocaust.

3 The Holocaust is inscrutable

For many God's part in this crucial point of Jewish history is enigmatic; he is portrayed as silent and unseen even though present in all the suffering of the Holocaust. Some have suggested that the response of the faithful is to be modelled on the response of Job; modern Jews must believe in God as Job believed even though he did not understand. One Orthodox Jew has commented, '*As Hidden God, God is saviour; in the apparent void he is the Redeemer of Israel*'.⁴

4 The Holocaust highlights the intolerable burden of being Jewish.

There are Jewish writers and thinkers to whom the divine election is more than can be borne. They resent the fact that God has chosen Israel, when this election has for them been such a source of suffering at the hands of Gentiles. Some time ago I came across this poignant little poem:

Merciful God, choose another people.
We are weary of dying.
We have no more prayers.
Choose another people; we have no more blood to shed as a sacrifice.
Merciful God, give us ordinary clothes of shepherds of flocks
and do us one more kindness, merciful God:
Take away your shechina from us.

5 The Holocaust as chastisement for assimilation

In 1990, Rabbi Eliezer Schach is head of a leading Orthodox Jewish yeshiva (rabbinic college) and considered by many to be the most influential Jewish leader in the world; he has stated that the Holocaust was God's punishment for those Jews who '*violated the Shabbat and ate pork*'.⁵ In other words, they were punished for their assimilation. For such thinkers as Schach, the irony of the Holocaust is that it emanated from Berlin, capital of the country '*that had been worshipped by its Jews as the epitome of civilisation, the cultural utopia*'.⁶ Leviticus 26.44 reads as follows:

Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, nor shall I abhor them, to utterly destroy them and break My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God.

Twenty years before the War Rabbi Meir Simcha Hacoen commented on the verse, making the following remarkable prediction:

Modern man thinks that Berlin is Jerusalem. But the fierce storm of destruction will emanate from Berlin and leave but a scant remnant. The survivors will disperse to other countries and Torah will strike new roots and young scholars will produce undreamt-of accomplishments.

In 1962 Rabbi Menachem Hartom posed the question: '*What sin could have evoked... the annihilation of European Jewry?*' He answered it in the following terms;

Assimilated Jews, Reform Jews, even Orthodox Jews, found positive meaning in German, Austrian, French identity. Some abandoned the hope of a return to Israel altogether... others deferred, and for this they were punished.⁸

6 After the Holocaust Christians must desist from evangelism

After all that they have suffered as a people, many Jewish people are quite outraged by Christians who attempt to persuade them that their religion is inadequate, fundamentally flawed or that the Christian Gospel provides the only way to God.

Listen to Jewish writer, Blu Greenburg:

I see mission through the unique ... event of the Holocaust. Would those who preach conversion for all Jews really want a world Judenrein, a world free of Jews? ...After the Holocaust, can any well-meaning Christian look into my eyes and make that claim, the call for a kind of 'spiritual final solution'.

In what she calls 'undialogic' language, Ms Greenburg refers to evangelism after the 'normative event of the Holocaust' as 'obscene':

To have them (young people and Russian immigrants) pried away through mission/proselytism is an act of spiritual rape.¹⁰

The Churches respond to the holocaust

The Christian community too is compelled both to acknowledge Auschwitz as historical fact and to formulate a theological analysis to guide Jewish-Christian relations in the post-Holocaust world. As with Judaism so with Christianity there are a number of suggestions on how to decipher and understand the suffering of Auschwitz.

1 The Roman Catholic Response

The Roman Catholic Church has been very slow to respond to Auschwitz. After hearing from Jews that Nazi anti-Semitism was the radical product of the anti-Jewish impulses of traditional Catholicism, Pius XII altered the wording of the traditional Good Friday prayer, for 'the perfidious Jew' to prayer for 'the unbelieving Jews'. The use of the prayer was finally abolished by Paul VI. Between these two popes was the remarkable five year pontificate of John XXIII, under whose aegis the document *Nostra Aetate* was promulgated in 1966 by the Second Vatican Council.

This short document of just fifteen Latin sentences overturned centuries of anti-Jewish bias as it set out to demonstrate clearly the Jewish roots of the Christian faith, and condemned the traditional Roman Catholic perspective that represented Jews as 'rejected or accursed by God'. It 'decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism... at any time and by anyone'.

Significantly, in October 1997 the French clergy took part in a public act of repentance and sorrow for the failure of French Roman Catholics to stop the deportations from the Paris suburb of Drancy to the death camps.

2 The World Council of Churches' Comments

Notwithstanding the record of wartime support for Jewish people on the part of many individual Protestants, the post-war official church leaders have been

racked with guilt at the silence of the churches in the face of anti-Semitism. For the ecumenical Protestant world the post-war realisation of the shocking reality of the Holocaust called for a radical re-appraisal of Jewish-Christian relations. The First Assembly of the Protestant World Council of Churches meeting in Amsterdam in 1948 produced a document on the Christian Approach to Jews, resolutely condemning anti-Semitism. At the same time, and much to the displeasure of the Jewish world, it also clearly advocated Christian witness to Jewish people. *'We have therefore to proclaim to the Jews "The Messiah for whom you wait has come. The promise has been fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ".'*

There is much evidence however to support the contention that the WCC, in seeking to find a consensus of the theologies of its constituent members, has often spoken with two voices on this issue. Since 1948 there have been many developments in conciliar circles that have sought to play down, modify or totally reject missions in the post-Holocaust era and, as Geoffrey Widgoder has pointed out,¹³ the individual member churches have often been less ambiguous in their own statements. The Dutch Reformed Church called for mission to be abandoned in favour of dialogue. The Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (GKN) endorsed the goals of the Christian kibbutz Nes Ammim including renouncing *'both practically and in principle any pretension to engage in missionary proselytism (i.e. efforts to make Jews members of the Church).'*¹⁴

The Church of Scotland has also largely rejected traditional mission to the Jewish people. In May 1981 the General Assembly affirmed the priority of deep-level theological dialogue with Israel. Lying behind the Assembly affirmation was the report of the Overseas Council of the Church of Scotland which, in language impregnated with the spirit of Two Covenant theology, affirmed that the Church is called to preach the Gospel and continue Jesus' evangelical mission but its special relationship to Israel bars it from taking the Gospel to Jews, *'Jews cannot be treated by Christians as unbelievers but only as brother believers with whom they are privileged to share a common faith in God.'*¹⁵ Christian witness is now considered to consist of showing sympathy and understanding; Israel is affirmed not only as a nation (ethnos) but also a church (laos). Moreover what witness there is must now take on a corporate form directed not to individuals but to the Jewish community as a collective entity. In the post-Holocaust age the Church must share in the mission of Israel *'as a people new-born from the grave'*. In language parallel to the ideas of Ignaz Maybaum, the report sees Israel's Holocaust suffering and mission as vicarious and redemptive. The report excludes the possibility of the essential unity of Jewish and

Gentile believers in Jesus, stating that '*...we cannot expect Jews to become Christians in the same sense that we are*'.¹⁶

This line of thought is similar to that in a statement issued in 1980 by the Synod of Protestant Churches of the Rhineland.

'We believe that Jews and Christians in their calling are witnesses of God in front of the world and in front of each other. Therefore we are convinced that the Church has the testimony to bring its mission to other people but not to the Jewish people.'

Individual Protestant reaction to the Holocaust has often been even more radical than the statements of the churches. Theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Paul Van Buren and Rosemary Ruether are seminal to our understanding of the post-Holocaust liberal viewpoint. Along with many church leaders these theologians have, both by their words and deeds, renounced the traditional Christian understanding of mission as evangelism. To Rosemary Ruether the lesson of Auschwitz is deeply pessimistic, it is that anti-Semitism is inherent in the Christian doctrine of the Messiah. According to Ruether and others two thousand years of Christian anti-Semitism did not directly result in the Holocaust but it did pave the way for it. In common with many Jewish thinkers, these Protestant liberals have concluded that evangelism is essentially an act of hostility; their grotesque perception of traditional mission is that of a 'final solution' of the Jewish problem sought not in extermination but by conversion.

No easy answers: Evangelicals also struggle with the holocaust

1 Human sinfulness

For evangelicals a primary lesson of the Holocaust was the renewed and deeply humbling awareness of the terrible reality of the sinfulness of man reinforcing the Reformed doctrine of total depravity. Auschwitz exposes the inadequacy of both liberal and Jewish teaching that man is a sinner because he sins. Not so says the confessional Christian, he sins because he is a sinner by nature. We have seen that freed of the constraining influence of common grace even ordinary people can commit and justify the most horrific acts of barbarity. We all are sinful human beings, each capable of the worst crimes.

On the other hand, the Holocaust challenges the superficiality of much of modern Christian theology's essentially man-centred and subjective understanding of sin. In the Holocaust awful and terrible sins against humanity were perpetrated, demonstrating the truth of Robert Burns' lines;

Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!

Yet what makes the sins of Auschwitz so heinous is that not only were they committed against man, they were an assault on the righteousness of God, a violation of his character as expressed in his Torah. The Christian, bound in human solidarity with both violator and victim, recognises the supreme truth of King David's contrite lamentation, *'Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight — That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge'*.¹⁹ Such biblical and historical realism alone provides room to hope for a final and just settlement, that God will act as the avenger of the innocent shed blood of millions. With many of the Jewish people we can agree that the way of God in the world of men may be past understanding and his silence inscrutable, but the Bible does not justify the terrible despair and abject pessimism that leads David Silverman to write:

The Holocaust has, I think, dismissed any easy use of omnipotence as an attribute appropriate to God. After Auschwitz, we can assert with greater force than ever before that an omnipotent God would have to be either sadistic or totally unintelligible.²⁰

To be sure the Christian, in this life, will always struggle with the doctrine of Providence and the way in which God's sovereignty comes to expression in human society. In the anguish of our hearts, in the face of the very opacity of theodicy, we acknowledge with the Psalmist:

Your way was in the sea, Your path in the great waters, and Your footsteps were not known.²¹

In his Word the Lord gives every assurance of a final and righteous retribution. While at present the Good News of God's identity with human misery in Jesus' vicarious suffering offers both comfort for the victim and pardon for each violator. In Psalm 51 David prayed for and received both healing and pardon;

Make me hear joy and gladness, That the bones You have broken may rejoice.²²

Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, The God of my salvation, And my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness.²³

2 Evangelistic sensitivity

Evangelicals struggling with the implications of the doctrine of human sinfulness, the divine government of the world and the administration of justice, have accepted the truth that many professing Christians were manipulated by a corrupt political process, that many of the churches at best maintained a guilty silence and at worst were implicated in the mass murder of Europe's Jews.

Evangelicals have also welcomed the opportunities for dialogue and have been deeply distressed when excluded from them. They have accepted the need for a better understanding of the Jewish roots of the Christian faith, and the Church's debt to the Jewish people as the vehicle of God's covenant blessing. Many have listened to Jewish criticism of both the language and methods of traditional evangelism. They have sought to avoid speaking with the rather patronising tone of former years and to avoid insensitivity in the manner of approaching Jewish people with the Christian Gospel. The evangelical community has sought new nomenclature to describe its relationship to the Jewish people. As the word 'mission' is considered to be loaded with anti-Semitic connotations traditional missionary agencies have refrained from using the term and consequently have even changed their names. So the *Barbican Mission to the Jews* became *Christian Witness to Israel*, the *Church Missions to Jews* was renamed first as *The Church's Ministry among the Jews*, and finally as *The Church's Ministry among the Jewish People*. The same trend is found in the USA where, for example, the *American Board of Missions to the Jews* renamed itself as *Chosen People Ministries*.

Some evangelicals, albeit a small minority, mostly identified with radical Christian Zionist bodies such as the International Christian Embassy (Jerusalem), have rejected mission. They side with liberal Christians and anti-missionary Jewish groups in asserting that the Church has lost the right to evangelise Jewish people. Some suggest a moratorium on missions until the Church regains credibility by 'comforting Israel' through socio-political action. Others teach that evangelism must be permanently abandoned, a knee jerk reaction to the familiar Jewish criticism that missions are fundamentally an act of hostility.

3 The Jewish Christian Contribution

A vital contribution to the evangelical discussion, and one that has often been strangely and deliberately overlooked, has been that of Jewish Christians. Prominent among whom has been Jakob Jocz whose writings include the influ-

ential book *Jesus Christ and Jewish People after Auschwitz* (Baker 1981). Jocz and other Jewish Christians can identify with both Jewish anguish and Christian guilt and so they are able to point us in the direction of true reconciliation, a meaningful dialogue and a sensitive but uncompromised sharing of the Gospel with Jewish people.

Along with many other Christian thinkers Jocz challenges us to think Christocentrically. As a Jew, Jocz maintains that post-Holocaust Judaism is unable to meet some of the deepest questions in the hearts and minds of Jewish people. By responding to the Christian message a growing number of Jews have found in Jesus the One who can release them from the power of the evil they find in their own lives.

They find him able to break the power of drug addiction, to release them from the tyranny of sexual desires, and to heal minds corrupted by delving into the practices of black magic. For this kind of need Judaism apparently has no remedy. Its usual panacea is to 'go back to tradition' and observance of the Law. It is only the love of Christ which both chastens and heals the human heart.²⁴

This analysis of Rabbinic Judaism has recently been reinforced in a Guardian article by Jonathan Freedman, a non-Christian Jewish journalist. Jews, says Freedman:

know that many of their people suffer a spiritual hunger that Judaism struggles to satisfy. ...God can often seem to go undiscussed among Jews, even among the orthodox: the average rabbi's sermon more often deals with Israel, politics and the community than with any matters that a non-Jew would recognise as spiritual.²⁵

4 Reaffirmation of the priority of Evangelism

Issuing both from a personal experience of Jesus and a corporate theological knowledge about Jesus, both Jewish and Gentile evangelicals have stressed their central commitment to the Bible's mandate for evangelism. After decades of discussion, debate and dialogue, both with the Jewish community and within its own community, the evangelical response to the Holocaust has been a clear re-affirmation of evangelistic witness to the Jewish people. Two major indications of this commitment are the founding of *the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism* and the production, under the auspices of the World Evangelical Fellowship, of *The Willowbank Declaration on the Christian Gospel and the Jewish People*. This commitment is well expressed in the preamble to *The Willowbank Declaration on the Gospel and the Jewish People*.

The holocaust, perpetrated as it was by leaders and citizens of a supposedly 'Christian nation', has led to a sense in some quarters that Christian credibility among Jews has been totally destroyed. Accordingly some have shrunk back from addressing the Jewish people with the Gospel.

The members of the international Willowbank Consultation, who came from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, address themselves in Article III.17 to a resolution of the predicament created by an awareness of Jewish pain and Christian shame on the one hand, and the unchanging requirements of Scripture on the other.

WE AFFIRM THAT Anti-Semitism on the part of professed Christians has always been wicked and shameful and that the church has in the past been much to blame for tolerating and encouraging it and for condoning anti-Jewish actions on the part of individuals and governments.

WE DENY THAT these past failures, for which offending Gentile believers must ask forgiveness from both God and the Jewish community, rob Christians of the right or lessen their responsibility to share the gospel with Jews today and for the future.

For all evangelicals the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah is the fullest expression of the love of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Jews and Gentiles alike. Christians recognise its earliest expressions in God's covenant with Israel and must learn to communicate it with the tact, prudence and sensitivity, as well as with clarity, that its gracious message requires.

Witness in a post-Holocaust age indeed raises many difficult questions but we strongly assert that evangelism is far from being an act of anti-Semitism, rather we see in the preaching of Jesus the Messiah something that our renunciation and condemnation of all anti-Semitism requires. *'There is one thing', said George A.F. Knight, 'and only one thing that we must communicate to all men, and that is Christ. To refrain from doing so ... is a form of religious anti-Semitism which is as basically evil as the philosophy of the Nazis'.*

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UNION AND COMMUNION WITH CHRIST IN THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN OWEN

by Peter de Vries

Peter de Vries is an ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church and is a well known author. This article is a summary of his thesis on one aspect of John Owen's theology.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The subject of this thesis is 'The Significance of Communion with Christ in the Theology of John Owen (1616-1683)'. John Owen may be regarded as one of the major British theologians of all times. There was no subject on which Owen wrote with so much pleasure as on that communion with Christ. To Owen, Christ is the centre of biblical revelation. Christ and fellowship with him is fundamental to all that he wrote on the grace of God and the piety of man.

Communion with Christ is a Catholic, a Reformed and a Puritan theme. Owen is standing in the western Trinitarian and Augustinian tradition. He is also a Reformed theologian who is fully convinced of the reality of justification and salvation by faith alone. In his works, he quotes extensively from Patristic and Scholastic and Reformed sources. In accordance with the view of the Reformation, the Bible is his ultimate authority.

The doctrine of the Trinity is of fundamental importance to Owen's theology. His theology has a Trinitarian structure, namely God and his decrees, Christ and his atoning work and the Holy Spirit and the application of salvation. All that Owen has written about communion with Christ is related to this threefold structure of his theology.

Owen has been called a theologian of the Holy Spirit. It is undeniable that the Holy Spirit is central to Owen's theology. However, this does not mean that the work of Christ is eclipsed by the work of the Holy Spirit. With his emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, Owen wished to make clear that the knowledge of God in Christ is of an experiential and practical character.

In this thesis, Owen's entire theology is viewed from the perspective of communion with Christ. All the major themes of his theology are highlighted. These are: The Person and Work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, Election, Covenant,

Justification, Sanctification, the Church and the Sacraments. For our theme Owen's following works are of primary importance: *Christologia: or, A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ, Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ, Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ Applied unto Unconverted Sinners and Saints under Spiritual Decays* and *On Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost*.

Chapter 2: Reformed Orthodoxy and Puritanism

Luther was very critical in his attitude towards Aristotle and Scholastic philosophy. Calvin was more systematic than Luther. In the margin, he sometimes made use of Scholastic distinctions. In Lutheranism Melancthon returned to a purified use of Aristotle. In the Reformed camp we see Beza, Zanchius and Vermigli do the same. Scholastic philosophy was the universally accepted academic paradigm in those days. The Orthodox Reformed theologians were convinced that Scholastic philosophy was a useful tool to order and clarify the content of revelation. By the use of Scholastic philosophy they could defend and debate the Reformed position with their Roman-Catholic and Lutheran opponents on an academic level.

What unites Reformed Orthodoxy with the Reformers, is the conviction that the Bible has an objective message. Calvin spoke about the heavenly doctrine revealed to us in the Scriptures. The difference between Reformed Orthodoxy and the Reformers is a difference in attitude, climate and accent, but not an actual difference in content.

The Church of England was regarded both at home and abroad as a Reformed Church. At the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century the leading clergymen were Calvinistic in their doctrinal convictions. However, the Reformed and Calvinistic legacy of the Church of England came under attack from several sides. In the seventeenth century, the 'High Church' came into existence. Theologians belonging to this movement interpreted the *Book of Common Prayer* in a sacramental way. They combined their sacramentalism with an Arminian flavoured view on the doctrines of grace. In the seventeenth century, we see besides the High Church the development of the 'Broad Church'. The theologians who felt attracted to this viewpoint extolled the place of reason. They were both critical of both Calvinism and of the sacramentalism of the High Church. To them, the essence of the Christian faith was an upright, moral life. Their doctrine contained Pelagian, Arian and Socinian tendencies. In the next century these tendencies developed into their full strength.

When Elizabeth I ascended the throne, the Protestant character of the Church of England was re-established. In reality, the Elizabethan Settlement of Religion amounted to a compromise. The Church of England possessed a Reformed creed, but in her government and liturgy there was, much more than in the Reformed Churches on the Continent and in Scotland, a marked continuity with the heritage of the Middle Ages. Many Protestants desired a further reformation of the Church of England. These men were called Puritans. In the sixteenth century, the Puritans were active in reforming the Church of England especially in the areas of worship and church government. Already before the beginning of the seventeenth century, we notice a growing emphasis on personal, experiential piety and also on the practice of godliness. This accent on personal, practical piety was also shared by theologians who had no objections to the Episcopal form of church government. The High Church equated Calvinism with Puritanism. The introduction of High Church rituals drove more radical Puritans and the broad mainstream of the Church of England into each other's arms.

In the forties of the seventeenth century, England saw the Puritan revolution. The cause of Puritanism was supported by the English parliament. When the Puritan movement rose to power in the Church of England, the different viewpoints among the Puritans on church government emerged. Instead of 'Puritan' such labels as 'Presbyterian', 'Congregationalist' and 'Baptist' were more and more being used. The Puritan movement disintegrated. The Restoration of 1660 and the Act of Uniformity of 1662 meant the end of Puritanism as a movement of reform within the Church of England. The Great Ejection of 1662 was the birth-hour of Nonconformity outside the Church of England. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the Toleration Act of 1689 officially legalised the position of the Nonconformists.

Puritanism played a rather important part in the development of the English heritage. However, it is extremely difficult to provide an exact definition of the term. The term 'Puritan' is applied to a very large number of various people and it is very difficult to find a common denominator. The emphases were not always the same. Reformation of liturgy and worship was never viewed as an aim in itself. Puritanism was a Calvinistic movement of piety endeavouring to reform the individual, the family, the church and the society. The main emphasis was on experiential and practical Christianity. A Puritan preacher was an affectionate and practical preacher. In his theological views, Owen was a representative of seventeenth century Reformed Orthodoxy. Besides this, he was a man of strong Puritan convictions. Owen combined a relatively moderate form of Scholasticism with a warm, personal relationship with Christ. He used Scholastic terminology and distinctions to express the heritage of the

Reformation. Underneath a Scholastic terminology burned a fervent piety. His view on church government he developed from a moderate Presbyterian into a Congregationalistic position.

Chapter 3: The life of John Owen in the Context of His Time

Owen's life can be divided into four periods bounded by the dates 1616-1643, 1643-1651, 1651-1660 and 1660-1683. The first part of his life spans his youth, his study at Oxford University, and his work as chaplain to families belonging to the nobility. The second stage of his life is connected with his labours in the parishes of Fordham and Coggeshall. During this period, he came in contact with Oliver Cromwell. From 1651 to 1660, Owen served the University of Oxford. At the same time, he was one of most important governmental advisers in regard to ecclesiastical affairs. After the Restoration, a new situation arose not only for Owen, but also for all Puritan preachers and theologians. Owen like the great majority of the Puritans did not continue to work within the bounds of the National Church. After the Restoration, Owen became one of the leading spokesmen of the Dissenters.

At the age of twenty-seven Owen published his first work: *A Display of Arminianism*. This book was dedicated to the 'Lords and Gentlemen of the Committee for Religion'. A new period of his life began when in 1643 this committee offered him the living (a church benefice) at Fordham. Soon after he had settled in Fordham, he married Mary Rooke. Eleven children were born out of this marriage, but only one daughter survived unto adulthood. Shortly before Owen left Fordham he preached for the first time in his life before the House of Commons. In later years, he fulfilled this duty on various occasions. In May 1646, a sermon appeared in print with the title *A Vision of Unchangeable Free Mercy*. On its title page, Owen was referred to as the 'minister of the Gospel at Coggeshall'. *A Vision of Free Mercy* with its appended tracts provides plain evidence that Owen had become a moderate Congregationalist. One of the reasons why he preferred Congregationalism to Presbyterianism was the fact that he wanted toleration for all orthodox Calvinists, regardless of their view on church government.

During his stay in Coggeshall Owen came in close contact with certain officers of the parliamentary army. He accompanied Oliver Cromwell as a chaplain during his expedition to Ireland and Scotland. In Ireland, Owen published *Of the Death of Christ*, which was a reply to Richard Baxter's criticism of his earlier *Salus Electorum*. Baxter defended his own version of Amyraldism. Baxter believed in particular election, but denied the limited character of the

atonement. Any kind of compromise with Arminianism was unacceptable to Owen. He held that Arminianism in turn would lead people either to Popery or to Socinianism.

In 1651, Owen was appointed dean of Christ Church at Oxford. Christ Church was a college as well as a cathedral. In 1652, the position of vice-chancellor of Oxford University was offered to Owen. Between 1652 and 1657 he also preached every fortnight in St. Mary's, the church of Oxford University. Several works he wrote in this period were a condensation of sermons and lectures to his students. Owen combined his Congregational principles with a strong emphasis on academic training. Confronted with the fanaticism of radical spirits he became even more conservative and put a heavy emphasis on the use of existing institutions to renew the Church of England.

During the time he lectured at Oxford University, Owen wrote several works of a polemic character. He wrote against John Goodwin, a Puritan who denied the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. He also opposed Baxter and especially Socinianism. Moreover, he defended Congregationalism against the attacks of the Presbyterian Daniel Cawdrey. In addition to this, he published devotional works including *On Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost*.

Owen was one of the most influential members of the meeting of representatives of the Congregationalists in Savoy Palace in 1658. The most important result of this meeting was the drafting of a statement of doctrine and church polity. *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* is essentially the same as the *Westminster Confession of Faith* except for the chapters on the church and church government. In 1657, Owen's term as vice-chancellor was not renewed. Political developments after the death of Oliver Cromwell led to the Restoration in 1660. Already before the Restoration, Owen was relieved of his function as dean of Christ Church by the restored Long Parliament that was dominated by Presbyterians. After the Restoration, Owen kept in contact with the highest circles. That was one of the reasons that he suffered less than most Nonconformists under the Clarendon Code. (The Clarendon Code is the legislation that restricted the freedom of the Dissenters.) His irenic attitude during the Protectorate was appreciated by many. The value of his polemic works against Rome was also recognized in the Established Church. After the Restoration, Owen emphasized the common Protestant heritage of Conformists and Nonconformists. He pleaded for toleration on both religious and practical grounds.

In this period, Owen wrote several works on church and church government in which he clarified the principles of Congregationalism. Most of them were practical in content, but some of them were of a polemic nature. Owen defended Congregationalism against the charge of being schismatic. During the time of the Commonwealth and the Protectorate that charge was made by the Presbyterian majority of the National Church. After the Restoration, this accusation came from the side of the Episcopalian clergy of the Established Church.

Compared to the works he published before the Restoration, most of what he wrote in the later part of his life is more devotional in character. These treatises can be divided into roughly three categories, namely doctrinal, exegetical and practical. We must say that quite often these three categories overlap. After his death, Owen was particularly loved as a devotional writer. He was remembered for, among other works, his *Pneumatologia*, nine treatises on the Holy Spirit and his work. We must also name, *The Nature, Power, Deceit and Prevalency of Indwelling Sin in Believers, A Practical Exposition upon Psalm CXXX, The Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone, Christologia: or, A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ and Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ.*

After he was relieved of his deanery of Christ Church, Owen held services in his home at Stadhampton. He also preached regularly in London. In 1673, the small congregation he served there was united with the congregation of Joseph Caryl, which came together in a meeting house in Leadenhall Street. A large part of his congregation belonged to the higher circles. In 1675 Owen's wife died. He remarried in 1677. The name of his second wife was Dorothy D'Oyley. During the last years of his life Owen's health deteriorated. Already in his student days, he laid the basis for both his great learning and his weak constitution. Owen died in 1683. Two days before his death he wrote to Charles Fleetwood: 'I am going to Him whom my soul hath loved, or rather who hath loved me with an everlasting love; which is the whole ground of all my consolation.'

Chapter 4: Communion with Christ: A Few Important Considerations

Union and Communion with Christ is a central theme in Owen's theology. Owen makes a distinction between union and communion with Christ. To him there is a very close relationship between union and communion. Union points to the state of a Christian and communion to his actual standing. A Christian is united to Christ and *has* communion with him. Owen wrote extensively on the Holy Spirit, but he did not emphasize the Holy Spirit at the expense of the person and the work of Christ. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit guides us, and

unites us, to Christ and consoles us with Christ and his work. On the other hand, Christ can only be known by the Holy Spirit. There is a very intimate relationship in Owen's theology between the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ.

Union with Christ is initiated in regeneration. The Holy Spirit personally takes possession of the sinner and makes him alive with Christ. In regeneration, a new principle of spiritual life is implanted in the soul. The immediate result of regeneration is faith in Christ. Viewed from God's perspective we are united to Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. From our perspective, we are united to him by faith. Regeneration is a fruit of election. In time, justification and sanctification accompany it. Justification and sanctification are both blessings flowing forth from union with Christ. The imputed righteousness of Christ, which we apprehend by faith, is the foundation of our justification. We are sanctified by Christ's righteousness infused in us by the Holy Spirit. Sanctification is the beginning of glorification. Here on earth we walk by faith. In eternal glory, the saints will walk by sight. Even then, they will have communion with God through his incarnate Son.

The union and communion with Christ is a union and communion in faith and love. Faith is the leading grace, but faith is always accompanied by love. The fountain of our love to God is the inner-Trinitarian love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit revealed to us in the cross of Christ. Like other Puritans, Owen made a distinction between notional and experiential knowledge of Christ and his love. By the power of the Holy Spirit, a true believer tastes the love of God and that fills his heart with joy. Owen was fully convinced that the Scripture has an objective, doctrinal and a personal character. A true believer does not only confess the doctrine of Christ but also has fellowship with the person of Christ.

According to Owen, the mind was the leading and the will the ruling and governing faculty of the soul. He assumed the prominence but not the dominance of the will. The depravity of human nature manifests itself most clearly in the will and the affections. In regeneration, all three faculties are renewed by the Holy Spirit. A renewed man meditates with his mind on Christ and his work, with his will, he follows his commandments and with his affections, he rejoices in Christ and loves him.

The affections were of central importance to Owen. Christ is not only the proper object of our affections, but he satisfies our soul when we have communion with him in faith and love. We see here the affinity between Owen and Augustine. The only difference is that Owen is more Christ-centred than the great church father. The void in our soul can only be filled by Jesus Christ.

Owen placed communion with Christ in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity. We already noted that his theology has a Trinitarian structure. Christ is the Mediator given by the Father. The Holy Spirit applies him to our soul. The Father graciously communicates his love to us through his Son Jesus Christ who became man. The incarnation of the eternal Word by the power of the Holy Spirit is the foundation of our participation in the grace of Christ and the love of the Father.

We can only actually participate in his grace and love by the communion and irresistible working of the Holy Spirit. Moved by the Holy Spirit we are made obedient unto God in a way of gratitude for the grace and love that God has given us. Owen defended the view that believers have communion distinctly with each of the three persons of the Trinity: with the Father in love, with the Son in grace and with the Holy Spirit in consolation.

The authority of Scripture was to Owen one of the springs of the Christian religion. He never separated the authority of the Bible from the authority of Christ. The Word is the formal and Christ the material ground of our faith. The Bible reveals Christ to us. We understand the content of Scripture only in so far as we personally know Christ. The efficient cause by which we understand the Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit who communicates to us wisdom and light. Owen rejected the claim of new revelation made by several sects in his time. The Holy Spirit teaches us by means of Scripture.

Owen emphasised the Christ-centred character of the Old Testament. In accordance with the tradition of the Christian church, he interpreted the Song of Songs in an allegorical way. There is one way of salvation under the Old Testament and New Testament dispensation. The only difference is that the person of the Mediator was not revealed under the Old Testament dispensation. That is the reason that the believers in that dispensation had not yet the boldness and freedom in approaching God given to believers in the New Testament. When we are united with Christ, we also share in the fruits of his work. Christ died, rose again and ascended to heaven for his church. What Christ did, he did for us, and is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. Communion with God is connected with creation and redemption. Man was created to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Since the fall of man, God's love can only be known in Christ. Unto all eternity Christ is the only way of communion between God and his church. We are united to Christ and renewed in God's image to glorify him. The ultimate aim of the salvation of the church is the glory of God.

Chapter 5: Election and Covenant

The source of our union with Christ is God's eternal election. God's fellowship with man is always fashioned after the pattern of a covenant. To Owen election and covenant are closely related. He understood the covenant in the context of election and election in the context of the covenant. He saw the covenant of grace as the historical manifestation of God's electing good pleasure. He loved to speak about election in connection with the eternal covenant between the Father and the Son.

To Owen the inner-Trinitarian covenant was the foundation of the whole economy of salvation. God's electing good pleasure is the source of the historical work of Christ. Because God loved his church with an eternal love, he sent his Son to redeem sinners. In the covenant between the Father and the Son Christ is not only the representative of his elect, but also the electing God, because he is of the same essence as the Father.

Owen defended with all his strength the doctrine of election, for the honour of God was at stake. God's honour is the norm for the will of man and not the reverse. Most of that which Owen wrote on election is connected with the limited scope of the atonement, the irresistible work of the Holy Spirit and the perseverance of the saints. The perseverance of the saints was to Owen the crown of the doctrine of election. Because God has elected us in Christ before the foundation of the world, nothing can separate us from his love.

Owen spoke on the covenant of grace against the background of the covenant of works. The covenant of works depended on man's obedience. It was broken by his fall. The glory of the covenant of grace far surpasses the glory of the covenant of works. To Owen the covenant of grace depends on the covenant between the Father and the Son. As the head of his elect, Christ met all the demands and conditions in the covenant between him and his Father. On this basis in the covenant of grace salvation and grace are offered freely to sinners and are applied freely to the elect by the Holy Spirit.

The covenant of grace has not the character of a contract but of a testament. The covenant of grace is unconditional. The unconditional character of the covenant of grace is intimately related to the free and gracious justification. The doctrine of law and grace was placed in a federal framework. In the *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, which was mainly the work of Owen, the unconditional aspect of the covenant of grace is more in the foreground than it

is in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The strong relationship between election and covenant undergirded to Owen the strength of God's covenant with his people. That is the reason why God's covenant and promises are the ultimate and complete ground of our salvation.

A one-sided emphasis on the unconditional character of God's covenant and grace led to the rise of Hyper Calvinism. This form of Calvinism came to full flower in the eighteenth century. It denied that faith and repentance are to be preached to man as duties. Owen himself never made an absolute antithesis between faith and repentance as a gift of God and a duty for man. Within the context of God's unconditional love and grace he spoke unfettered about the command of faith and repentance. He offered Christ to sinners and urged them to flee to him. Here he differed from Hyper Calvinism. The Marrowmen who combined a strong emphasis on the unconditional character of the covenant with a fervent preaching of the offer of Christ were more in line with his real intentions.

Chapter 6: The Person and the Work of Christ

Owen taught that our love to the person of Christ is based on our knowledge of what Christ did for us. In his theological reflections on the person of Christ, he agreed closely with the Early Church. We see this in his use of the Patristic ideas of anhypostasy and enhypostasy to explain the union between the divine and the human nature in the person of Christ. Like Anselm, Owen connected the two natures of Christ and the doctrine of atonement. Much of what Owen wrote on Christ and his work stands in a polemic context. He defended the deity of Christ and the substitutionary atonement against the Socinians and the limited scope of the atonement against the Arminians and against Baxter with his Amyraldian scheme

Compared to the Reformers Owen concentrated more on the person of Christ. This can be explained by Owen's extensive controversy with Socinianism. It belongs to the heart of Owen's theology that communion with God is only possible as a result of the atoning death of Christ. Reconciled with God through Christ's blood we enjoy fellowship with him.

Like Anselm, Owen taught that Christ took our human nature upon him to bear in this nature the wrath of God on human sin. Besides this objective aspect, he also gave attention to other elements of Christ's human nature. In Christ's humanity, God's love to mankind is revealed. Because Christ became man, he can sympathize with us in all our afflictions and trials.

Owen never separated the prophetic, the priestly and the kingly office of Christ. Christ teaches us as Prophet in order that we learn to value his work as Priest and obey him as our King. The priestly office of Christ is his central office. As Priest, Christ died for his church and still prays for her.

To Owen, the source of the atonement is the eternal love of God for his elect. Owen emphasised that Christ died as a penal substitute for his people. Christ pacified by his death the wrath of God. Owen especially loved to use commercial terms to explain the nature of Christ's work. Against the Socinians Owen argued that the free grace of God and the merits of Christ do not exclude each other. God's grace is opposed to our merits but not to the merits of Christ.

Hugo de Groot had used the term 'solutio tantidem' as distinguished from 'solutio eiusdem' to explain the nature of Christ's atoning death. He denied that the death of Christ was the complete equivalent for the punishment due to human sin. To Owen it was just the reverse. He started to use the term 'solutio eiusdem' to describe the meaning of Christ's death.

Baxter was influenced by De Groot's governmental theory of atonement. He made a distinction between the old law of the covenant of works and the new law of the gospel. He taught that God on the basis of the work of Christ comes to mankind with a new law in which he commands us to exercise faith in Christ and repentance unto God. Baxter used political terms to describe the union between Christ and his church. Fellowship with Christ is for him first of all a matter of human obedience.

In Baxter's opinion, Owen did not pay enough attention to human responsibility. In contrast with Baxter, Owen postulated that Christ is the personal representative of all his elect. By faith we are personally united to him and are interested in what he did for us and in our place. Owen used the terms active and passive obedience of Christ. Both aspects of Christ's obedience are imputed to believers. Christ did not only pay the guilt of his people but also fulfilled the law in their place.

As a young theologian, Owen had taught that the atonement is only based on God's sovereignty. In this way, he wanted to stress the complete freedom of God. To counteract every possibility to explain the death of Christ in a Socinian way, he later connected the death of Christ with the nature of God. The death of Christ was the only way for the atonement of human sin. In this way, Owen's position became more Christ-centred. Given God's sovereign purpose to save

sinners, there is the absolute necessity of atonement. God can only save sinners by the blood of Christ. This absolute necessity does not restrict God's freedom. God was not obliged to send his Son. That was his freedom. His grace is seen in the fact that he actually did it.

The nature of the atonement implied to Owen its limited scope. Because Christ completely paid the debt, his death made the salvation of his people not only possible, but he actually redeemed them. Our faith in Christ is not an addition to his atoning work but just a fruit of it. Owen used Aristotelian logic to explain his view on the scope of the atonement, but that was for him only accidental. It was fundamental to Owen that the particular nature of the atonement is the heart of the Christian faith. According to Packer, Owen has done full justice to the testimony of Scripture in his defence of particular atonement. Owen believed beyond any doubt that the words of Paul 'who loved me, and gave himself for me' implied that we are actually saved and will never lose that salvation. The particular nature of the atonement also testifies to the personal nature of Christ's love for us.

Although Owen defended with all his power particular atonement he at the same time spoke about the infinite intrinsic value of the atonement. He based the free offer of Christ on this infinite value of Christ's sacrifice. In his polemic works, Owen paid only marginal attention to this aspect of Christ's sacrifice, but especially in his posthumously published sermons this element is seen much stronger. Owen closely connected Christ's sacrifice and his intercession for us at the right hand of God. When it is said that the sacrifice of Christ was universal and only his intercession particular, the consolation that believers find in the death of Christ is taken away. The death of Christ is the complete ground of our salvation because it is connected with Christ's resurrection and intercession. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers is the fruit of Christ's sacrifice and intercession. Leading us to Christ's sacrifice and intercession, God's Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of the living God.

Chapter 7: Justification

To Owen justification by faith alone was an essential element of the union with Christ. Only when clothed with the imputed righteousness of Christ, we can have fellowship with God. We obtain an interest in that righteousness when we are united to Christ by faith. Faith is trusting in Christ alone for justification and salvation. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Here we see the relation between regeneration and justification.

Owen dealt extensively with the doctrine of justification in his treatise *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone*. There he states that he had cautiously avoided all those philosophical terms and distinctions which had perplexed rather than illustrated this evangelical doctrine. In fact his own treatment of the doctrine of justification is not completely free from Scholastic distinctions, but we can say that he used these terms to make clear that the ground of our salvation and justification lies completely outside of us.

To Owen it was fundamental that the imputed righteousness of Christ is the only formal cause of our justification. Here he differed from Baxter. Baxter defended the view that God justifies us because we obey the law of the gospel. Baxter denied our justification is complete in this life. Owen defined justification as the way and means by which a person, weighed down and perplexed with a sense of the guilt of sin, obtains acceptance before God with a right and title to a heavenly inheritance. He spoke of justification by faith alone against the background of God's holiness and the sinner's conscience burdened with a sense of guilt.

Owen emphasised the complete character of justification. The moment that we are united to Christ we are forever in the state of justification. That anyone should be a true believer and not justified was, he believed, destructive to the foundation of the gospel. Owen argued against the invention of conditions and preparations in the doctrine of justification. Justification is a matter of unmerited free grace. Our works do not have a place in our justification.

The reality of indwelling sin does not diminish in any measure the completeness of our justification. To Owen the distinction between justification and sanctification is fundamental here. Although our sanctification remains partial, our justification is complete. Our justification is not continued by obedience or good works but by faith alone. Believers are in the state of justification. At the same time Owen can say that they have to go to Christ again and again for justification and life. That is how the believer experiences the reality of justification.

Owen spoke about faith as the instrumental cause of justification. He did not like the word 'condition'. When we use this word, it tends to suggest that our faith is a secondary ground of justification besides the imputed righteousness of Christ. Our justification does not depend on the strength of our faith. The believer who has a weak faith is not less justified than the strongest believer. The only difference is the consolation that we taste in believing.

In *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* Owen denied that justification is from eternity. In this connection, he also refused to say that justification only means that we become aware in our conscience that we were already justified before. Owen said that although we were elected before the foundation of the world and Christ paid for us at Calvary, we are not justified until the moment we embrace Christ by faith.

In *Of the Death of Christ, the Price He Paid, and the Purchase He Made* Owen defended the view that the absolution of our sins in heaven logically, if not chronologically, precedes the act of faith. To Owen our justification logically starts before we are by faith united to Christ and it is terminated in our conscience. Baxter commented critically on Owen's views. It is understandable that Baxter was not completely convinced by Owen's defence that in his doctrine justification did not precede faith. In *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone*, Owen is less speculative on the relation between faith and justification. There he states that our faith in Christ logically precedes the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us. Owen explicitly denies that we have to know the point of time in which we first embraced Christ as our Saviour. Owen spoke about justification in our conscience in the context of assurance of faith. Justification in conscience meant to him that we are in our conscience assured of the fact that we are in the state of justification. This assurance is created by the fruit of the Spirit, by past experiences, by the act of faith itself, but above all by the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Owen did not see an antithesis between the forensic nature of justification and union with Christ as the basis of justification. Trusting in anything other than in Christ's merits alone as a ground of our justification he saw as spiritual adultery. Owen spoke here about the conjugal relation between Christ and his church. Owen connected justification and adoption. The state of justification is a state of childlike fear in the believers. Not only to Owen but also to the other Puritans the Fatherhood of God was an important theme in their theology and spirituality.

In the seventeenth century in England, several theologians modified the doctrine of justification because they regarded it as a threat to a holy life. Owen denied in strong terms that this was the case. He just stated the opposite: justification is the only true foundation of a holy life. To put it differently: faith is never without repentance. Faith is the tree and repentance the immediate fruit. We fear God in a childlike way because we know that with him there is forgiveness. We are justified by faith alone, but saving and justifying faith is never alone. It manifests itself in fruits.

Chapter 8: The Holy Spirit and His Work

Owen was aware of the fact that no one before him in church history had written so extensively on the Holy Spirit and his work than he had done. Owen had both a theological and a practical interest in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Owen taught that intercourse between God and man is only possible by the effectual operations of the Holy Spirit. Although he did not restrict himself to the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of salvation, he paid most attention to this aspect.

In Owen's Pneumatology, the Holy Spirit is integrated in his doctrine of the Trinity and in his Christology. The Holy Spirit makes the love of God, as revealed in the cross of Christ, effective in our life. By his development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit Owen used, according to his own testimony, the following three sources: the plain testimonies of the Scripture, the suffrage of the Ancient Church, and the experience of sincere believers. It is needless to observe that only the first source had for Owen ultimate and final authority. Owen used the conversion of the church father Augustine as a paradigm of the work of the Holy Spirit in the soul of man. The differences between Owen and the Reformers can be explained among others in this way: he and Augustine emphasised more than the Reformers the reality of internal grace.

Owen also stressed that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit has a personal character. The Holy Spirit is both the Spirit of sanctification and of consolation. Owen based both regeneration and sanctification on the indwelling of the Spirit. By regeneration and sanctification, man is restored into God's image. Regeneration is the tree and sanctification the fruit. In accordance with the development of Reformed theology after Calvin, Owen defined regeneration as the implanting of spiritual life. In this way, he wanted to emphasise the reception of spiritual life as a matter of pure grace. On account of this view of regeneration, Owen's Pneumatology is more independent from Christology than Calvin's. At the same time, we must never forget that in Owen's theology the Holy Spirit is always the Spirit that not only proceeds from the Father but also from the Son.

Writing on the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, Owen turned against three other views, namely that regeneration is nothing more than a moral reformation, that we are regenerated in baptism and that regeneration just consists in emotions. In a typical Puritan way, Owen spoke about preparation for regeneration. He did not mean to say that man can prepare for regeneration but that God makes room in the soul of man for the grace of Christ. It was essential

to him that real faith in Christ is born in need. Owen made a distinction between legal and evangelical repentance. God uses legal convictions of sin to make Christ precious for us. Evangelical repentance is a fruit of regeneration and of faith in Christ. Evangelical repentance is the same as godly sorrow.

Owen defined sanctification as an immediate work of the Holy Spirit on our whole nature. He emphasised that sanctification is only possible in union and communion with Christ. The Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ and gives us communion with him renews us in the image of Christ. This is the positive aspect. The negative aspect of sanctification is the mortification of sin. The death of Christ for us is the source of the mortification of sin in us. Owen was deeply convinced of the fact that believers have a lifelong struggle with indwelling sin. With the Reformers, he understood the second part of Romans 7 to portray the struggle of a believer.

For Owen a believer is free from the curse of the law, but not from its rule. The law discovers the sinful pollution of our nature and gives us a clearer sight of our need of Christ. The law is also the rule for evangelical obedience. Owen can also say that evangelical sanctification implies some graces and duties the law knows nothing of. Owen makes here a distinction between law and gospel, which Calvin never made. In Owen's theology, the thought of the gospel superseding the law as rule of evangelical obedience is only marginal. From the eighteenth century and onward it became a central thought in some Congregational and Baptist circles. Sanctification means to Owen practical holiness. Owen has written quite extensively on two aspects of this practical holiness, namely prayer and the Lord's Day. In prayer, we have communion with God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Owen regarded prayer as one of the most important means of mortification of sin. It is the special privilege of believers under the New Testament dispensation to call upon God as their Father. The observance of the Lord's Day is, according to Owen, of primary importance for the preservation of true piety. All the duties with regard to the Lord's Day are related to communion with God through Christ. The communion with God on the Lord's Day is a foretaste of the eternal, uninterrupted and immediate communion with God in eternal glory.

Owen made a distinction between the graces and the gifts of the Spirit. The gifts are for edification and the graces for sanctification. He also distinguished the extra ordinary gifts from the ordinary gifts. According to him, the extra ordinary gifts were reserved for the apostolic period of the church. The ordinary gifts are for the church of all ages.

Like the other Puritans, Owen did not reckon assurance to be of the essence of faith. He distinguished faith and full assurance of faith for pastoral reasons. He emphasised that Christ is the only ground of our faith. We have to exercise faith in Christ to experience the assurance that we belong to him. Owen was convinced of the fact that assurance of faith is attainable in this life and that assurance is the normal and healthy state of faith. For him a deep awareness of indwelling sin can and even ought to accompany assurance of faith. He taught that we can only preserve an experienced assurance of faith, when we walk in holiness before the Lord.

Owen especially related assurance to the sealing of the Holy Spirit. First, like the mainstream of Puritanism, Owen made a temporal distinction between regeneration and the sealing of the Holy Spirit. In *Pneumatologia: or, A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit* we find Owen's final view on the sealing of the Holy Spirit. Here he emphasises that the believer is sealed and not his faith. The sealing of the Holy Spirit takes place at the moment we are regenerated. Owen ascribes all experiences of peace and joy in believing to the sealing work of the Holy Spirit who lives in the believer. He does not identify this sealing with one special crisis-experience. In relationship with assurance of faith, Owen also mentioned spiritual desertion and spiritual joy. He is convinced that those who deny spiritual desertions do not know spiritual joy either. Spiritual joy means to Owen the felt awareness that Christ is ours and we are his.

Perseverance of the saints, to Owen is the crown of the doctrine of grace. He related it to the unchangeable nature of God and of his decrees, to the covenant of grace, the particular atonement and intercession of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. To Owen, especially this doctrine renders Jesus Christ lovely to the souls of believers.

Chapter 9: The Church and the Sacraments

Owen's views on the spiritual nature of communion with Christ are closely related to that on the church as the communion of saints. In ecclesiology Owen made a distinction between the catholic church invisible, the catholic church visible, and the particular congregation. He rejected the thought of a national church. Owen's ecclesiology was governed by three factors, namely the spiritual needs of England, the desire to preserve the Protestant heritage together with those who held other views on worship and church government and the aspiration to form particular churches in accordance with what he considered the biblical standards. Only in regard to this third factor does Owen's Congregationalism emerge.

Owen's Congregationalism was closely related to his view on toleration. He rejected the view that the government should preserve unity and uniformity in the church by force. Force was, according to his opinion, in direct opposition to the essence of the Christian faith. Owen did not deny that the government has a task with regard to the Christian church. She ought not to protect just one branch of the Christian church, but the Protestant religion, which was, according to Owen, the pure expression of the biblical religion. Owen's ecclesiology had also eschatological overtones. He expected a universal flourishing of the church, when the earth would be covered with particular churches worshipping the Lord according to his Word.

Owen emphasised that only what the Bible prescribes is allowed in the Christian church. Like the Presbyterians and unlike the Episcopalians he wanted to have an exclusively biblical foundation for church government and worship. He related worship and church government to the office of Christ as King of the church. In worshipping God according to biblical standard we honour Christ as King and have communion with him.

Owen's ecclesiology has a distinctive New Testament emphasis. To Owen it is both the duty and privilege of believers to form a particular church. A particular church consists of those who in the judgement of love can be considered as really born again and their children. To Owen the concept of the covenant of grace is not of primary importance for the life of the church. In his ecclesiology, the emphasis is not upon God who comes to us with his Word, but upon the believers who make a covenant with God to worship him in accordance with his Word.

Believers join a particular church to be edified there. To Owen, not only false doctrine, an unbiblical form of church government and worship, but also lack of doctrine and even the fact that one can be edified more in another particular church is a valid reason to leave a particular church. Owen did not only distinguish between true and false churches but also between pure and less pure churches. These churches can be found in the same territory. Therefore, Owen defended the fact that the church of Christ in its visible form has a pluriform character. Owen defined sacraments as sign and seals of the covenant of grace. In the New Testament dispensation, there are only two ordinances, namely baptism and the Lord's supper. Owen believed in the objective significance of the sacraments, but the emphasis was on the worthy receiving of them. Owen defended the biblical foundation of the baptism of children of believers. The children of believers are members of the church although not members in full communion as long as they do not personally own the church covenant.

Chapter 10: Evaluation

First of all, Owen wanted to be a biblical theologian. His own exposition of the Bible has a distinctive theological aspect. Especially in his treatises that are based on texts from the epistles of Paul, we see Owen's insight as an exegete. Communion with Christ was to Owen the centre of the biblical message. He paid attention to both the doctrinal and personal aspect of the biblical message. We see them well balanced. Just as Calvin had done before him, Owen related both the forgiveness of sin and the renewal of our life to our communion with Christ. In line with the Augustinian-Bernardian devotion, Owen gave more attention to the affectionate aspect of the believer's relation with Christ than the Reformers did.

Owen taught that the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ. The Holy Spirit uses the Word and especially the preaching of the Word to create the union between Christ and the believer. Owen strongly emphasised that we can be completely sure with regard to the positive result of the preaching of the gospel. He found this assurance in God's eternal counsels. Owen taught both God's eternal election and the free offer of Christ in the gospel. In his theological treatises, Owen used the word 'will' just for God's eternal pleasure. He hesitated to base the free offer of the gospel on God's will to save sinners, but in his sermons we do not see that Owen felt himself fettered in any way to proclaim Christ and the gospel invitations to lost sinners. Still we can ask the question whether it is right not to connect the preaching of the gospel with God's will to save sinners.

The strength of Owen's ecclesiology is that he did justice to the fact that the visible church of Christ was divided in several parts. Its weakness is that it does not make much effort to overcome these divisions. To Owen the structural unity of the church is in fact not important. He just emphasised the spiritual unity of all believers and the local particular church as a congregation of believers. We need the emphasis of the first Reformers on the covenant of grace as the foundation of the church to correct this weakness in Owen's ecclesiology. They taught that from generation to generation Christ comes to his church with his gospel and gives his church faithful preachers of the gospel. Of course, Owen did not deny this fact, but he saw it in the first place from the side of the believer.

Owen's view on communion with Christ influenced and coloured his whole theology. With regard to the doctrines of atonement, justification, the Holy Spirit and the church, Owen made considerable contributions to the development of theology. Owen used Scholastic philosophy to formulate his theology. One of the results was that he was sometimes overly systematic. Besides, Owen

had the inclination to be too elaborate. However, in and through his elaborate discourses we feel his Christ-centred and Trinitarian piety.

Owen realized that all our theological formulations are only partial. He felt that all our words fail to state the glory of Christ and of our communion with him. Owen finished his work *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* thus: 'There is nothing farther for us to do herein but that now and always we shut up all our meditations concerning it with the deepest sense of self-abasement, out of a sense of our unworthiness and insufficiency to comprehend those things, admiration of that excellent glory which we cannot comprehend, and vehement longings for that season when we shall see him as he is, be ever with him, and know him even as we are known.'

BOOK REVIEWS

Peter: Eyewitness of His Majesty, Edward Donnelly, Banner of Truth Trust, 1998, 152pp. Pb. £4.95.

This book contains addresses delivered at two pastors' conferences — one in Wales, the other in America. In them Peter is considered as disciple, preacher and pastor. In a scholarly appendix the author refutes the current notion that the speeches of Peter recorded in *Acts* are really Luke's version of what Peter said, and not the *ipsissima verba* of the apostle.

It was B.B. Warfield who wrote, 'No character in Scripture history... is drawn for us more clearly or strongly than Peter's. In the gospels, in the Acts, and in the epistles it is the same man that stands out before us in dramatic distinctness. Always eager, ardent, impulsive, he is pre-eminently the man of action in the apostolic circle... His virtues and faults had their common root in his enthusiastic disposition: it is to his praise that along with the weed of rash haste, there grew more strongly into his life the fair plant of burning love and ready reception of the truth... Accordingly the life of Peter is peculiarly rich in instruction, warning, and comfort for the Christian, and his writings touch the very depths of Christian experience and soar to the utmost heights of Christian hope'.

Resulting from his original study and writing in his own lucid and cogent style, Professor Donnelly highlights these and similar features in the life and witness of this devoted follower of the Lamb. Throughout, the reader is addressed directly and the book is eminently practical as principles of perennial importance are established and applied. The author is frank, even fearless in pressing home the lessons to be learnt from this study, yet always there is a persuasive warmth in his words. Clearly he is speaking from the heart. There is a passionate earnestness as he discusses what discipleship involves, the glory and responsibility of preaching the gospel, and the spirit that must prevail in the pastor's labours.

An important and much needed note is struck when our author writes, 'How intensely God loves his flock! How much care he devotes to their well-being! And it is this flock which is entrusted to pastors. We must never handle them impatiently or with distaste. They do not exist to feed our egos. They are not mere fodder for our grandiose schemes. They are "the flock... the church of God which he purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28)', p.116. The pastor

is a leader, *not a driver*; and he will serve and lead lovingly and sacrificially as he sees ‘the flock of God’ through Christ’s eyes. Professor Donnelly reminds us that this can only happen as we love Christ. ‘When Jesus was commissioning Peter to the pastorate, it is significant that he did not ask him, “Do you love my sheep?” It was important, of course, that Peter should love the sheep, but such affection was not to provide the impetus for his ministry. The question was, rather, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” (John 21:16). Here is the secret. If we love the Saviour, we will be able to shepherd his sheep’ (*ibid.*).

Ultimately our thoughts, as we read this book, centre more on Peter’s Lord than on Peter — exactly as Peter would have wanted it, exactly as it ought to be. This book should be required reading for every student of Pastoral Theology. Pastor and people alike will profit from its pages. It is non-technical and easily read, and it should be read and re-read. Heart-warming and humbling, it will long rank as one of the best devotional studies of this ardent leader of Christ’s disciples.

Frederick S. Leahy

On Romans, C.E.B. Cranfield, T & T Clark, 1998, 191 pp., hbk., £21.95

C.E.B. Cranfield is one of the leading post-war British New Testament scholars. Emeritus Professor of Theology at the University of Durham and author of magisterial commentaries on Mark and Romans, his publications, from 1941 until the present, bear impressive witness to over half a century of careful study of the Scriptures. This collection of thirteen New Testament essays, three published for the first time, represents a significant proportion of his output over the past ten years.

The contents of this volume cover matters homiletic, apologetic, exegetical and controversial. ‘Preaching on Romans’ offers advice on preaching through the whole epistle in twenty-four sermons. Although not everyone will be disposed to follow slavishly the suggested outline (doubtless quailing at the prospect of covering 2:1 - 3:20 in thirty minutes!), this chapter has illuminating suggestions for preachers, with practical hints on application.

Chapters 11 and 12 are apologetic in nature, defending the historicity of the resurrection and virgin birth of Jesus Christ. The standard arguments are offered, though in an elegant and persuasive style, and several passages are infused with moving personal faith. Noteworthy is the statement that 'The Virginal Conception attests the fact that God's redemption of his creation was by grace alone... Our humanity, represented by Mary, here does nothing more than just accept - and even that acceptance is God's gracious gift. That is the real significance of the *kercharitomene* of Luke 1:28... Our pride and self-reliant initiative set aside, our humanity's part is here simply to be made the receptacle of God's gift, to be enabled to submit to the object of God's mercy...' (pp. 164, 165).

Four chapters (2,3,4,&10) deal with exegetical issues. 'A Note on Romans 5:20-21' establishes, with careful word-studies, that these verses, far from criticising the law, demonstrate that its making sin to increase is a necessary element in God's purpose of salvation. 'Romans 6:1-14 Revisited' amplifies four senses in which we can speak both of dying with Christ and of being raised with him. Cranfield describes these as juridical, baptismal, moral and eschatological. The term juridical, which the author himself considers unsatisfactory, could be replaced by federal, as Christ's covenant headship of his people is not specifically developed in these pages. His description of the moral element also seems inadequate when 'we died to sin' is explained as 'a recognition that, instead of continuing to live in sin, we must try to die to it' (p.26). Paul's point is surely that we have died to sin already and must now reckon on and act upon that fact.

A similar emphasis is needed in an otherwise excellent treatment of 'Sanctification as Freedom'. To say that 'The Christian is like a country which, having been overrun and occupied by a brutal enemy, is at last being invaded by a friendly force determined to drive out the occupying power' (p.40) is to fall short of the finality and wonder of what has happened at conversion. The question 'Who are Christ's Brothers?' refers to Matthew 25:40,45 where the author argues that they are the needy and suffering of this world, a proposition which this reviewer finds unpersuasive.

The remaining six chapters are more controversial in tone, critiques of the views of several contemporary scholars. The positions held by some of these men would seem, to the average believer, so at variance with Scriptural evidence as scarcely to need refutation. But in the confusion of today's academia no aberration is without its exponents and we may be thankful that Professor Cranfield has taken the trouble to engage with and puncture these errors on their own ground.

Thus, chapter 7 successfully quashes the fashionable notion that (pistis) Iesou Christou in Romans 3:22 (and similar genitives in 3:26; Gal.2:16,20; 3:22; Phil.3:9) are subjective rather than objective - referring, that is, to the 'faith' or 'faithfulness' of Christ rather than to faith in him. Chapters 8 & 9 demolish the assertions that Paul's view of the law was confused and that he taught that it has no continuing role in the life of the believer.

Particularly severely handled is J. D. G. Dunn. He contends, following E. P. Sanders, that, for Paul, 'the works of the law' means adherence to such distinctly Jewish practices as circumcision, Sabbath keeping and food laws and that the apostle is engaged in a polemic against Jewish reliance on their privileged status as God's covenant people. This 'new perspective' is gently yet devastatingly dismantled, as is Dunn's attempt to reshape the doctrine of the person of Christ. One almost feels sorry for the unhappy recipient of Cranfield's remorseless analysis and excruciatingly polite conclusion: 'My impression is that the author of *Christology in the Making* - for all the valuable provocativeness of the contribution he has made, which is gratefully acknowledged - has not yet got the measure of the sheer intellectual power and alertness of the author of the Epistle to the Romans' (p.68).

This is a book for the specialist. The price is exorbitant and the contents, in spite of the title, lack coherence. Yet it is an encouraging volume. If ever tempted to an Elijah-like sense of loneliness, it is salutary to be reminded of scholars, working at the most prestigious levels of academic life, who are not ashamed to confess their faith in such words as these: '...though I cannot prove by historical-critical methods that God raised Jesus from the dead, I can believe it without in any way violating my intellectual or moral integrity. For myself, I must declare that I do indeed confidently believe it' (p.150).

Edward Donnelly

A Tapestry of Beliefs: Christian Traditions in Northern Ireland, Norman Richardson, ed., The Blackstaff Press, 1998, 342 pp., hbk., £9.99

That Northern Ireland is known throughout the world for its religion is not necessarily a compliment. For religious loyalties are an intrinsic element in the

volatile mix of nationality, culture and faith which has roiled Ulster society throughout its history and especially in the past thirty years. 'Christians at war' is an unfair jibe but a realistic summary of how the international community views what we describe, with characteristic indirectness, as 'the Troubles'. So what is the religious situation in Northern Ireland?

This book provides some of the raw materials for an answer. In an attempt to dispel myth and misinformation about the various religious traditions in the province, it seeks to give a positive, honest and non-confrontational account of the main denominations. These are listed in numerical strength from the Catholic Church in Ireland to the Eastern Orthodox Church, with a chapter assigned to each grouping. None of the chapters has the status of an official denominational statement, but all, with one exception, are written by a member of the group described. Contributors were asked to cover various set topics and guidelines on length were determined by the perceived size of each denomination.

The exercise must be judged a success. The twenty-two contributors vary in clarity and several writers appear to have disregarded both the suggested structure and, less excusably, the allotted length. Yet the various statements about such matters as origins, present condition, doctrinal position, sacraments, worship and inter-church relations seem, for the most part, balanced and accurate. As one would expect, each church is described in a positive way, although the enthusiasm of several contributors has produced more of a promotional tract than is appropriate for the overall purpose of the book. On the whole, however, this is a courteous and informative presentation of what each body wants to say about itself. A table of denominational statistics (p.6) is valuable, but slightly out-of-date.

The second main part of the book, entitled 'Reflections across the Traditions', consists of eight chapters analysing cross-denominational themes from different points of view. Topics include Spiritualism in Contemporary Ireland, Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism, Christian Reconciliation Movements and Women in the Churches. The quality of these discussions varies, several writers making incisive and thought-provoking comments and the majority echoing the currently fashionable orthodoxy. For the most part, this material is bland, inclusive and rather superficial. A more rigorously biblical approach is needed for a satisfactory analysis, together with an openness to truly radical (i.e. spiritual) thinking. An appendix provides addresses of denominational headquarters, book-shops and other organisations.

This is a useful volume for anyone looking for information about the beliefs and practices of the denominations in Northern Ireland. It should help to dispel ignorance and prejudice and facilitate better-informed religious dialogue. Such discussion is sorely needed if the biblical gospel is to gain a wider hearing.

To suggest, however, as the title does, that the range of views in these pages forms a 'Tapestry' is wide of the mark. A tapestry is a unified whole, with each part contributing its colour and shape to a harmony beyond itself. Here, instead, is discordance, truth side by side with soul-destroying falsehood, especially that of Rome. Religious reconciliation in Northern Ireland will not come through polite inter-action, important though that may be. What is needed is a bold, clear proclamation of truth, empowered by the mighty working of the Spirit of God.

Edward Donnelly

Van Til's Apologetics. Readings and Analysis Greg L. Bahnsen, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing House, (distributed in the UK by Evangelical Press), 1998, 764 pages, £27.95.

The obstacles hindering an understanding of the apologetics of Cornelius Van Til are formidable. To begin with, no one book by Van Til sets out in a clear systematic way all of the basic elements of his approach to apologetics. His system has to be culled from a variety of sources. To this must be added the difficulty that Van Til often assumes a great deal of knowledge, particularly of philosophy, on the part of his readers, and some of the philosophers he examines are little studied today. At times his mode of expression is vague and his books poorly organised. The unfamiliar nature of his thinking can cause difficulties and he has a frustrating habit of using technical terms in a way that is significantly different from their customary usage. In the light of all this, why bother with Van Til?

The only good reason for making the effort to read and understand Van Til is that his system of apologetics is the best attempt to date to do apologetics in

a manner that is fully consistent with the data of Scripture. At key points earlier Reformed apologists have made concessions to the thinking of unbelievers which have seriously damaged their attempts to defend biblical truth in a biblical manner. Van Til sought to be consistent with Scripture in both the content and the method of his apologetics, and to a great extent he succeeded. Beginning with his assertion that knowledge is possible only on the presupposition of the existence of the God who has revealed himself in the Bible, Van Til challenged unbelieving thought, in all its forms, at its very root. His apologetic method demands serious attention.

What has been needed for a long time, however, is a book which brings together the most important parts of Van Til's thinking from his various writings and presents them in a systematic form, doing what Van Til himself never actually did. That is what the late Greg Bahnsen, student and disciple of Van Til, has aimed to achieve in this massive tome. Along with selections from Van Til, Bahnsen has provided lengthy discussions of the subjects Van Til addresses, hence the subtitle 'Readings and Analysis'.

A summary of Van Til's apologetics is unnecessary here, but an outline of the book's contents may be helpful. After an introductory chapter which includes a consideration of Van Til the man, Bahnsen turns to the task of apologetics (chapter 2), its nature and necessity, its relationship to theology, evangelism and philosophy, and its aim. Chapter 3 provides a 'simple summary' of Van Til's method, highlighting the clash between belief and unbelief. Included is Van Til's useful short work 'Why I Believe in God'.

Chapter four examines the epistemological side of apologetics, considering such vital issues as the inescapable knowledge of God in nature and the redemptive, self-attesting revelation of God in Scripture. True knowledge, as Van Til shows, is 'thinking God's thoughts after him'.

Chapter five turns to the apologetical side of epistemology, dealing with the antithesis between belief and unbelief, and highlighting the epistemological failure of unbelief as evidenced for example in Hume and Kant.

Chapter six addresses the psychological complexities of unbelief. The difficulties in which unbelievers find themselves are considered, as is the role played by common grace. Van Til himself admitted his difficulties in trying to state precisely how sin has affected unbelievers' thinking, and this is an area which is still much debated in Reformed apologetics.

Chapter seven deals with methodological issues which are characteristic of Van Til's approach - the importance of presuppositions, indirect proof and the transcendental nature of presuppositional arguments.

Chapter eight provides comparisons and critiques of other approaches to apologetics, not only those of evidentialists such as Clark Pinnock and John Warwick Montgomery, but also the 'traditional' Reformed apologetics of Kuyper and Warfield. Such interaction serves to highlight Van Til's unique contribution.

Chapter nine provides a summary of Van Til's method, aiming to present the essentials in a concise memorable format. A comprehensive bibliography of Van Til's writings is provided, together with substantial indices of Scripture, names and subjects.

Bahnsen himself was an excellent communicator and writes clearly. Some of the issues he addresses, particularly in relation to philosophy, are complex and his discussion inevitably demanding, especially for beginners. He is a faithful follower of Van Til, seldom deviating from the path mapped out by the great man. His critical comments are confined to occasional suggestions that Van Til's choice of terminology (for example regarding 'analogy') was not the happiest. In a work like this it is always difficult to decide how much should be Van Til and how much should be Bahnsen. Bahnsen's analyses are lengthy and would make a substantial book on their own. Perhaps more of Van Til could have been included, with excerpts more thoroughly integrated into the exposition. So thorough is Bahnsen's discussion that by the time the extracts from Van Til appear there is a danger that they sound like dull repetition.

There is no doubt that Bahnsen has produced an indispensable tool for understanding a towering Christian thinker. It will be a standard work for many years. It should not, of course, become a substitute for reading Van Til, for all his frustrating quirks, (a temptation for students and perhaps a few others). For critical interaction with Van Til's views, readers will have to turn elsewhere, for example to John Frame's *Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, but Bahnsen's book will be foundational for an understanding of what Van Til himself said. It is essential reading for any with a serious interest in apologetics.

David McKay

EX LIBRIS**'When a Nation Gives Up The Sabbath'***Villeneuve, Sunday, October 12, 1834*

How different is a Sunday here from the holy calm of an English sabbath! On the opposite side of the street - it is now about ten o'clock - there are two large shops open, and through the open door of a house I can see a woman working at her needle, and can hear where I sit the hammer of the smith busily playing, and a quarrel carried on in loud and angry voices. When a nation gives up the sabbath, it gives up, as a nation at least, having any religion; for it is the observation of Sunday which keeps up a people to that point of religious knowledge and recognition of religious obligations which, though not in themselves lifeful Christianity, are yet the preparation of the soil for the reception of it. What a cruel thing is Liberalism and infidel philosophy! Its very mercies are cruel, and especially is it cruel to the poor; but in nothing is it crueller than in taking away their sabbaths, which thou, O Lord, of Thy goodness hast provided for the poor. When one considers what the sabbath has done for man, and is doing, and the simplicity of the means by which all these mighty effects are brought about, one is struck with admiration at the difference of God's work and man's works. With what ease He brings about His purposes, and how His work, His primaeval work, yet stands and endures. I think one of the most beautiful aspects of the sabbath is expressed in Exekiel xx., 'Moreover, I gave them My sabbaths as a sign between them and me, that I would sanctify them' - a pledge of sanctification, and all else in it, are a continual call to man to trust in God, to trust in Him for this life, and more, much more, to trust in Him for the things which pertain unto life eternal; to trust in Him that He will nourish our souls, that we shall find that Divine life, whereof He is the well and fountain, evermore springing up in our hearts. This, when we feel our own inborn and deeply grounded unholiness, is hard to believe, and God has met our unbelief in manifold ways, and the appointment of the sabbath is one of these ways, a sign between Him and us that He will meet us and sanctify us, or else why should He have appointed it? How beautiful are those lines of my mother's, likening these days to

'Smooth stepping-stones upon the stream of life,
Which chafes below in all its petty strife'.

Archbishop R.C. Trench, *Letters and Memorials*, vol.. 1, pp 172-3. His mother's lines, to which he refers, were written on 22 September 1826 and read—

O Happy those whose Sabbaths seem to be
'Linked each to each by natural piety',
Smooth stepping-stones above the streams of life
Which chafes below in all its petty strife;
Gems that recur upon the varied chain
Of our existence, or in joy or pain;
Green olive-branches where the soul may rest,
Like the tired dove that seeks her peaceful nest,
Shake off the encumbrance of each worldly care,
And for its last and longest flight prepare.

Errata 1998 issue of Reformed Theological Journal

A Family Correspondence

Pages 35-36 and footnote 12

I am most grateful to Dr. Irmgard Linder of Haan, Germany for her kind correction of some geographical inaccuracies, both Maria Dorothea's and mine. The place where Maria Dorothea and her father caught the train was not Kreppin but Krippen. The Pabstein is normally referred to as the 'Bastei'. The town of Tepliyz to which they returned is not in Mecklenburg - West Pomerania but in the Czech Republic, then Bohemia

John S Ross

An Ecclesiastical Republic

In H.M. Cartwright's review of the above title, p.87, the sentence concluding, 'this is salutary even if overdue', should have read 'even if overdone' as it did on disk.