



**NOVEMBER 2005**

# REFORMED THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL



REFORMED THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE  
FOUNDED 1854

Theological Seminary of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland  
35 Knockbracken Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT8 4SF

Vol. 21

NOVEMBER 2005

© Reformed Theological Journal



# REFORMED THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

*Edited for the Faculty of the*

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

Rev. Professor Edward Donnelly, B.A., 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.K. Hyndman, B.A.

Rev. Dr. H.J. Blair, Professor Emeritus

Rev. Professor F.S. Leahy, Principal Emeritus

Vera Cromie, Librarian

by

EDWARD DONNELLY

KNOX HYNDMAN

DAVID MCKAY

---

## *Editorial Policy:*

Contributors enjoy reasonable liberty in the exposition of the Reformed Faith.

## *Editorial Address:*

MSS., books for review and correspondence should be addressed to Reformed Theological Journal, 429 Cregagh Road, Belfast BT6 0LG, Northern Ireland.

## *Subscriptions:*

£5.00 plus postage U.K. 75 pence. US \$10.00 post paid. \$Can. 15.00 \$A 18.50. Elsewhere €10. In common with most periodicals, subscriptions run until cancelled. Cheques to be made payable to Reformed Theological Journal. Subscriptions should be sent to Reformed Theological Journal (Subscriptions), 85 Shore Road, Greenisland BT38 8TZ, Northern Ireland.

The Reformed Theological Journal is on microfilm at Widener Library, Harvard Divinity School U.S.A. and is available for purposes of research.

ISSN 0268 - 4772

[www.rpc.org/college/rtj](http://www.rpc.org/college/rtj)

Email: [rtj@rpc.org](mailto:rtj@rpc.org)

# CONTENTS

SCRIPTURE AND HERMENEUTICS by Edward Donnelly .....	5
BABEL'S TOWER AND BETHEL'S LADDER <i>Another look at Genesis 11:1-9 and 28:10-22</i> by Norris Wilson .....	21
THE MEANING OF 'ALL ISRAEL' IN ROMANS CHAPTER 11 by David Sutherland .....	28
THE PASTORAL VALUE OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS by Andrew Stewart .....	40
SEEKING AND GRANTING FORGIVENESS WITHIN THE CHURCH by Walter J. Chantry .....	60
PREACHING IN THE DUTCH CALVINIST TRADITION by Neil Pronk .....	73
BOOK REVIEWS Tim Shenton, 'AN IRON PILLAR' by Knox Hyndman .....	88
Austin Walker, THE EXCELLENT BENJAMIN KEACH .....	89
Michael Green, I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT by Edward Donnelly .....	90
Robert P Gordon, HOLY LAND, HOLY CITY by Norris Wilson .....	92
Philip Benedict, CHRIST'S CHURCHES PURELY REFORMED .....	92
Thomas Harding, THE DECADES OF HENRY BULLINGER by David McKay .....	94
James M. Garreston, PRINCETON AND PREACHING by Robert McCollum .....	95

BOOK NOTICES

John Owen, TRIUMPH OVER TEMPTATION

Richard Baxter, WATCH YOUR WALK

Jonathan Edwards, FAITH BEYOND FEELINGS

by Edward Donnelly ..... 98

R.C. Sproul, THE REFORMATION STUDY

BIBLE, ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

..... 98

Tae-Hyeun Park, THE SACRED RHETORIC

OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

..... 99

Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James,

THE GLORY OF THE ATONEMENT

..... 100

D.G. Hart, J GRESHAM MACHEN.

SELECTED SHORTER WRITINGS

..... 100

G. R. Evans,

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS

Carter Lindberg, THE PIETIST THEOLOGIANS ..... 101

Gerald Bray, DOCUMENTS OF THE ENGLISH

REFORMATION 1526 - 1701

..... 101

Martin Greschat, MARTIN BUCER, A REFORMER

AND HIS TIMES

..... 102

Jon D. Payne, JOHN OWEN ON

THE LORD'S SUPPER

..... 102

John Webster, KARL BARTH

..... 103

David McIlroy, CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

ON LAW AND JUSTICE

..... 103

Andreas J Köstenberger with David W. Jones

GOD, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

..... 104

Richard Harries, THE PASSION IN ART

..... 104

Carsten Peter Thiede, THE COSMOPOLITAN

WORLD OF JESUS

..... 105

Philip Clayton and Jeffrey Schloss,

EVOLUTION AND ETHICS

by David McKay

..... 105

# SCRIPTURE AND HERMENEUTICS

**Edward Donnelly**

*Edward Donnelly is Principal and Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at the Reformed Theological College and minister of Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church, Newtownabbey. This article is based on a paper read at the 1998 Theological Study Conference of the British Evangelical Council.*

## **Is our journey really necessary?**

Many of the members of our churches would be puzzled to hear that the interpretation of Scripture is a controversial matter. After all, what can there be to discuss? They have been taught that God's Word is clear and easy to understand. There are, of course, 'difficult' passages with which they need help and the preaching ministry is a God-given means for instruction in Scripture. But cruces are in the minority. For the most part, the meaning of the Bible is plain and the ordinary believer has no need of a hermeneutical mediator. Scripture is 'profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness' (2 Timothy 3:16) for all God's children, not just the experts. William Tyndale's resolve to have every plough-boy a Bible reader ushered in a reformation and, throughout history, the Christian faith has progressed when the Word of God has been placed in the hands of the people and they have been encouraged to read it for themselves.

This conviction about the perspicuity of Scripture is confirmed by experience. Time and again God speaks to his people from his Word. As they read it daily, verses come to challenge, comfort and guide them. They know that God is addressing them and respond in faith to his voice. Their interpretative method is a simple one - taking much of what they read and applying it more or less directly to themselves. But this unsophisticated approach has a long and honourable pedigree. In Puritan times, Thomas Watson urged: 'Oh, then, search the Scriptures! There is no danger in tasting this tree of knowledge...Think in every line you read that God is speaking to you... Read the Scripture, not only as a history, but as a love letter sent you from God, which may affect your hearts'.<sup>1</sup> Some years later, Thomas Boston wrote: 'Singing at family worship Psalm 121, this view of the Bible was given me, viz: that whatever were the particular occasions of the writing of it, or any part thereof, I am to look upon it as written for me as much as if there were not another person in the world, and so is everybody to whose hand it comes'.<sup>2</sup>

These quotations express what is still a majority view among spiritually healthy Christians and we need to bear it in mind as we plunge into the

hermeneutical quagmire. We do not ever want to think, or imply, that understanding the Bible is hugely difficult. It is not. But there are compelling reasons why the interpretation of Scripture demands our present attention.

### **A crucial issue**

It has become a truism that hermeneutics is the central issue in modern theology. That, in itself, would be reason enough to focus on it, but two additional factors intensify its importance.

(a) One is the sheer scope of modern hermeneutical theory, which reaches beyond the interpretation of Scripture into almost every area of life. Bernard L. Ramm's prophecy of a generation ago has now been fulfilled: 'It is the contention of the new hermeneutic that their understanding of hermeneutics or interpretation is actually the foundation for reconstruction in philosophy, for a new programme in epistemology, for a fresh justification of and foundation for the liberal arts, and for a totally new formulation of the nature of Christian theology'.<sup>3</sup> This issue will affect all of life. It is not limited to the ivory towers of academia.

(b) Evangelical hermeneutics is in a state of disrepair. If we were in a position to offer a cogent, unified interpretation of Scripture, we might feel able to ignore the vagaries and excesses of many non-evangelicals. It is difficult, however, to throw stones when living in a glass-house. Although evangelicals claim, rightly, to share a common understanding of the teaching of the Bible on the main issues of salvation, we are notorious for our differences over other matters. The world, listening to a group of people who start with an infallible Bible and end up with widely differing conclusions, might be excused for thinking that Scripture can be used to prove anything.

We cannot avoid considering a subject with such momentous implications. God's Word is being lost in a Babel of conflicting voices and evangelicals are, to a limited extent, part of the problem. We do have a responsibility to see what can be done.

### **Neither Athenians nor ostriches**

In approaching the hermeneutical crisis, two extremes need to be avoided.

(a) **Athenians.** Luke, in his account of Paul's visit to Athens, captures the decadent superficiality of first century Greek society when he writes that: 'all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in

nothing except telling or hearing something new' (Acts 17:21). But such obsession with what is new is a feature of our culture also and it would be easy for Christians to be swept along by it. We could follow every fresh hermeneutical fad with enthusiasm, reacting like Pavlov's dogs as each new method of interpretation is propounded to a gullible audience.

Such an infatuation with modernity might gain us academic respectability or a reputation for being up-to-date, but the price would be high. A preoccupation with scholarly fashion should be avoided for the following reasons:

(i) Much current hermeneutical theory is so obviously absurd as to be unworthy of attention. The inherent improbability of deconstructionism, for example, is patent to all but the most blinkered. The very texts which teach it should, by their own admission, be devoid of meaning themselves, at the mercy of the understanding of each interpreter. But this is unsustainable. If language has no fixed, ultimate meaning, that is a truth which no-one will ever be able to express. As Michael Ovey has written:

Deconstructionism faces a massive difficulty in explaining the successful use of language in the everyday world. True, misconstructions do occur. But the fact that they are occasions for comment or for humour or for irritation reveals how overwhelmingly successful language seems to be. If language is so unreliable, why do we so readily assume it is a viable means of communication?<sup>4</sup>

Is there much point in wasting effort arguing over an edifice which will soon collapse under the weight of its self-contradiction?

(ii) Fashions in scholarship, as in most things, are short-lived. Today's craze is tomorrow's junk. One of the fascinating features of the history of New Testament criticism is the way in which a colossus in one generation is repudiated in the next. Ferdinand Christian Baur is a prime example. Founder of the Tübingen school, he was a leading figure in New Testament scholarship in the mid-nineteenth century. His researches, backed by formidable ability and industry, seemed to have devastating implications for biblical Christianity and threw the orthodox into a turmoil of fear lest the faith had been irreparably damaged. 'In the years that followed 1860, Christians in England were almost in a state of panic. The *status quo* could never be restored'.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in a few years, J B Lightfoot's work on Clement and Ignatius had demolished Baur's assertions: 'The theories had been killed stone dead... The whole mythology of the enmity between Peter and Paul, of the later reconciliation in the Church, and of the dating of New Testament books in the middle of the second century, had collapsed like a house of cards'.<sup>6</sup>

The same pattern continued in the twentieth century, as one new theory



succeeded another. Scholars moved through source criticism, form criticism, demythologising, redaction criticism, semantics, structuralism, the new hermeneutic and on (or down) into postmodernism. This is a partial list, but serves to make the point. Evangelicals can be certain that, as soon as we have mastered a new hermeneutical approach and worked out a biblical response, we will be informed that it is no longer relevant. Anyone who marries the spirit of today is sure to be a widower tomorrow.

(iii) A massive difficulty in engaging with modern approaches to interpretation is that they are governed by presuppositions antithetical to our own. Anti-supernaturalism is a given. Bultmann, for example, has explained his starting-point with commendable frankness:

The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect. This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that there is there no 'miracle' in this sense of the word... There cannot be any exceptions in the case of biblical truth.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, Bultmann is not open to proof or argument regarding one of the central realities of the Christian faith. His presupposition has rendered real dialogue impossible.

If some narrow and cramping philosophy has closed our minds to the possibility of the Resurrection, then we could not receive the testimony though it were a thousand times more cogent and consistent than it is already is. Probably at no point in the whole range of historical and literary criticism and research is the priority of philosophy over history, of suppressed presupposition over conscious thought and conclusion, more evident than here.<sup>8</sup>

The same applies to the relativism and subjectivism of more recent interpretative approaches. We reject absolutely the principles on which they are based. How then can we devote ourselves to considering methods of interpreting Scripture which we believe to be poisoned at the source?

(iv) Much current biblical scholarship echoes, in an eerie fashion, the concerns of the outside world. Is it just a coincidence that two topics currently claiming attention - feminism and homosexuality - are at the same time hotly debated in society at large, with militant pressure groups advocating radical changes in perception? Have genuine exegetical developments necessitated reinterpretation? Is it not more likely that the church is being influenced by the world, so that scholars are trying to shape Scripture into a more currently acceptable mould? Rather than seeking to hear the voice of God more clearly,

as they profess, they seem to be attempting to make God say what humans want to hear. This is falsification, not interpretation - the being 'conformed to this world' (Romans 12:2) which Paul forbids.

(v) History shows that if we try too hard to make the Word comprehensible to unbelievers, we run the risk of silencing it altogether. In the second century, Clement of Alexandria sought to win his world to Christ by expressing the faith in the language of Greek philosophy, showing the unbeliever how the truth of God was partially revealed in the metaphysics of Plato, the ethics of the Stoics and the logic of Aristotle. In his words: 'God is the cause of all good things, but of some primarily, as of the old and new covenants, and of others consequentially, as of philosophy... Philosophy educated the Greek world as the law did the Hebrews to bring them to Christ'.<sup>9</sup> His method of assimilation was staggeringly effective, but at a terrible cost. The church attracted humanists and rationalists and pagan philosophy was allowed to pollute the wellsprings of truth.

In the 20th century, Barth and Bultmann followed a similar path. They had a genuine pastoral concern - to preach the gospel to modern man in categories which he could understand and would accept. In this respect, they are still a rebuke to smug insularity. But in adapting the gospel they destroyed it. What modern man was willing to believe was not worth believing. Any approach to communicating divine truth tends towards danger if it overlooks the necessity of supernatural illumination from the Spirit.

(vi) More practically, a preoccupation with the minutiae of hermeneutical theory would divert us from more important issues. Our people need built up in their faith. The gospel must be taken to the millions, in our own country and abroad, who have never heard it. We do not have much time to spend on analysing and responding to the vagaries of unbelieving interpreters. More urgent responsibilities await us.

**(b) Ostriches.** If involvement with modern hermeneutics is so hazardous, might it be wiser to ignore the whole field altogether? This is not an option for those called to love God with the whole mind. The feeling of security induced by burying one's head in the sand is rarely justified and there are a number of valid reasons for interacting with developments in interpretation.

(i) Although it is true that what is new in modern hermeneutics is not usually good and what is good is not new, the fact remains that recent scholarship has drawn to our attention some valuable truths. The sovereignty of the text has been re-emphasised, with stress placed on the importance of

allowing it to speak for itself. Renewed emphasis on the corporate dimension of hermeneutics has been healthy.

For whatever we think about it, the Bible lives as the book of the church, and it is from the bosom of the believing community that scholars arise to study and expound it. If that link is severed it is not the church which will die but the academic study of the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

We have been reminded of our prejudice as interpreters, coming, as we do, with a pre-understanding which can all too easily distort our comprehension of what Scripture is saying. It is important to realise that we do need to work for a fusion between our 'horizon' and that of the biblical writer. We can be thankful for the stress being laid on the phenomenon of communication, treating the Word as more than a written document. In the words of J I Packer:

The current avowed shift of the biblical debate to hermeneutics as its central focus, even if made under the influence of views that Evangelicals do not accept, is a move that Evangelicals can welcome, since it makes explicit their concern that the divine message be heard.<sup>11</sup>

James Barr, influenced by de Saussure, has drawn attention to weaknesses in our approach to the study of words. Issues such as illegitimate totality transfer and the relative value of diachronic and synchronic linguistics deserve more evangelical attention than they have received.

We should have known all this, of course. But these and other truths have been overlooked and we would be the poorer if we refused to learn from those with whom we disagree. John Owen provides a classical statement of the value of plundering the Philistines. He is writing about experts in the original languages, puffed up with pride, but his point has a wider application:

The Holy Ghost usually teacheth not such persons, neither should I expect to learn much from them relating to the truth as it is in Jesus. But yet the stones they dig may be made use of by a skilful builder.<sup>12</sup>

(ii) We cannot ignore modern hermeneutics, even if we wish to, because its influences are already among us, affecting our people profoundly. The mass media are dominated by pluralism, individualism and subjectivism. Christians are told constantly, through television and popular journalism that 'What is true for you may not be true for me' and that all religions are expressions of human aspiration, backed by no absolute reality. Douglas Groothuis, author of *The Soul in Cyberspace* (1997) has commented on the danger of new word-processing technology, in many ways such a blessing:

I am afraid hypertext technologies - which give us the ability to rearrange texts and connect with other texts almost effortlessly - may corrode our sense of authorial intent, fixed meaning, and intellectual coherence. Some postmodernist thinkers revel in this... This kind of cyber-relativism refuses to admit any determinative and authoritative meaning - either in Scripture or anywhere else. It is really high-tech nihilism and poison to the soul. Christians may innocently fall into this error by using Bible software in a manner that divorces Scripture from its literary genre and contextual meaning'.<sup>13</sup>

Current concern over 'gender-inclusive language' has led to the promotion of a 'neutral' translation of Scripture which claims to remove the 'patriarchalism' of the biblical texts. The aim, of course, is the wider one of changing thought and perception through changes in language. If evangelicals do not confront these and other issues head-on, we will be infiltrated and shaped by them without realising it. Peaceful co-existence is a short-sighted policy for people who are already being invaded.

(iii) If damage were being caused only on the periphery of Christian truth, it might be possible to argue for non-involvement in favour of more urgent matters, but modern hermeneutics is headed in an exceptionally destructive direction. D A Carson confesses that:

In my most somber moods I sometimes wonder if the ugly face of what I refer to as philosophical pluralism is the most dangerous threat to the gospel since the rise of the gnostic heresy in the second century'.<sup>14</sup>

Some of those arguing for acceptance of a homosexual lifestyle seem to want to abolish altogether large areas of personal morality. The feminist movement aims at creating another God. Postmodernism would abolish truth itself. If these trends are not resisted and overcome, the effects will be disastrous for both the Christian faith and society at large. This is a battle in which we must take part and which we dare not lose.

(iv) As Christians, we are commissioned to communicate the gospel to our own age. To do so effectively, we need to understand those to whom we are sent. Many of them are in a horror of great darkness. Truth and meaning are slipping through their fingers, while, at the same time, the image of God within them cries out in anguished protest. If we are not aware of their mentality, their use of language, their concept of reality, our evangelism may be ill-judged and insensitive. Time spent entering their thought-world will enable us to preach Christ more perceptively to them.

For these and other reasons, we must face up to the demands of the current hermeneutical challenge.

## How to proceed? Reformed, yet reforming.

How, then, can we steer a safe course between the Scylla of instability and the Charybdis of obscurantism? By remembering the 16th century adage *ecclesia reformatata semper reformanda* – the church, though reformed, needs reforming still.

**(a) Reformed.** Buffeted by winds of change, we need not panic. Christians have been interpreting Scripture for 2,000 years - for much of the time, with notable success. It is a manifestation of chronological snobbery to assume that only in this present generation are we beginning to understand what the Bible really means. A former student of James Denney recalled the wit with which the Glasgow professor deflated the pomposity of a German scholar who believed that he was the first in history to discern the true meaning of a text: 'And so this evangelist has gone on deceiving the world all these centuries - *till Schmeidel found him out!*'.<sup>15</sup>

The Holy Spirit, as Jesus promised, has, through the centuries, been guiding God's people into the truth. A treasury of biblical study and theological writing is available to serve as a quality control in our interpretation of Scripture, helping to discern ever more accurately the analogy of faith. The grammatico-historical method of exegesis is sound in its basic principles and has stood the test of time. The thinking of the past needs to be purified and conserved, not denigrated and replaced.

In the midst of our interpretative wrestlings, we must never forget that most of Scripture is perfectly clear in both meaning and application. Even the differences between the first century and succeeding eras, real though they are, have been exaggerated by those who wish to advance a novel and eccentric hermeneutic. J I Packer's comment about Puritan interpreters should apply equally to believers today:

Puritan exegetes are pre-modern, in the sense that they do not bring to the Bible the pervasive sense of difference and distance between cultures and epochs that is so much part of today's mind-set... Instead of feeling distant from biblical characters and their experiences because of the number of centuries between them, the Puritans felt kinship with them because they belonged to the same human race, faced, feared and fellowshipped with the same unchanging God, and struggled with essentially the same spiritual problems. (Was that wisdom? Yes!).<sup>16</sup>

The 'problem' of understanding Scripture is not nearly as serious as some would have us believe.

**(b) Reforming.** Yet we must not be complacent. We need to recognise afresh how indwelling sin distorts our perceptions and how prejudice biases our



understanding. We need to admit to sloppy exegesis, to cultivate a deeper humility as we undertake to comprehend and communicate the words of God. One of the most valuable, yet seldom quoted, treatises on biblical interpretation is John Owen's *Causes, Ways and Means of Understanding the Mind of God*, a rich source which evangelicals would do well to digest. He is constantly urging humility and warning against pride:

This is an eternal and unalterable law of God's appointment, that whoever will learn his mind and will as revealed in the Scripture must be humble and lowly, renouncing all trust and confidence in themselves. And whatever men of another frame do come to know, they know it not according to the mind of God, nor according to their own duty, nor unto their advantage... But principally are they exposed hereunto (self-confidence) who either really or in their own apprehensions are exalted above others in secular learning, and natural or acquired abilities; for such men are apt to think that they must needs know the meaning of the Holy Ghost in the Scriptures better than others, or, at least, that they can do so, if they will but set themselves about it. But that which principally hinders them from so doing is their conceit that so they do. They mistake that for divine knowledge which is in them the great obstruction of it.<sup>17</sup>

Reformation will mean that, as evangelicals, we give ourselves seriously to developing a more solid, responsible and generally accepted hermeneutical method. What issues should claim priority? The following suggestions are by no means exhaustive.

### **The way forward?**

**(a) Maintain biblical presuppositions.** Evangelicals must remain crystal clear on the nature of Scripture as a divinely-inspired book. We must persist in asserting distinctively Christian emphases: the infallibility of the Word; the effects of sin on our understanding; the importance of prayer in interpretation; the place of the Spirit in enlightening us. We must maintain that biblical texts have one meaning, but multiple applications.

Applications vary with situations, but... the core truths about God's work, will, and ways that each biblical book teaches, and that God himself teaches, remain both constant in themselves... and permanently accessible to the careful exegete. Thus... the manifold applications of the same Scriptures to different people do not in the least imply an ultimate pluralism in their teachings.<sup>18</sup>

Vern S Poythress reminds us of the importance of working in a **distinctively biblical atmosphere**, since much current biblical scholarship

*generates an 'immanentistic' hermeneutical atmosphere dangerous to breathe. This atmosphere can stifle theocentric faith. Lack of sufficient reflection on and*



appreciation of the work of the triune God in inspiration and interpretation tends to produce a black attitude. The sense of awe, fear, joy, and adoration in hearing God are displaced by a sea of probabilistic weighing. No doubt we must wrestle again and again to really *hear* what God is saying. The probabilistic weighing has its role. But equally we must hear what *God* is saying.<sup>19</sup>

These categories are, of course, alien to the modern intelligentsia. If we insist on them, we will be laughed out of court and may lose any claim to academic respectability. So be it. We cannot afford to lay aside these truths in order to meet anti-supernaturalists on supposedly common ground. There is no common ground. We either presuppose God or we do not. To discuss the Bible, for the purposes of argument, as an ordinary book is to have conceded our position before we begin. Much professedly evangelical interpretation is too weak-kneed to say that something is true simply because 'the Bible tells me so'. For evangelicals working in academia, a commitment to robust supernaturalism may prove costly.

**(b) A new translation?** Is the dream of one, generally accepted translation of Scripture attainable - or advisable? Bible versions multiply and cannot but help adding to hermeneutical confusion. Misleading translations can have long-lasting results, as when Jerome's Latin Vulgate translated 'repentance' as *poenitentia*, thus leading to the medieval sacrament of penance and the loss of a vital gospel truth. The development of a gender-inclusive NIV will force a change on many evangelicals. Might the NKJV or ESV serve as a rallying-point? Are we too fragmented to undertake a new translation?

**(c) Work at listening to Scripture.** In spite of a commitment to live under the authority of the Word, it is possible to approach it in a smug, know-it-all fashion. God's Word becomes an object for us to use for our own purposes. We do not expect to be shaken by it, taken by surprise, have our lives revolutionised. We do not tremble as we begin to read. For this sin, we need to repent. Many of the Lord's parables end with a devastating thrust at the pre-understanding of his hearers. Suddenly they find themselves being put on the spot. Having listened complacently as he spoke to others, they realise that he is in fact addressing them. We should always come to the Word with open-minded expectation, ready to hear something which we have never noticed before.

Presuppositions are inevitable. We have moved away from the arrogant assumption of the possibility of a completely objective interpretation. Bernard F Lonergan has stingingly described presuppositionless exegesis as 'the principle of the Empty Head... On this view, the less one knows, the better an exegete will one be'.<sup>20</sup> T F Torrance concurs: 'Our psychology insists that detachment is not the sign of rationality but of open-mouthed imbecility'.<sup>21</sup> We all have presuppositions and they are helpful, provided that we recognise them.

take them into account in studying Scripture and are prepared to re-examine them in the light of biblical evidence.

Systematic theology is an excellent servant, but a dangerous master. It provides us with a doctrinal grid by which we can test interpretations of particular passages and this is valuable, keeping us from eccentricity and error. But when our confessional statements become a filter through which Scripture must pass, we are running the risk of silencing God. Calvinists, for example, can mute the force of warnings of apostasy or assertions of God's concern for all humans by a quick mental reminder of what they cannot mean. But what do they mean? There must be an honest wrestling with the text, a reluctance to assume that we invariably know what God is going to say.

**(d) Avoid deifying grammatico-historical interpretation.** It is, and must continue to be, the basis for sound exegesis. Evangelicals are not as competent in this field as they should be, and we need to work harder at lexical and syntactical analysis, context, authorial intent and so on. But there is more to interpreting Scripture than taking it to pieces and reassembling it in a new format. Our exegetical method may be making us over-academic, stilted, rationalistic. Don M Wardlaw has commented: 'When preachers feel that they have not preached a passage of Scripture unless they have dissected and rearranged that Word into a lawyer's brief, they in reality make the Word of God subservient to one particular, technical kind of reason'.<sup>22</sup> He decries the 'assumption that preaching as such seems to mean finding sensible, orderly things to say about scriptural texts, rather than letting those texts say things their own way'.<sup>23</sup> Much as we are indebted to the Puritans for their exegetical thoroughness, we may have been misled to some extent by their habit of preaching by means of doctrinal propositions. In the words of J I Packer:

The Puritan method of 'opening' a text... was first to explain it in its context... next, to extract from the text one or more doctrinal observations embodying its substance; to amplify, illustrate and confirm from other scriptures the truths thus derived; and, finally, to draw out their practical implications for the hearers.<sup>24</sup>

This is often an excellent method. But not always. It suits the epistles more than the gospels. Poetry and parable, narrative and apocalyptic are not always best approached in a strictly analytical way. They appeal to the emotions as well as to the mind. How something is said is important as well as what is said and we need to learn to respect form as well as content. A child, or childlike believer, who enters imaginatively into a biblical narrative, empathising with the characters, will reach a more satisfactory interpretation of that passage than desiccated scholarship ever can.

Though the place of the mind is primary, understanding God's Word involves also the imagination and the affections, which is why he reveals truth

to babes which is hidden to the wise and prudent. 'Experts', especially, need to practise coming to the Bible like little children.

**(e) Give more attention to specifically biblical issues.**

(i) The massive topic of apostolic exegesis and the extent to which it is normative.

(ii) Redemptive-historical interpretation; typology; so-called 'spiritualising'. We need to soak ourselves in the Old Testament, studying biblical theology, avoiding simplistic proof-texting and learning to examine thoroughly the context and meaning of passages quoted in the New.

(iii) The degree of continuity and discontinuity between Old and New Testaments. Would a clearer understanding of the relationship between the Testaments help, for example, in bringing baptists and paedobaptists closer?

(iv) The genres of biblical literature. 'A genre mistake takes place... when the genre of prophecy or apocalypse is understood as historical narrative, or when a parable is understood as historical narrative, or when descriptive statement is understood as prescriptive. A genre mistake leads to faulty interpretation because the interpreter will ask the wrong questions'.<sup>25</sup> The Book of Acts is a classic example. Is it meant to be a record of the believer's normative spiritual experience? To what extent is controversy over charismatic issues rooted in disagreement over the function of this book? Or, how much can it teach us about church order? Dennis E Johnson reminds us that: 'Although Acts contains information on the early church's life, the book may frustrate us if we try to turn it into a manual of church polity or mission policies'.<sup>26</sup>

**(f) Acknowledge and deal with practical inconsistencies.** We are right to be critical of the bias of liberal theology, antisupeanaturalism, postmodernism and other approaches to Scripture which fail to acknowledge its divine authority. But we must also face up to the unpalatable truth that evangelicals have their own blind spots. Where it suits us, we are often rebellious. There are areas in which we simply do not hear the Word of God. It is blotted out by the static of our own sinfulness. Two examples, among many, may be cited:

(i) Materialism. Many evangelicals have a living standard which, by biblical standards, is indefensible. Scripture has a great deal to say about treasures on earth, the sin of luxury, our obligation to the poor. Yet Western

Christians, on the whole, refuse to take these passages seriously. A glaze of selfishness and habit prevents them from penetrating our minds. Third world Christians might look at our self-indulgent lifestyles and wonder if we had ever read the Bible at all.

(ii) Christian unity. In spite of Christ's prayer for unity, the pictures of the church as body and family, and the stumbling-block created for the watching world, we tolerate denominational division and practical isolation with scarcely a pang.

The list could be continued, but the point is clear. Our convictions about the authority of Scripture will lack credibility unless we live them out, at personal cost. Otherwise, the stench of hypocrisy will negate the truths for which we are contending.

If Christians are obligated to think through issues of truth and error, or orthodoxy and heresy, they are obligated to think no less about issues of right and wrong, morality and immorality, purity and impurity. Indeed, the two are intimately connected, for Christians hold that the most fundamental distinctions in the moral arena are upheld by revelation that is nothing less than propositional, revelation that is absorbed by cognitive faculties.<sup>27</sup>

We must show that, for us, the Bible really is our rule of faith and practice.

**(g) Engage in the hermeneutical enterprise on different levels.** It should be possible for evangelicals to interact with modern hermeneutics without losing our way. A three-tier approach might be profitable:

(i) A few evangelical scholars could be encouraged to spend their lives in this field. They should be assured that their involvement would not raise a question-mark over their evangelical *bona fides*. Instead, as missionaries sent into a dangerous sphere of labour, they would be entitled to the prayerful support of the churches.

(ii) These experts could, in turn, keep ministers and church leaders up-to-date through writing, conferences, etc. Pastors would not need to spend an inordinate amount of time on the subject, yet could be confident that they were being adequately briefed.

(iii) The results of such briefings would be mediated to church members in whatever ways were considered appropriate or necessary.

**(h) Give priority to improving preaching.** Since interpretation is not an end in itself, but a means to communicating God's truth, we must work at developing preaching competence. This will mean improving both our understanding of what Scripture is saying and our ability to communicate it to modern men and women.

It is admittedly very difficult to update doctrine without distorting it one way or another, but at the same time, Christian truth can never be allowed to appear stale and irrelevant. The great challenge for adherents of this position is to make their classical orthodoxy seem compelling when dealing with the problems of this present age, and demonstrate that its staying power is due to its intrinsic worth, not simply to historical inertia.<sup>28</sup>

At present, the level of preaching in evangelical churches is deplorably low in both respects. The best way of teaching sound interpretation to our people is by modelling it from the pulpit.

### **Closing encouragements.**

It is easy to feel overwhelmed when contemplating the hermeneutical morass, but God has provided us with considerable encouragements as we seek to move forward.

**(a) 'There is nothing new under the sun'.** Believers have often been forced to speak God's Word to an uncomprehending world. Missionaries do so today in many foreign cultures. From the very beginning, the pre-understanding of those outside the community of faith has been alien to biblical presuppositions.

Ancient man tried to answer ultimate questions about life and reality when the light of revelation had not dawned upon him. Interestingly, the answers provided to those questions by ancient man are not all that different from the answers provided by modern but unredeemed man.<sup>29</sup>

The pagan myths of Mesopotamia - the *Enuma Elish* and the *Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh* epics - presented a view of creation and the flood radically different from that of the Hebrews, and Genesis confronts these views head-on.

Genesis 1-11... is a commentary, often highly critical, on ideas current in the ancient world about the natural and supernatural world... a polemic against many of the commonly received notions about the gods and man.<sup>30</sup>

The opening chapters of the Bible, therefore, were written in a situation similar to our own:

Genesis 1-11 is setting out a picture of the world that is at odds both with the polytheistic optimism of ancient Mesopotamia and the humanistic secularism of the modern world... a fundamental challenge to the ideologies of civilized men and women, past and present, who like to suppose that their own efforts will ultimately suffice to save them.<sup>31</sup>

Circumstances were the same in the first century AD, as the early evangelists went out into the world of Greek philosophy, Roman utilitarianism and the mystery religions of the East. But God's people did not panic, capitulate or fall silent. They had the mighty Word to proclaim. In the same way, we should not allow ourselves to be intimidated, but should tell out the gospel, whether it is acceptable or not, for it contains its own convicting power. Human culture, sinful and fallen, can never be allowed to determine the meaning of Scripture. It must, rather, be confronted, challenged and changed by the Word of God.

One of the jobs the Bible does is to challenge and undercut 'modern' positivistic deism, panentheism, and atheism, just as it challenged and undercut the then 'modern' polytheistic paganism of the Greco-Roman world in the first Christian centuries.<sup>32</sup>

**(b) The internal ally.** Inside all humans is a voice agreeing with what God's Word is saying. Their cultural background may make it difficult to hear the Word. But God's image in them cries out for meaning, for rationality, for truth. Postmodernists they may be, but they cannot live without real communication, and, in their saner moments, they know this well enough. Creation tells them of a mighty Maker. Conscience speaks to them of good and evil, of sin and judgment. They 'show that the work of the law is written on their hearts' (Romans 2:15). As we preach or witness, they may reject our message as folly. It may seem that we are shouting nonsense into a gulf of incomprehension. But the inner voice speaks and, one day by God's mercy, may silence their protests so that they hear the gospel.

**(c) The powerful Word.** God's speech is not limited by man's refusal to listen or inability to understand. It is like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces (Jeremiah 23:29). It is 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit' (Hebrews 4:12). If we were using only our own words to communicate into this chaotic world of unreason, we might well despair. But the Bible is the Word of God, which, he says, 'shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it' (Isaiah 55:11).

Let us take heart and speak out. We are almost deafened by a babble of conflicting voices. But we can be confident that, by the help of the Spirit, accurate and courageous communication of Scripture will so penetrate human



misapprehension as to bring lost sinners to confess that 'we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God' (*Acts* 2:11). For, in our world, Babel has been succeeded by Pentecost.

### Notes

- 1 Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, revised edition 1965), p.35.
- 2 Thomas Boston, *Memoirs*, quoted in S M Houghton, *My Life and Books* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), p.59.
- 3 Bernard L Ramm et al., *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 edition), p.138.
- 4 In 'Deconstruction: Gaggling the Speaking God?', *Cambridge Papers*, Vol.2, No.4, December 1993.
- 5 Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.34.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp.59,60.
- 7 Rudolph Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (Harper and Row: New York, 1961), pp.291,292.
- 8 J V Langmead Casserley, *The Retreat from Christianity in the Modern World* (London: Longmans, 1952), p.84.
- 9 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, I:5:28.
- 10 Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation, Past and Present* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p.584.
- 11 In 'Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics', *Scripture and Truth*, Carson and Woodbridge, eds., (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1983) p.326.
- 12 John Owen, 'Causes, Ways and Means of Understanding the Mind of God', *The Works of John Owen*, (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 1967), Vol.IV, p.217.
- 13 Interview in *Christianity Today*, September 1, 1997, p.54.
- 14 D A Carson, *The Gaggling of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p.10.
- 15 *Letters of Principal James Denney to W Robertson Nicoll, 1893-1917* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920), p.xxxiv.
- 16 J I Packer, *Among God's Giants* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991), p.129.
- 17 John Owen, *op. cit.*, pp.179,180.
- 18 J I Packer, *Scripture and Truth*, p.330.
- 19 In a review of 'New Testament Interpretation', *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol.XLI, Fall 1978, Number 1, p.198.
- 20 Bernard F Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1972), p.17.
- 21 T F Torrance, *God and Rationality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.8.
- 22 Cited in Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p.18.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Packer, *Among God's Giants*, p.374.
- 25 Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, p.17.
- 26 Dennis E Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, N J: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1997), p.5.
- 27 Carson, *The Gaggling of God*, pp. 365,366.
- 28 Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, pp.23,24.
- 29 Victor P Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), p.35.
- 30 Gordon J Wenham, *Genesis 1-11*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), p.xlvii.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p.liii.
- 32 J I Packer, *Scripture and Truth*, p.331.

# BABEL'S TOWER AND BETHEL'S LADDER:

*Another look at Genesis 11:1-9 and 28:10-22.*

**Norris Wilson**

*Norris Wilson is Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature at the Reformed Theological College and minister of Drimbolg Reformed Presbyterian Church, Co. Londonderry.*

It will be our contention in this article that not only is Jacob's experience in Genesis 28 set over against the Tower of Babel account in Genesis 11 as its background and counterpart, but directly parallels it and shows us the divine answer to the dilemma it presents. Before we compare and contrast the two accounts, however, we must assess the significance of the Tower of Babel incident in Genesis 11.

## **The Tower of Babel**

It is clear that 'the whole earth' (v1) denotes all the then inhabitants of the world. What happens here happens to the whole human family of the time, for mankind is one, both in language and place of habitation. Noah's family has migrated in an easterly direction and settles on the plain of Shinar. It is hard to escape the ominous echoes of Cain here, not just in the symbolic easterly movement away from God, but in the attempt to forestall dispersal by city building (Genesis 4:12-17). The human family is under the renewed mandate to Adam to, 'fill the earth, subdue it and rule over it' (Gen.1:28, 9:1-3), however, in contravention of this, they decide to settle, entrench and seek for glory and security on their own terms. The verb 'to settle' will be used again in the chapter, in v. 31, significantly of Abram's family in its migration from Shinar. Abram's willingness to go to the place of God's ordering contrasts with his forefathers here.

There is no lack of ingenuity and practical skill here in taking giant steps forward in social organisation, cooperation and collaboration. The account begins with the invention of brick technology. The real problem, however, is **crystallized** in v4 in the statement of intent of the builders. This is a project that **centers on themselves** – 'Come let us build ourselves a city...' God's glory and his mandate find no mention here. Then there is the ambitious scale of the project, '...with a tower with its top (head) in the heavens'. The tower

symbolizes the purpose of the city's construction. The word 'tower' here refers to a fortified tower or acropolis in the O.T.(e.g. Judges 8:9,17; 9:46-52). Thus they propose to construct their own place or centre of strength, safety and security.

But from whom are they protecting themselves? Mankind is united at the time, so are they fortifying themselves against God whom they are beginning to think of as an enemy? When we remember that for the writer here 'the heavens' are God's domain, then we realise that there is an audaciousness about the statement, an aspiration to what is beyond limits. As Westermann says, 'It is an expression of the will to greatness, to something "over and above"'<sup>1</sup> Here then is a sacrilegious human effort, not perhaps so much seeking to depose God, as to become like him. Here is vaunting ambition. Jeremiah catches the nuance, 'Though Babylon should mount up to heaven and though she should fortify her strong height, yet destroyers would come from me upon her, says the Lord' (Jeremiah 51:53).

There may well be more here if we draw from our parallel passage in Genesis 28. There we read of Jacob's 'ladder' (or, as we shall see, better translated 'stairway', such as mounted the sloping side of a ziggurat) that 'its top reached to the heavens' (v12) and Jacob exclaims, 'This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven' (v17). If we take things in this sense in Genesis 11, then the Tower of Babel may well have also been conceived as a stairway that would give mankind access to the realm of the divine. The vital difference between the two incidents is that with Jacob's experience, God takes the initiative to make himself known, whereas at Babel the presumptive initiative was man's.

Then there is the crucially revealing phrase, 'and let us make for ourselves a name' (v4). Here is nothing less than a sinister assertion of proud autonomy on the part of the human family. In the O.T. it is God alone in his gracious covenantal dealings with man who makes a name for men, notably, in this context, Abram (12:2. cf. David in 2 Samuel 7:9). Here then is a blatant attempt to usurp divine prerogatives. John Calvin comments, 'This is always the way of the world, never to bother about heaven, but to look for immortality on earth where all is transitory.'<sup>2</sup>

Verse 4 ends, 'lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth'. This not only betrays their anxiety, but flies directly in the face of the divine mandate to fill the earth. There is dramatic irony here, since what mankind does his utmost to avoid, the decree of God, in punishing mankind's disobedience, will force him to fulfil.

In verses 5-8 we have the divine reaction to the human effort to assert autonomy. Verse 5 is heavy with irony. Mankind wishes to erect a tower whose top will be 'in the heavens', but in the end it is so far from the heavens that God must come down to see it! Human efforts are seen for what they are - tiny and

puny when set alongside the Creator's high omnipotence as he sits 'above the circle of the earth', viewing its inhabitants 'as grasshoppers' (Isaiah 40:22). The frailty of the builders is also emphasised here by the way they are described as 'sons of men' (v.5). For all their grand pretensions as heroic innovators in world history, they are mere earthlings.

When the Lord speaks, we see that he takes the matter very seriously. The structure of v.6, its divine sentiments, intra-divine dialogue and line of approach all reveal a striking parallel with the reaction to Adam and Eve's assertion of autonomy in Genesis 3:22. 'Since man has become like one of us...now lest he reach out...and live for ever...' is paralleled by 'Since they are one people and all have one language...now, lest nothing they plan to do be impossible to them, come, let us go down...'. Just as the eating of the tree of knowledge could have been the prelude to a disastrous eating of the tree of life before the proper time, so the arrogant building of this tower may be the sinister forerunner of yet further abrogations of divine prerogatives, which, if left unchecked, would bring disastrous consequences on the human family.

There is an interesting parallel with the phrase in v.6, 'lest nothing they plan to do will be impossible', in Job 42:2, when Job declares to the Lord, 'No purpose (plan) of yours can be thwarted'. Job has learned through hard experience that the Lord's plan or blueprint will triumph and thus the lesson is that only he, and not his creatures, may plan without limitation. Mankind is here attempting to overstep his limits and nothing will be able to thwart him unless this initial project, a threat to the divine will and rule, is halted. As Westermann says,

The simple and direct thrust of the story...is that humans were no longer satisfied with the limited state of their existence, but wanted to force their way into the realm of God...the basic motif is that of people overstepping their limits...By putting the two parallel passages 3:5...and 11:4...at the beginning and end of the primeval story the writer wants to say that human beings, left to their own resources by the creator, are in the gravest danger because of their aspiration to burst their created limits, to acknowledge no longer that they stand before God, but to be like God, or to reach to the heavens with their works.<sup>1</sup>

The divine method of thwarting mankind's activity is startling, ingenious and devastatingly effective. God does away with the ability to communicate by erecting the barrier of language. Without mutual communication through a common language it is impossible for people to cooperate commercially or socially. No longer will they be 'one people'. The choice of this term, with its emphasis on unity due to kinship ties (cf. 14:16; 23:7,11-13), is set in deliberate contrast with the term 'nation' which predominates in the Table of Nations in the chronologically subsequent chapter 10, and which has a connotation of plurality and division, politically, geographically and linguistically.

Verse 8 shows the results of the divine resolve. Mankind's great fear, dispersal, is now realized. There is more than punishment here, however, for this action also serves to fulfil by divine initiative the divine mandate that mankind disperse and fill the earth. Only thus will the diverse groups realize their true potential and only through submission to the sovereign God will they attain the security they crave and which their first parents enjoyed in the garden.

In verse 9 we reach the conclusion to which the whole narrative has been drawing us, an explanation of the word 'Babel', as the author connects it to the Lord's confusion (*balal*) of the language. Interestingly the oldest attested extra-biblical name for the city of Babylon was *babili* (*gate of the god(s)*). The author has the Lord say, with biting sarcasm, that in reality, it means what it sounds like - a place of confusion that is under his sovereign judgment because of its intolerable rebellious hubris and assertion of autonomy. The sarcasm bites at mankind's deluded aim of obtaining 'a name'. Intended as a monument to united human effort the city served rather as an unfinished monument to human impotence and shame, a reminder of the babble that arose when divine judgment fell on mankind's disobedience, folly and futile revolt against his sovereign creator and lawgiver. The multiplicity of man's languages and his dispersal across the face of the earth together serve as reminders of judgment and the futility of his attempting to set himself against his creator.

A question remains - Is there any hope? Will there be submission to the sovereign law of the Creator? Will the scattered nations, divided in judgment, submit to his rule? The answer is found immediately. Out of the babble of confusion Eber, from the line of Shem, his son symbolically named as a reminder of judgment (10:25) 'crosses over' to the south of Shinar and locates his family there at Ur. It is out of here that God will call Abram, Eber's descendent, in and through whom he will begin his work of bringing all the scattered nations under the blessing of his rule, as the antithesis of all that Babel stood for (12:1-3).

### **Jacob at Bethel**

This brings us now to Jacob in Genesis 28:10-22. Here he is on his journey not only to escape Esau's vengeance, but also to seek a wife from within the wider family called out of Babylonia, in line with his father Isaac's experience. It is at this time that he will have his first significant encounter with God at Bethel, an experience that is not only set over against the Tower of Babel incident as its background and counterpart, but directly parallels it and shows us the answer to the dilemma it represented.

As we compare and contrast the two incidents we find numerous points of comparison:



**First** of all we find that both places became important religious centres for significant representative men on an eastward journey. We have already spoken of the symbolic significance of movement to the east in Genesis. Moreover, in the very names of the two places are we not meant to notice an immediate linguistic contrast, each being three-consonant words opening and closing with the same consonants - Babel and Bethel?

**Secondly** we have the stones of Bethel compared with the man-made bricks of Babel. One of these unhewn stones will serve as a sufficient altar to the Lord, just as in the future Israel's altars will be of unhewn stone, undressed by human ingenuity. (In fact it appears that in the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish* there was a year-long brick ritual before the Babylonian god Marduk's abode could be built.)

**Thirdly** we may compare the 'tower' of 11:4 with the 'stairway' of 28:12. The Hebrew word for the latter (*sullam*) is a *hapax legomenon* which has been connected to the root meaning 'to heap up, as in a siege-ramp'. Indeed the related noun means 'a siege-ramp'. This would suggest something akin to the 'mound' thrown up against a walled city, which slopes up the sides of its hill and defensive wall, (as, for example, in 2 Samuel 20:15). However, decisive in our view for the interpreting of the word's meaning, is the fact that the Akkadian cognate word *simmiltu* refers to the 'stairway of heaven' that extends between heaven and the netherworld in the Mesopotamian temple towers, up and down which messengers from the gods ascend and descend. A R Millard has pointed out, for example, how in the myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal communication between heaven and the netherworld takes place by means of 'the long stairway (*simmiltu*) of heaven' that leads to the gate of the gods.<sup>4</sup> This would lead us to conclude (in line with the position of Speiser<sup>5</sup> and Youngblood<sup>6</sup>) that the image in Jacob's dream resembled the sloping stepped side of the Mesopotamian temple tower (or ziggurat), with its long staircase to the temple top.

Victor P Hamilton is reluctant to allow the parallel between the stairways of the ziggurats in Mesopotamia and the stairway in Jacob's dream. He states,

H Hoffner has pointed out that the parallel is not without its difficulties, for while priests use ziggurat stairways for climbing to the summit of the temple tower for worship, the deities did not use the stairways for descent to the ground level (as in the Jacob story).<sup>7</sup>

This objection is easily answered, however, for in the Jacob story it is not the deity who uses the stairway, but his messengers (significantly, the Lord stands above the stairway). The fact that a word used in ziggurat settings to speak of the way by which communication between heaven and earth is



effected is the cognate to the Hebrew word used here is surely significant, especially when we consider that the Tower of Babel may have been the original ziggurat. Here is a place where heaven really touches earth, where there is access to God.

This leads to the **fourth** point of comparison. Whereas the builders of Babel planned a tower 'with its top in the heavens' (11:4), the top of the stairway in Jacob's dream actually 'reached to the heavens' (28:12). More than this Jacob states, 'This is the gate of heaven' (28:17b), the place where communication between heaven and earth takes place. As has been mentioned the oldest attested extrabiblical name for Babylon meant, 'gate of god', a name reflected in later Babylonian *babili(m)*, 'gate of god(s)'. Against this the voice of Jacob is heard to speak in firm polemical tones, 'This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven'.

**Fifthly**, while the builders of Babel failed miserably in their ambitious and arrogant goal, in that God had to, 'come down to see the tower which the sons of men had built' (11:5), in Jacob's vision 'the angels of God were ascending and descending' the staircase. This speaks of communion between heaven and earth, of God in communion and fellowship with his chosen people, of needs and prayers being brought to God and his blessing descending in answer. Already Genesis has shown that the role of angels is to guard for God (3:24) and to communicate God's will (18:2; 19:1).

**Sixthly** whereas the expressed desire of the builders of Babel was to 'make a name' for themselves, we see that in Jacob's vision, at the top of the staircase stood the one who is named as the great 'I Am', who speaks to cause things to be, who alone has the prerogative to make a person's name great (12:2) and who makes it great only through his blessing.

**Seventhly** we see that the builders of Babel acted out of a fear of being 'scattered over the face of the whole earth' (11:4), something which their very rebellious actions brought about as they were scattered in judgment (11:9b). Jacob, however, hears the very counterpart of this with God's promise that, instead of being scattered in judgment, his descendents 'will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south', bringing blessing (28:14a). Whereas the builders of Babel inherited only the curse of God, Jacob is now promised that he and his descendents will indeed inherit the blessing promised to the one chosen out of the chaos of Babel's scattering, Jacob's own grandfather, Abraham. Jacob's descendents will be given the land on which Jacob lies so that 'all peoples on earth will be blessed' through him and his offspring (28:14b).

**Eighthly** whereas Babel was to become a ridiculed place of confusion where God was present in judgment (11:7), Jacob acknowledges that the place where he has had his vision is 'awesome...surely the Lord is in this place' (28:16-17).

**Finally** whereas for the builders of Babel there was only a sequel of scattering in confusion, a being driven away from the Lord's presence (11:6-8, which deliberately echoes the being driven away from the Garden in 3:22-24), for Jacob there follows reverent worship. There is an immediate contrast between the elaborate man-made structure of the Tower of Babel and the single, undressed stone pillar used as an altar for worship at Bethel. Jacob is spiritually aligned with Abraham, in that, at this very spot where Abraham had built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord (12:8), here he does the same. In his emulating Abraham, we see that he ends by pledging a tithe to God (14:20-22; cf.28:22).

Thus in seeing these significant points of contrast, we may conclude that the full significance of Jacob's experience at Bethel is more clearly seen against the background of what happened at Babel. The latter incident is the counterpart to the former, showing us the answer to the dilemma the former presents. The only answer to the curse on mankind's assertion of proud autonomy, which results in the splintering and division of the human family, is the carrying forward and unfolding of the gracious covenant of redemption in which people from every tribe and nation are brought together in the promised 'seed of the woman' and united in the family of the Lord. In John 1:51 we hear Christ himself telling Nathaniel that in the future he will 'see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'. Thus he claims to be the staircase that links heaven and earth, the one who will finally undo the curse that fell upon mankind at Babel.

## NOTES

1. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1984) , p.456.
2. John Calvin, *Genesis* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), p.128.
3. Westermann , op cit., pp. 152-4.
4. A R Millard, 'The Celestial Ladder and the Gate of Heaven (Gen.28:12, 17)' in *Expository Times* 78 (1966-67), pp.86-7.
5. E A Speiser, *Genesis, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co, 1964), p.218-9.
6. R F Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), p.218.
7. Victor P Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50, New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1991), p.240.

# THE MEANING OF 'ALL ISRAEL' IN ROMANS CHAPTER 11

**David Sutherland**

*David Sutherland is minister of Ballyclare Reformed Presbyterian Church*

The Christian Church has persistently retained an interest in the Jews. In the last half-century this interest has been fuelled by a number of factors. The establishment of the state of Israel on 14 May, 1948, and the return of many Jews to that country was the cue for a profusion of books, articles and studies on the Jewish people. The dominance of pre-millennialism in Christian eschatology throughout the period kept the subject of the Jews to the fore. A third component was the very public and sustained commitment of the world's super power to the state of Israel over recent decades. These influences linger with us to ensure that the topic of the Jews remains alive.

Three Reformed thinkers wrote books within the context of each of these influences throughout this period. In 1968 William Hendriksen published *Israel in Prophecy* to counter the widespread belief that 'the recent return of many Jews to Palestine and their establishment as an independent state...is a fulfilment of prophecy'.<sup>1</sup> In 1971 Iain Murray produced *The Puritan Hope - A study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy*. One reason he gave for the lack of interest in Puritan eschatology was the prevalence of pre-millennialism in English-speaking Protestantism for the last hundred years. Murray opposed that view in his book. In 2000 O. Palmer Robertson wrote *The Israel of God - Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. His volume was formed in the awareness of the closing words of a speech delivered by President Bill Clinton before the Israeli Knesset assembled in Jerusalem in October 27, 1994: 'Your journey is our journey, and America will stand with you now and always'.<sup>2</sup>

Romans chapter 11 formed a common meeting-point for these authors as they determined their Israelology. Each writer engaged in detailed exegesis of v25 and v26 and in particular the words 'and so all Israel shall be saved'. One chapter is devoted to a discussion of that phrase in each of their books. The attempts by scholars to interpret the statement generated a plethora of opinions. The avalanche of attention given to a handful of words indicates the importance of the phrase. The interpretation of this statement and the encompassing chapter has moulded the eschatology and missiology of the Church throughout the centuries. Indeed some government policies have been forged on the anvil of this text.

Hendriksen, Murray and Robertson arrive at three different meanings of the phrase, and their diverse conclusions may be taken as representative of the main interpretations of this part of Scripture. In this study the view of each author is stated and weighed.

## VIEW I THE CHURCH

O. Palmer Robertson stated his understanding of the term 'all Israel' as 'the full number that are the product of God's electing grace, coming from both the Jewish and Gentile communities'.<sup>3</sup> Robertson indicated that he transferred to that position from the view of 'all Israel' as meaning 'all elect Jews'. In adopting that opinion he was identifying himself with John Calvin's comments on the term:

Many understand this of the Jewish people, as though Paul had said that religion would again be restored among them as before; but I extend the word Israel to all the people of God, according to this meaning, 'When the Gentiles shall come in, the Jews also shall return from their defection to the obedience of faith; and thus shall be completed the salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be gathered from both.'

In support of his position Robertson marshalled the following arguments:

*The wider context of the chapter places an emphasis on God's present dealings with Israel rather than on any future prospects for the nation.* Such an emphasis on the immediate programme for Israel he believed had been largely ignored in the interpretation of the chapter. Paul's observations about his current apostolic ministry to the Gentiles in v13 and v14 concerned the present. The 'receiving' of Israel v15 Robertson argued was something that was being fulfilled in the present era of gospel proclamation and should not be consigned to a future time. He judged that the weight of textual evidence supported a third 'now' in v30 v31, which underpinned his contention that the words 'shall be saved' must not be relegated to a momentary end-of-time mass conversion of Jews but had current fulfilment.

*A parallel use of the term 'Israel' in the apostle's writings.* Robertson appealed to Galatians 6:16 as an example of 'Israel' being used in the sense of the Church. He commented on that verse; 'Here Paul clearly uses the term 'Israel' to refer to elect Jews and elect Gentiles as together constituting the Israel of God'.<sup>5</sup> That, he insisted, was the apostle's 'rule' for life; that no distinction be made between circumcised and uncircumcised people with respect to their possession of the blessings of redemption.

*The 'mystery' referred to in v25.* Robertson again cited a parallel in the

Pauline corpus which he maintained interpreted the 'mystery' in this verse. He quoted Ephesians 3:6 and drew attention to Paul's explanation of the mystery as God incorporating Gentile believers fully into Israel. Hence the mystery of 'all Israel' is not the salvation of Jews only but of Gentiles also.

*The significance of the phrase 'has come in' v25.* That was what Robertson called his 'key evidence'. He enquired, 'but into what do the full number of elect Gentiles come? The answer is unavoidable. Believing Gentiles come *into Israel!*...In other words they have become Israelites'.<sup>6</sup> He regarded this assertion as the clue to understanding 'all Israel'. The Gentiles have become additional branches, joined to the single stock that is none other than Israel. He noted parallels to that phrase situated in close proximity to it, principally v17 and v24.

Robertson confessed the turmoil he passed through in shifting to this opinion. He judged that both views fitted into the context of Paul's argument throughout Romans chapter 11, and both supported a valid theological point. 'However, further consideration leads to the conclusion that "all Israel" consists not of all elect Jews, but of all the elect of God whether of Jewish or Gentile origin'.<sup>7</sup>

### **Evaluation of View I**

The advantage of this interpretation of 'all Israel' is that it supports the emphasis given to the equality of believers in the New Testament Church whether Jew or Gentile. The truth that elect Jews and Gentiles constitute the 'Israel of God' was a point that was emphasised in the chapter on the metaphor of the olive plant.

However difficulties remain with this opinion:

1. The phrase 'has come in' (v25) is not the major subject of the context as Robertson concluded. It is a subordinate thought, giving the time-frame for the partial hardening of the Jews, rather than detailing the conversion of the Gentiles. It is the Jews who have been the dominant theme from v23. Robertson's view disturbs the flow of the argument by raising what is, in this place, a minor theme to a major platform.

2. Understanding 'all Israel' as the Church on this occasion is not in accord with the use of 'Israel' in the context. A strong case can be made for 'Israel' meaning the Church in Galatians, to which both Calvin and Robertson appealed. But here there are contextual considerations that militate against

such an interpretation. In the verses immediately preceding and subsequent to v26 Paul is clearly discussing the Jews. So it is jarring to claim that 'all Israel' means the Church. In chapters 9-11 the term 'Israel' occurs eleven times. In the preceding ten cases it refers to Jews in contrast with Gentiles, giving an indication that 'Israel' is to be understood in that way here. Hence View I makes Paul's reasoning in this place cacophonous.

3. There is more than one 'mystery' revealed in the New Testament. There need therefore be no obligation to equate the mystery of Romans chapter 11 with the mystery of Ephesians chapter.3, as this writer did. Ironically Robertson offered an appealing definition of the 'mystery':

It would be understandable if all Jews were lost, since Israel as a nation rejected Christ. On the other hand, it might be understandable if all Jews were saved in light of God's covenant promises to the fathers. But the fact that some Jews are lost and others are saved remains a mystery of God's grace. No one can fully understand this mystery.<sup>8</sup>

However he went on to claim that such a definition was a partial understanding of the mystery, the other part being the calling of the Gentiles.

The reader of Robertson's view comes away impressed by his reasoning and exegetical abilities, but wondering if he has tried to squeeze the interpretation of v26 into the overall thesis of his book; that the New Testament Church is the Israel of God.

## **VIEW II ETHNIC ISRAEL**

Iain Murray believed that in v25 and v26

Paul is speaking of the realisation in future history of what the predictions of the earlier verses point towards, namely the termination of the long period of Israel's blindness, and the resulting salvation of a large mass of that people. The 'all Israel' is not the believing remnant of all the centuries but the body of the Jews received again at a particular period in history. The mystery of which Paul would not have them ignorant is, in Parr's words 'that when the fullness of the Gentiles is come in, there shall be a famous, notorious, universal calling of Jews'.<sup>9</sup>

Murray did not believe that every Israelite alive at that time would be saved, but that a preponderance of Jews would be converted; 'the number to be ingathered will be of an extent which justifies the expression 'all Israel shall be saved''.<sup>10</sup> Murray rejected the sentiment that the future mass conversion of Jews would happen at the very end of history. He disputed that the phrase 'till the fullness of the Gentiles be come in' or the statement 'life from the dead'



necessitated such a view. Murray envisaged a mass conversion among the Gentiles denoted by the words 'the fullness of the Gentiles' to be succeeded by the ingathering of the Jews 'all Israel shall be saved' and followed by further blessing for the Gentiles v12 'how much more'.

Murray rooted his interpretation of the phrase 'all Israel' in a consideration of the whole chapter. He focused principally on v12 and v15 reasoning that 'the parallel drawn between the 'casting away' and 'the receiving of them' required the subject to be the same in both instances. The people who were rejected are to be readmitted'.<sup>11</sup> In shoring up his position he quoted from Elnathan Parr, 'if the casting away of them; of whom? Of the nation, say learned men; what shall the 'receiving of them?' of whom? Of them which are cast away: that is the nation'.<sup>12</sup> Murray concluded that v12 and v15 pointed to 'a vast addition to the church by Israel's conversion with resulting wider blessing for the world. There is a great revival predicted here!'<sup>13</sup>

Murray descried further evidence for his opinion in the quotations made by Paul from the Old Testament in v26b and v27. He deemed the fulfilment of those prophecies in the apostolic age as 'only initial and by no means exhaustive...A larger fulfilment still awaits the church'.<sup>14</sup>

He remarked without expansion that there were 'three further reasons' which should lead us to expect the conversion of the Jews on a large scale:

because of the holiness of the first-fruits and the root v16; because of the power of God, ...v23; and because of the grace of God manifested to the Gentiles, v24, who would in turn be the means of salvation to the Jews v31.<sup>15</sup>

Murray rejected the view that 'all Israel' meant the Church, dubbing the change in meaning from literal Israel in v25 to spiritual Israel in v26 a 'violent transition'. Nor could he accept that the 'mystery' Paul was declaring was simply the salvation of the elect because that tenet was never in any doubt. But of the calling of the Jews there was a doubt.

Murray was also conversant with Hendriksen's opinion and quoted from him. While Hendriksen's position was prevalent in the early 17th century 'it was almost uniformly rejected by English and Scottish exegetes of the Puritan school'<sup>16</sup>, and Murray likewise rejected it.

## **Evaluation of View II**

This second view is the most popular view of the three. Some A-Millennialists, and all Pre- and Post-Millennialists have been partisans of this view; hence it carries the appeal of a vast adherence. The sympathy given to this position by the Puritans has attracted some. The hope held out by it in a post-Christian era has enticed others. The exegetical strength of the view in its

interpretation of v12 and v15 and in the consistent use of the term 'Israel' has won many.

However some difficulties survive Murray's explanation:

1. The first criticism of Murray's position must be that he based a lot on very little evidence. He admitted that Romans chapter 11 was the chief authority in the New Testament on Israel's future. He mentioned Matthew 23:38,39, 21:9, II Corinthians 3:15,16, Revelation 16:12 as verses appealed to in support of his view, but conceded 'that in the case of each a considerable amount of obscurity remains'.<sup>17</sup> However, Murray perceived Romans 11 to be different. He believed that the truth of a future conversion of Israel was palpably taught there. He quoted approvingly from James Durham's writings regarding Israel: 'the whole body of them shall be brought, in a common way with the Gentiles, to profess Christ which cannot be denied, as Romans 11 is clear and that will be enough to satisfy us'.<sup>18</sup> Also from Jonathan Edwards, 'nothing is more certainly foretold than this national conversion of the Jews in Romans 11'.<sup>19</sup> Murray entitled the chapter in which he analysed Romans 11 'The basis of the hope'. But surely the presence of three compelling interpretations on this chapter indicates a lack of clarity in the verses. It appears he founded much of his argument on very little evidence.

2. One observation on the chapter lending support to the above assessment is the denial that the apostle anywhere stated that the Jews would be converted as a nation in the future. After exegesis of v12 and v15 Murray wrote, 'there is a great revival predicted here!'<sup>20</sup> An immediate response to that claim is 'Where exactly?' In any statement Paul made about the future conversion of the Jews in vv11-32 there was always an 'if' included, or a question mark. The apostle hoped and longed for blessing on the Jews, but nowhere did he definitively state that it would come. In v23 he asserted that 'God is able', but he did not predict that God would perform such a feat. A note of uncertainty pervades the whole section. Can we be so sure where the apostle was unsure?

3. Upon coming to a detailed analysis of the exegesis of particular terms and phrases we find further concerns. In his discussion on the meaning of 'fulness' in v12 and v25 Murray understood the phrase to mean mass conversion, rather than total number of elect. Although he chose one view, he recognised the other in v25. Murray understood the word 'until' (v25) as determining the state of affairs after the termination of the partial blindness of Israel. But Robertson has argued convincingly that 'until' is essentially terminative in character: 'the phrase carries actions or conditions to the ultimate point in time, without stressing the reversal of prevailing circumstances

afterwards'.<sup>21</sup> Murray appeared to have understood the words 'and so' in v26 in the sense of 'and then', something which Hendriksen and Robertson ably contested, insisting that the phrase can only refer to the manner and not the time of God's dealings with Israel. Murray reasoned for a continuity of meaning to the term 'Israel' from v25 into v26 even though Paul used that same term with two different meanings in chapter 9:6. It can be argued that much of the exegesis of this section, which is the basis of Murray's view, is inconclusive.

4. Again, the 'three further reasons' Murray cited for the expectation of the future conversion of the Jews, cannot be regarded as clinching. There are many works in Scripture it is said God 'is able to do' but does not perform. God is able to save a preponderance of Jews but that does not mean that He will. Verse 31 need not have, in fact probably does not have, any reference to a future conversion of Israel. Indeed the words in v31 arguably should be translated as in the NIV 'that they too may now receive mercy'.

5. In connection with the prophecy in v26 and v27 Murray admitted a New Testament fulfilment, albeit a partial one. One is forced to ask why only partial? From where does he conceive a future dimension to this prophecy? He commented on v27 and its fulfilment in Hebrews 8:8 'there is nothing to prevent what has already been referred to New Testament converts being applied to the future conversion of Israel'.<sup>22</sup> In stating this Murray was taking two different leaps; one from the Jews to the Gentiles, warranted by the New Testament (see Hebrews 8:8); the other from the Jews to a future mass conversion of the Jews not indicated here.

6. Murray greatly reduced the significance of the word 'fulness' in his exposition. In his view the great ingathering of Gentiles 'the fulness' which triggers the salvation of 'all Israel', will be followed by an even greater ingathering of Gentiles, meaning that the 'fulness of the Gentiles' is not very full. He quoted John Murray in support 'the fulness of the Gentiles denotes unprecedented blessing for them but does not exclude even greater blessing to follow'.<sup>23</sup> This appears to be a forced exegetical construction to conform to their post-millennial sympathies. The same criticism could be used on his interpretation of the word 'all', v26. 'All Israel' but in Murray's view not quite 'all'. Does 'all' only mean the last generation of Israelites? That will be but a fragment of the total number of Jews who have lived on this earth. Can such a fragment properly be called 'all Israel'? It is surely difficult to accept that.

Murray's view is extremely inviting at many points and has appealed to many Reformed thinkers. Nonetheless it draws a number of serious criticisms.

### VIEW III ELECT JEWES

William Hendriksen believed that Calvin's interpretation of 'all Israel' was partly right: 'He was right in giving a spiritual connotation to the term'.<sup>24</sup> He also believed that Murray's position was accurate insofar as it declared the term to refer to Jews and not to Gentiles. In Hendriksen's opinion the phrase 'all Israel shall be saved' referred 'to the full number of elect Jews whom it pleases God to bring into the kingdom throughout the ages until the very day when also the full number of Gentiles shall have been brought in'.<sup>25</sup>

After collating the interpretations of the expressions 'the Israel of God' and 'all Israel', Hendriksen rebuffed the belief that 'Israel' referred to the same group in both instances. He concluded that 'when Calvin assigns the meaning 'church' to 'all Israel' this is probably incorrect'<sup>26</sup> on the basis that the use of the term 'Israel' throughout chapters 9-11 related invariably to Jews as distinct from Gentiles. He discerned no compelling reason to broaden the term to include Gentile believers.

Hendriksen also dismissed Murray's interpretation of the phrase 'all Israel'. He did so on the following grounds;

➤ Paul dismissed the idea of any future conversion of the Jews by teaching in I Thessalonians 2:15,16 that Israel is under God's wrath 'to the uttermost'.

➤ Paul clearly taught that special privileges for any definite national or racial group have ceased during the new dispensation Romans 10:12,13.

➤ It is not imperative for 'Israel' to carry the same sense in v25 and v26. In 9:6 Paul used 'Israel' in two different senses.

➤ 'And so' does not mean 'and then'. It was the manner not the time of 'all Israel' being saved that Paul was considering.

➤ The mass conversion of the Jews was associated generally in this view with Christ's second coming. But the Old Testament prophecy, quoted in v26, connected the salvation of 'all Israel' with Christ's first coming. That was principally evident in the words 'out of Zion'.

➤ Hendriksen concluded that if Paul was here predicting a future ingathering of Jews,

then he is overthrowing the entire carefully built-up argument of chapters 9-11: for the *one* important point which he is trying to establish constantly is exactly this, that God's promises attain fulfilment not in the nation as such, but in the remnant according to the election of grace.<sup>27</sup>

Hendriksen then continued to present four succinct arguments in favour of his position that the phrase 'all Israel' meant the sum of all the remnants in the Jewish nation:

*That position was in harmony with the whole argument of chapters 9-11.* Paul's argument throughout was that God had not entirely rejected his covenant people Israel. That was evidenced by the salvation of elect Jews in the Old and New Testament eras.

*That view was concordant with the main theme in chapters 9-11.* Paul had been discussing the question of 'the remnant' calling them variously; 'Israel, children of promise, a seed, election of grace, grafted in again'. Understanding the apostle in v26 to mean elect Jews throughout the centuries was native to the context. Hendriksen observed that 'his remnant doctrine is therefore by no means a novelty'.<sup>28</sup>

*That opinion did justice to the word 'all'.* That 'all', Hendriksen affirmed, clearly indicated:

*'the total number' of elect Jews, without a single exception: all the elect. In Elijah's day there was a remnant. In Paul's day there was a remnant. In the years to come there would be a remnant. These remnants of all the ages taken together, constitute 'all Israel'*<sup>29</sup>

That expression provided the counterpart to the adjacent phrase 'the fulness of the Gentiles' which denoted the full number of elect Gentiles.

*That interpretation gave accurate meaning to the word 'so'.* Hendriksen argued that 'so' referred to the manner rather than the time of God's dealings with Israel:

*in every age until the last elect Gentile is saved there will also be Jews who, by sovereign grace, accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour 'and so all Israel shall be saved'. 'So', i.e. by the abiding grace and mercy of God who, though, in punishment for sin, he hardens, does not harden all: 'so', hence, through faith.*<sup>30</sup>

That was the mystery God revealed to Paul.

### **Evaluation of View III**

There are many commendable aspects of this position. The view seems to exegete 'until' and 'so' in the proper way. It appears to fit naturally into the context of chapters 9-11 and does not suddenly thrust upon the reader a fresh idea. The opinion is also in harmony with apostolic eschatology throughout the New Testament and can even claim a parallel usage of the phrase 'all Israel' in Pauline literature.

The strongest challenge to this view is in quadrating the interpretation of



'all Israel' with the assertions of v12 and v15. Hendriksen did not attempt a harmonisation in his book but he ventured one in his commentary on Romans. He remarked on the words of v12 'how much more their fulness':

the salvation of the full number of Israelites who had been predestined to be saved 9v6 – hence, not just the salvation of a remnant at any one particular time (11v5) – would progressively bring an abundance of blessings to the entire world. Think of such blessings as spiritual unity and fellowship Ephesians 2v14, 18, co-operation in providing aid to the sick and needy, and presenting a strong united evangelical testimony to the world.<sup>31</sup>

Hendriksen illustrated the term 'life from the dead' (v15) from the conversion of the apostle Paul, likening him to one that was dead but made alive at his conversion. Robertson similarly explained those crucial phrases, emphasising the present aspect of the 'receiving of them' from the details of Paul's ministry in v14. But does this exegesis fully explain the statements? It is more in keeping with the temporal sequence asserted in those verses to understand 'life from the dead' as a reference to blessings on the Gentiles rather than to a change in the Jews. Hendriksen's change of subject in v12 and v15 from the nation of Israel to the elect Jews seems to be a forced interpretation. In neither his commentary nor his book on Israel did he address this point.

Another objection to this view is the unnatural change of meaning for 'Israel' from v25 to v26. Hendriksen's rejoinder was an appeal to 9:6 where the very term 'all Israel' was used in the exact sense in which he understood it here, and therefore insisted that he had contextual warrant for his position. This phrase stands like two bookends in this section on the Jews, one introducing and the other concluding the theme of 'the remnant' in Israel. Hence v26 reaches back over chapters 11, 10 and 9, to v6 of chapter 9 summarising the apostle's argument 'and in this manner the remnant shall be saved'.

Many writers insist that the prophecies of v26 and v27 indicate a future mass conversion of the Jews. Hendriksen repelled such an idea and contended that the prophecies predicted that Christ's human nature would come 'out of Zion', probably a reference to Israel as the people of God, to minister, as 15:8 stated, to Israel. Had the prophecy been intended as a reference to Christ's second coming he believed it would have read 'out of Heaven', but 'out of Zion' is an announcement of His first advent. Verse 27 referred to the New Covenant with the house of Israel and Judah. Hendriksen saw in that prophecy a very clear reference to elect Jews saved by Christ. Hendriksen's arguments are strong here. A future dimension to the prophecies of the conversion of the Jews seems to have no support from this quotation.

The phrase 'wrath...to the uttermost' in I Thessalonians 2:16 has challenged commentators as they try to reconcile the pronouncement of judgement with what they understand to be the promise of future blessing in



Romans 11. Many theories have been postulated, including the suggestion that Paul changed his mind on the future prospects of the Jews in the seven years between writing the two letters. Hendriksen's interpretation in which he ruled out any mass ingathering of Israel at any future time, because God's wrath was on them 'to the end', is appealing, in that it reconciles these two apostolic passages.

## Conclusion

There are exegetical and eschatological difficulties attached to all three interpretations of the term 'all Israel'. As the study of this term has indicated, the interpretation of the phrase is closely associated with the topic of the future prospects of the Jewish people and so greatly increases the complexities. These problems make it hard for us to adopt any view indubitably. A current theologian reflected this mood when he wrote,

it is possible that I am wrong in my view of Romans 9-11. After all, the church has often been wrong in its interpretation of prophecy and I know that I must hold this view of Romans 9-11 with a loose grip. I can't assert it dogmatically, because only the fulfilment can really interpret the prophecy.

An adherence to View I does not preclude the belief in a future mass conversion among the Jews, as Calvin in his comments indicated. Nor does an adherence to View III rule out a future ingathering of Israel, as the writings of Lloyd-Jones and AA Hoekema have shown. It is only that neither view believed that this tenet was taught in the words 'and so all Israel shall be saved'. Perhaps on balance the third interpretation of 'all Israel' leaves us with the fewest knotty issues to reconcile.

Perhaps, however, there is no compulsion to choose between believing that there will be a large ingathering of Jews in the future and not believing this. Did the apostle himself not supply us with the key to the future of Israel in this passage? What was his attitude towards the spiritual prospects of his own people? It has been argued above that he was optimistic about a great revival in the nation but not certain. He prayed for such an awakening; he preached for such a conversion; he longed for a mass ingathering of his fellow Jews; he believed God was able to perform it, but he never stated that it would happen. Throughout his statements in chapter 11 there was always an 'if' (v23) a 'might' (v14) or a question mark (v15). Shackled to his optimism we detect a distinct strain of uncertainty.

Adopting such a perspective we will pray for the Jews, encourage missionary work to the Jews – even go ourselves – and yearn for a mass ingathering of Israel. Perhaps that is the apostolic way to follow. That view would retain Romans chapter 11 in line with all the apostolic eschatological

passages. It would prevent this chapter from being forced out on a limb in its teaching on Israel. This view would ensure that we retain a vision for what God can do, but has not clearly promised to deliver.

### Notes

- 1 William Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), p.16
- 2 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2000, p.1
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.188
- 4 Hendriksen, *op.cit.*, p.37
- 5 Robertson, *op.cit.*, p.189
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.188
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.187
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.188
- 9 Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), p.68
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.68
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.66
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.66
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.66
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.74
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.68
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.64
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.61
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.61
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.61
- 20 *Ibid.*, p.66
- 21 Robertson, *op.cit.*, p.179
- 22 Murray, *op.cit.*, p.74
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.69
- 24 Hendriksen, *op.cit.*, p.49
- 25 *Ibid.*, p.49
- 26 *Ibid.*, p.42
- 27 *Ibid.*, p.49
- 28 *Ibid.*, p.50
- 29 *Ibid.*, p.50,51
- 30 *Ibid.*, p.51
- 31 William Hendriksen, *Romans* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), p.367

# THE PASTORAL VALUE OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

**Andrew Stewart**

*Andrew Stewart is minister of Geelong Reformed Presbyterian Church, Victoria, Australia.*

Along with the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments have long been considered a basic tool for teaching the Christian faith. They have shaped the Church's confessions and pastoral practice. The Apostles' Creed is a summary of basic doctrine; the Lord's Prayer is an example of Christian devotion and the Ten Commandments highlight our duty before God. All three are pastoral in their nature and usage and their respective emphases are essential components in pastoral ministry.

It probably has to be admitted that the least popular of these three documents is the Ten Commandments, for fallen man imagines himself to be autonomous and resents the limitations upon his freedom which are inherent in the law of God. This sentiment is as old as sin itself and finds expression in the serpent's words to Eve in Genesis 3:4-5, 'You will not surely die...for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' This God-like knowledge appeals to those who want to devise their own ethical standards without relation to God. In modern times Bishop John Shelby Spong has described the idea of a divinely ordained code of ethics, binding upon all mankind in all ages, as 'outmoded'. Basic questions are being asked about the authority and pastoral usefulness of the Ten Commandments.

## **The Early Church**

This stands in marked contrast to the historic teaching of the Christian Church. As early as the late first century *The Didache (or The Teaching of the Apostles)* bears testimony to the use of the Decalogue in training converts to the faith. Its opening words present the student with two ways of life in words which are reminiscent of our Lord's summary of the Decalogue in Matthew 22:37-39:

There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways. The way of life is this. First of all, thou shalt love the God that made thee; secondly, thy neighbour as thyself.<sup>1</sup>

*The Didache* then explains the second heading by giving a homiletic rendition of the second table of the Decalogue – expanding where further application is deemed necessary:

And this is the second commandment of the teaching. Thou shalt do no murder, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not corrupt boys, thou shalt not commit fornication, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not deal in magic, thou shalt do no sorcery, thou shalt not murder a child by abortion nor kill them when born, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's goods, thou shalt not perjure thyself, thou shalt not bear false witness, thou shalt not speak evil, thou shalt not cherish a grudge, thou shalt not be double-minded nor double-tongued; for the double tongue is a snare of death.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the third century Tertullian articulated the view, which has been widely taught ever since, that 'the divine precepts were engraven on the hearts of men even before being written on tablets of stone.'<sup>3</sup> In consequence the Ten Commandments are of universal authority and timeless value. Augustine shared this view and gave the teaching of the Decalogue a prominent place in combating the moral teachings of the Manicheans (to which he had been attracted as a young man) who claim that the Decalogue was the work of an evil principle and advocated strict adherence to an alternative 'simple morality' known by Gnostic means.<sup>4</sup>

The evangelical significance of the Decalogue was not absent from the preaching and pastoral ministry of the Church Fathers. Clement of Alexandria (c.195 AD) writes:

We have the Decalogue given by Moses, which, indicating by an elementary principle, simple and *of one kind*,<sup>5</sup> defines the designation of sins in a way conducive to salvation: 'Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not worship idols. Thou shalt not corrupt boys. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Honour thy father and thy mother. And so forth. These things are to be observed, and whatever else is commanded in reading the Bible.'<sup>6</sup>

That this was not a call to earn salvation by good works, but a call to the sinner to acknowledge his sin and seek mercy, is seen by what follows, 'And He enjoins on us by Isaiah, "Wash you and make you clean."'

### **The influence of Reformation Theology**

The pastoral value of the Ten Commandments gained particular recognition during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. As well as emphasising the abiding authority of the Ten Commandments the Reformers sought to define how they were to be used effectively as a tool in pastoral ministry.

After many centuries during which the doctrines of salvation by grace and justification by faith had been obscured by the Roman Catholic doctrines of good works and human merit, the proper use of God's law became the subject of intense theological debate. The distinction between law and gospel was blurred during the Middle Ages and obedience to God's law was regarded as an essential contribution to the sinner's reconciliation with God. In contrast Martin Luther emphasised the abiding importance of both law and gospel, yet clearly distinguished their roles. The distinction between law and gospel became one of the key themes of Luther's theology.

The theologians of the Reformation summarised the abiding relevance of God's law (summarised in the Ten Commandments) under three headings or uses. Firstly, to regulate the conduct of civil society, thereby promoting righteousness and discouraging evil. Secondly, to convict the sinner of his guilt before God and to drive him into the arms of a merciful Saviour. Thirdly, to guide the believer's gratitude, directing his progress in sanctification which follows justification by grace through faith.

This appreciation of the role of God's law finds expression in the confessional statements of the Reformation. The Augsburg Confession of 1530<sup>7</sup> defends the Protestant Churches against the charge that they did not teach God's law and devalued good works:

Our teachers have been falsely accused of forbidding good works. Their writings on the Ten Commandments, and other writings as well, show that they have given good and profitable accounts and instructions concerning true Christian estates and works... We begin by teaching that our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace for us, for this happens only through faith... Consequently this teaching concerning faith is not to be accused of forbidding good works but is rather to be praised for teaching that good works are to be done and for offering *help as to how they may be done.*<sup>8</sup>

This last phrase reveals the pastoral thrust of Reformation theology – God's people needed help to do good works and that help was given through preaching the Ten Commandments.

Under the leadership of John Calvin the newly reformed churches in the Swiss city of Geneva articulated a similar evaluation of God's law in the Genevan Confession of 1536.

Because there is only one Lord and Master who has dominion over our consciences, and because his will is the only principle of all justice, we confess all our life ought to be ruled in accordance with the commandments of his holy law in which is contained all perfection of justice, and that we ought to have no other rule of good and just living, nor invent other good works to supplement it than those which are contained as follows: Exodus 20: 'I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee,' and so on.<sup>9</sup>

The reference to the preface to the Commandments in Exodus 20 is significant, indicating that the Decalogue is in view as a statement of this 'rule of good and just living'.

### **Luther's Small Catechism.**

The Reformers' appreciation of the pastoral uses of the Ten Commandments finds its clearest expression in the catechisms which they produced. These were 'clear statements, in question and answer form, of the essentials of the Christian faith' drawing especially upon the Decalogue, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer.<sup>10</sup>

Among the earliest of the Reformation catechisms was the Small Catechism of Martin Luther, published in 1529. After establishing the distinctive doctrines of the Reformation, Luther turned his attention to the condition of the Church. In 1527 he persuaded Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, to commission a visitation of the churches within his domains. What Luther and others observed shocked them deeply.<sup>11</sup> Church property had fallen into disrepair after years of neglect, but this was only symptomatic of the deeper spiritual problems. In some parishes the remnants of Romanism were evident, including celebration of the Mass.<sup>12</sup> Ignorance and immorality were widespread and, as many parish schools were in ruins, there seemed little likelihood that the young would receive any instruction in Christian doctrine or ethics.

Luther refers to these conditions in the preface to his Small Catechism.

The deplorable conditions which I recently encountered when I was a visitor constrained me to prepare this brief and simple catechism or statement of Christian teaching. Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptised, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed or the Ten Commandments, they live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts, and now that the gospel has been restored they have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty.<sup>13</sup>

Teaching the people how to live as Christians was therefore Luther's pastoral priority.

Luther's response to the pressing pastoral needs of the Saxon people was to prepare short statements explaining the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Initially these were written on large posters which were displayed in public places, such as the walls of public buildings. As demand for this kind of teaching grew, these statements were published in catechism form, with additional sections on how to confess sin, how to come to the Lord's



Table, how to conduct family worship, how to give thanks for food, and how to conduct oneself in different relationships. Luther hoped that his catechism would be a tool in the hand of pastors and preachers,<sup>14</sup> but he addressed it expressly to heads of households to encourage them to take up the task of teaching their families.

Each section of Luther's Small Catechism is headed with a statement that its subject matter is set out 'in the plain form in which the head of the family shall teach them to his household.' Luther exhorted the preachers, 'You should take pains to urge governing authorities *and parents* to rule wisely and educate their children.'<sup>15</sup> First in the list of matters that parents ought to teach their children was the Ten Commandments.

The restoration of the doctrines of grace and gospel preaching made it especially important that the Ten Commandments be taught to the people. Luther found that many churchgoers who were hearing the gospel for the first time were in fact abusing the liberty which the gospel proclaimed. Many had not been convicted of sin or brought to repentance and saving faith in Christ yet were claiming the comforts of the gospel. Luther's emphasis in his catechism was on the second use of the law, as a schoolmaster to bring the sinner to Christ. Following his exposition of the Ten Commandments, Luther's explanation of the Creed emphasised the redemptive work of Christ.<sup>16</sup> This evangelical emphasis is one of the distinctive features of Luther's Shorter Catechism.

Luther expounded the detail of the commandments in terms of the Mosaic summary of the Law in Deuteronomy 6:5, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.' Love and gratitude are the dominant notes. Concerning each commandment (which Luther numbers after the usage of Augustine and the Roman Church) Luther asks the question, 'What does this mean?' Each response commences with the words, 'We should fear and love God...' His exposition of the first commandment in Exodus 20:3-6<sup>17</sup> is short and positive, 'We should fear, love and trust in God above all things.'

In his exposition of the remaining commandments Luther follows the opening exhortation with a statement of specific implications which are negative and then positive. For instance, the commandment 'You shall not kill'<sup>18</sup> means that 'We should love and fear God, and so we should not endanger our neighbour's life, not cause him any harm, but help and befriend him in every necessity of life.' The assumption is clearly being made that each of the commandments relates to a general principle which will have many implications for godly living – some positive as commands, others negative as prohibitions. Underlying all these commands is the basic law of love. Hence the prohibition of killing is also a command to 'help and befriend our neighbour.'

Luther recognised that, if the people of God were to live as God desired,

their consciences must be informed. It was imperative that they be taught the Ten Commandments as part of the regular ministry of the word. This accounts for Luther's treatment of the commandment, 'Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.'<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the Sabbatarianism of the Westminster Catechisms, Luther emphasised the duty to hear God's Word on the Sabbath rather than avoidance of work or other activities. 'We should fear and love God, and so we should not despise his Word and the preaching of the same, but deem it holy and gladly hear and learn it.'

Through instruction in the Scriptures – including the Ten Commandments – the heart as well as the mind is brought into a new orientation to God. Luther opposed efforts to compel anyone to believe the gospel or come to the Lord's Table. He believed that with proper 'exhortation' they would come with all their hearts. With this in view Luther concludes his exposition of the Ten Commandments with an explanation of Exodus 20:2, which the other Reformation catechisms refer to as the Preface, but which Luther regards as a summary of all the commandments. 'God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. We should therefore fear his wrath and not disobey these commandments. On the other hand, he promises grace and every blessing to all who keep them. We should therefore love him, trust in him, and cheerfully do what he has commanded.'

### **The Genevan Catechism of 1541.**

We find a similar theology underlying the catechisms produced by the Calvinist Reformers. The first of these originated in Geneva, where William Farel had been labouring for the gospel since 1532, in the face of many obstacles. He recognised the need for a scholarly defence and a popular presentation of the Reformed faith. When John Calvin passed through Geneva in August 1536 Farel believed that he had found his man – a scholar who could communicate with the people of Geneva. In March of that year Calvin had published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* which included substantial expositions of the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. Upon this theological foundation three documents of great pastoral significance were constructed: articles of church government, a catechism and a confession of faith for the city of Geneva. These documents aimed to restructure the spiritual life of Geneva and the influence of John Calvin is evident in all three.

The articles of church government proposed that a 'brief outline of the Christian faith be prepared for the instruction of children.'<sup>20</sup> This catechism, which is widely regarded as the work of John Calvin,<sup>21</sup> was first published in 1537 as a statement of faith. In 1541 a greatly expanded version was produced in question and answer format. Original French and Latin versions were

subsequently translated into English, German and Dutch and this was the form in which the Genevan Catechism exercised a significant influence upon thinking about the moral law in English, Scottish and Continental Reformed circles. Sadly the text of the Genevan Catechism is not easy to access, as it has been replaced in the usage of Reformed Churches by the Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms.<sup>22</sup>

The Genevan Catechism of 1541 expounded the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the sacraments, as Luther had done in his Shorter Catechism, but, significantly, Calvin adopted a different order. First of all he expounded the Apostles' Creed as a statement of evangelical faith. Then he expounded the Ten Commandments as a rule of life for those who are saved by faith in Christ. Calvin acknowledged that the moral law binds all men: 'For the law pronounces all cursed who have not fulfilled all the things contained in it.'<sup>23</sup> However he distinguished between the uses of the moral law as it applied to believers and unbelievers:

Hence we must conclude that, as there are two classes of men, so the office of the law is twofold... For among unbelievers it does nothing more than shut them out from all excuse before God... In regard to believers it has a very different use.<sup>24</sup>

Calvin then summarises the uses of the moral law for believers:

First, while they learn from it that they cannot obtain righteousness by works, they are *trained to humility*, which is the true preparation for seeking salvation in Christ. Secondly, inasmuch as it requires of them much more than they are able to perform, it *urges them to seek strength from the Lord*, and at the same time reminds them of their perpetual guilt, that they may not presume to be proud. Lastly, it is a kind of curb, by which they are *kept in the fear of the Lord*.<sup>25</sup>

The style of the Genevan Catechism is distinctive. It is of the longest of the Reformation catechisms, with 374 questions, 102<sup>26</sup> of which are devoted to teaching the Ten Commandments.<sup>27</sup> Individual questions and answers are not inordinately long, but matters of practical and pastoral interest are explored in some detail. The flow of questions and answers is very conversational, rather like the dialogues of classical literature and the writings of the Church Fathers. A conversation between a master (teacher) and a scholar is envisaged. The master may ask his student to state a doctrine or repeat one of the commandments; then he may ask his student to think through the implications of what he has said; or he may make a summary statement and seek a simple affirmation.<sup>28</sup>

As a confessional statement or a summary of material to be taught, the Genevan Catechism is rambling and unwieldy. It lacks the brevity of Luther's Small Catechism, and the precision of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. However it is worthy of study as a model for pastoral ministry as it shows how

Calvin set out to teach a group of catechumens.

Especially in the section on the Ten Commandments, Calvin's approach was to focus on the text of Scripture rather than on heads of doctrine. The master's questions challenge the scholar to examine the words of Scripture in their original context. This is illustrated in the questions on the first commandment, which Calvin took to include the preface in Exodus 20:2.<sup>29</sup> 'Now explain the meaning of the words.'<sup>30</sup> 'Why does he mention that matter in a preface to the law?'<sup>31</sup> 'Why is the clause added, "before my face"?'<sup>32</sup>

By a process of interaction with the text of Scripture the master encourages his pupil to deduce moral principles and applications. Calvin set out to explain in this catechism the hermeneutical principles upon which he built his pastoral theology.<sup>33</sup> This is seen most clearly in the questions on the fourth commandment, where Calvin distinguished between the ceremonial and moral aspects of the law. The fourth commandment, in Calvin's view, unique in that it had ceremonial, and therefore temporary,<sup>34</sup> aspects. 'As the observance of rest is part of the old ceremonies, it was abolished by the advent of Christ.'<sup>35</sup>

Beyond the ceremonial aspects of the fourth commandment the catechism taught that there were moral and permanent aspects; these are teased out and summarized under three headings in the questions that follow.<sup>36</sup>

Master: What then? Is there any thing beyond ceremony?

Scholar: It was given for three reasons.

Master: State them to me.

Scholar: To figure *spiritual rest*; for the preservation of *ecclesiastical polity*; and for the *relief of slaves*.

Master: What do you mean by spiritual rest?

Scholar: When we keep holiday from our own works, that God may perform his own works in us.

Master: Is it sufficient to do so on the seventh day?

Scholar: Nay, continually. After we have once begun, we must continue during the whole course of life.

Master: What order, then, is to be observed on that day?

Scholar: That the people meet to hear the doctrine of Christ, to engage in public prayer, and make profession of their faith.

Master: Now explain what you meant by saying that the Lord intended by this commandment to provide also for the relief of slaves.

Scholar: That some relaxation might be given to those under the power of others. Nay, this, too, tends to maintain a common polity. For when one day is devoted to rest, every one accustoms himself to labour during the other days.

Calvin sets out three hermeneutical principles which guide him in his exposition of the Ten Commandments. The first of these is that *each commandment is a representative 'species' drawn from a larger family of sins*. The wording of the Ten Commandments is very specific and modern studies of the Decalogue have tended to limit their application by reference both to linguistic data and cultural context.<sup>37</sup> For instance the ninth commandment, strictly understood, prohibits perjury or telling lies while under oath in court, rather than telling lies more generally. It has been argued that the traditional moral applications of the Decalogue are far from convincing. For instance, the Swedish Lutheran theologian, Eduard Nielsen, pays tribute to the profound influence of 'Luther's uncompromisingly Protestant interpretation of the ten commandments', but goes on to highlight the 'problems which arise when we go beyond the popular catechism version of the commandments in order to study them in the original text and on the basis of the historical and critical research of the past two hundred years.'<sup>38</sup> What might be said of Luther's use of the Ten Commandments might be said more generally of their exposition in the catechisms of the Reformation.

Calvin anticipated these issues in his careful study of the Hebrew text of the Decalogue. He was well aware, for instance, that the ninth commandment 'expressly mentions public perjury'<sup>39</sup> and in the Genevan Catechism the master asked the scholar whether the commandment prohibits perjury only, or whether it included other kinds of lying. The answer sums up his approach to interpreting and applying all the commandments: 'Under *one species* the *general doctrine* is comprehended, that we are not to charge our neighbour falsely, nor by our evil speaking and detraction hurt his good name, or harm him in his goods.'<sup>40</sup> He used similar language to explain the third commandment, which he took to forbid 'swearing without necessity'.<sup>41</sup> 'The mention of *one species* admonishes us in general never to utter the name of God unless with fear and reverence.'<sup>42</sup>

The second hermeneutical principle which Calvin taught in the Genevan catechism is *the spirituality of the commandments*. This is stated in question 214, relating to the tenth commandment: 'Seeing then that the whole law is spiritual... and the above commandments are set down not only to curb *outward acts*, but also the *affections of the mind*, what more is added here?' In relation to the sixth commandment he goes so far as to say that this is the main thrust of that commandment. 'Does it forbid nothing but the perpetration of murder? ... For seeing it is God who speaks, he here gives law not only to outward works, but also to the affections of the mind, and indeed to them *chiefly*.'<sup>43</sup> Hence 'anger and hatred and any desire to hurt is murder in the sight of God.'<sup>44</sup>

The third hermeneutical principle was that *the commandments commend good behaviour as well as prohibiting bad*. Every prohibition has its



corresponding exhortation. This is because the proper context in which the Ten Commandments ought to be studied is the whole Bible, so that

the many admonitions, precepts, exhortations which both Prophets and Apostles are continually applying... are nothing but mere expositions of the law, which lead us by the hand to the obedience of the law.<sup>45</sup>

What is expressed negatively in the Decalogue is expressed positively in other Scriptures, but the underlying truth is one and the same. Hence Calvin expounds the positive implications of the sixth commandment as follows:

Is it enough if we do not hate anyone? By no means. Since the Lord, by condemning hatred and restraining us from any harm by which our neighbour may be injured, shows at the same time that he requires us to love all men from the heart, and study faithfully to defend and preserve them.<sup>46</sup>

Calvin's approach to teaching the Ten Commandments was adopted and adapted in subsequent Reformed catechisms, most notably the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms of 1647.

### **The Heidelberg Catechism.**

The progress of the reformation in the German city of Heidelberg was far from smooth. In 1545 Prince Frederick II declared the city Protestant, but the tensions between Lutheran and Calvinist were heated and sometimes violent. In 1560 Frederick III asked Caspar Olevianus (a Frenchman who had studied with Calvin in Geneva) and Zacharias Ursinus (a Pole who had studied with Melancthon in Wittenberg) to draft a catechism for the city. Both men wanted to heal the divisions among Protestants and were reputed for their pastoral insights. To this day the Heidelberg Catechism is renowned for its judicious emphasis on the major themes of Protestant doctrine and its pastoral usefulness.

Olevianus and Ursinus followed the Genevan Catechism of 1541 by placing the section on the Ten Commandments after the section on the Creed. Noll comments,

With this arrangement, the Reformed were stressing the law as part of a Christian's joyful service to Christ, where Lutherans characteristically described it as the force that drives the sinner to Christ. The positions are not antithetical, but they do point to different emphases in the two Protestant traditions.<sup>47</sup>

The Heidelberg Catechism does emphasise, near the beginning, the second use of the law. Questions three and four<sup>48</sup> explain the work of God's law to show the sinner his sin and its wretched consequences. However the Ten Commandments themselves are expounded in part three (Man's Gratitude



and Obedience) only after the mystery of redemption has been expounded in part two (Man's Redemption and Freedom) concerning the Apostles' Creed. Ursinus commented on this arrangement:

The Decalogue belongs to the first part so far as it is a mirror of our sin and misery, but also to the third part as being the rule of our new obedience and Christian life.<sup>49</sup>

The Third part of the Heidelberg Catechism is headed: Of Thankfulness. The answer to question 86 states that: 'Because just as Christ has redeemed us with his blood he also renews us through his Holy Spirit according to his own image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for his goodness and that he may be glorified through us...' In answer to question 91 the Heidelberg Catechism defines the good works which please and glorify God: 'Only those which are done out of true faith, in accordance with *the Law of God*, and for his glory, and not those based on our own opinion or on the traditions of men.' Thereafter questions 92-115 state and expound the Ten Commandments.

The influence of Luther's exposition of the Ten Commandments is seen in that the implications of the Commandments are stated positively and negatively. The Heidelberg Catechism emphasises the positive requirements of the law. The section on each commandment opening with a question asking 'What does the Lord require...?' The only exception is found in question 108, which asks, 'What does the seventh commandment teach us?' Questions 109 and 110 also ask what their respective commands (the seventh and the eighth) forbid. The basic assumption is that the Decalogue is open to expansive application because each command is a reflection of God's character, to which we ought to be perfectly conformed. For instance, the prohibition of killing in the sixth commandment rests upon the fact that God is the creator of life, who values the lives of his creatures and abhors all that wantonly destroys life.

The Heidelberg Catechism gives a fuller statement of the implications of each commandment than did Luther's Small Catechism. Instead of expounding the sixth commandment in one question and answer it uses three (questions 105-7). In answer to question 105 the Catechism tells us that in the sixth commandment God requires: 'That I am not to hate, injure, or kill my neighbour, either with thought word or gesture, much less by deed...' The implications of this are developed in the next two questions in ways reminiscent of the thought flow of the Genevan Catechism.<sup>50</sup> Question 106 points to other actions which God forbids. 'But does this commandment speak only of killing? In forbidding murder God means to teach us that he abhors the

root of murder, which is envy, hatred, anger, and desire for revenge, and that he regards these as hidden murder.' Question 107 points to the affections which God commands: 'Is it enough, then, if we do not kill our neighbour in any of these ways? No; for when God condemns envy, hatred, and anger, he requires us to love our neighbour as ourselves, to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him, to prevent injury to him as much as we can, and also to do good to our enemies.'

By the time the Heidelberg Catechism was written many Swiss and German Reformers were calling for a more thorough reformation of the Church, and especially its worship, than that which Luther and his followers had sought. The exposition of the second commandment expresses this distinctively Reformed view of Church life. 'What does God require in the second commandment? That we should not represent him or worship him in any other manner than he has commanded in his Word.'<sup>51</sup> The implications of the second commandment are clear – images of God are not to be tolerated. The pastoral question of whether pictures may be used in churches as teaching tools is addressed in question 98. 'But may not pictures be tolerated in Churches in place of books for unlearned people? No, for we must not try to be wiser than God who does not want his people to be taught by means of lifeless idols, but through the living preaching of his Word.'

In its exposition of the Ten Commandments the Heidelberg Catechism taught Christians to be good citizens. One of the accusations levelled against the Reformers was that they opened the door for radical extremists who undermined the social order and civil government. The Catechism showed that this was not so by teaching due respect for the powers that God had established. The proper motive for keeping God's law is the fear of God's wrath<sup>52</sup> and gratitude for his mercy.<sup>53</sup> However God's people are to remember that 'the authorities are armed with the means to prevent murder'<sup>54</sup> ; that 'civil authorities punish theft and robbery'<sup>55</sup> ; that civil authorities may require their subjects to take oaths<sup>56</sup> ; and that 'in judicial and all other matters I am to love the truth, and to speak and confess it honestly.'<sup>57</sup>

In its exposition of the Ten Commandments the Heidelberg Catechism assumed that the learner is a Christian believer who wants to know God better and follow him more obediently. It does not state biblical ethics in a scholastic or abstract way. Rather, it presumes a strong sense of personal responsibility before God, and directs the teaching of the Commandments towards the goal of helping the believer walk with God.<sup>58</sup> First person pronouns dominate the text. The exposition of the first commandment is an excellent example of this emphasis:

What does the Lord require of me in the first commandment? That I must avoid and flee all idolatry, sorcery, enchantment, invocation of saints or other creatures because of the risk of losing my salvation. Indeed, I ought properly to acknowledge the only true God, trust in him alone, in humility and patience expect all good from his only, and love, fear, and honour him with all my heart...<sup>59</sup>

In its exposition of the Ten Commandments the Heidelberg Catechism taught believers to aim for perfect holiness in this life, even though they were taught to recognise that they would never attain it in this life:

No, for even the holiest of men make only a small beginning in obedience in this life. Nevertheless, they begin with serious purpose to conform not only to some, but to all the commandments of God.<sup>60</sup>

The recurring tendency in the Church to downplay the importance of the Ten Commandments in pastoral ministry and personal Christian living is addressed in the question, ‘Why, then, does God have the Ten Commandments preached so strictly since no one can keep them in this life?’ The answer is a challenge to us all and sets out some key pastoral goals:

First, that all our life long we may become increasingly aware of our sinfulness, and therefore more eagerly seek forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, that we may constantly and diligently pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that more and more we may be renewed in the image of God, until we attain the goal of full perfection after this life.

### **The Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly**

Another great reformational exposition of the Ten Commandments came almost a century later when the Westminster Assembly produced its Larger and Shorter Catechisms in 1647. Both differed from previous catechisms by not expounding the gospel in terms of the Apostles’ Creed. The historical account of God’s plan of redemption in the creed was replaced by a systematic account influenced by the covenant theology which gave the Westminster Standards (including the catechisms) their distinctive tone and emphasis.

The covenant theology of the Westminster standards was not new, but a mature statement of the doctrines taught by Calvin and other continental Reformers. Its impact upon the exposition of the Decalogue by the Westminster Divines in their catechisms can be seen in two ways. First, they followed the Genevan Catechism of 1541 and the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 by *emphasising the third use of the law* - as an expression of gratitude in the life of the believer. According to the Shorter Catechism the two major themes of biblical revelation are,<sup>62</sup> ‘what man is to believe concerning God’

(his decrees of providence and creation, his covenants with man which are his providential ordering of a remedy for man's sin, the Redeemer of the Covenant of Grace and his work) and 'what duty God requires of man' which is stated in terms of obedience to God's will,<sup>63</sup> revealed in the moral law,<sup>64</sup> summarised in the Ten Commandments.<sup>65</sup>

The significance attached to the preface to the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2) in the Westminster Catechisms is worthy of note in this context. It is taken as a preface to the whole Decalogue, indicating their scriptural context in the history of redemption:

The preface to the Ten Commandments teacheth us that because God is the Lord, and our God, and our redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments.<sup>66</sup>

God's law is binding on redeemed people because they have been redeemed from sin. The Larger Catechism develops this point by highlighting the significance of the covenant name 'Jehovah' and the fact that 'God in covenant' delivered not only the nation of Israel from 'their bondage in Egypt', but he also 'delivereth us from our spiritual thralldom... to keep all his commandments.'<sup>67</sup>

The second way in which the influence of covenant theology can be seen to influence the Westminster catechisms is *the care taken to state how a believer ought to respond appropriately to God's gracious initiative*. Covenant theology seeks to place a balanced emphasis upon the unconditional initiative of God's mercy to sinners and the crucial importance of the believer's response to God's conditional offer of mercy. The grace of the gospel demands a response from those who hear. The magnitude of God's grace demands from those who hear and respond strenuous efforts to keep the moral law as fully as possible. The detailed applications of the commandments in the Westminster catechisms are based on this presumption.

Typically the Westminster catechisms state the text of each commandment and then state what the commandment requires and what the commandment forbids. The Shorter Catechism summarises the general principle of the commandment while the Larger Catechism goes on to list specific sins to be avoided and practices to observe. For instance the duties required in the first commandment are said to include:

thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honouring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him; believing him; trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him; being zealous for him, calling upon him; giving all

praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man; being useful in all things to please him, and sorrowful when in any thing he is offended; and walking humbly with him.<sup>68</sup>

After these systematic moral applications of each commandment the Westminster Catechisms may return to aspects of the biblical text which require further explanation. This is where we see the pastoral interests of those who drafted the Westminster catechisms most clearly.

The two commandments which receive the most extended consideration are the fourth and the fifth.<sup>69</sup> This to be explained in the light of issues which were current, and therefore pastorally significant, in mid-seventeenth century England. The High Church party in the Church of England emphasised the observance of saints' days and other holy days, while commending sport as recreation on the Sabbath. The English Puritans held that the weekly Sabbath was the only holy day commanded in Scripture and that this was to be sanctified 'by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days...'<sup>70</sup> Hence the significance of questions 59 and 60 of the Shorter Catechism, 'Which day of the seven hath God appointed to be the weekly Sabbath?' and 'How is the Sabbath to be sanctified?' Significantly the Westminster Divines went beyond Luther and Calvin, who emphasised the hearing of God's word on the Sabbath. The requirement of a 'holy resting' went beyond merely attending Church, and the Westminster catechisms spelled that out in some detail.

The social upheavals associated with the English Civil War alarmed many moderate Puritans and this is reflected in their application of the fifth commandment to society as a whole as well as the family. It was a well established practice to see in the words 'mother and father' in that commandment a reference to other authority figures as well.<sup>71</sup> Hence

by father and mother, in the fifth commandment, are meant, not only natural parents, but all superiors in age, and gifts; especially such as, by God's providence, over us in place of authority, whether in family, church or commonwealth."<sup>72</sup>

The Westminster catechisms developed this principle by stating its implications for everyone in the structure of authority, whether superiors, inferiors or equals.

In an age when authority was being questioned the Shorter Catechism taught that, 'The Fifth commandment requireth the preserving the honour, and performing the duties belonging to every one in their several places and

relations as superiors, inferiors or equals.’<sup>73</sup> The Larger Catechism went further by describing the honour which inferiors owe to their superiors<sup>74</sup> and the sins of inferiors against their superiors.<sup>75</sup> Yet it also taught superiors that their authority brought with it responsibility and stated the sins committed by superiors in general terms<sup>76</sup> as well as the sins which superiors commit towards those under their authority.<sup>77</sup>

In their exposition of four commandments – the second, third, fourth and fifth – the Westminster catechisms explain the reason annexed to (or included in the text of) the commandment.<sup>78</sup> For example, the reason annexed to the second commandment in Exodus 20:5b is, ‘...for I, The Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments’, and this is explained in answer to Shorter Catechism question 52. ‘The reasons annexed to the Second Commandment are, God’s sovereignty over us, His propriety in us, and the zeal he hath for his own glory.’

The pastoral value of this arrangement is evident. As well as contributing to a better understanding of the text of Scripture, the learner is thereby motivated to obey God’s commands. In true puritan style, the divines of the Westminster Assembly knew that, as well as instructing the mind in the substance of God’s commands, pastors must engage the will. They must set out to persuade those who hear them of the rightness and reasonableness of God’s law. Hence the questions which explain the reasoning of the commandments, especially those God-ward commandments where a socially beneficial goal is not evident.

This pastoral goal is more clearly evident in the Larger Catechism. Question 100 asks, ‘What special things are we to consider in the Ten Commandments? We are to consider in the Ten Commandments, the preface, the substance of the commandments themselves, and *several reasons annexed to some of them, the more to enforce them.*’ This last phrase is incorporated into questions 110, 120 and 133 which explain the reasons annexed to the second, fourth and fifth commandments. ‘What are the reasons annexed to the ... commandment, *the more to enforce it.*’

Robert Godfrey comments that ‘the Larger Catechism provides an especially full and rich exposition of the Ten Commandments.’<sup>79</sup> Out of 196 questions, 59 (that is 30%) are devoted to the Ten Commandments.<sup>80</sup> Interestingly of the 107 questions in the Shorter Catechism a higher proportion expound the moral law, that is 43 questions or 40% of the total.<sup>81</sup> The number



of questions given to expounding the Ten Commandments in the Westminster catechisms is significantly greater than in the Genevan Catechism of 1541 or the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563.<sup>82</sup> It is evident that the Westminster catechisms drew on those sources and were in substantial agreement with their theology. However their distinctive pastoral emphasis appears in this strenuous effort to conform the lives of God's people to the high standards of His perfections.

Some have criticised the exhaustive exposition of the Ten Commandments, especially in the Larger Catechism. According to Philip Schaff, '...it is over-minute in the specifications of what God has forbidden in the Ten Commandments and loses itself in a wilderness of details.'<sup>83</sup> T.F. Torrance, whose aversion towards the underlying covenant theology of the Westminster Standards is well-known, describes the discussion of the moral law in the Larger Catechism as 'highly moralistic.'<sup>84</sup> In the face of these criticisms it is important to note that the Larger Catechism emphatically rejects a moralistic or legalistic use of the moral law. It is warmly evangelical as its explanation of the use of the moral law to the regenerate illustrates:

Although they that are regenerate, and believe in Christ, be delivered from the moral law as a covenant of works, so as thereby they are neither justified or condemned; yet besides the general uses thereof common to them with all men it is of special use, to show them how much they are bound to Christ for fulfilling it, and enduring the curse thereof in their stead, and for their good; *and thereby to provoke them to more thankfulness, and to express the same in their greater care to conform themselves hereunto* as the rule of their obedience.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

We might summarise the expositions of the Ten Commandments in the catechisms of the Reformation as follows: the Decalogue has been given for the purpose of convicting the sinner and sanctifying the believer; it states fundamental truths about the character of God which are to be reflected in the lives of his moral creatures; its principles are universally binding and have many implications, both positive and negative; its guiding principle is love for God and for others, a love which flows from the heart; its statements are simple and memorable, yet comprehensive so that they are designed to communicate readily how God wants us to live. The theology which underlies these expositions is thoroughly pastoral in purpose and effect.

## Notes

- 1 J B Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1956), p.123.
- 2 J B Lightfoot, op.cit., pp.123-124.
- 3 See the article on The Ten Commandments in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by F L Cross, (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 An alternative translation of this phrase is 'limited to one thing' – indicating that the moral teaching of the commandments is clear and focused. See the section on the Decalogue in *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, edited by David W Bercot, (Peabody: Hendrikson, 1991).
- 6 Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume II, p.292.
- 7 Described by Mark Knoll as 'the chief Lutheran official confession'. Mark A Noll, *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), p.83.
- 8 Article 20. From Noll, *Confessions*, p.94-6. See also Article 6 – The New Obedience.
- 9 Article 3 – The Law of God Alike for All. Quoted from Noll, *Confessions*, p.126.
- 10 *New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Sinclair B Ferguson and David F Wright. Article on Catechisms by Peter F Jensen. The comment applies specifically to Luther's two catechisms, but might appropriately apply to almost all of the Reformation catechisms.
- 11 Noll, *Confessions*, p.59, describes the Saxon visitation as 'one of the greatest disappointments of his (Luther's) life.'
- 12 Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Tring: Lion, 1978), pp.313-4.
- 13 Noll, *Confessions* pp.61-2.
- 14 The preface begins, 'Grace, mercy, and peace in Jesus Christ, our Lord, from Martin Luther to all faithful, godly pastors and preachers.'
- 15 Noll, *Confessions*, p.64.
- 16 Luther explains the second article of the Creed as follows: 'I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me from all sin and death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death.'
- 17 According to the usage of the Anglican and Reformed Churches these are the first and second commandments.
- 18 Exodus 20:13. Luther calls this the fifth commandment, but it is better known as the sixth commandment.
- 19 Luther calls this the third commandment, but it is better known as the fourth commandment.
- 20 Quoted in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arthur Cochrane (London: SCM Press, 1966), p.118.
- 21 Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper, 1877), Vol.III, p.232.
- 22 ibid. The version quoted in this article was obtained from [www.reformed.org/documents/calvin/geneva\\_catechism/geneva\\_catechism.html](http://www.reformed.org/documents/calvin/geneva_catechism/geneva_catechism.html)
- 23 Question 229.
- 24 Question 227.
- 25 Question 228.
- 26 Questions 131-232.
- 27 Compare with the Westminster Larger catechism which has 196 questions. There are 20,259 words in the Genevan Catechism compared with 15,993 words in the Westminster Larger Catechism.
- 28 Examples of such short responses are: 'It is so' (answer 223), and 'Such is my belief' (answer 146).

- 29 Question 136. This division was followed in the Heidelberg Catechism, see question 92. The Westminster Shorter Catechism takes Exodus 20:2 as a preface to the Ten Commandments as a whole, see question 43.
- 30 Question 138.
- 30 Question 139.
- 32 Question 142.
- 33 Although the Westminster Catechisms are more to the point and move quickly from the text of Scripture to their moral conclusions, a very similar way of interpreting the Ten Commandments underpinned the Genevan and Westminster Catechisms. The Westminster Larger Catechism sets out its approach in question 99, 'What are the rules to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments?'
- 34 Question 169.
- 35 Question 168.
- 36 Questions 170-2, 174, 179-180.
- 37 J J Stamm and M E Andrew, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research* (London: SCM Press, 1967). A more recent survey of scholarly opinion is found in the article by Raymond F Collins on the Ten Commandments in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
- 38 Eduard Nielsen, *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1968), pp.1-2.
- 39 Question 210.
- 40 Question 209.
- 41 Question 160.
- 42 Question 162.
- 43 Question 197.
- 44 Question 198.
- 45 Question 231.
- 46 Question 199.
- 47 Noll, *Confessions*, p.135.
- 48 Interestingly the Heidelberg Catechism quotes from Matthew 22:37-40 as a summary of the law of God.
- 49 Quoted in Schaff, *Creeds*, Vol.1 p.544-5.
- 50 Compare with questions 196-199 of the Genevan Catechism, which expound the sixth commandment.
- 51 Question and answer 96.
- 52 Question and answer 112.
- 53 Question and answer 86.
- 54 Question and answer 105.
- 55 Question and answer 110.
- 56 Question and answer 101.
- 57 Question and answer 112.
- 58 See comments by Philip Schaff in *Creeds*, Vol.1 p.545. His comment on p.787 concerning the Westminster Shorter Catechism is worthy of note: 'It addresses the disciple as an interested outsider rather than as a church-member growing up in the nurture of the Lord.' What the Westminster Shorter Catechism allegedly does not do the Heidelberg Catechism does brilliantly.
- 59 Question and answer 94.
- 60 Answer to question 114, 'But can those who are converted to God keep these commandments perfectly.'
- 61 Question and answer 115.

- 62 Answer 3.
- 63 Answer 39.
- 64 Answer 40.
- 65 Answer 41.
- 66 Shorter Catechism answer 44.
- 67 Larger Catechism answer 101.
- 68 Larger Catechism answer 104.
- 69 The fourth commandment is expounded in six questions in the Shorter Catechism and seven in the Larger Catechism. The fifth commandment is expounded in four questions in the Shorter Catechism and eleven in the Larger Catechism.
- 70 Shorter catechism answer 60.
- 71 Luther's Shorter Catechism: 'We should fear and love God, and so we should not despise our parents *and superiors*, nor provoke them to anger...' Genevan Catechism, answer to question 194, 'Though father and mother only are expressed, we must understand all who are over us, as the reason is the same.' This position is fleshed out by Calvin himself in his commentary on the fifth commandment, see Calvin's Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), Vol.3, pp.11-12.
- 72 Larger Catechism answer 124.
- 73 Answer to question 64.
- 74 Question 127.
- 75 Question 128.
- 76 Question 130.
- 77 Question 129.
- 78 Larger Catechism questions 11, 114, 120 and 133. Shorter Catechism Questions 52, 56, 62 and 66.
- 79 Johannes G Vos, *The Larger Catechism – A Commentary*, ed. G I Williamson, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), p.xii. Godfrey's introductory article was first published as a chapter in *To Glorify and Enjoy God: A Commemoration of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, ed. John L. Carson and David W. Hall, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994).
- 80 Godfrey, op. cit., p.xviii. Only 50 questions relate to specific commandments, but nine more comment on general aspects of the moral law.
- 81 36 questions expound specific commandments while seven more comment on general aspects of the moral law.
- 82 27% of the Genevan Catechism questions and 18% of Heidelberg catechism questions were devoted to the moral law. Godfrey, op. cit., p.xviii.
- 83 Schaff, *Creeds*, Vol.1, p.786.
- 84 T F Torrance, *The School of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1959), p.xviii. Quoted in Godfrey, op. cit., p.xii.
- 85 Larger Catechism answer 97.

# SEEKING AND GRANTING FORGIVENESS WITHIN THE CHURCH

**Walter J. Chantry**

*Walter J. Chantry served the Lord in pastoring the same church in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for thirty-nine years. He now lives south of Gettysburg and serves as Editor of The Banner of Truth Magazine.*

Two indispensable requirements made of us all as fallen creatures living in a sinful world are seeking forgiveness and granting the same to others. Understanding the mechanism of seeking forgiveness is essential to receiving eternal life from the hand of the Almighty. At the same time, forgiving and being forgiven are essential to social civility and to maintaining long term human relationships. This realization should make instruction on forgiveness a high priority for parents, school teachers, ministers, elders, and youth leaders.

Scripture gives us a great amount of teaching on the subject of injury and forgiveness. However, even in the Christian church there is a lingering ignorance on the topic. Few churches and pulpits have undertaken a careful study of the subject from God's Word. Yet all the while we are inundated by clichés and homespun theology. The popular religious song of yesteryear comes to mind, a song in which God is represented by the description, 'He **always** says, "I forgive"'!

## **The Need for Forgiveness from God**

As we stand before a holy and just God, we 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). Liberalism and other religions that are uninformed by the Bible have spread the notion that in the end God will forgive everyone. This 'universalism' is evident at modern funerals. No matter how much a person has shunned the worship of God and has lived in immorality, it is said by those who attend his funeral that he has gone to a better place. It is presumed that God has forgiven all. The Word of God insists that God will not forgive everyone.

Certain conditions are placed upon the receiving of God's forgiveness.

1. **'If we confess** our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9). Verbal acknowledgements

to God that we have disobeyed him as our Maker, Lawmaker and Judge are required. So many are our sins against God that Jesus advised us frequently to pray, 'Forgive us our debts' (Matthew 6:12). He is speaking of moral debts, broken obligations to God's laws. We have provoked and insulted the God of all the earth.

2. **'Repent** and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins' (Acts 2:38). Repentance is a word rich with meaning. It refers to more than admission of guilt. The word 'repent' also suggests sorrow for having given injury, a change of mind in which one now considers such wounding behavior inappropriate for his future walk, and an actual turning into a different pathway.

After David was one of two consenting adults involved in a sexual affair, he came to realize that his behavior offended Almighty God. In a prayer he confessed of this incident, 'Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight' (Psalm 51:4). Of course he had injured the woman, her husband, his own family, and society at large. Yet none of these compared in measure with his rebellion against the Most High. We are always social beings and every moral act has consequences for others. We offend our fellow-men, and we offend our God by every transgression against those who are made in his image.

3. Identifying with Jesus Christ in baptism represents **a conscious reliance on him as our Surety and Redeemer**. Restitution must be made to God for sin to be pardoned. If sin is viewed as debt, then Jesus is the Surety who pledged to fulfill our obligations which we could not meet. If someone is a debtor and has 'nothing with which to pay' (Luke 7:41-42), the surety, who is legally liable for that person's debt, must pay in full. Often in our society people with poor credit must secure the signature of someone else in order to receive a large loan. Jesus became the legal signatory for the moral debts of God's people.

God is always a king of holiness and justice as well as of mercy. In his mercy 'he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life' (John 3:16). Yet in his holy justice God required of his Son that he become a curse for us to release us from bondage to the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13). Jesus made complete satisfaction of divine justice for all the offences of those who trust in him.

God's forgiveness is offered only to those who confess their guilt, repent in their hearts, and rely upon Jesus as Surety and Redeemer.

his pattern is to be remembered when we argue that Christians are to



forgive one another. 'Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *even as God in Christ forgave you*' (Ephesians 4:32). Thus our forgiving one another is to imitate God's forgiveness to us. It is conditional upon certain expectations from the one who trespasses against us.

### **The Need for Forgiveness from One Another**

When James began to address the subject of sins committed by the tongue, he made the general observation, 'We all offend in many things' (James 3:2). He was reflecting on the moral frailty common to fallen humanity, both unconverted and Christian. In every moral misstep offenses are given to our neighbors. 'There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not' (Ecclesiastes 7:20). The conscience of every man who reflects on Scripture is humbled by the fact that 'all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags' (Isaiah 64:6).

This is not merely a theoretical consideration of abstract ideas. We have provoked, distressed and injured others frequently. How do we manage relationships in which we are offenders? In our unglorified state this is a constant reality. We are also being offended and injured frequently. How do we conduct ourselves when we are the recipients of wounds or are victims of abusive behavior?

Among men the subject of forgiveness is extremely practical. We are all giving and receiving offenses. How do we **seek** pardon and reconciliation? How do we **grant** pardon and reconciliation?

### **A Starting Point**

Each of us gives countless offenses in a lifetime. We are also offended more times than we can number. Is social interaction to be absorbed in nothing but apologies and pardons? Just as James reminded us that 'we all offend in many things', so also both Solomon and Peter have stated that 'love will cover a multitude of sins' (Proverbs 10:12, 1 Peter 4:8). Insecure love may be sensitive to the smallest slight, but mature love will at once cover over offenses, with no mention of them.

Within a loving family the vast majority of slights, stinging words and ill humors, although they can bring stabbing pain to others, are overlooked. Love makes excuses for its troublers and forgives them without giving rebuke or receiving so much as an apology. The stronger the love, the more serious are the injuries which are passed over. This is not meant to deny that in the home are formed the habits of saying, 'Forgive me, I was wrong' and in response, 'You are forgiven'.

Perhaps the wording 'to cover a sin' may illustratively reach back to the

incident of Noah's drunkenness after the flood (Genesis 9:20-24). When Ham saw the consequences of his father's sin, he exposed him to shame by mentioning his foolishness to others in the family. But with loving reverence toward their father, Shem and Japheth took a garment, walked backward (so as not even to look at his shame) and covered Noah's nakedness. So must we do with the multitude of sins against us by those whom we love in Christ. Surely we can endure being pricked by the thorns which remain in the fallen nature of those we love without howling our complaints!

Nevertheless, there are differences in degree and kind among sins. Sometimes serious injustice may be suffered. Lasting injury may be done to our reputations, to our persons, to our property, to our loved ones, or to the cause of truth and righteousness. Perhaps a brother has a pattern of repeatedly giving these offenses. In such situations even love calls for correction and rebuke.

In other words, there are times when we are unable merely to cover the sins of those who injure us. My judgment of the situation may be that the relationship between me and my brother has been gravely damaged by his sin against me. Therefore something must be done to pave the way for me to forgive him and to restore our fellowship in such a manner as will enable us once more to be on solid ground.

### **In Pursuit of Reconciliation**

Specific directions are given in Scripture for resolving acute offenses given and received by brothers and sisters in the Lord. These are principles which ought to be employed in a much broader sphere than in the Christian community alone for settling disputes among neighbors. However, there is an exception which needs to be stated. If a person believes that he stands under a threat of violence from an offender, counsel should be sought immediately, and the following directions should be set aside. For instance, a battered wife should not seek to confront her violent husband alone.

All parties to a dispute are obligated to seek a face-to-face conversation with the person who is their adversary. The individual who has been considered the offender is commanded to take the initiative to seek reconciliation with the party who 'has something against' him (Matthew 5:23). So urgent is this obligation for the one who is blamed for giving injury, that he is commanded to suspend worship or making offerings to God until 'first' he is 'reconciled to his brother' (Matthew 5:24). He is charged to search out the party who claims to be injured by him in a conciliatory spirit, prepared to agree with his accuser, lest greater evils than loss of fellowship with a brother fall upon him (Matthew 5:25-26).

The Christian who has a grievance against a brother is under the same

obligation 'to go and tell him his fault between you and him alone' (Matthew 18:15). There is to be no spreading of tales about a grievance. Because the offender may repent, his reputation is to be protected by confidentiality. This is to be done in personal conversation (not in written communications). The confrontation is to be private – only including the two principal parties. The injured person is to seek the interview not to insult or to 'get even with' the errant one, but with the sincere hope that he will hear you and that you will gain back the brother in restored fellowship. Both parties are expected to frame their words in such a conversation with the goal of reconciliation (Matthew 18:15).

Our Lord Jesus also instructed his disciples, 'If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and **if** he repents, forgive him' (Luke 17:3). Just as God remits sin when sinners repent, so do we forgive **when offenders repent**. In all conversations aiming at reconciliation between brothers, the injured person must be prepared to forgive; the sinner must be prepared to repent.

### **The Conversation**

The above comments by Christ make demands of both parties to a dispute. If Christ commands a brother against whom there has been sin to go to the offender; then by implication the offender is obligated to receive the person who comes. However, this is where advisors may go awry. Often those who have suffered unjust treatment are told at once to forgive the offender. Seldom is Christ's command **to rebuke** the offender stated. Yet if Christ has told your brother to 'rebuke' you, then you are obliged to hear the rebuke. The reverse is true if the sinner approaches the injured Christian. The injured one is to receive and hear the one who has harmed him.

The sinner is expected to be conciliatory, ready to confess his sins to the offended brother; and ready to express in his own words that, God helping him, he will not again injure his brother in this way. 'He that scandalizeth his brother, or the church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or publick confession and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended' (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XV, Section 6).

The injured one must labor to verbalize a rebuke in such a way as to invite the sinner's confession and repentance. Inflammatory and damaging words should not be used in the rebuke, since they will only complicate the effort to reconcile brothers. Attempts must be made by the injured to demonstrate a willingness to forgive if the guilty person repents.

Jesus emphasizes the need for this preparation of heart so that it is ready **to forgive** in Luke 17:4. 'If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, **saying**, "I repent", you shall forgive him.'

Understanding the difficulty of such a scenario, the apostles prayed, 'Increase

our faith'!

We must realize that we do not have access to the heart of the sinner as does God. Therefore, if he 'says' that he repents we must be ready to forgive. It is to be supposed that if the Christian who has given injury does not repent, further efforts to rebuke will be appropriate. Of these added efforts Jesus speaks in Matthew 18: 16-20.

It is not uncommon in such meetings to hear feeble attempts to deny that an injury has been given. Many of these fall short of confession and repentance. In these situations the one who has harmed a brother will say something like, 'I'm sorry this incident hurt you. I did not intend to injure you. I'm sorry you **took it** this way'. Such statements deny wrongdoing and accuse the injured person of being 'thin-skinned' or over-sensitive. The fault is thereby shifted to the one who has a complaint.

Others come to the injured and say, 'I've asked God to forgive me. He has done so. Now you are obliged to forgive me too'. Making such demands of someone you have harmed is altogether inappropriate. The sinner is not to become the instructor of the one whom he has injured.

Jesus' requirement is, '**If** your brother repents, forgive him'. He does not compel us to forgive the non-repentant. Yet all too frequently psychologists and fellow-Christians will take upon themselves the authority to urge on the wounded a duty to give forgiveness to the non-confessing. Some even dare to forgive offenders themselves though they are not the injured parties, and although the guilty ones have not repented. Such standards were not the apostolic practice (2 Timothy 4:14; see also the Psalms of David as examples of prayers against enemies).

## **Restitution**

There is the additional matter of restitution which demonstrates sincerity in repentance. The Lord expects it in his system of justice, and so should we. We all remember the striking case of Zacchaeus! He had spent much of his life systematically defrauding his neighbors and had grown very wealthy at the expense of his fellow-citizens.

On the day in which Jesus invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house, his host stood and said to the Son of God, 'Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold'. What sort of repentance would it have been if Zacchaeus had made no repayment for what he had taken? If a brother were to steal your automobile and to show no inclination to return it to you, could you believe in his repentance? That would not be acceptable even if he admitted the crime and said, 'I'm sorry for the inconvenience it has cost you, and I will never again ~~take~~ a vehicle from you'. He must return your vehicle!

There can be restitution even for such offenses as slander. A slanderer may publicly admit that he has improperly assaulted another's reputation. But there will be times when no reparations can be made for an injury. The guilty party simply has 'nothing with which to repay'. Then an admission of guilt and words of repentance must lead to 'freely forgiving all'.

### **A Subsequent Step**

Having repeated meetings with one who has injured you is a requirement of the New Testament for seeking reconciliation with a brother. This is the procedure given for one who has personally sustained serious injury at the hand of a fellow Christian. But it is not necessarily the unvarying rule for church leaders exercising church discipline, as will be seen in the following example.

When a professing Christian is living in openly scandalous behaviour, and everyone in the community is aware of it, measures of church discipline need not be preceded by the series of meetings required in the Matthew 18 passage. Paul writes to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 5 urging immediate action by the congregation. The facts in this case were not in doubt.

Our Lord Jesus conceives of a time when a weighty injury has been inflicted on us by a brother, when we have met with him alone to rebuke and to seek reconciliation with him, and yet there has been no satisfactory solution. 'If he (the sinner against you) will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established' (Matthew 18:16). Clearly, a second meeting is to be held.

The brother with a grievance selects one or two to go with him. Their role is to witness the second conversation. They are to observe the rebuke by the injured and the response of the accused. They are to assess the spirit in which each party enters the conversation. They may, perhaps, enter the conversation themselves, with questions to clarify, with reinforcement of the claims by either party, or with biblical pleas for resolving the matter. If still a third step needs to be taken, they will serve as important witnesses of facts established by the words of this meeting.

In choosing one or two to go along on a second meeting, it is not sympathy for my side of the controversy which should be the main consideration. Galatians 6:1 should be our guide: 'If a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted'. We should take along spiritual, gentle, appropriately humble saints on this important mission.

### **A Final Attempt**

'If he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church' (Matthew 18:17). How



many who think they have sustained an injury from another Christian run immediately to pastors or elders! This may be appropriate when one has been the object of criminal and violent assaults. Ordinarily, however, Christians are to take a matter to the church only after having a private meeting with the offender and after a second meeting as described in Matthew 18:16 has occurred. Ministers and elders should not insert themselves into disputes until the first two steps have been taken, because their involvement in earlier steps will appear to be church discipline.

If the offender adamantly refuses to repent, 'tell it to the church'. One must approach church officers with the complaint. Now there are two or three witnesses to the sin. When Christ's word has been followed church officers are obligated to adjudicate all charges of serious sin by one brother against another. If the sinner will not hear the church, the keys of the kingdom are to be used to exclude him from the body of Christ (Matthew 16:19, Matthew 18:17-20, 1 Corinthians 5:3-5).

Any reluctance of church officers even to consider (or enter into formal inquiry about) charges of serious sin cannot be excused. Too often officers desire peace at the expense of justice. Perhaps an influential member of the congregation is the accused, and a much lesser individual in their eyes is the victim. To avoid scandal or division there is often a refusal to look into serious sins.

### **Elders as Judges**

When Satan attacked Job, this 'blameless and upright man who feared God' lost something very precious to him. It was an item that few remember to list among the sufferings of Job. We all chronicle his losses of children's lives, wealth, health, wife's support, and friends' loyalty. But few remember to catalog his loss of position as an elder of his city.

In Job 29:7-25 the famous sufferer mused on the aspects of satisfying pleasure which he could recall from his experiences as a leader of his people. He described his memory of the unique comradeship amongst those who spend hours working together to resolve difficulties in a kingdom. He had enjoyed having veneration and deference shown toward him in important councils. Now all of that had been swept away.

However, there was one lingering satisfaction from his past eldership. His chief accomplishment in wielding the power of office continued to bring him delight. He had employed his influence to bring justice to helpless people who had no one else to defend them from oppression. When these folk 'who had no helper cried out' (vs. 12) Job arose to 'break the fangs of the wicked, and pluck the victim from his teeth' (vs. 17). He was speaking of the poor, the fatherless, the perishing man, the widow, the blind, and the lame. The tenor of



his labors had been to champion justice for the weak.

Serving as an elder in a church includes holding the responsibility of hearing complaints of injury from those who have exhausted other avenues of redress. Often the allegation of wrongdoing comes from an individual of minimal social standing and is against the powerful and esteemed. It may immediately occur to an elder that his church will scarcely suffer from the continued protest of the accuser. Yet the church would be rocked with scandal if the person being blamed is found to be guilty.

Therefore some elders prefer to immerse themselves in other aspects of the church's life and activity, hoping that these charges of injustice will fade. 'After all', they may reason, 'we do not want anything divisive to spoil our peace, interrupt the more vital tasks of teaching sound doctrine, evangelizing, and preserving unity and harmoniousness'. In this manner arises the temptation to exhort the injured to be silent for the wider good of the body. Or is it really for the peace of mind and comfort of the leaders? What is the value of a peace which covers over slander and injustice? Will God not rather bless those under-shepherds who take great pains to tend their hurting sheep?

Another temptation in leadership is to avoid the difficult confrontation by refusing to 'take sides'. Realizing that 'there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin' (Ecclesiastes 7:20), we can identify incidental faults in both parties, ask them both to confess their faults of procedure or self-control to one another and to forgive one another. In doing this the subject has been changed! No longer is there consideration of the charges of serious injury. Rather injury has been put to the side and all attention is given to the ways in which the dispute between parties has been conducted. The person with a complaint of serious injury has then been manipulated through guilt for lesser sins. He has been pressured to withdraw his charge of injustice as being no more significant than are his own procedural errors.

When complaints of injury are initially presented to elders, of course the accused party will be asked to comment on the charges. Often it is not at all obvious which party to the dispute is speaking the truth. Already burdened with various aspects of ministry to God's people, leaders are tempted to put the entire burden for proof on the one who complains to them. Some even proclaim openly, 'There is no way that we could discover which party in the dispute is telling the truth'. This comment is based more on a desire for self-justification for inaction by those who are hearing the complaint than on a sincere desire to attempt to secure justice for the parties concerned.

In contrast to this, Job said of the difficult cases involving weak people which were brought before him as an elder, 'I searched out the case that I did not know' (vs. 16). He took pains to establish the facts. Only then could he 'break the fangs of the wicked and pluck the victim from his teeth'. These pains included serious deliberation and investigation. The pursuit of truth

required an investment of time and energy, and also involved personal political risk.

### **Refusing To Yield to Worldly Measures**

In the history of any complaint of serious injury unjustly given, a critical point may arise for the injured person. It may come in the private meeting between him and the one who has sinned against him. It may raise its head as charges are taken to the church. Or it may present itself years after the process is concluded with no satisfactory resolution of the conflict.

Even as a Christian follows biblical directives required when a brother has sinned against him, all other parties involved in any way in the search for reconciliation may turn the focus away from the perpetrator of injury and join in an attack upon the one who has been harmed and who is seeking just reconciliation. In this situation the major sins of an enemy are downplayed. At the same time minute errors of the aggrieved person are exaggerated. Perhaps everyone will be most disturbed that the injured person refuses to forgive the obviously guilty brother who refuses to repent, or refuses even to acknowledge any wrongdoing.

This is a tactic learned in debate and finely honed in the loud public controversies which are ever heard in our democratic societies. It is especially the tool of defense lawyers. The strategy is never to admit wrongdoing, never to discuss one's own mistakes, but always to change the subject, to turn all attention toward some minor weakness of an opponent. The goal is to compel the person with a more righteous cause to confess a fault, however small. It works because such a person is apt to have more humility and a more tender conscience than does the errant one, and thus he is vulnerable to this ruse. After that the opponent's credibility is further weakened by hammering away at the small issue that has been raised.

There are authoritarian church leaders who have stooped to enlist this tool against anyone who dares to accuse a church officer of wrongdoing. The motives of self-vindication and reputation enhancement drive them to reach for these weapons in order to destroy the influence of critics.

When a Christian with a just complaint finds himself victimized by these Pharisaical tactics (John 9:13-34), which are not absent from modern churches, he must carefully avoid yielding to these Satanic traps. Furthermore, all Christians who hear of such behaviour, even by legitimate leaders, must rush to the assistance of the abused Christian as did our Lord Jesus in John 9:35-41.

When facing one who has caused serious injury, there is no reason to allow others to change the subject to that of the lesser sins that we all have. Nor should the Christian with a just complaint allow anyone to pressure him into premature or unwarranted forgiveness of the sinner. Our Lord himself

instructed us to 'rebuke' the sinner and to forgive when he repents (Luke 17:3). Apostolic example teaches us to look for God to repay unrepentant men who do us much harm (2 Timothy 4:14).

## **Final Resolutions**

To hear an expression of repentance from a brother who has sinned against you and to express forgiveness to him in return must be the chief hope throughout the process of pressing charges. Reconciliation, restoration of peaceful and loving fellowship between the two of you is the 'success' at which all parties to the controversy ought to aim.

Still, following biblical directives for the process of managing a complaint against a brother does not guarantee either satisfaction or success. Doing what God requires and doing it prayerfully and with proper motives may not win an erring brother. It may not secure equity for you among men.

You must always realize from the outset that a sinner against you may not confess his fault and may not repent. It is also possible that others called in to help you in seeking reconciliation may not agree with your side of a dispute. The church or its officers may not choose to support your claims for a large variety of reasons (whether proper or improper). The process may end with no one caring about your injury and with few, if any, supporting the legitimacy of your claims.

This consequence may add to the burden of your struggle. At this point the original injury will have acquired supplemental anguish. There can be a sense of isolation, rejection, and insignificance.

You may exit meetings with church officers feeling like the man in Acts 18:17 who was unlawfully beaten in front of the court while chief officials observe but 'care about none of those things'. Or you may sympathize with Paul who said, 'At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me' (2 Timothy 4:16). You could be left without earthly physicians, defenders, or allies who will help you in your internal conflict over these matters. Although you may call upon God, you also will know that you have been doing so for some time, and that he has not granted your requests. It therefore will seem as though God has rejected your appeals as well as have men.

When Christians have exhausted all avenues of appeal with no gratifying outcome, there are obligations to God which we must consider.

### **1. *Vengeance***

**Never** is vengeance to be taken by the offended Christian. 'Repay no one evil for evil' (Romans 12:17). 'Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord"' (Romans 12:19; the quote is from Deuteronomy

32:35). No efforts may be made to 'get even'. On the contrary, Romans 12:20 exhorts us to do acts of kindness toward enemies who are in need. They **are** and they **remain** 'enemies'; we are to view them as enemies, but we are forbidden to inflict harm upon them.

God has set up earthly rulers as 'avengers to execute wrath on him who practices evil' (Romans 13:4). It is for these authorities to repay those who injure their citizens. The modern confusion of personal ethics with governmental ethics is entirely unbiblical and is harmful to society. To some degree church officers too have been empowered by God to inflict punishments on those who injure church members. However, their punishments are wholly spiritual and are wholly within the church. Yet on the part of the injured Christian himself there must be **no** vengeance!

## 2. *Trust*

When we are forbidden to take vengeance, and when all earthly rulers appointed by God to bring justice to the righteous refuse to give aid, there is yet a court of appeal. There is a flip side to our doing no harm to enemies. We know that ultimate justice is in the hands of God! He will not stumble in vindicating the righteous nor will he do so in exposing the guilty. He may act at some other time during this life or he may wait until the final day of the judgment of all men. But his justice is certain. 'Vengeance **is** Mine, I **will** repay, says the Lord' (Romans 12:19). This is his holy promise to all who have been oppressed.

Peter advised, 'Let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator' (1 Peter 4:19). In all adverse circumstances it is a strong starting point to recognize that we can successfully manage neither the direction nor the outcome of our own affairs. There is no one else to whom we can turn but to the Triune God. We must rest our affairs entirely upon his mercy, wisdom and power. Only with his providence is your reputation, property, family or very life in trustworthy hands. Peter reminds us that God is our 'faithful Creator'. When all others fail us, he will be faithful.

It seems that this is what Paul meant in 2 Timothy 4:14. 'Alexander the Coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works'. Paul, near the close of his life, was continuing to experience the harm Alexander had done to him. He had no further recourse among men to correct the damage. There were no measures he could take to win Alexander to repentance. However, God was on his throne and would repay all malice and requite every injury. He entrusted the case into God's hands as being the only One having perfect Justice. In this case Paul did not extend forgiveness. Rather he warned fellow-Christians of the harm which his unrepentant enemy might do to others.

### 3. *Bitterness*

Every time we suffer under the mischief of other men, when no one will stand with us when we are abused, and when God does not immediately respond to our pleas for help, there can be a temptation to grow bitter in spirit. Brooding on the sins of others which bring lasting damage to us may make our attitudes sour, cynical and abrasive. Bitterness toward men and bitterness to God may begin to mix within our souls.

Nothing will grieve the Holy Spirit more quickly than our yielding to a frame of soul that is hostile and resentful toward God and men. Paul said, 'Grieve not the Holy spirit...Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice...' (Ephesians 4:30-31).

These commands of Scripture are not easily followed when someone has 'done you much harm'. Levels of obedience new to you are now being required. Bitterness begun will have to be confessed. Strong crying out to God for grace, and perhaps for a long time, will be needed to 'put away' the bitterness, the anger, the malice, the outcry. The task will be, in all likelihood, complicated. Accessories to the one who sinned against you may be the ones who call this text and others like it to your attention. Yet God's truth is our law, regardless of how or by what hand it is delivered.

Through just such trials and struggles, both without and within, are God's jewels of grace formed. The spiritual pressures upon you may exceed the forces of volcanic activity in the natural realm which form literal gems. Your faith is more precious to God than gold. 'For a little while' God knows that it is necessary that you should be 'grieved by various trials' (1 Peter 1:6-7). We are not here speaking of various trials at various times, but of a great variety of trials all at once. If he grieves you it is not unnecessary that he do so. Your suffering has been sent by his own loving hand to form you as his choice treasure.



# PREACHING IN THE DUTCH CALVINIST TRADITION

**Neil Pronk**

*Neil Pronk has been a minister in the Free Reformed Churches of North America since 1968 and presently serves at Brantford, Ontario, Canada. He is also the editor of his denomination's monthly magazine, The Messenger.*

## **Introduction**

Every religion has certain characteristics that set it apart from its rivals. There are different traditions, customs, rituals, ceremonies, modes of worship and styles of preaching. Limiting ourselves to Christianity and preaching, there is a marked difference, for instance, between Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Pentecostal and Reformed or Calvinistic preaching. It does not require a high degree of religious sophistication to be able to recognize certain unique characteristics both in content and delivery when listening to preachers from different backgrounds and traditions. This is true also of Dutch Calvinistic preaching. Whereas there is something distinctive about this kind of preaching, there are also important differences when it comes to sermon content and emphases.

## **Old and New School Dutch Calvinists**

Broadly speaking, Dutch Calvinistic preaching may be divided into two categories. First there are the Old school or traditional Calvinists who insist on experimental or experiential preaching. This branch of Calvinism is found in several smaller denominations, such as the Christian Reformed Churches (not to be confused with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, although both have their roots in the Secession movement of 1834), the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, and the Reformed Alliance, a conservative group within the Dutch Reformed (State) Church.<sup>1</sup>

Then there are the so-called Neo-Calvinists, represented in the much larger Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, associated with Dr A. Kuyper and the Free University, and also in the Liberated or Article 31 Churches, better known as the followers of Dr K Schilder. Although these Liberated churches strongly object to being identified with the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, because there are important differences between them, both



denominations are united in their stand against the Old Calvinists and exhibit a marked aversion to experimental preaching.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, even though experimental preaching has well nigh disappeared from these Neo-Calvinist churches, it is not all that long ago that a mild form of it could still be heard from many of their pulpits. Especially in rural areas people continued to prefer the older type of preaching which searches the heart and explains the way in which the Holy Spirit brings sinners to conviction of sin and a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. As late as 1945, Dr S J Popma observed to his dismay that there were still pietistically coloured congregations 'whose members lacked joyful assurance of faith because they tried to obtain that assurance by grasping at certain marks within themselves.'<sup>3</sup>

### **Exemplary or Redemptive-Historical Preaching**

A decade earlier the Reformed community had been considerably agitated by a prolonged controversy between those advocating 'exemplary' or moralistic preaching and those insisting on, a strictly 'redemptive-historical' approach. The spokesmen for the latter included Dr K Schilder, who may be called the originator of the redemptive-historical method, B Holwerda, C Veenhof, D Van Dijk and J Spier. These men complained about the method most ministers at that time (1920s and 30s) were using in preaching historical texts. Their main objection was that those who used this method tended to hold up historical characters as examples to be followed - hence the term 'exemplary' preaching. They charged that thus no justice could be done to the meaning of the text. 'The point at issue,' said Van Dijk,

is not primarily whether the truths proclaimed are biblical, but whether these truths are actually revealed in the preaching-text. Ministry of the Word ... is to proclaim to the congregation that message which God gives in the text. [Hence] when one studies the text, he must try to discover its special content. That specific content must be preached, not notions--however beautiful--which could equally well be tacked onto other texts.<sup>4</sup>

Defenders of the 'exemplary' method were quick to point out that their opponents with their 'redemptive-historical' approach reduced sermons to dry lectures on Bible history with no relevant application for the hearers. It is not my intention to enter into the details of this controversy, interesting and profitable as this would be. It has to be admitted that the advocates of the 'redemptive-historical' method have raised some very legitimate questions regarding the proper exegesis of Scripture, though in my opinion they went much too far in their rejection of the 'exemplary' approach. The purpose of this paper, however, is to examine the philosophical and theological background to this homiletical controversy.

## The New Direction

It is no coincidence that almost all the representatives of the 'redemptive-historical' school were members of the Association for Calvinistic Philosophy. This Association was formed in 1935, shortly after the publication of Herman Dooyeweerd's *Philosophy of the Law-Idea*.

What characterizes the 'Dooyeweerdians' is an almost excessive concern with culture and the externals of religion and a corresponding de-emphasis on the more inward and spiritual side of religion. The same men who were critical of the 'exemplary' method of preaching also objected to what they regarded as latent pietism with its three daughters: subjectivism, individualism and spiritualism. These, they said, were the historical roots of the Dutch Calvinistic churches, and they saw themselves as the apostles of the 'New Direction'. Over against the alleged subjectivism of the exemplary-minded preachers, they advocated not objectivism, as one might expect, but rather what they termed the 'normative' character of preaching. As Spier, a popularizer of Dooyeweerdianism, puts it: 'The Word of God is neither objective nor subjective... The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation ... it is the dominating *norm* for our lives.' And C Veenhof adds:

Scripture is *kerygma*, address and appeal ... [and] in it God lays hold on us. Scripture may [therefore] never be divorced from the speaking God: it is His Word. Christ is present in the Word; He stands behind it as the divine Logos; the Word is never without His Spirit; Word and Spirit always go together.<sup>5</sup>

## Covenantal Versus Individualistic Preaching

In this way the men of the 'New Direction' sought to overcome the age-old subjective-objective dilemma. How successful has the attempt been? Listen to the following evaluation of Schilder's preaching, first by an opponent and then by an admirer. 'Schilder's sermons were not much different from his lectures, they were intellectualistic in character, and preponderantly objective, and the application merely consisted of "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."' If this sounds exaggerated, here's what a close friend said of Schilder's pulpit work: 'His sermons were always dominated by stringent objectivity; he was averse to all subjectivism and mysticism. He also disliked applications because he realized their worthlessness.'<sup>6</sup>

The second characteristic of pietism as defined by Schilder and his associates, is individualism. This 'disease' they tried to cure with a renewed emphasis on the covenant. The reason why this was thought to be such an effective weapon against individualism becomes clear from the following statement of S G DeGraaf. He says in his book *Promise and Deliverance*,

In the covenant God always draws near to His people as a whole--never just to individuals. Because of the covenant, the entire people rests secure in God's faithfulness, and every individual member of the covenant shares in that rest as a member of the community.<sup>7</sup>

The third characteristic of pietism, according to the men of the 'New Direction', was spiritualism, or as Neo-Calvinists preferred to call it, mysticism. This word became a kind of catch-all term covering everything that was considered undesirable in religion. Mysticism was thought to be responsible for anthropocentrism, the nature-grace dichotomy, introversion, excessive self-examination, lack of assurance, etc., etc. Schilder accused those given to mystical tendencies of turning the attention away from the world outside and closing the eye 'to what God has wrought and will work on the broad highways of redemptive and revelational history.' All that remains, he concluded, 'is God and the soul embracing each other.'<sup>8</sup> He felt that the only way to rid the church of these mystical tendencies was to stress once again the great Reformation theme of *Sola Scriptura*, and to proclaim the relevance of God's Word for all areas of life.

From what has been said so far one could easily conclude that the Reformed Churches in the thirties were full of subjectivists, individualists and mystics, and that the criticisms of Schilder and others were really called for. But were these evils really so widespread in these churches of which Schilder was still a member at that time? No, they were not. There were, indeed, some within the Calvinist camp whose piety was sickly and mystical in the wrong sense of that word. But this was not the case in the major Reformed denominations. What the men of the 'New Direction' were objecting to was not the excesses of a wrong kind of experimental preaching, but rather the remnants of a healthy, biblical experimental preaching which at one time had characterized all of Dutch Calvinism. J H Bavinck, one of the defenders of the 'exemplary' school, diagnosed the real nature of his opponent's attack when he wrote, 'the new spirit is averse to the soul's religious experiences and the inner marks of the Christian.'<sup>9</sup>

### **Objections against Discriminating Preaching**

As might be expected, the New school was also opposed to discriminating preaching, because such preaching assumes that the visible church is made up of converted and unconverted people. While recognizing the possibility that there may be some hypocrites within the congregation, the 'redemptive-historical' men objected vigorously to any preaching which addressed itself to different types of hearers. Here is what the Rev. D Van Dijk wrote:

The preacher who has accepted a confessional church which excommunicates all who demonstrate in their lives that they do not belong to the Lord's congregation, does not have the right to sift the people once more when addressing them... The preacher who does this commits three wrongs: he insults the church of Christ by addressing it as a mixed lot; he harms the church of Christ because believers may begin to doubt and hypocrites tend to close their ears at the familiar refrain; and finally, he retards the upbuilding of the church because his view of the hearers is bound to distort the goal and content of his sermons.<sup>10</sup>

The above statement points up the essential difference between the traditional or Old school Calvinism, and the 'New Direction' or New school Calvinism. These two schools, although having a common origin in the Reformation, may be traced to quite different developments in subsequent Reformed history.

### **Kuyper's Neo-Calvinism**

The 'redemptive-historical' school of preaching, as was pointed out, was and is espoused by men influenced by Dooyeweerd's *Philosophy of the Law-Idea*. This philosophy, in turn, has its roots in the Neo-Calvinism of Dr Abraham Kuyper.

This giant among theologians dominated the whole theological scene in The Netherlands for over forty years (1880-1920). Kuyper was a great man, but as often happens with such men, they can make great mistakes too. His first mistake was to rob theology of its royal dignity as queen of the sciences.

The theological climate in Kuyper's time was influenced by the philosophy of Kant. According to Kant, whatever cannot be known by reason lies outside the realm of science. Only if a science has an object that can be studied empirically, that is, with the senses, it is a true science. Theology, therefore, is not a science, because its object, God, being outside the cosmos, cannot be subjected to scientific investigation. Only if theology can find its object within the cosmos it can make good its claim to being a true science.

Theologians were thus faced with a dilemma. Schleiermacher 'solved' it by changing theology into the science of religion. Kuyper found another solution. He asked himself whether God, as the object of theology, is completely beyond the cosmos, or whether He is in some way also part of it. If so, God would form part of the totality structure, which the various sciences scrutinize. Kuyper thought that this was indeed the case. We can never know God as He is in Himself - He is beyond the cosmos - but He can be known insofar as He has revealed Himself to us in Scripture and in nature. This he called God's 'ectypal revelation', God Himself being the Archetype. This 'revelatio ectypa', Kuyper concluded, may be studied as a science, along with other objects within the cosmos. And the place to study this theological



science, he insisted, was not the seminary, but the university. The church, indeed, may train ministers of the Word, but if such men want to be real theologians, they need to receive a proper, i.e., scientific, university education.

No man understood; more clearly the implications of this new concept of theology than F M Ten Hoor, a contemporary of Kuyper and a minister in the Secession Church of 1834. Ten Hoor warned that if Kuyper's ideas were accepted, theology would eventually be reduced to one among many cosmological sciences, especially if it should only be studied at the University, and not at the Theological school of the Church, as Kuyper insisted.

Ten Hoor was not anti-scientific, but he firmly believed that a clear distinction must be retained between the natural sciences, which have the cosmos as their object, and theology, which has God for its Object. These are two sciences, which in no way may be fused together to form one comprehensive body of scientific knowledge. As to the ectypal knowledge of God, which Kuyper said we obtain from the Scriptures, Ten Hoor denied that this is the sole object of our knowledge. This ectypal revelation is only the *means* whereby God imparts that knowledge to us, but God Himself remains the Object.<sup>11</sup>

Ten Hoor's fears were fully justified. What has happened to the Free University and the Reformed Churches must be traced, at least in part, to Kuyper's views on theology as a science. I'm sure he never intended this, and it would be wrong to blame him for the apostasy that so characterizes the Dutch Reformed Churches today. Kuyper was a God-fearing man, as appears from his devotional writings, but it cannot be denied that his disciples went far beyond their master as they carried his views to their logical conclusion.

### **Presumptive Regeneration**

In connection with this we must speak of another serious error of Kuyper, and that is his doctrine of presumptive regeneration. Kuyper propounded the thesis that children born of believing parents must be presumed to be regenerated and dealt with as such. This soon came to mean that being born into the covenant was almost a guarantee that one would go to heaven. To be sure, Kuyper himself stressed the need for self-examination, but as time went on, the call to soul-searching was heard less and less, until the men of the 'New Direction' called for an end of this practice altogether, for reasons already mentioned. The result was that a new generation of covenant children grew up which never learned the meaning of John 3:3. Many of these children grew up to become ministers, and it is to be feared that not a few of them were strangers to experimental religion.

Here we have, if not *the* cause, then certainly a cause of the present malaise of the Dutch Reformed Churches. When men who have not

experienced the new birth themselves become ministers in the Church of Christ, they will do little more than perpetuate error and emphasize at best only the intellectual side of religion, and not its spiritual or experiential aspects. Preaching will be objective, rather than subjective, and the call to faith will result in people giving mental assent to the truths of Scripture. In other words, there will be historical, rather than saving faith.

Also, in such an environment the 'fruits' of faith are likely to be outwardly oriented, rather than inwardly directed. Where historical faith is mistaken for saving faith, there will be an effort made, of course, to let that faith come to expression. Well, in Neo-Calvinist circles faith has come to expression in an unprecedented interest in and concern for culture and the so-called cultural mandate. As William Young says in his article, 'Historic Calvinism and Neo-Calvinism':

Culture is now understood in the widest possible sense, to include economic and political activity as well as the arts and, thus understood, is made to become the preoccupation of the Reformed Christian. Calvinism ceases to be concerned above all with the sovereign grace of God in the salvation of the elect, but becomes a label to cover aesthetic dilettantism and political activism.<sup>12</sup>

### **Roots of Old School Calvinistic Preaching**

Let us now take- a look at the roots of traditional or historic Calvinistic preaching in The Netherlands. These roots are to be found in both the Reformation of the sixteenth and the Second Reformation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Neo-Calvinists have often charged that everything they found objectionable, such as subjectivism, individualism, marks of grace and discriminating preaching, must all be attributed to the influence of Puritanism and Pietism. These movements, they charge, have steered the Dutch Reformed in the wrong direction, away from the pure Calvinism of Geneva.

It cannot be denied that Dutch Calvinism as it was found in the Reformed Churches prior to Kuyper's ascendancy, and in several denominations even today, has been greatly influenced by Puritanism and to a lesser extent by German Pietism. In so far as these churches had and have their roots in these movements there is warrant for tracing their emphasis on experimental or exemplary preaching to those mighty movements of the Spirit.

Experimental religion, however, did not begin with the Puritans. As F Ernest Stoeffler says in his *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, 'From the days of the apostles we find running through the history of the church what we might call an experiential tradition.'<sup>13</sup> Stoeffler sees this tradition surfacing in the Middle Ages in the mystical and ascetic piety of the monasteries as well as in the many protest movements calling for reformation of morals in the fourteenth



and fifteenth centuries. He sees it also exerting itself in the Protestant Reformation and states that 'neither Luther nor Calvin were free from its grip', and that also the Strasbourg reformers were 'strongly motivated by its influence.'<sup>14</sup>

But it was especially "during the seventeenth century that this experiential line asserted itself throughout Protestantism in the Pietistic movement. Stoeffler, in my opinion, is wrong in lumping together Puritans and Pietists, for although they had much in common, there were also important differences. One of these differences is that whereas Pietism was primarily concerned with the sanctification of the individual believer, Puritanism, at least in its early stages, aimed also at the reformation of the Church as a whole, and society as well. What J I Packer says about the Puritans in England, applies equally well to their spiritual brethren in The Netherlands,

Inheriting the medieval vision of the solidarity of Christian society (*corpus Christianum*), the Puritans saw and felt the unity of life to a degree that moderns find hard to grasp. Their vision of reality was not fragmented; they did not need to argue the point that Christian concern may not be limited to church order or the welfare of individuals, but must embrace both together, along with the politics, economics, and culture of nations, for they took this as axiomatic. Therefore they spent their strength trying to insure that 'holiness to the Lord' could be written in letters of gold over every part of life and relationship--the nation-church's faith and order, the personal state and conduct of each citizen-worshipper and the goals and standards of all community activities.<sup>15</sup>

### **Dutch Puritans and their Concerns**

The Dutch Puritans, even more than their English counterparts, had reason to be thankful for what the Reformation had accomplished in their land. The Reformed Church had become the established Church in The Netherlands, and especially after the great Synod of Dort, sound doctrine was preached from all its pulpits. Yet the more discerning among the Dutch clergy realized that purity of doctrine alone is not sufficient. They knew that unless a sound profession was adorned by a holy walk, the Reformation would eventually lose its hold on the people. Consequently they began to work towards a more thorough-going reformation.

Concerned about the growing number of nominal Christians in the Church, the Puritan-minded preachers began to differentiate between true and false converts and they showed from Scripture the marks of a believer and a hypocrite. That some of these men went too far in their zeal to separate the precious from the vile was to be expected. And that some became disillusioned when they saw that in spite of all their efforts to reform the church and society things remained pretty much the same, so that they gave up and began to withdraw into conventicles of like-minded believers, that too is understandable.

But despite the shortcomings and failures of some of them, the Dutch Puritans on the whole were truly God-fearing men with a real burden for souls and a deep concern for the glory of God.

Characteristic of Dutch Puritan preaching is that it was objective-subjective. They would have agreed wholeheartedly with Archibald Alexander who wrote in the preface to his *Thoughts on Religious Experience*,

There are two kinds of religious knowledge which, although intimately connected as cause and effect, may nevertheless be distinguished. These are the knowledge of the truth as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and the impression which that truth makes on the human mind when rightly apprehended.<sup>16</sup>

This is a thoroughly Calvinistic statement. Dutch Calvinists of the Old school believed, and still believe, that true, biblical preaching ought to be explication and application of God's Word, and by application they do not just mean relevant preaching, in the sense that the preacher should apply his text to everyday life. That, to be sure, has to be done also. But by application they mean rather the subjective appropriation on the part of the hearers of that which is preached. Against the objection of the Neo-Calvinists that such application is the work of the Holy Spirit and should therefore be left to Him, Old Calvinists insist that while it is indeed the Spirit who applies the Word, preachers must so divide the Word that the Spirit has something to apply.

About seventy years ago the Rev. I Kievit, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church (Alliance), and a prominent representative of the Old Calvinist school of preaching, wrote a book entitled *Objective-Subjective Preaching: The Demand of Holy Scripture*. In this book the author first explains the philosophical distinction between objective and subjective and then says this about objective preaching:

Objective preaching speaks about faith, conversion, repentance, God, salvation, and Christ. It deals with the truth, but it is without life and without experience. There is no heartbeat in such preaching. The preacher delivers an essay or discourse, but it is dead and spiritless. Such preaching petrifies and genders pride, for historical faith is considered to be saving faith. In fact, objective preaching is not administration of the Word. For it does not explain how Christ becomes the possession of the sinner. Of course, the preacher will say that it is by faith, but how that faith is worked by grace or how it is exercised, you don't hear.

And then he gives this advice to ministers of the Word:

The preacher must not only point to Christ and speak of the promises that are given, but he must also speak about the exercises of the heart in regard to the appropriation of the promises and their fulfilment in our life. The preacher must not only explain who Christ is and for whom He came into the world, but he must

also point out the way that leads to Christ. He must not only point to the necessity of Christ, but also how Christ and the lost sinner are brought together, how [all italics in this quotation mine, C.P.] this faith relationship is established, and how Christ makes room for Himself in the sinner's heart. Many of these elements are missing in sermons today and therefore the people receive stones for bread and they start to look elsewhere for food. Of course, the objective element comes first. We can and may only draw the fulness of the objective truths from Scripture. But the subjective experiences and exercises may never be forgotten. These things also belong to the body of the sermon. If they are missing, the sermon cannot be called Scriptural.<sup>17</sup>

These excerpts clearly show that this minister stood firmly in the Puritan Reformed tradition. That tradition, however, does not begin in the seventeenth century with the fathers of Dort, as some charge, but with Calvin and the other Reformers. It is very significant that most of the quotations in Kievit's book are not from representatives of the Second Reformation, as one would expect, but rather from John Calvin. For instance, he quotes the great Reformer as saying this about the purpose of preaching:

The end of the whole Gospel ministry is that God, the fountain of all felicity, communicate Christ to us who are separated from God by sin and hence ruined, that we may from Him enjoy eternal life; that in a word, all heavenly treasures be so applied to us that they be no less ours than Christ's Himself.<sup>18</sup>

### **Calvin's View of Preaching**

Calvin believed that in the preaching of the Word there are two ministers at work: the external minister who holds forth the vocal word which is received by the ears, and the internal minister or Holy Spirit, who 'by His secret virtue effects in the hearts of whomsoever He will their union with Christ through faith.'<sup>19</sup> Apart from this applicatory work of the Holy Spirit, Calvin says, 'Christ remains of no value to us, and therefore at a great distance from us.'<sup>20</sup> It is the Spirit who takes the Christ 'out there' and brings him to us, causing him to dwell in our hearts by faith, which he works in us by his secret operation. Thus Calvin clearly distinguished between the objective and the subjective aspects of preaching; therefore those who try to do away with this distinction cannot appeal to him for support.

The men of the 'New Direction' were fully aware that Calvin followed the exemplary method of preaching. D Van Dyk credits J Douma with irrefutably and clearly demonstrating that the reformer of Geneva 'considered himself to be called by God to preach sacred history in an exemplary manner', and that 'not only Calvin but all the Reformed preachers held that conviction'<sup>21</sup> But this admission did not dissuade them from levelling a scathing critique on that time honoured method

Another characteristic of Dutch Calvinistic preaching of the Old school is that it is discriminating. While Neo-Calvinists maintain that preachers have no right to separate between those who have made profession of faith lest they should cause believers to doubt their state, the Old Calvinists insist on such separation. Dr. H Bavinck, who came out of the Old Calvinist school of the Secession of 1834, followed Kuyper in many things, but he disagreed with his colleague's doctrine of presumptive regeneration, which fostered this non-discriminatory preaching. In his book *Calling and Regeneration*, he warns against a type of preaching that assumes that all professing believers in a given congregation are saved. Because such preaching proceeds from the ideal, it fails to appreciate reality and ignores the lessons of history. The result is that faith in the confession is confused with the confession of faith, and a dead orthodoxy, which contents itself with an intellectual consent to doctrine is fostered. Under such preaching, Bavinck warns, there is but little concern about the disposition of the heart and the purity of life. As Israel rested on its descent from Abraham and on the temple that was in their midst, so many members of the New Testament church are beginning to build their hopes for eternity on the external ecclesiastical privileges wherein they share: baptism, confession, the Lord's Supper, and thus they fall into a false complacency. Although the church is a gathering of true believers in Christ, there must yet constantly go forth in her midst the summons to faith and repentance.<sup>22</sup>

Again, the above statements of Bavinck have their roots, not just in Puritanism which, as we know, favored a discriminating ministry, but also in the Reformation and in Calvin. Both in his commentaries and his *Institutes* he makes clear that he does not believe that all who profess Christ are truly in Christ. For instance, commenting on Acts 11:23, which tells of Barnabas exhorting believers to cleave unto the Lord with purpose of heart, Calvin says this:

We learn from Barnabas' definition of the way to persevere, as continuing with purpose of heart, that faith has put down living roots only when it is grounded in the heart. Accordingly it is no wonder that hardly one in ten of the number of those who profess the faith persevere right to the end, since very few know the meaning of good-will and purpose of heart.<sup>23</sup>

And on Psalm 119:101, where David says, 'I have refrained my feet from every evil way, that I might keep Thy word', Calvin says this:

Though all, without exception, to whom God's Word is preached, are taught, yet scarce one in ten so much as tastes it; yea, scarce one in a hundred profits to the extent of being enabled, thereby, to proceed in a right course to the end."<sup>24</sup>

Commenting on Psalm 15:1, 'Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill?' he writes,

David saw the temple crowded with a great multitude of men who all made a profession of the same religion, and presented themselves before God as to the outward ceremony; and, therefore, assuming the person of one wondering at the spectacle, he directs his discourse to God, who, in such a confusion and medley of characters, could easily distinguish his own people from strangers.

And then Calvin applies it this way:

As we too often see the Church of God defaced by much impurity, to prevent us from stumbling at what appears so offensive, a distinction is made between those who are permanent citizens of the Church, and strangers--who are mingled among them for a time. God's sacred barn-floor will not be perfectly cleansed before the last day, when Christ at His coming will cast out the chaff; but He has already begun to do this by the doctrine of His gospel, which on this account He terms a fan.<sup>25</sup>

### **Calvin and Covenant Membership**

Neo-Calvinists, as we saw, try to combat individualism with a renewed emphasis on the doctrine of the covenant, and they often appeal to Calvin, who, they claim, also stressed the importance of this key doctrine of Scripture. This is true, but unlike some of his modern disciples, Calvin did not make membership in the covenant a kind of eternal life insurance. He taught, indeed, that as Abraham and his seed were adopted into the covenant of grace, so New Testament believers and their children were included in the same covenant. He even called covenant membership a general election, which he, however, distinguished from particular election. In a sermon on Deuteronomy 10:15-17 Calvin explains his view on the covenant this way:

But meanwhile let us note that there has been a general election which pertains to all the people [the Jews], which deserves to be highly esteemed; however, it does not profit unless each one for his own part is participating in it... See here ... the election of God whereby he puts such difference between the lineage of Abraham and all the rest of the world... Lo, here is an election which pertains in general to all the children of Abraham, but it was necessary that such a grace was to be ratified by faith... For we see that many of them were cut off... Now, then, the election of God which extended itself to all the people was not sufficient, but it was necessary that each one should be a participant of it for himself. How? By faith. But let us see from whence faith proceeds: God has willed to confirm his grace in those in whom it pleased him to do so... Lo, here a double election of God. The one extends itself to all the people, because circumcision was given indifferently to all ... and the promises likewise were common. However, it is necessary that God add a second grace, namely, that he touches the hearts of his elect ... and these come to him, and he causes them to receive the good which is offered them.<sup>26</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

Membership in the covenant or visible Church, then, while a great



blessing and privilege, is not enough. There has to be faith and all other things that accompany salvation, such as repentance, sorrow for sin, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, a close walk with God, and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. These things must be insisted on in our preaching. For unless it comes to what the Puritans called a 'closing with Christ', unless we as wretched and undone sinners learn to cast ourselves on God's mercy revealed in His dear Son, yes, unless God embraces our souls and accepts us in the Beloved, our religion is but a shell, and an outward show. The men of the 'New Direction' may call this sickly mysticism but without this experimental, that is individual, personal and intimate heart knowledge, we remain dry and dead bones that no amount of exegetically correct preaching can bring to life.

We can learn much from the redemptive-historical method of preaching, but we make a colossal mistake if we neglect the exemplary and moral aspects of biblical proclamation. Without pointed, serious yet warm and loving application, the sermon may instruct the mind, but it will not reach the heart in a life-changing, saving way. As Dr. Jay Adams warns,

When the minister of the Word reduces a sermon to little more than a biblical-theological lecture (or meditation), he is no more preaching than if he were delivering a lecture on systematic theology."<sup>27</sup>

The Old Calvinists understood this. Therefore they preached as they did, with a sense of urgency, knowing that the eternal destiny of their hearers was at stake. Richard Baxter was wont to say:

*I preached as never sure to preach again,  
And as a dying man to dying men.*

Baxter's preaching and that of many Puritans was a Spirit-anointed and Spirit-dependent preaching, 'not...in word only but also in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance.' (1 Thessalonians 1:5). That kind of preaching has been blessed by God for centuries, not just during Puritan times or the Reformation era, but from the days of the apostles. Such preaching cannot be learned in even the best seminaries and universities, but only in the school and at the feet of Him who calls to the ministry only those who are first converted themselves, before they go out to convert others. May the Lord thrust forth many such labourers into His harvest (Luke 10:2).



## Notes

- 1 The Reformed Alliance no longer exists in a formal sense because the Dutch Reformed Church, together with the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, associated with Abraham Kuyper (GKN), and the Lutheran Church of the Netherlands have formed a new denomination, the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PKN). Most of the Alliance churches have decided to go along with this merger, be it with great reluctance and after much protest. A small number of these churches, however, could not in good conscience join this new denomination and have reorganized themselves under the name Restored Reformed Church (HHK).
- 2 William Young, 'Historical Calvinism and Neo-Calvinism', in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol.XXXVI, Fall 1973, No.1, p.48.
- 3 Quoted by Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, p.36.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.42.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp.153,154.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.180.
- 7 S G DeGraaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, Vol. I, p.24.
- 8 Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, p.38.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.87.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.97.
- 11 See C Pronk, *F M Ten Hoor: Defender of Secession Principles against Abraham Kuyper's Doleantie Views*, Th.M. thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987, pp.73-75;91-97.
- 12 William Young, 'Historic Calvinism and Neo-Calvinism', in *WTJ*, Vol.XXXVII, Winter 1974, No.2, p.169.
- 13 F Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, p.6.
- 14 *Ibid.* p.7.
- 15 J I Packer, 'Foreword', *Introduction to Puritan Theology*, Edited by Edward Hinson, p.10.
- 16 A Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, p.xvii.
- 17 I Kieviet, *Voorwerpelijke-Onderwerpelijke Prediking, Eisch der Heilige Schrift*, pp.62-65.
- 18 J Calvin: *Theological Treatises*, Edited By J.K.S. Reid, p.171.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.173.
- 20 J Calvin, *Institutes*, III,1,3.
- 21 Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, p.29.
- 22 Summarized by A Hoekema, 'Two Types of Preaching', *Reformed Journal*, May 1966.
- 23 J Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. I, p.330.
- 24 J Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, The Psalms*, Vol.IV, p.477.
- 25 *Ibid.*, Vol.V, p.249.
- 26 Quoted by A Hoekema, 'The Covenant of Grace in Calvin's Teaching', in *Calvin Theological Journal*, Vol.2, No.2, November 1967, p.151.
- 27 Quoted by Geoffrey Thomas, "Learning from the Life of Dr. Klaas Schilder," Part IV, *Banner of Truth Website*: [www.banneroftruth.org](http://www.banneroftruth.org), 'Articles'.

## Bibliography

Alexander, Archibald. *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967).

Calvin, John. *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries. The Acts of the Apostles*, 1-13. Ed. David W. Torrence and Thomas F Torrence (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965).

Calvin, John. *Calvin's Commentaries. The Book of Psalms*, Vols. IV and V (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963).

John Calvin. *Calvin: Theological Treatises*. The Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition, Ed. J K S Reid (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954).

De Graaf, S G. *Promise and Deliverance*. Vol. I, translated by H. Evan Runner and Elizabeth Wichers Runner (St. Catharines: Paidea Press, 1977).

Greidanus, Sidney. *Sola Scriptura* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1970).

Hindson, Edward. *Introduction to Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, 1976).

Kieviet, I. *Voorwerpelijke-Onderwerpelijke Prediking, Eisch der Heilige Schrift* (Huizen: J. N. Bout, 1936).

Pronk, Cornelis. *F.M. Ten Hoor: Defender of Seccessionist Principles against Abraham Kuiper's Doleantie Views*, Th. M. Thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987.

Stoeffler, F. Ernest. *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971).

## BOOK REVIEWS

*'An Iron Pillar' The life and times of William Romaine*, Tim Shenton, Evangelical Press, 2004, hbk., 463 pp., £16.95.

Tim Shenton, author of this new biography of William Romaine, has thoroughly researched his subject, as is attested by the thirteen pages of bibliography. He therefore brings an authentic scholarship to this study which gives the reader confidence in the details included and the applications which are made.

William Romaine is perhaps best known today for his work *The Life, Walk and Triumph of Faith* but the lasting influence of his preaching certainly equalled and probably surpassed that of his writing. He was born in 1714, the same year which witnessed the birth of several other prominent preachers of the eighteenth century - George Whitefield, Howell Harris, Samuel Walker and James Hervey.

Romaine was born in Hartlepool in the north east of England, but spent the years of his ministry in London, principally in two congregations, St Dunstan's and Blackfriars. He was deeply attached to the Church of England and sometimes demonstrated an apparent intolerance of all other denominations. Indeed one criticism with which the author deals is that Romaine had a brusque manner and was very outspoken in defence of his views. Not infrequently he had to seek out individuals and apologize for his rudeness.

Certainly he loved the truth of the Gospel and was decidedly Calvinistic in his theology. For years he stood almost alone in the capital city as a champion of Reformed truth and as a consequence drew both great support and considerable opposition.

Romaine was convinced of the principle of exclusive Psalmody in public worship and defended the position vigorously, notably against the hymn writer Isaac Watts. 'The Book of Psalms,' said Romaine, 'treats of Christ and contains the praises of the Father's love and of the Spirit's grace as they were manifested in the Person and work of Jesus Christ.' He stood against the rising popularity of hymn singing in worship services: 'My complaint is against preferring men's poems to the good Word of God.'

The challenges of his life are many. We note two of them:

He demonstrated a seriousness and a diligent use of time in his approach to ministry. The author states that 'he could not tolerate idle, godless chatter. This he regarded as a waste of time. He had a fixed rule for living: "Here is a new day, what lies before me to be done?"' He remained a serious student

throughout his life and believed that the reading of good books was essential to Christian growth.

He was motivated in his work by love for Christ. Romaine's sermons are full of Christ. He preaches and writes with evident delight in his Saviour. One of his colleagues, preaching following his death, concluded, 'I am bound to say, to the best of my knowledge, no-one in all London, either in the establishment or out of it, did or could preach Christ more constantly, sweetly and successfully than this aged father in Christ.'

The author clearly has a high regard for his subject and has been painstaking in his research. In the view of this reviewer, however, there are times when the details of the research obscure the flow of the story.

That said, there is undoubtedly much in this biography to warm the heart and encourage the spirit. Romaine's preaching was expository and simple and his sermons quite short. He 'is one of the few ministers who completed a commentary on the whole Bible in a course of evening lectures in one place.' He saw many conversions but remained humble and grateful to God for the privilege of preaching. He had little regard for his own abilities: 'I have seen enough of His glory to be ashamed of myself. I reprobate all my services and if I were to begin again I would shoot higher.' Romaine lived through a period of revival and it is of particular value to read of God's power at work through the preaching of His Word.

Knox Hyndman

*The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, Austin Walker, Joshua Press (U.K.: Evangelical Press), 2004, pbk., 423 pp, \$Can 25.

Benjamin Keach, not even mentioned, for example, in the *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, has been unjustly neglected by church historians, with no full-length biography appearing until this volume, published on the 300th anniversary of his death. Yet he was a leader among the Particular Baptists, a preacher of the gospel for 46 years and pastor of a growing and influential congregation in Southwark, later to be shepherded by John Gill and C H Spurgeon.

Born into the Church of England in 1640 in Buckinghamshire, Keach was converted at 15 and soon began to preach among the General Baptists, coming to see infant baptism as 'one of the chief Pillars of the Romish Church, and of all National Churches and Constitutions in the European World' (p.60). The restoration of Charles II in 1660 resulted in persecution for Dissenters and Keach was to experience both the pillory and several periods in prison for his testimony.

Embracing Calvinism, he ministered among the Particular Baptists, moving to London in 1668 and remaining there until his death. He was a faithful preacher, an energetic pastor and a courageous controversialist, exercising a wide and increasing influence, particularly in the extensive writings of the last 15 years of his life, few of which are still in print.

Keach has been described as the 'first to introduce the regular singing of hymns into the normal worship of an English congregation' (p.289) and this resulted in a sharp and painful controversy, mostly over the propriety of singing at all in worship. He himself penned a number of hymns, many, it has to be said, of indifferent merit. What strikes this reviewer, however, is the extreme slenderness of the scriptural evidence upon which so momentous a change was based.

One of his most significant controversies was the battle against the Neonomianism of Richard Baxter, the teaching that the basis of one's personal saving righteousness is obedience to a 'new law' brought in by Christ, of saving faith and holy living. Keach cogently and perceptively rebutted this perversion of the gospel which was to bear such bitter fruit in English Nonconformity. At a time when the biblical doctrine of justification is again under assault from 'New Covenant Nomism' and other aberrations, Keach's analysis of Baxterianism takes on a new relevance.

Austin Walker writes in a fluent and interesting style and sets before us a fascinating portrait, 'warts and all', of this brave, passionate and committed minister. Though not in the first rank of Christian leaders, Benjamin Keach is a figure whose life may be read with profit, especially by those with an interest in early Baptist history. The inclusion of an index would have increased the book's usefulness.

*I Believe in The Holy Spirit*, Michael Green, Victor, Revised edition 2004, pbk., 350 pp, £9.99.

This is in many ways a depressing book. Originally issued as the first in the influential 'I Believe' series, it has sold prolifically, was revised in 1984, again in the 1990s and now with a new publisher. Michael Green is a distinguished New Testament scholar and superb communicator and has read widely in this field. He has many helpful things to say about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Beginning with the Spirit in the Old Testament, he moves to the Spirit of Jesus, then the Spirit in mission, in the individual and in the Church. Chapters on the baptism, the fulness and the gifts of the Spirit lead on to an assessment of the charismatic movement, and the book concludes with a summary of the present state of the Church and possibilities for the future. One would need to be unusually well-informed not to derive instruction from these pages.

Why then the negative assessment? Because Green's book illustrates the

almost complete capitulation of neo-evangelicalism to charismatic teachings and practices – not always in the sense of agreeing with them, but from the perspective of accepting them as valid expressions of Christianity, to be made room for and indeed welcomed within the fellowship of the Church. He accepts tongue-speaking, miraculous healings, exorcism and prophecy as gifts for the Church of today and his aim is ‘to provide a bridge between those who find themselves divided by the renewal movement’ (p.8).

Michael Green is not uncritical of charismatic beliefs. His assessments are often penetrating, sometimes devastating. These are, however, weakened in their impact by his determination to maintain a Panglossian optimism regarding the multifarious charismatic manifestations. Almost everything is welcomed, any mild slap on the wrist soon swallowed up in a rose-coloured geniality.

This benevolence is not extended to those unpersuaded by the validity of charismatic claims. They are ‘very scared of allowing that these gifts of the Spirit... might be expected to occur today’ (p.269) – ‘heavily infected by the rationalism of the Enlightenment... unduly cerebral’ (p.270). Like fierce dogs, their ‘hackles rise... Fear is one reason, and a very unworthy one at that’ (p.271). Such denigration is unworthy of Christian controversy. We are surely obliged in love to offer those from whom we may differ the courtesy of accepting that they may be acting from sincere conviction.

Green can be cavalier in his interpretation of Scripture, as when he makes the astonishing assertion that ‘Drunkenness, or being so full of the Spirit that the limbs are uncoordinated, is also to be found in Scripture (Jer.23:9; Acts 2:13; Eph.5:18)’ (p.321). He persists in setting up a false dichotomy between Word and Spirit, with, for example, a facile inveighing against ‘the strait-jacket of Protestantism, confining the Spirit to an article in the Creed’ (p.283). He appears ignorant of the massive emphasis on the Spirit in Reformation theology, as in the writings of Calvin, ‘theologian of the Holy Spirit’, or the Westminster Divines. One cannot help wondering to what extent his theology is influenced by pragmatism, revealingly displayed on page 270: ‘It is perfectly evident *from the widespread growth* (emphasis reviewer) of the Pentecostal church and the neo-Pentecostal movement in the last one hundred years that God has poured out these gifts in rich measure on his people, rationalistic and sceptical though we have been about them’.

His book, as a whole, is a wake-up call to Reformed Christianity. Our weaknesses are patent, the poverty of our Christian experience often driving unsatisfied believers into the arms of falsehood. The charismatic movement is not going to go away. Instead, it bids fair to steamroller all before it. If it is in error, as historic Christian theology claims, we need to explain this more cogently and persuasively than has yet been done and to demonstrate by our lives the beauty and power of life in the Spirit.

Edward Donnelly



*Holy Land, Holy City: Sacred Geography and the Interpretation of the Bible*, Robert P Gordon, Paternoster Press, 2004, pbk., 162 pp., £14.99.

This is a scholarly work from the hand of the Regius Professor of Hebrew at the University of Cambridge, who is well known in Old Testament circles for his commentary on 1 & 2 Samuel. The bulk of the material first saw the light of day in the form of public lectures - the Didsbury Lectures in 2001 and the annual Semitic Studies Lecture at Queen's University, Belfast, in 2003.

The theme of the work is what the writer calls 'non-literal' or 'sacred geography' and he defines this as follows:- 'Basically, what I call "Sacred Geography" comes into play when the literal, geographical facts of a case are disregarded by a biblical text in order to express some further, or higher, truth.' For those of us who hold to divine inspiration of the text of Scripture and all that follows from this, the implications of this statement may immediately cause some concern. The present reviewer would take issue with Gordon for his apparent proclivity towards critical views. For example, in chapter one he asserts that 'sacred geography' is 'a useful category to bring to the study of Gen.1-11', and he gives space to a view which sees Genesis 2:10-14 as 'belonging to the realm of the supramundane'. In chapter two he suggests that the 'anachronistic concept of the "holy land"... has been introduced into the story of Cain and Abel'. In chapter four he sees the presence of 'mythical elements' in Psalm 48. He himself admits that the first four chapters deal 'with issues perhaps of more interest to old Testament specialists' and this is so.

The second half of the book (chapters 5-9) is much more readable, with many fascinating insights into church history, as he shows how the topography of Jerusalem and its environs have affected the spirituality of both Jew and Gentile over the centuries. He comes to measured and sane judgments on several controversial matters such as the predicted end-time pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem. The highlight for the reviewer was the discussion in the eighth chapter on Zionism and the modern Jewish state and its postscript on the human cost of misinterpreting symbolic texts that may well be vulnerable to ignorance or party spirit. The book then comes to a worthy climax with a focus on Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman at Sychar to show how true Christian worship now utterly transcends place.

All in all this was a fascinating and stimulating read.

Norris Wilson

*Christ's Churches Purely Reformed. A Social History of Calvinism*, Philip Benedict, Yale University Press, 2002, hbk., 670 pp., £30.00.

Philip Benedict, Professor of History and Religion at Brown

University and specialist in the study of the Huguenots, has produced in *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed* a comprehensive survey of the history of Calvinism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which will be of great value to anyone interested in this subject. One of the strengths of the book is the author's attention to eastern as well as western Europe, thus giving a balanced view of the progress of Calvinism across the continent.

Part I, 'The Formation of a Tradition', begins with the rise of an alternative to Luther's reforming work in the person of Zwingli in Zürich. This is followed by an examination of the work of Bullinger and the development of Reformed ideas in the (German) Empire. A study of the ministry of Calvin himself closes this section.

Part II, 'The Expansion of a Tradition', examines in turn France, Scotland, the Netherlands, the Empire, England and Eastern Europe, detailing the development of the Calvinistic movement in several very different settings. In some cases the religious changes were imposed by government authority, in others the movement was more from 'the grass roots', and this was to affect significantly the way in which national movements responded to later challenges and persecution.

Part III, 'The Transformations of a Tradition', considers some of the difficulties which began to become apparent especially as the seventeenth century dawned. Benedict examines in detail the challenges posed by the views of, among others, Amyraut and Arminius, by the philosophy stemming from Descartes and the rise of rationalism, and by the new attitudes to the Bible among sceptical scholars. Political changes in Europe are also considered, particularly the persecution of Calvinists in Hungary, Poland and France. There is also a substantial treatment of events in England and Scotland during a century which brought a series of radical changes to the churches.

Part IV, 'New Calvinist Men and Women', considers three vital aspects of Calvinistic church life: the ministry, church discipline and the practice of piety. These chapters are full of fascinating information and serve to show the diversity evident within and among Calvinistic churches, such that it is often impossible to define the Reformed attitude to a particular issue. Benedict concludes this section by reconsidering common views of the social effects of Calvinism in, for example, the realm of economics, and questions some of the received wisdom on these matters.

Benedict's scholarship is right up to date, and his bibliographies and notes are a treasure-trove of information and pointers for further study. In particular he makes considerable use of the most recent studies of local religious practice, which often shed light, either confirming or debunking, on familiar generalisations. He is not afraid to swim against the currently favoured tide of scholarship, for example in questioning some of the views of Pre-Reformation English religion propounded by Eamon Duffy (in *The Stripping of the Altars*)

and others. Inevitably any scholar writing on so many different situations has often to depend on the work of a host of others, and so there is scope for disagreement with some of Benedict's descriptions and views. The dissenting position of the Covenanters after the Revolution Settlement, for example, receives no mention, although there is later a reference to 'Cameronians' which is not explained.

Such quibbles, however, are no more than that. Benedict's writing is a pleasure to read and is endlessly informative. He writes within the conventions of academia, where divine action does not figure as an explanation for events, yet all the facts are here for those who wish to discern a higher hand at work. Benedict is, on his own profession, an agnostic Jew, but he has written a most even-handed study of the development of Calvinism. There is much in the story for which to give thanks, as well as much sobering material that should give pause for deep reflection and self-examination.

*The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, Edited by Thomas Harding, with new introductions by George Ella and Joel R Beeke, Reformation Heritage Books, 2004, hbk., 2 Volumes, cccviii + 432 pp. and 590 pp., \$65.00.

A number of Swiss Reformers, such as Heinrich ('Henry') Bullinger, have been unfairly overshadowed by the towering figure of John Calvin. Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Bullinger and others did sterling work for the cause of Christ in Switzerland and much further afield. As Zwingli's successor in Zürich, Bullinger (1504-75) exercised a very fruitful ministry in that city and was responsible for drafting the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), which is still a doctrinal standard in several Continental Reformed churches. He worked closely with Calvin on, for example, the right understanding of the Lord's Supper, the result being the significant *Consensus Tigurensis*. He also played an important role in the English Reformation, corresponding with a number of leading Reformers and exercising a moderating influence on occasion, and personally sheltering English refugees from Marian persecution.

After prolonged neglect, Bullinger has more recently become the object of renewed scholarly interest. The focus has been chiefly on his covenant theology, with some arguing that he is the source of an 'alternative' covenant tradition to that flowing from Calvin, and others disagreeing vigorously. Bullinger's greatest influence, however, has been through his *Decades*, and so this reprint of the nineteenth century Parker Society translation of his major work is especially welcome.

The *Decades* consist of five series of ten sermons each (hence the title) covering many of the main areas of Christian doctrine. It is possible that they were originally delivered to an audience of pastors, although this is

uncertain and the length of the later chapters raises some doubt about this theory. Their goal was to train ministers in sound doctrine and to give them patterns for good preaching. Whatever their origin, they provided an excellent textbook of Reformed doctrine which was translated into several other languages soon after publication and circulated very widely across Europe.

The First Decade deals with Scripture, faith, justification, the Apostle's Creed and the commandments of Jesus. The Second and Third Decades expound at length the Ten Commandments and consider other issues such as the ceremonial and judicial laws, the use of the law, Christian liberty and sin. The Fourth Decade covers grace and repentance, God's providence and predestination, the Son of God, the Holy Spirit, good and evil spirits, and the soul. The Fifth Decade examines the nature of the church, the ministry and the means of grace, including prayer and the sacraments. It is interesting that the covenant theme plays a relatively small part in the theology set out in the *Decades*.

These sermons are of more than historical value: they expound the Reformed Faith in a thorough and helpful way, and provide food for the reader's soul. The fact that the translation was first published in 1587 should not deter readers in the least. The spelling has been regularised and the translation is no more difficult to read than is the Authorised Version of the Bible.

Additional helpful features of the Reformation Heritage edition are a lengthy biography of Bullinger by historian George Ella and a survey of the theology of the *Decades* by Joel Beeke. This is a most valuable addition to resources for the study of the Reformation and for the appropriation of its spiritual riches.

David McKay

*Princeton and Preaching: Archibald Alexander and the Christian Ministry*, James M Garretson, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005, hbk., 304 pp., £16.75.

The Presbyterian Church, USA, could never have imagined the enormous blessing that would arise from the decision, by their General Assembly in 1812, to appoint Archibald Alexander as the first professor of their church's seminary at Princeton. The seminary began in August 1812 with Alexander lecturing to his class of three students in his home at Mercer Street. From these small beginnings, Old Princeton developed into the foremost Reformed Seminary of the 19th century. From a human perspective Princeton's renown owes much to its first professor, whom church historian, John DeWitt, describes as 'one of the loftiest, purest and simplest characters with one of the largest and best disciplined intellects the American Church has produced'.

Dr James Garretson has been of immense service to the church in the 21st century by making accessible to this generation of ministers and theological students a collection of the unpublished lecture notes of Alexander. Dr Garretson brings these notes to life by interspersing them with his own pithy comments as well as some vivid testimonies from students who sat under this eminent professor.

The contents of the book are set out in eleven chapters which form the outline of a course in Pastoral Theology and Homiletics, with the emphasis being on Preaching. Although prepared for students in the 1800s there is nothing antiquated about Alexander's notes because his scholarship was based on the living and enduring Word of God and the emphasis in his lectures is entirely Christocentric.

Alexander put great emphasis on the importance of an educated ministry. Garretson opens up for his readers Alexander's rationale:

In Alexander's view, learning enriches the minister and enhances his effectiveness in ministry. While some in Alexander's day decried the need for the kind of extended study that he advocated, he assured his students that learning is not an impediment to effectiveness in ministry. On the contrary, men of lesser attainments were more apt to use complicated language to communicate concepts they had not grasped. Educated men were more likely to exercise perspicuous simplicity in their instruction.

This emphasis in the book is particularly relevant today, as some sections of the Church despise the need for scholarship in preparation for the work of the ministry.

It becomes clear from the notes that Alexander had a deep experimental knowledge of the human heart, which led him to be described as a 'theologian of the heart'. As Garretson puts it,

It has been said that his heart was in his preaching and his hearers were in his heart. They knew it and felt it; it was this passionate preaching that drew them into the circumference of Christ's love.

This dimension to preaching is often missing today. Twenty-first century ministers, by picking up and using Alexander's approach to preaching, could greatly increase their usefulness in the service of Christ. Charles Hodge, Alexander's contemporary at Princeton, recognized that Alexander's experimental preaching is the kind of discriminating, applicatory preaching that is necessary for spiritual renewal in the Church.

The final chapter of this extremely useful book is an analysis of the secret behind Alexander's eminence. In Garretson's opinion it comes down to two things: his love for Christ and his love of the Scriptures. He writes:

Alexander was a man in love with Christ. He never replaced his personal relationship with Christ with book learning or activism on behalf of his Redeemer's kingdom. Alexander was a learned and active man but he never forgot his first love. ... This explains Alexander's passion for the things of Christ; it is the source of Alexander's love for the church and his love for the lost.

Alexander read many books and mastered many disciplines, but he studied the Bible most, reading, we are informed, his Greek New Testament with ease. This meant that his heart and mind were thoroughly suffused with Scripture, giving him, in large measure, 'the mind of Christ' and 'the wisdom of Christ'.

It is impossible to speak too highly of this volume. It should quickly find its way onto the required reading list of Pastoral Theology courses in Reformed Seminaries throughout the world. Not only will this book be extremely helpful to students preparing for the ministry, but it will be invaluable to men in the ministry reminding them of the disciplines essential to their high calling.

Robert McCollum



## BOOK NOTICES

*Triumph over Temptation*, John Owen, Edited by James M Houston, Victor, 2005, pbk., 224 pp., £8.99.

*Watch your Walk*, Richard Baxter, Edited by James M Houston, Victor, 2005, pbk., 224 pp., £8.99.

*Faith beyond Feelings*, Jonathan Edwards, Edited by James M Houston, Victor, 2005, pbk., 254 pp., £8.99.

These abridged and rewritten versions of the classics, *Sin and Temptation*, *The Reformed Pastor and Religious Affections* are intended to introduce these seminal works to a new readership. As such they are to be warmly welcomed. Purists may sniff, but we need to face the fact that the contemporary Christian public needs to be taught again to read, and such modern versions may well serve not only to edify but to kindle an enthusiasm for going back to the richer originals. James Houston has done a masterly work of editing, simplifying and presenting the material in an attractive and accessible format. Each volume begins with an editor's note, setting the work in context, followed by introductions from J I Packer, Richard Halverson and Charles Colson respectively, testifying to how they have profited from the book concerned. A readers' guide at the end raises questions for discussion and reflection. Here is rich spiritual food, immensely valuable to the thoughtful, meditative reader.

Edward Donnelly

*The Reformation Study Bible, English Standard Version*, R C Sproul, General Editor, Ligonier Ministries, 2005, hbk., 1948pp., \$39.00. (Distributed by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company). Black and burgundy leather-bound editions are available at \$69.

This volume does for the English Standard Version what The Geneva Study Bible did for the New King James Version. It brings together a Bible translation which has gained wide respect in the conservative evangelical community and a series of explanatory notes written by eminent Reformed scholars which will enable readers to gain a better understanding of the Bible's

message. Each book is provided with an introduction dealing with matters of authorship, date and content. Thousands of footnotes cover historical, cultural and theological issues which can be dealt with in a short paragraph. Some weightier theological matters are examined in ninety-six longer 'Theological Notes' placed at appropriate places in the text. These cover issues such as the image of God, divine sovereignty, the atonement and the authority of Scripture. All are written from a clearly Reformed standpoint, exhibiting a reverent attitude to Scripture. A number of maps, together with charts dealing with, for example, the ages of the patriarchs, Israel's annual feasts and the plans of the Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple, will also prove to be helpful. The fact that the explanatory material is explicitly 'Reformed' of course does not mean that every statement will command complete agreement. There is scope for other interpretations, as in the view offered of the opening verses of Genesis 6, to take but one example, and the diversity of views on a book like Revelation is fully recognised. For preachers, the study notes are no substitute for specialist commentaries on the biblical text, but nevertheless *The Reformation Study Bible* will be of great help to all Bible readers and can be warmly recommended.

*The Sacred Rhetoric of the Holy Spirit. A Study of Puritan Preaching in a Pneumatological Perspective*, Tae-Hyeun Park, Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn, 2005, hbk., 429 pp., €19.99.

This doctoral thesis, written in English by a Korean for a Dutch institution (the Theological University of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands), provides a comprehensive overview of the Puritan approach to preaching. In particular the role of the Holy Spirit in the preparation, delivery and hearing of sermons is examined. Park takes as his main focus three outstanding Puritan preachers – William Perkins, Richard Sibbes and John Flavel – but also sets them in the wider context of the period, with chapters on the Reformed Church of England, on English Puritanism and on the Westminster Standards. The three key preachers are considered in detail, with copious quotations from their writings, which Park has evidently mastered thoroughly. He demonstrates how, in each case, the Holy Spirit is regarded as crucial in every aspect of preaching. In his conclusion Park draws some brief practical lessons from his study. The thesis is well written, with the fact that it has not been written by a native English speaker not at all evident. It contains a wealth of information on the Puritan understanding of preaching and deserves a wide readership. (The reviewer should perhaps admit that he was a member of the Committee of Examination for this thesis).

*The glory of the atonement. Biblical, Theological and Practical Perspectives*, edited by Charles E Hill and Frank A James III, Apollos, 2004, pbk., 495 pp., £19.99.

The biblical doctrine of the atonement has constantly come under attack and so must be expounded and defended anew in each generation. This collection of essays, produced to honour well-known theologian Roger Nicole, provides a wide-ranging study of the atonement. The list of authors includes many familiar names which are themselves sufficient recommendation of the book. We mention only a few: D A Carson, Richard Gaffin, Simon Kistemaker, Henri Blocher, Joel Beeke, Kevin Vanhoozer, J I Packer and Sinclair Ferguson. Ten papers cover the biblical material from the Pentateuch to the Book of Revelation. Eight deal with the historical development of the doctrine, from Augustine to postmodernism, by way of Luther, Calvin, Bavinck and Barth. The two final papers consider 'The Atonement in the Life of the Christian' (Packer) and 'Preaching the Atonement' (Ferguson). Nicole himself adds a postscript on penal substitution. Together they make up a valuable and significant study of a fundamental Christian doctrine.

*J Gresham Machen. Selected Shorter Writings*, edited by D G Hart, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing (Distributed in the UK by Evangelical Press), 2004, hbk., 590 pp., £21.95.

Gresham Machen was a figure of major significance in American Presbyterianism in the early part of the twentieth century, particularly because of his role in the conservative battle with liberal theology. He was instrumental in the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He is best known for books such as *The Virgin Birth of Christ and Christianity and Liberalism*, but here we now have a wide selection of Machen's shorter writings which provide new insights into the thinking of this important theologian. Machen was in the best sense a 'popular' theologian and these pieces are readily accessible to non-specialists. The 46 articles are divided into sections headed: Christ and the Witness of Scripture, Christianity and Modern Substitutes, The Task of Christian Scholarship, Theological Education, The Nature and Mission of the Church, The Presbyterian Controversy, Church and Society, Christianity and Culture, Reviews and Autobiographical. The editor has provided an introductory assessment of Machen and extensive bibliographies of material by and about Machen and his historical context. The publishers have done the Church a valuable service in making this collection available.

*The First Christian Theologians*, edited by G R Evans, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pbk., 277 pp., £19.99.

*The Pietist Theologians*, edited by Carter Lindberg, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pbk., 282 pp., £24.99.

The most recent additions to Blackwell's 'The Great Theologians' follow the format of previous volumes. Some of the foremost scholars in their respective fields provide concise introductions to a number of major theologians or movements, together with bibliographies of primary and secondary sources. Without going into too much detail, the essays nevertheless highlight most of the main issues addressed by each theologian and give the necessary direction for those wishing to pursue their study further.

*The First Christian Theologians* begins with general essays on the first Christian writings, on Scripture and on the Church. Christian theology's relationship to Judaism is considered next, along with an introduction to Philo. After an essay on 'Christian Theology and Secular Philosophy', individual theologians from Justin Martyr to Nestorius (and the Council of Chalcedon) are examined. The coverage provided is good, with no significant gaps evident.

*The Pietist Theologians* covers a diverse group of writers who flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some names being more familiar than others. After an introductory essay by the editor defining and describing 'Pietism', and justifying the inclusion of Pietist writers in a series on great theologians, there follow studies of writers such as Johann Arndt, William Ames, Philipp Jacob Spener, Madame Guyon, Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf and John Wesley. Surprisingly, Jonathan Edwards is omitted, perhaps because he does not fit the classification 'Pietist', but it appears that he will consequently be entirely absent from 'The Great Theologians', an indefensible result. Leaving aside this negative note, the book is a good introduction to a study of this period which is so rich in writings on Christian living.

*Documents of the English Reformation 1526-1701*, edited by Gerald Bray, James Clarke and Co., 2004, pbk., 675 pp., £25.00.

This paperback edition of Gerald Bray's 1994 publication makes easily accessible a great range of material relating to the English Reformation. The collection of 58 documents includes confessions of faith, parliamentary legislation, ecclesiastical regulations and prefaces to important books and editions of the Bible. Many of these documents are otherwise very difficult to access. Apart from longer works, such as the Edwardian Prayer Books, almost

all the sources required for an understanding of the English Reformation are here. Bray provides historical introductions to each document, and appendices list English monarchs, Archbishops of Canterbury and Popes, compare the Augsburg Confession and the Thirty-Nine Articles, and study the Westminster Confession and the confessions based upon it. This is an essential reference work for anyone interested in this important period of church history.

*Martin Bucer. A Reformer and His Times*, Martin Greschat, translated by Stephen E Buckwalter, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, pbk., 340 pp., \$34.95

Works in English on the Reformer Martin Bucer (1491-1551) are few and often expensive, and so this translation of Martin Greschat's 1990 German biography of Bucer is especially welcome. Greschat deals thoroughly with Bucer's historical context and then provides a full survey of his life and ministry. After dealing with Bucer's early life and the influences that shaped him, Greschat describes his reforming work in Strasbourg and further afield, his attempts to promote unity among Protestants, for example with Luther regarding the Lord's Supper, and his later years in exile in Cambridge. A final chapter details new insights into Bucer's career which have emerged since the book's German publication, a testimony to the amount of research into the Reformation currently being undertaken. Bucer deserves to be much better known than he is, at least in the English-speaking world, not only for his influence on Calvin during his exile from Geneva and on the English Reformers, but as a Reformer in his own right. This clearly written and very informative biography will go a long way to achieving that goal.

*John Owen on the Lord's Supper*, Jon D Payne, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004, hbk., 249 pp., £15.95.

John Owen was undoubtedly one of the greatest among the Puritan theologians of the seventeenth century. Considerable scholarly attention has been given to his formulation of doctrines such as those of the Trinity, the person of Christ and the atonement, and to his theological method. His doctrine of the Lord's Supper, on the other hand, has been neglected, a lack remedied by this new publication from the pen of Jon Payne, a pastor in Georgia, USA. The first part of the book is an examination of Owen's view of the sacrament,



emphasising his debt to John Calvin and Peter Martyr Vermigli. It is interesting that, although he wrote extensively on the work of the Holy Spirit, Owen had relatively little to say about the Spirit's role in the Lord's Supper. Payne's valuable study is followed by 25 Sacramental Discourses which Owen preached between 1669 and 1682, preparing his congregation to observe the sacrament, and which were previously published in volume 9 of Owen's *Works*. This is a useful addition to the literature on an outstanding Reformed theologian.

*Karl Barth*, John Webster, Continuum, Second Edition, 2004, pbk., 181 pp., £12.99.

John Webster, who is now Professor of Systematic Theology at Aberdeen University, has established himself as one of the foremost contemporary interpreters of Karl Barth. This book, however, is designed as an introduction to Barth's theology for the non-specialist. Webster indicates at the outset that his aim in the book is not only to expound Barth but to 'unsettle its readers into exploring Barth for themselves.' After a biographical summary of Barth's long career, Webster provides a tour of Barth's thought on the main areas of Christian theology, including his understanding of the term 'Word of God', and his doctrines of God and of reconciliation. The final chapter seeks to relate Barth to postmodern trends in theology. By the standards of Barthian studies, the treatment is clear, and delivers the kind of introductory guide which the author promised. For more critical assessment of Barth, readers will need to look elsewhere, but for those requiring some basic knowledge of this influential theologian, Webster's book offers a good starting point.

*Christian Perspectives on Law and Justice*, David McIlroy, Paternoster, 2004, pbk., 238 pp., £17.99.

David McIlroy, who practises as a barrister in London and who is involved in the leadership of a Baptist church, has written an illuminating examination of biblical teaching on law, legal systems and justice. He rightly begins with the character of God as sovereign, holy, light, just, merciful/generous/gracious and also wrathful against sin. The following chapters consider, first, law, creation and fall, then the Mosaic Law, kingship in the Old Testament, the prophetic call to justice, Christ and Caesar, law and the Spirit, submission to authorities and the Last Judgment. Many controversia

issues are touched upon and, as we would expect, the author argues his case clearly and effectively. Covenanters have, of course, had a particular view of the proper role of government in terms of national confession, which McIlroy as a Baptist would not share, but they have seldom worked out their view in relation to a society which does not presently confess Christ. There is therefore much in this book to provoke thought. McIlroy makes good use of legal theorists as well as biblical scholars, and has produced a stimulating study which will be of interest to theologians and ethicists as well as to lawyers, politicians and administrators.

*God, Marriage and Family. Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, Andreas J Köstenberger with David W Jones, Crossway Books, 2004, pbk., 448 pp., \$15.99.

Christian contributions to current debates on marriage and family have not always been as well informed as they ought, and some Christian books on the subject of the family are relatively superficial. This weighty book, however, provides a thorough, theologically informed treatment of biblical teaching on virtually every issue relating to sexuality, marriage and family, and will prove to be an outstanding resource for the Church. Chapters cover, for example, marriage in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, family in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, childlessness, abortion, contraception, artificial reproduction, parenting, singleness, homosexuality, divorce and remarriage, and qualifications for church leadership. Throughout the book the Scriptures are treated reverently as the Word of God and the Church's final authority. Given the diversity evident among Christians, some will dissent from various views expressed by Köstenberger, in particular those who hold that divorce and remarriage are never permissible for Christians. His positions, however, will generally command widespread agreement among evangelical readers. Also of great value are the 23 page bibliography, the guide for group and personal study (with answers to the discussion questions), and the 64 densely packed pages of notes. Köstenberger, with the assistance of David Jones, has produced a study which should be given wide circulation.

*The Passion in Art*, Richard Harries, Ashgate, 2004, pbk., 154 pp., £16.99.

This is the first book to study how the death of Jesus has been portrayed throughout Christian history. Harries begins with some of the inscriptions

found in the catacombs of Rome, continues through medieval artworks from East and West, examines Renaissance masterpieces by artists such as Giotto, Piero della Francesca and Caravaggio, and concludes with modern artists including Chagall, Spencer and Sutherland. The theology of each piece is carefully examined, showing the intimate connections that exist between art and the historical and cultural context in which it is produced. The reproductions are of the highest quality, making this a fascinating study of a significant subject.

*The Cosmopolitan World of Jesus. New Light from Archaeology*, Carsten Peter Thiede, SPCK, 2004, pbk., 168pp., £9.99.

Although archaeology cannot 'prove' the truth of the Bible, it does provide essential background information for a proper understanding of Scripture. Eschewing the sensational, which often captures the headlines, Carsten Peter Thiede, who is Professor of New Testament History (with Archaeology and Papyrology) at Basel, Switzerland, sets out in popular form the contribution of archaeology to our knowledge of the world in which Jesus lived and ministered. He argues that first-century Palestine was no backwater, but a cultured part of the Roman Empire. Matters such as family and social life, the world of work, cross-cultural contacts, education, writing and scribal practices are all dealt with in an accessible way. The treatment is right up to date and includes Thiede's sceptical view of the controversial 'James ossuary', which stirred considerable media interest in 2002. (Others, such as Ben Witherington, consider the ossuary to be authentic). This is a book full of useful information that will illuminate the reader's understanding of the Gospels.

*Evolution and Ethics. Human Morality in Biological and Religious Perspective*, Philip Clayton and Jeffrey Schloss (editors), William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004, pbk., 339 pp., £19.99

Opponents of evolutionary theories have often argued that evolution cannot provide a satisfactory basis for ethics. The scholars brought together for this publication, all committed to some form of evolutionary theory, argue that this is not the case, and that in fact ethical principles can be married to evolution. The authors represent fields such as biology, anthropology, physics, environmental science, political science, philosophy and theology, and the issues they discuss include the origin of the human race and of moral values,

divine revelation, sin and the fall, natural law, genetics and morality, altruism, and the development of moral communities. Ethicists must of necessity take into account a philosophy which exercises a pervasive influence in western culture, and there is much here to challenge those who seek to submit to the authority of the written Word of God. This is an important book for specialists in the fields of theology and ethics.

David McKay