



# Reformed Theological Journal

Volume 32  
NOVEMBER 2016



# REFORMED THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Edited for the faculty of the  
REFORMED THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

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ISSN 0268 – 4772

# REFORMED THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL



REFORMED THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE  
FOUNDED 1854

Theological Seminary of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland  
37 Knockbracken Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT8 6SE

**Vol. 32**

**NOVEMBER 2016**

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# CONTENTS

INFANT BAPTISM AS A MEANS OF GRACE by Robert L. W. McCollum .....	1
PREPARING TO PREACH ISAIAH by Andrew Kerr .....	11
REPLACEMENT THEOLOGY? .....	25
NOT REFORMED AND NOT SAFE: A SUMMARY CRITIQUE OF PAEDOCOMMUNION by William M. Schweitzer .....	37
JEREMIAH BURROUGHS ON THE INFINITE EXCELLENCY OF GOD by Jim Davison .....	50
 <b>BOOK REVIEWS</b>	
Scott M. Manetsch CALVIN'S COMPANY OF PASTORS: PASTORAL CARE AND THE EMERGING REFORMED CHURCH, 1536-1609 by Robert McCollum .....	62
Donald John MacLean JAMES DURHAM (1622-1658) AND THE GOSPEL OFFER IN ITS SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CONTEXT by David McKay .....	63
Sinclair B. Ferguson and Derek W. H. Thomas ICHTHUS. JESUS CHRIST, GOD'S SON, THE SAVIOUR by Knox Hyndman .....	65
Vern Poythress THE MIRACLES OF JESUS. HOW THE SAVIOR'S MIGHTY ACTS SERVE AS SIGNS OF REDEMPTION by Warren Peel .....	66

**BOOK NOTICES** by David McKay

Johannes Cocceius, translated by Casey Carmichael, introduced by Willem J. van Asselt THE DOCTRINE OF THE COVENANT AND TESTAMENT OF GOD .....	68
Karin Spiecker Stetina THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD IN JOHN CALVIN'S THOUGHT .....	68
Kelly M. Kopic (Ed.) SANCTIFICATION. EXPLORATIONS IN THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE .....	69
Dallas M. Roarke, edited by Bob E. Patterson DIETRICH BONHOEFFER. MAKERS OF THE MODERN THEOLOGICAL MIND .....	69
David L Mueller, edited by Bob E. Patterson KARL BARTH. MAKERS OF THE MODERN THEOLOGICAL MIND .....	69
J. Edward Humphrey, edited by Bob E. Patterson EMIL BRUNNER. MAKERS OF THE MODERN THEOLOGICAL MIND .....	69
Gerald Bray THE CHURCH. A THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL ACCOUNT .....	70
Oliver D. Crisp JONATHAN EDWARDS AMONG THE THEOLOGIANS .....	70
John D. Currid ECCLESIASTES. A QUEST FOR MEANING? .....	71
Terry L. Johnson 1, 2, 3 JOHN. A MENTOR EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY .....	71
Chris Green CUTTING TO THE HEART. APPLYING THE BIBLE IN TEACHING AND PREACHING .....	71
Robin Lane Fox AUGUSTINE. CONVERSIONS AND CONFESSIONS .....	72

## INFANT BAPTISM AS A MEANS OF GRACE

**Robert L. W. McCollum**

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Every subject that we think about, every topic that we discuss or every theme that we examine must be considered with reference to God - God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God the Father is the fountain of all knowledge and understanding. In Jesus Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3) and it is God the Holy Spirit who guides “into all truth” (John 16:13) through the Scriptures which he has given. This means that we will consider the topic “Infant Baptism as a means of Grace” with reference to God and particularly through the Word of God.

Baptism is one of the two Sacraments that Christ instituted for his Church; the other one being the Lord’s Supper. The Westminster Confession of Faith defines sacraments as follows:

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him; as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his word<sup>1</sup>

Sacraments are signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace. That invites the question: What is the Covenant of Grace? As it was determined in the counsels of eternity between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, it is usually designated the Covenant of Redemption. On the other hand, as it applies to the elect, those whom God has purposed to save from all eternity, it is known as the Covenant of Grace. The comment by W. G. T. Shedd in relation to this differentiation is helpful:

The Covenant of Grace and that of Redemption are two modes or phases of the one evangelical covenant of mercy<sup>2</sup>

This eternal Covenant of Grace entered time when God addressed the serpent (Satan) after the rebellion of Adam and Eve. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15) The blessings of the Covenant would come through a Mediator - the seed of the woman, Jesus Christ.

The remainder of Scripture is the unveiling of this Covenant - the first part of the Bible (the Old Testament) being the administration of the Covenant prior to the Incarnation, prior to the coming of Christ; the second part of the Bible (the New Testament) being the administration of the same Covenant after Christ’s coming.

God very specifically established the Covenant with Abraham. The details are recorded in Genesis 12:1-9. Genesis 17:1-14 informs us that the Covenant was established, not with Abraham alone, but also with his offspring, in descending lines of generations. “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” (Genesis 17:7).

<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, ch. 27, para. 1

<sup>2</sup> W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 1889-94 ed., (Nashville 1980), 2.360

With respect to this gracious Covenant that God established with undeserving Abraham and his offspring, he decided to give to him a sign. This sign would be a visible pledge of his covenant faithfulness. That visible sign was circumcision. "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised." (Genesis 17:11, 12a).

God gave to his people another sign of his covenant faithfulness, prior to the coming of Christ. It was the Passover. To his people, about to leave Egypt, God said through Moses, "You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever. And when you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service." (Exodus 12:24, 25).

Down through the centuries these signs of God's covenant faithfulness were observed by the Jews. Therefore, when we come to the 'Incarnation' we are simply informed about the child born to Mary and Joseph, "...at the end of eight days he was circumcised." (Luke 2:21).

And the annual Passover feast was something that still was being observed in the first century. Jesus experienced this for himself at twelve years of age. "Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom" (Luke 2:41, 42).

Both these Old Testament signs of God's covenant faithfulness involved the shedding of blood. When Christ's blood was shed, once for all, to redeem his people, to procure their salvation, the bloody signs needed to be changed into bloodless equivalents for the New Covenant era. The Passover was replaced by the Lord's Supper on the evening of the crucifixion by Jesus in the Upper Room (Luke 22:14-23). Circumcision was replaced by baptism, prior to our Lord's Ascension, when he commissioned his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19, 20).

The disciples responded to that commission. Their mission began on the day of Pentecost, with Peter preaching the gospel, concluding with the challenge, "...Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." (Acts 2:38, 39). Those devout Jews, assembled in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost from all over Asia Minor and the Eastern Mediterranean, would have recognised immediately the covenant formula that Peter used in his concluding remarks. It was essentially the same as was given by God to their ancestor Abraham 2000 years earlier. To Abraham God had said, "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you." Through Peter God the Holy Spirit said, "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

The Lord's Supper being the New Covenant equivalent of the Passover is beyond dispute. It is something that finds universal acceptance in the Christian church. That baptism is the New Covenant equivalent of circumcision is disputed by some. However, when we recognise that there is one God, and one eternal Covenant of Grace, with one way of salvation throughout history, through faith in Jesus Christ, then the evidence is compelling that baptism is the fulfilment of circumcision. Colossians 2:12, 13 places the matter beyond dispute when Paul uses the two terms interchangeably. "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."



I have taken time to lay this foundation because I want us to see that there are parallels between baptism as a means of grace and circumcision as a means of grace.

It is also important that we understand the terms of the subject before us. The Westminster Confession of Faith defines baptism as follows:

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptised into the visible church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life: which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Hodge in his commentary on the Confession reduces this definition to three propositions.

- a Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, instituted immediately by Christ, and by his authority to continue in the Church until the end of the world.
- b As to the action which constitutes baptism, it is a washing of the subject with water (the manner of the washing not being essential), in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a lawfully ordained minister.
- c It is done with the design and effect of signifying and sealing our ingrafting into Christ, our partaking of the benefits of his covenant, and our engagement to be his."<sup>4</sup>

As we are principally considering in this article "Infant Baptism as a means of Grace", what do we understand by "means of grace"?

The eternal God we know, love and worship is the God who uses "means" to accomplish his eternal purpose. He is not limited to "means" but often for his own glory this is how he operates. For example, when an elderly person becomes partially sighted through cataracts God will use a simple operation by an eye surgeon to restore perfect vision. In the same way God often chooses to use means to communicate his grace to those who are dead in trespasses and sins.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism helpfully addresses the subject of means. The question is asked: "What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?" (Q88). The answer is, "The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of Redemption, are his ordinances; especially the Word, Sacraments, and Prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation."

Roderick Lawson comments:

In order that we may be saved, God demands of us not only faith and repentance, but the diligent use of the outward means of grace as well. These outward means are here called ordinances, or things which God has ordained. They consist mainly in - 1 The study of the Bible; 2 The observance of the Sacraments; 3 The use of Prayer.<sup>5</sup>

Baptism is one of the two sacraments. How or in what way does it become a means of grace?

<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, ch. 28, para. 1

<sup>4</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding The Westminster Confession*, (Edinburgh, 1958), p.338, 339.

<sup>5</sup> Roderick Lawson, *The Shorter Catechism, with Scripture Proofs and Comments*, Comment on Question and Answer 88, p.51.

First of all we eliminate the view held by Roman Catholicism that the sacrament of baptism in and of itself always communicates grace at the time of being administered (*ex opere operato*). Rome teaches and believes that, at the moment a child is baptised, it is then and there regenerate. The child is then and there born again. This is known as “sacerdotalism”.

G. I. Williamson helpfully compares the sacerdotal view of the sacraments with the Reformed view:

The sacerdotal view is that the saving grace of God is contained in the sacraments and conveyed by their administration. The Reformed view is that God the Holy Ghost works when, where, and how he will in conferring saving grace, and that the sacraments are dependent upon and subordinate to his sovereign operation. It is because he is pleased to use the sacraments to exhibit and to confer grace that they become efficacious<sup>6</sup>

I emphasise Williamson’s statement “that the sacraments are dependent upon and subordinate to his sovereign operation”. Everything that I say in this article recognises this as a foundational principle. God is sovereign in whatever means he determines to use and when he makes that means effective.

### 1. Baptism itself as a means of grace

Can we say that the sacrament of baptism is a means of grace at the moment of baptism for the child baptised? The answer to that question is “no”, if we are thinking that the baptism of a child automatically or magically communicates the blessing that it signifies - regeneration and union with Christ.

Edmund P. Clowney writing on this subject comments:

The sacraments are not sacred magic, the elements themselves containing the blessing, as if the Holy Spirit could be dispensed from a font, or Christ contained in a cup. God does not surrender his work of grace to external symbols, controlled by the manipulation of men.<sup>7</sup>

I agree entirely with Clowney. But does this mean that the sacrament of baptism, at the time of being administered, is *not* a means of grace to the child being baptised in any sense? It would be wrong, I believe, to come to that conclusion.

Christ has appointed the sacrament of baptism for believers and their children. It would be unreasonable therefore to conclude that there was no blessing, of any description, on the child at the baptismal service. While the child will have no conscious awareness of his baptism, yet I do believe that Christ, in the exercise of his sovereignty, will communicate a blessing upon the child.

Such a conclusion is not based on sentiment. The sacraments, as the Reformed Confessions teach us, are a means of grace to all who participate in them. The infant child of Christian parents being baptised should not be considered an exception. But is faith not essential to the receiving of such blessing? John Calvin, in a comment made on Isaiah 58 has written:

We maintain, therefore that there is a direct relationship between faith and the sacraments; they become effective through faith.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> G. I. Williamson, *The Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, (Philadelphia, 1965), p.203

<sup>7</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *Contours of Christian Theology, The Church*, (Leicester, 1997), p.274, 275

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah 58*, quoted by Joel Beeke, *365 Days with Calvin*, (Leominster, 2008), 10<sup>th</sup> May

Although it is impossible for the infant being baptised to exercise faith, the parents are expressing their faith in presenting their child for Christian baptism. They are in effect saying, “in the Covenant God has promised to be God to us and he is, through Jesus Christ our Saviour; but he has also promised to be God to our children after us. We therefore present our child for baptism and in so doing, by faith, lay claim to that covenant promise.”

Some will maintain that a little child, a few weeks old, is incapable of receiving blessing. The answer to such an objection is found in Mark 10:13-16. Parents were bringing their infants to Jesus so that “he might lay his hands on them and pray.” The disciples of Jesus thought that such a thing was ridiculous and rebuked these parents. Jesus was indignant with his disciples. To the parents he gave the following words of encouragement,

“Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them. (Mark 10:14b-16).

There are two things to note about these words of Jesus. Firstly he blessed these infants; so infant children are capable of receiving blessing from the God of all grace and mercy. Secondly, he revealed that children of such a tender age can be regenerate. He said, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for *to such* belongs the kingdom of God.”

With respect to this incident and the prayer offered for these children Calvin writes,

...what other prayer did he utter for them than that they should be received into the number of the children of God? It follows then that they were regenerated by the Spirit in the hope of salvation ... they were partakers of the spiritual gifts represented by baptism...<sup>9</sup>

Matthew Henry makes a similar comment.

The strongest believer lives not so much by apprehending Christ as by being apprehended by Christ and this the least child is incapable of doing. If they cannot stretch out their hands to him; yet he can lay his hands on them and so make them his own and own them for his own<sup>10</sup>

Recently when preaching at a baptismal service from Mark 10:13-16 I drew particular attention to those words at the end of verse 14, “...to such belongs the kingdom of God.” From this statement I made the point that there are no limits on the work of the Spirit in regeneration. God is sovereign. A child may be born again (regenerate) in his mother’s womb as we believe Jeremiah was (Jeremiah 1:5) and as we believe John the Baptist was (Luke 1:44) every bit as much as a boy of sixteen, or a woman of seventy. The Holy Spirit is sovereign in his operations, as we read in John 3:8. In relation to the baptism of a child of believing parents we can draw the conclusion that what was signified in baptism, regeneration and union with Christ, can take place before baptism, at baptism or after baptism.

## **2. Baptism is a means of grace to covenant children through the faithfulness of parents to their vows**

Prior to the baptism of a child parents in most Reformed denominations take vows. I will illustrate

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, (Edinburgh, 1972), Vol.2, p.171

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Henry, *One Volume Commentary*, on Matthew 19:13-15, p.1711

from the vows taken by parents in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland. There is a vow that calls on the parents to be faithful to their parental obligations.<sup>11</sup> It is four-fold in nature. The first obligation relates to prayer.

**a) *Parents make a commitment to pray for their child***

They promise: “To pray that your child may be renewed and brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as signified in this sacrament”.

While parents will take this promise at the baptismal service they will already have prayed this prayer from the moment they knew a child was conceived in the womb. They will have prayed this prayer in the days leading up to the baptismal service. And they will pray it many days after the service, maybe for years, until they see evidences of grace in the life of their child.

They will pray on the basis of the Covenant of Grace. Their prayer will be worded something like this: “Lord you are our God, be a God to our little boy, save him by your grace, for you have promised not only to be a God to us but to our children after us.” An essential aspect of prayer is laying claim to the promises of God.

We have an example of such persistent prayers being offered by the father of the famous missionary to the New Hebrides, John G. Paton. He writes in his autobiography about a little room in his family home:

Thither daily, and oftentimes a day,...we saw our father retire, and shut the door; and we children got to understand by a sort of spiritual instinct (for the thing was too sacred to be talked about) that prayers were being poured out there for us, as of old by the High Priest within the veil in the Most Holy Place.<sup>12</sup>

**b) *Parents make a commitment to teach God’s Word to their child***

They promise: “to seek that your child may come to know the Holy Scriptures and to know the duty of committing himself/herself to God”.

Covenant children will be taught God’s Word at church services and through children and youth ministries in the church. Their most effective teachers, however, will be the parents. By taking a solemn vow at the baptism of their infant children, to teach them God’s Word, they are placed under a sacred obligation to fulfil that vow (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 6:4). “A religious vow or covenant does not bind us to anything additional to God’s Word but additionally binds us to that which is already our duty to do.” (Wm Symington).

Children are to be taught by their parents in both formal and informal situations. Deuteronomy 6:6, 7 commands parents that they are to seize every opportunity, through the day, to teach their children about God and his wonderful works. “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

This command is reinforced by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:4. Parents will delegate some of this responsibility to the church through the teaching ministry of the congregation to which they belong. This will be of immense benefit and support. Children, however, who are taught God’s Word primarily from their parents enjoy an immense privilege. With God’s blessing it will bring forth much fruit. Paul writing to the Christians in Rome states, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17).

<sup>11</sup> *The Code*, The Book of Government and Order of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland, ch. 9, para. 9.05

<sup>12</sup> J. G. Paton, *Missionary to The New Hebrides*, p.8

**c) *Parents make a commitment to be faithful in their Christian life and worship***

They promise: “to rule well your household, exercising parental authority with firmness and love, setting the example of a holy and consistent life, and attending with regularity to personal, family and public worship”.

Parents who are consistent in responding faithfully to this vow will be the means of much blessing to their children. Parents promise in this vow to set “the example of a holy and consistent life”. As ministers must practise what they preach, if they are to have an effective ministry, so parents must conscientiously model the truth of God before their children. Parents who habitually disregard God’s clear, specific commands are not keeping their covenant with God. Such parents cannot expect their children to respond in faith to the promises of God offered to them at baptism. Psalm 103 emphasises to parents the importance of keeping the covenant: “But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments”. (Psalm 103:17, 18).

Daily family worship will train covenant children from infancy to reach out to God in faith. In that daily context they will be brought face to face with the reality of God and the gospel of his grace. Not only will that be true but the faith of their parents will be a challenge, and a stimulus to faith, as covenant children grow up in a world of unbelief. By being included in all aspects of family worship they will experience what it means to be part of God’s covenant community in the context of the family.

Children who experience daily family worship will also integrate better and benefit more quickly from public worship than children devoid of this experience. Each day covenant children experience “little church”. Then once a week there will be a degree of excitement in meeting with other families in “big church”.

As well as taking these three vows parents take a fourth vow which relates to Reformed Presbyterian distinctive principles and Covenant history. Baptism is therefore a means of grace through the faithfulness of parents to their vows at the baptism of their children.

The initial promises with respect to children in the Covenant of Grace were given to Abraham and God knew that Abraham as a conscientious parent would be faithful to his parental obligations. “For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised.” (Genesis 18:19). The sign of God’s Covenant Promise had been revealed to Abraham. God would use Abraham as the means by which that promise would be fulfilled.

It is important that parents bring up their children believing that God will use the means he has chosen to bring covenant children to himself in saving faith. Rev. William Still, a Scottish minister, in a sermon he preached to his Aberdeen congregation in 1968, challenged the parents:

I have said this before: too many Christian parents bring up their children in fear lest they will go astray, rather than in faith that they will not. That fear, expressed in the course of their first few years in a thousand ways, soon communicates itself to their sensitive souls and they become like you, preoccupied with thoughts of going astray. It is like the horrible, drawing power of a precipice. The likeliest thing in the world is that children brought up in a home where it is feared they will go astray, will go astray. They are predisposed and preconditioned to that possibility for fear comes from Satan,

and by fearing where you ought to trust and quietly implement that trust by the works of faith you are bringing Satan into your home. Whenever fear tends to grip you as it may (Satan is always up to his tricks), turn at once to God and away from Satan and say, "God, you have said and you have commanded me to say back to You what You have said to me; that these children are Yours. I will not fear, but will believe and act accordingly".<sup>13</sup>

Some Christians can be heard to say, "It's an awful world in which to bring up children." Such Christians need to be reminded that it has *always* been an awful world. It is a *fallen* world. But God's people have the assurance that their children are separated unto God - because they are the children of God's children. That truth is recognised in their baptism. Parents should rear their children in faith, rather than in fear; in the faith that God will early in life fulfil what was signified in their child's baptism; that God will regenerate them and unite them to Jesus Christ. In practice Christian parents should communicate that they trust their children when they are outside their direct supervision. For example, when a six year old is going to a birthday party of one of her school friends, the parent as the child leaves the home should say, "enjoy yourself" rather than "behave yourself". This indicates trust rather than suspicion. This attitude should continue throughout childhood and adolescence.

Because baptism carries with it such significance children need to be often reminded of their baptism. In many homes, displayed in a prominent position, will be certificates for swimming or for piano or singing. Among all these the Baptismal Certificate should be displayed.

In the Christian home birthdays are celebrated each year. As well as this celebration it would be excellent practice if parents reminded each child of their baptism on its anniversary. Family worship is a good context in which to do this. As the children reach years of understanding the meaning of their baptism should be explained in simple terms. This will keep the event of baptism alive in the child's experience and underline its significance. Children in a covenant home will then grow up aware of having been baptised, in the same way as boys in an Israelite home would have been aware of their circumcision and their covenant status.

In Israel the Passover was to be observed annually. God knew children would be curious about that sacrament. "And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" (Exodus 12:26, 27). And no doubt inquisitive boys in Israel would have enquired as to why they had been circumcised. Likewise today, children, brought up in such a way as to be aware of their baptism, will want to know from their parents its covenant significance. Such questions will be a golden opportunity to speak of the promises offered to them in the Covenant, at their baptism, and how they must by faith lay claim to these promises.

### **3. Baptism a means of grace to covenant children, through the faithfulness of church members to their vow**

At a baptism, in many Reformed churches, the members of the congregation, into which the child is being baptised also take a vow. The vow in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland is framed as follows:

Do you promise to pray for this covenant child and to seek by example and precept to encourage him/her to walk in the ways of the Lord?<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> William Still, from a Sermon preached in Aberdeen, 1968

<sup>14</sup> *The Code*, The Book of Government and Order of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland, ch. 9, para. 9.06

People who do not believe in paedobaptism will find it impossible to participate in the sacrament of infant baptism and therefore will not wish to take this vow. It is because of this and other reasons that I believe such believers should not be admitted to the membership of a Reformed paedobaptist church.

Covenant children have the support, encouragement, example and prayers of the members of their congregation. This is a means of grace that is an invaluable support to parents and to children growing up in such a context. There are many practical ways of expressing this.

#### **4. Baptism is a means of grace to covenant children through their reception into the church**

The minister, administering the sacrament of baptism to a covenant child will say,

I baptise you *into* the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

This formula pictures union with the triune God and thereby symbolise all the blessings of the Covenant of Grace. It also indicates reception into the body of Christ, the Church. Edmund Clowney speaks of baptism as “the initiating sacrament that marks the candidate as belonging to the people of God.” Or as James Bannerman succinctly writes, “Baptism is the door of formal admission into the church.”<sup>16</sup>

Baptised children in the congregation need to be recognised as belonging to the covenant community. These children must grow up believing that they are a valued part of the family of God. This will give them a sense of belonging which has, in the past, often been neglected through lack of thought. Congregations ought to rejoice in the gift of children and seek with the parents to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

The Westminster Assembly of Divines in its Directory for Public Worship addressed the subject of Covenant children:

The seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church have, by their birth, interest in the covenant, and a right to the seal of it and to the outward privileges of the church, under the gospel, no less than the children of Abraham in the time of the Old Testament: ... That children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers;<sup>17</sup>

The Covenant status of baptised children will influence the minister in his attitude towards them and in his approach to these little ones. As he speaks to them in public worship his remarks will be governed by the fact that they have been received into the covenant community. He will on occasion speak to them about the significance of their baptism. A baptismal service is a good context in which to do this. He will inform them about what was prayerfully anticipated on that occasion, that the outward washing with water would be accompanied, early in life, with the inward washing of regeneration. He will say to these covenant children that the members of the church, their parents included, are looking forward to the time when they will make a public profession of faith before the congregation and in so doing be added to the communicant membership of the church.

Such an occasion is sometimes called “confirmation”. Their profession of faith is a confirmation that what was anticipated at their baptism has become a reality in their lives; that they have by the gracious work of God come to know and love Jesus Christ as their Saviour and King.

<sup>15</sup> *The Code*, The Book of Government and Order of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland, ch. 9, para. 9.08

<sup>16</sup> James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, (Edinburgh, 1960), Vol.2, p.80

<sup>17</sup> The Westminster Assembly, *Directory for Public Worship*, p.371

When such young people are before the congregation, taking their vows of communicant membership, the minister should refer back to their baptism. It may have been fifteen or sixteen years previously. As a sacrament, a means of grace, its primary goal has been realised as the young people testify, through their vows, that they have been regenerated by the Spirit and united to Christ in all his saving work. It becomes a matter of great thanksgiving to God. Almighty God has blessed all the 'means' associated with their infant baptism to the salvation of their immortal souls.

## Conclusion

When Christian parents truly understand the significance of this sacrament and faithfully respond to the obligations it places on them, rich and abundant blessing is enjoyed in family life.

One glorious blessing is that many of the children growing up in such homes will experience the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the tender years of childhood. Of course there will seldom be a conscious awareness of this experience and they will simply confess their faith in Christ by saying that they never remember a time when they did not love the Lord. Of course such professions are tested when children from covenant homes become more and more exposed to the temptations and allurements of this godless age. If their profession is in fact based on the regenerating grace of the Spirit then they will stand firm when tempted, but if not, then the true state of their heart will soon become apparent.

John Murray writes about childhood regeneration:

... where regeneration takes place in the case of an infant there is the immediate transition from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God, and even though intelligent faith cannot be exercised, nevertheless there is that which we may and must call the germ of faith. The regenerate infant is not under the dominion of sin, is not a child of wrath, but a child of God and a member of his kingdom. He grows up in the nurture of the Lord in the highest sense of that term. It will take years, of course, for the infant concerned to arrive at explicit consciousness of the implications of that generation and of the salvation it involves.<sup>18</sup>

The experience of salvation does not always occur in childhood or youth. Parents are sometimes tested. They may never live to see their children coming to faith. And in the mystery of the divine will there will be those children like Esau, who despise their birthright and become breakers of the Covenant. For them the fury of God's righteous judgement will be reserved. Such exceptions ought never to cause parents to lose sight of what all parents should earnestly pray for, the regeneration of their offspring in the tender, formative years of life through the means of grace divinely appointed.

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<sup>18</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings*, (Edinburgh, 1976-82), Vol.2, pp.199, 200



## PREPARING TO PREACH ISAIAH

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### Introduction

On account of its theological sweep and literary grandeur, Isaiah is widely regarded as the high-water mark of the Old Testament (OT).<sup>1</sup> His material embraces ‘...the entire progress of God’s kingdom’ through to cosmic renewal.<sup>2</sup> ‘Isaiah sums up biblical theology’ in an exceptional manner rivalled only by Romans.<sup>3</sup> If preaching this prophet is onerous and inspiring, careful preparation is both essential and rewarding. As Fasol rightly notes:

Preaching from Isaiah is a joyful prospect, but what a daunting task! Sixty-six chapters of beautifully written, perfectly constructed, thought-provoking prophecy! In some ways the book of Isaiah is like a beautiful symphony or a breathtaking landscape--it needs to be seen and heard, not described! Yet, God has called us to proclaim His word. So surely, then, we can find some means of preaching this majestic book.<sup>4</sup>

### Aims

In the course of this paper I will attempt to show why we should preach Isaiah today. Next I will discuss some difficulties that put off pastors from expounding this book. Then I will propose a strategy to overcome such obstacles by mining main themes, establishing core convictions, constructing a timeline, providing an outline, stating a melodic line and making series’ suggestions. As I indicate in my conclusion, it is my prayer, to the glory of God, that my paper will encourage, inspire and help you to prepare to preach Isaiah.

### The importance of preaching Isaiah

It is hard to overestimate the current relevance of Isaiah. Perhaps with the exception of Genesis, no other OT book has more reason to be top of your pastoral ‘to preach list’.

First, its position at the head of the Hebrew Latter Prophets makes Isaiah the gateway through which we enter into hearing and heeding Yahweh through his prophets.

Second, the book’s sheer physical size and theological scope make Isaiah an essential nutrient in any contemporary Christian or church diet.

<sup>1</sup> Raymond. B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Apollos: Leicester, 1995), p.276.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Harman, *Isaiah: A Covenant to be Kept for the Sake of the Church* (Christian Focus: Fearn, 2005), p.31.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.32, who quotes Geerhardus Vos.

<sup>4</sup> A. Fasol, ‘Preaching from Isaiah’, *Criswell Theological Review*, 7.2 (1994), p. 91-101 (91).

Third, its ‘Fifth Gospel’ sweet promises have an illustrious track-record of bringing boon and blessing to sinners who need a Saviour (1.18-19), missionaries who need motivation (6.1-13), those who hum along to Handel (9.1-7), suffering saints who struggle (40.1-31), churches when communing (53.1-13), preachers offering pardon (55.1-2), and remnants craving revival (64.1-12). Preach these best-loved, God-given, texts – they are hooks for hanging sermons and hitting ‘home-run’ applications!

Fourth, if sceptical jibes, about ‘two or three Isaiahs,’ have infiltrated campuses and eroded confidence in churches, robust refutation is long-overdue; while canonical reading is a welcome, temporary, respite from the siege of unbelieving scholarship, you must hammer stakes through the hearts of imposters ‘Deutero-’ and ‘Trito-Isaiah’, and resurrect the authorship of a single eighth century prophet!

Fifth, it is good to catch the wave of revived OT preaching, but don’t rest on the laurels of neat, brief, ‘summer series’ on minor prophets: start in Jonah ‘foothills’, climb higher to ‘base-camp’ Amos, but once you acclimatise, you must summit Isaiah’s ‘Evangelical Everest’. In the process, by grace, you will fan your gifts to fire!

Sixth, in the present, pluralistic, secular climate, Isaiah is a ‘Flying Fortress’ to blitz behind contemporary trenches post-modernity’s lies, and galvanise God’s gospel, frontline, forces. If the immense, omnipotent, God rules history for our good (6.1-8, 9.1-7, 11.1-16, 40.9-31, 44.6-46.13), Isaiah teaches us to reject alliances with no-gods, and re-learn to satirise false ‘so-called respectable’, passé, ‘faiths’ (41.21-29); with the tide out on godly living, at its evangelical ebb, the Holy One of Israel (6.1-6), rings alarm bells in churches and sets saints feet back on Yahweh’s ‘Holy Highway’ (35.1-10); bang up-to-date and relevant, the spiritual sirloin steak of Isaiah, must get back on the preaching menu.<sup>5</sup>

Seventh, excepting the Psalter, this is the favourite apostolic cross-reference source, whose Messianic focus, expounds God’s gospel glory and fosters faith, hope and love (2.1-5, 6.1-6, 9.6-7, 11.6-9, 12.1-6, 19.23-25, 25.1-9, 32.1-8, 35.1-10, 40.1-31, 42.1-9, 43.1-44.8, 45.1-25, 49.8-26, 51.1-56.12, 60.1-66.24),<sup>6</sup> as they apply Isaiah in a rich variety of ways.<sup>7</sup>

### Difficulties in Preaching Isaiah

In his salutary article Bill Thompson, highlights four factors that help explain why Isaianic sermons have fallen on lean times:<sup>8</sup> first, decline and deterioration of doctrinal OT preaching; second, the daunting task of deciphering sixty-six chapters of Isaianic Hebrew, prophecy, history, poetry, theology, customs, and metaphors; third, sustained attacks on Isaiah’s unity and authority; fourth, even pre-eminent expositors drop ‘non-urgent’ prophets as they swim against the tide of ‘seeker-sensitive’, ‘how-to’, Mega Church menus.

To this I would add a fifth further factor: Isaiah’s non-chronological arrangement of events, that span long historical periods, from ancient Empires to the Eschaton. Isaiah mingles oracles that address the spiritual and political destinies of near-neighbours like Moab, Edom and Syria, with those of Judah

<sup>5</sup> David Jackman (source unknown).

<sup>6</sup> H. Songer, ‘Isaiah and the New Testament’, *Review and Expositor* 65:4 (Fall 1968), p.459-470 (p.470).

<sup>7</sup> J. Flamming, ‘The New Testament Use of Isaiah’, *SWJT:11:1:89-103* (1968) p.89. See also Ellis, E., ‘Isaiah in the New Testament’, *SWJT:34:1* (1991), p.31-35 (p. 32), who summarises key themes.

<sup>8</sup> B. Thompson, ‘Preaching Isaiah’s Message Today’, *The Asbury Journal* 70/2 (2015), p.100-114.

and Israel, during four regencies in Zion. For those unaccustomed to Ancient Near Eastern geopolitics, it is easy to see why mention of Tyre does not ‘tick-the-box’ as regularly as Tiberius. Isaianic sermons generate migraines for preachers by magnifying interpretative and chronological problems. Yet, hot pursuit of the prophet, by believers of modest gifts, using a steady, step-wise, approach, can short-circuit pastor alarm-bells and shrink Zion’s Mountain Vision to a hillock.

### Determining Isaiah’s Main Themes

Most reader will want to decide for themselves how to best they might tackle the task of preparing to preach Isaiah. Some hard-pressed pastors will forage for reliable journal review articles which prove worth their weight in gold. For those who want to dive into the river of text, the following stepping stones will safely traverse the torrent of critical scholars.

### Consult Standard Works

A quick way to start digging is to consult introductions in standard textbooks or in the opening sections of basic commentaries. Dillard and Longman represent the recent ‘thematic’ consensus: fairly typically they highlight ‘God as Holy Redeemer and Ruler’, ‘The Remnant’, ‘The Servant’; slightly atypically they mention ‘The Spirit of the Lord.’<sup>9</sup> Oswalt identifies ‘Incomparable Creator and Redeemer’, ‘Messiah’, ‘Trust’, ‘Sin’, ‘Humanity’ and ‘Salvation’ as the main themes.<sup>10</sup> Allan Harman’s excellent commentary settles on such Isaianic ‘hot topics’ as ‘Divine Kingship’, ‘Creator’, ‘Holiness’, ‘Redeemer’, ‘Exile and Return’. As he sees it, Isaiah addresses ‘two basic questions’ raised by the trauma of Exile, namely, ‘Is Yhwh God?’ and ‘Will God forgive?’: chapter 1 introduces the theme of sin, salvation is served in chapter 53, with service resumed and creation renewed, in Zion, in chapters 65-66.<sup>11</sup> ‘Christ’, for Webb, is the most important feature.<sup>12</sup> Young, Oswalt, Mackay and Motyer provide hungry most pastors with clear, satisfying, food. Yet if you are to feed Christ’s flock from a satisfied heart, you must allow Isaiah’s sunlit, snow-capped, peaks to shine in your mind first: a few map references will help your ascent up the slopes of this spiritual Kilimanjaro.

### Check Out Bookends

Begin your search by a ‘start and finish’ study: well-constructed thrillers generally open by heralding main themes, characters and issues, and in this respect Isaiah 1-2 does not disappoint. ‘Virtually all the main themes occur in a summary’ [embryonic] ‘form in the opening chapter, and are developed in greater detail as the book progresses.’<sup>13</sup> The book commences with Yahweh’s people who, instead of resembling him, have rebelled against their Holy Covenant Lord. A provisional solution is mooted in 1.16-17 and the ultimate Kingdom goal for the global Temple is previewed in 2.1-5. The

<sup>9</sup> R.B. Dillard, p. 280. See also O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets*, (P & R: Philipsburg, 2004), p.212-227. Similarly H.G.M. Williamson, ‘Isaiah’ in *Dictionary of Old Testament Prophets* (IVP: Nottingham, 2012), p.364-378, where he stresses two main Isaianic themes: namely first, the Character of God as high, holy and just; and second, King and Messiah.

<sup>10</sup> John. N. Oswalt, ‘Isaiah, Theology of’, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis: Volume 4: Ed. W. Van Gemeren* (Paternoster: Carlisle, 1997), p.725-732.

<sup>11</sup> A. Harman, p.24-25, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: Bible Speaks Today* (IVP: Leicester, 1996), p.37-39.

<sup>13</sup> A. Harman, p.24. See also Williamson and Alec. J. Motyer, *Isaiah: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (IVP: Leicester, 1999) p.43-47.

prophecy reaches ‘The End’ in 65.1-66.24. Here we see climactic plot resolution and epilogue, with redeemed renewed Zion living ‘holy and happy’ ever after. The remaining, central, section, 2.6-64.12, is thus a marvellous account of Covenant God’s sovereign, glorious work of grace, through the coming suffering Messianic servant –he alone saves all nations in fulfilment of the Covenants.

### Find Isaiah’s Focus

For writers ancient and modern, the inaugural ‘call’ vision in 6.1-13 is pivotal: it captures, in microcosm ‘...the essence of the message of Isaiah’,<sup>14</sup> and, no doubt, his formative, call-experience ‘...sets the tone for the remainder of his ministry’,<sup>15</sup> for ‘the exalted majesty of God ...was a dominating consideration for Isaiah in his theological worldview.’<sup>16</sup> As we explore Isaiah, it soon becomes apparent that themes that appear in the initial vision, colour and form his prophecy, as the sealed up scroll is unwound: the Transcendent Sovereign King; the Holy One of Israel; Yahweh’s glory’s cosmic fulness; grace abounding to the chief of condemned, broken-hearted, sinners; a willing volunteer whose message will be shunned; a holy remnant preserved, to be raised up through a seed, so the Kingdom is restored; these main lines of thought converge, in antegrade and retrograde fashion, from the prologue and to the finish, on chapter 6. If all roads lead to Rome, then in Isaiah’s case all themes point to Theophany. His kingly vision so consumed the prophet that it became as programmatic and paradigmatic for Isaiah as the Road to Damascus was for Paul. His favourite descriptor of God, as ‘Your Redeemer’, ‘The Holy One of Israel,’ used 25 times in Isaiah, is only rarely found elsewhere.

### Survey Horizon Peaks

Note favourite chapters which, like peaks in a mountain range, soar up above the clouds of the text. While many hills rise and valleys dip along Isaiah’s horizon, spiritual skyscrapers stand out like chapters 1-2.6; 6.1-8, 9; 11-12; 40; 53 and 65-66. This scan displays ‘the Holy Sovereign offended by Sin, who restores the Kingdom by providing a Son, who as the “Only Servant Left Standing”, will bring Salvation through Judgement.’<sup>17</sup>

### Study Gospel Applications

Banish the fear of applicatory quicksand by the abundant bedrock of apostolic uses which number 500+, citing, quoting or alluding to all but three chapters (Isaiah 15, 18 and 20).<sup>18</sup> One fifth of Apocalypse references depict ‘A Tale of Two Cities’.<sup>19</sup> If on occasions minor themes are treated, the majority of cross-references deal with Isaianic ‘big issues’. In passing we note themes of the Christian gospel (Isaiah 1.16-17, 6.7, 40.3 and Mark 1.1-3), Virginal Conception (Isaiah 7.14 and Matthew 1.22-23), Servant Sufferings (Isaiah 53.1-13 and 1 Peter 2.21-25), Faithful Remnant (Isaiah 8.16 and Hebrews 2.13), Glory of Jesus (Isaiah 6.1-13, 52.13-13.12 and John 12.41-45), Sovereignty of God (Isaiah 40.6-8 and 1 Pet 1.24-25), Lordship of Christ (Isaiah 29.23 and 1 Pet 3.15), Good

<sup>14</sup> O.P. Robertson, p.212.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.276.

<sup>16</sup> H.G.M. Williamson, p.372.

<sup>17</sup> O.P. Robertson, p.227.

<sup>18</sup> Nestle-Alland, ‘*Loci Citati Vel Allegati*’ in *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft: Stuttgart, 1993), p.789-793.

<sup>19</sup> A. Harman, p.33.

Shepherd (Isaiah 40.10-11 and 1 Pet 2.25 & 5.1-5), Slain Redeemer (Isaiah 53.7 and Revelation 5.6-14), Tearless Riverbank (Isaiah 25.8, 49.10 and Revelation 7.16-17) and Two Cities (Isaiah 13-14, 23, 65.17-25 and Revelation 21.1-9), to mention but a few.<sup>20</sup> Most intense activity relates to ‘the manifestation and suffering of Messiah’ and ‘the fortunes of the People of God.’<sup>21</sup> When preaching prophecy make sure to consult apostles!

## Establish Core Convictions

### (i) Virgin Birth

Areas of scholarly strife are usually targets for enemies and shields for friends of truth. While this is not the place to defend the Virgin-Conception-Birth text in 7.14, all double-reference solutions, including Barry Webb’s recent typological proposal,<sup>22</sup> tend to be found wanting, serve to undermine faith, and fall short of the rigour of Young, cogency of Harman,<sup>23</sup> or potency of Robert Reymond’s *tour de force*.<sup>24</sup> Though good pastors still tend to sit on the fence for hermeneutical,<sup>25</sup> exegetical, or apologetic reasons, I concur with Robertson that ‘only the same unbelief that marred the response of King Ahaz...will rationalize away the wonder of this word’.<sup>26</sup> No compelling cause exists to disagree with Calvin or Young, for Messiah’s Name, Immanuel, fits nobody but God.<sup>27</sup>

### (ii) Single Authorship

Attacks on the authorship, affirmed by Jesus and his Apostles, make it mandatory for Christians to uphold the unity of Isaiah. The onslaught, doubtless, aims at undermining confidence in messianic prophecies. A major theme of the book is the undisputed, unique Sovereignty of Yahweh, who exposes lying idols, who unlike the God of Israel, cannot announce events in the future, and then subsequently steer history, in order to bring them to pass (incidentally another contextual reason for contending that the Virgin Birth text is messianic). The predictive naming of Cyrus (45.1), is not evidence of later redaction or authorship, but the very stuff of which Isaianic faith consists. It is a pity some good OT surveys yield concessions on this point.<sup>28</sup> Compelling defences of unity of authorship, both dated and recent, are not lacking.<sup>29</sup>

To believe, without any supporting external evidence, in any one of these proposed processes that is supposed to have occurred over twenty-five hundred years ago, requires more faith, and a different kind of faith, than believing that the one and

<sup>20</sup> See R.B. Dillard, p.283, for a slightly more extensive survey.

<sup>21</sup> H. Songer, p.468.

<sup>22</sup> B. Webb, p.62-64. His argumentation seems strained, since the stump references are both retrospective and prospective in chapters 6 and 11; too much hangs on the meaning of ‘repent’ or ‘return’; a messianic conception secures the throne of David more than a remnant prophecy; this fits better with 9.6.

<sup>23</sup> A. Harman, p.83-89.

<sup>24</sup> R.L. Reymond, *Jesus Divine Messiah. The New and Old Testament Witness*, (Mentor, Fearn, 2003), p.89-106.

<sup>25</sup> D. Peterson, *Christ and His People in the Book of Isaiah*, (IVP, Leicester), p.54-60. It is now well known that sign can have a present or future reference which makes Peterson’s claim that ‘the sign given ...must have an immediate relevance to the historical context’ look fallacious. Nothing is more pertinent to Ahaz, than a sign of the coming Messiah, which seals the Covenant Promise to David, to inspire fear-killing faith.

<sup>26</sup> O.P. Robertson, p.215.

<sup>27</sup> Edward. J. Young, *The Book Of Isaiah: Volume 2/Chapters 1-18* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1965), p.291.

<sup>28</sup> R.B. Dillard, p.268-275. See also Bruce. K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2007), p.837, 844, 847.

<sup>29</sup> O.P. Robertson, p.227-240.

only God who created this world with a purpose revealed to his prophet, a deliverance of Israel that was still 170 years in the future.<sup>30</sup>

### (iii) Servant Identity

Much ink has been spilled on the ‘Who is the Servant?’ debate.<sup>31</sup> There should be no real doubt about the answer to the ‘Servant’ question.<sup>32</sup> While not agreeing with every detail, one recent author has opened up the discussion with refreshing clarity.<sup>33</sup> He suggests that we discard the nation-remnant-redeemer ‘pyramid’ model of Delitzsch, and instead view the servant theme through his own ‘hourglass’ model of Servant Israel (41-48), Anonymous Servant (49-53) and Servants (54-66). The servant passages then, however we work out the details, must include failed Israel, an unfit remnant, a political Saviour Cyrus, and our spiritual Redeemer Jesus – he it is who renews a nation of servants to fulfil their Gentile Mission. 4-D spectacles are an essential when viewing Isaiah.

### Constructing a Timeline

Charting the chronology of Isaiah’s feared politico-historical chaos reveals to the student that such fears are ill-founded. Begin by cross-referencing relevant passages, with the help of reliable commentaries, and attempting to trace the history, character, features, successes and failures of the reigns of Judah’s four monarchies during which the prophet ministered (1.1). Next place major textual divisions into broad historical periods (don’t worry about specific dating at this point), in the manner illustrated in my diagram below, to show that the bulk of the action in these periods takes place in the Assyrian (1-39), Babylonian-Persian (40-55) & Roman/Gospel (56-66) Periods respectively. Then specify dates precisely (if they can be known for sure). Lastly complete Isaiah’s chronology: weekly preaching will lead to multiple revisions, with the choppy waters still uncharted till the train hits new creation buffers (excuse the mixing of metaphors!). For those who like short-cuts, Mackay should be consulted.<sup>34</sup>

### Providing an Outline

Coherent sermon series demand transparent outlines. Regular signposts along the path lead lost sheep from Sodom’s cliffs of judgment to saving grazing on Mount Zion’s slopes. Numerous schemata already exist,<sup>35</sup> but if you draw up your own you’ll feel Isaiah’s pulse.

### Stage 1

Summarise the main themes of each section verbally or graphically. Try to map Isaiah’s river of thought. Study thought-bridges that interconnect sections. Work out how each part fits into the overall message. Subjective impressions can be fine tuned later. My own chart leads me to this provisional summary: *The sinful kingdom solution (1-12), in light of Yahweh’s cosmic reign (13-27),*

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.240.

<sup>31</sup> B. Waltke, p.845 gives a handy summary while Harman, p.283, in footnote 3, gives a neat historical background to the discussion.

<sup>32</sup> O.P. Robertson, p.225.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel. J. Brendsel, *Isaiah saw His glory: the Use of Isaiah 52-53 in John 12: BZNV 208* (De Gruyter: Boston, 2014), p.56-60.

<sup>34</sup> John. L. Mackay, *Isaiah, Volume 1: chapters 1-39* (Evangelical Press: Darlington, 2008), p.14-22.

<sup>35</sup> See various outlines.

*is not to form alliances but have faith in the Sovereign (28-39), to send his messianic servant (40-55), to purify a remnant to inhabit Zion's new creation (56-66).*

### Isaiah General Thematic Outline

Ch 1-12	Ch 13-27	Ch 28-39	Ch 40-55	Ch 55-66
<b>Kingship Crisis</b>	<b>Cosmic Sovereign</b>	<b>Trust LORD</b>	<b>Israel Redeemed</b>	<b>Zion Holy</b>
<b>Sin Needs Sorted</b>	<b>Oracles against Foreign Nations</b>	<b>Abandon Alliances</b>	<b>Deliverance through Servant</b>	<b>Creation now Holy</b>
<b>Assyrian*</b>	<b>Assyrian*</b>	<b>Assyrian*</b>	<b>Babylonian, Persian &amp; Roman</b>	<b>Eschaton°</b>
<b>Vision of King</b>	<b>King Steers History</b>	<b>History Breeds Trust</b>	<b>Trust in Servant</b>	<b>Servant Redeems Zion</b>
<b>Pre-Exilic</b>			<b>Post-Exilic</b>	
<b>Sin</b>	<b>Sovereign</b>	<b>Saviour</b>	<b>Salvation</b>	<b>Sanctity</b>
<p>Note that the sigla above * and ° refer <u>broadly</u> to the period of history in which most of the action in these sections is set</p>				

#### Stage 2

Supply particulars of selected manageable chunks. For each chosen section, identify a key theme, label each speech, narrative unit, or chapter. Correct obvious, previous, errors to avoid mid-series U-turns! Now suggest sermon themes with sub-points for smaller units in each chunk. Before plunging headlong into a series, consult a brief, reliable commentator. If you discover you have got the wrong end of the stick, pray, pause, then go back to square one!

#### Stage 3

Place the sermonic units within their precise historical context. Deduce the reason for their jumbled historical order. Precision is not always possible (for example, does 1-5 deal with the aftermath of an earlier Assyrian assault, or share circumstances with the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis in 7-12?). If uncertainty persists, remember chronological dates are the handmaid of theological detail. Draw a diagram, construct a chart, and provide dates (See appendices for my initial hasty attempts to get a handle on this book – the content took about 15 minutes per section while the full colour tables took about an hour, but even with mistakes or inaccuracies some clarity emerged!). Studying your charts, even if later corrections are required, will make you feel at home with the contents of Isaiah – you should now be able, like nerve roots to spine, to plug in each passage to Isaiah's melodic line.

#### Melodic Line Statement

Now settle on Isaiah's Melodic Line (the most prominent theme or thread that runs all the way from start to finish and best explains all of Isaiah's contents). You may have to choose between two or three prominent themes. My diagram highlights the central element 'Faith' in the Sovereign's salvation to redeem his Holy Kingdom. Choosing the bookends makes the message 'Kingdom

Rebellion and Restoration'. If Ray Ortlund's 'God saves Sinners' appears a little too simplistic, his hearers, I am sure, will benefit from such clarity,<sup>36</sup> as Fasol concurs:

Isaiah's purpose, then, was to confront Israel with their sinful plight and to proclaim God's awesome plan to save His people from their sins. This information is crucial to preparing sermons from the book of Isaiah.<sup>37</sup>

Modify this by Yahweh's sovereignty in the key vision (6); factor in Abrahamic and Davidic covenant fulfilment (1-2 form a single introductory unit); recall 1-12 are a 'programmatic' lengthy introduction to Isaiah's main action whose themes are recapitulated regularly;<sup>38</sup> note that 'salvation from sin' always has a wider, cosmic, covenant goal; understand that it is through this sovereign purpose Israel fulfils her holy calling - through the suffering servant he becomes a corporate light to nations and of individual, spiritual, temples.<sup>39</sup> Put this altogether and the following summary statement results:

The prophet Isaiah's teaches us to place all our trust in the transcendent holy sovereign God of salvation who through His messianic servant will bring full and final promised redemption to the world.

Such a summary relates well to the introduction (1-20), paradigmatic vision (6), Gentile oracles (13-27), sovereign comfort (40), suffering servant (42-53), and the effect of his exaltation, namely glorious supra-national consummation (55-66). Adding my own twist to David Murray's lecture notes, I suggest the following final book summary sentence: 'Trust in the sovereign who rescues the nation and the servant who redeems the nations.'

### Constructing a Series

There are several options when it comes to preaching Isaiah. Regular textual preaching, apart from occasional communion texts from chapter 53, or best-loved comfort texts from chapter 40, is unlikely in the near future to feature heavily in most pulpits. Mini-series sermons, if websites or recent publications are indicative, are becoming commonplace.<sup>40</sup> Sequential systematic exposition, though the obvious gold-standard, is still apparently quite rare,<sup>41</sup> thus, sadly, muting the message of Isaiah's Sacred, Saving, Sovereign.

There are a number of ways we might move from start to finish: we could select the five main sections and then preach one or a number of sermons from each, filling in large gaps, to show the relentless sovereign progression of Isaiah's message of salvation; or we could take the five main sections, with 'time-outs' in-between; or we could take whole chapters, oracles, speeches or narratives in order, handling texts quite lightly, to sustain the interest of hearers - we can decelerate occasionally, and briefly, for concentrated focus (chapters 6, 40 and 53 are cases in point), and

<sup>36</sup> Raymond. C. Ortlund Jr., *Preaching the Word: Isaiah - God Saves Sinners* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2005). The view of Ortlund, of course, is more profound and searching than his valuable, 3-word, title might initially suggest, including as it does key themes of sovereignty and faith.

<sup>37</sup> H. Fasol, p.92.

<sup>38</sup> H.G.M. Williamson, p.364-365.

<sup>39</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Grace and Glory* (Banner of Truth Reprint: Edinburgh, 1994), p.261-264.

<sup>40</sup> See for example the mini-series recommended in Peterson, p.11-25.

<sup>41</sup> Derek Thomas, *God Delivers: Isaiah Simply Explained* (Evangelical Press, Darlington, 1991). You can find Alexander Maclaren's series 'Expositions of Holy Scripture: Isaiah and Jeremiah' on the ccel.org website. Matthew Henry will also come in mighty handy.



accelerate if need be (with edited highlights of chapters 13-27<sup>42</sup>). As a word of caution, since introductory themes recapitulate, 'keep your powder dry!' (don't exhaust kingship by the time you've concluded chapter 6!). Even a young preacher, in a year of morning services, can lay a firm foundation, and then add subsequent sermons on favourite texts or mini-series, like 'Isaiah's Messiah' (7.14, 9.1-7, 11.1-9, 42.1-4, 49.1-6, 52.13-53.12 and 61.4), or 'Servant Songs in Isaiah.' Prepare to preach Christ's Person, Office and Work<sup>43</sup> in Isaiah! Don't hesitate or draw back - remember '*Carpe Textum!*'

## Conclusion

It is my hope that this article has spurred you on, as a pastor or Bible class teacher, to tackle the Book of Isaiah in the near future. If you are a brother believer, I pray you will be stimulated to mine Isaiah's pure gold for yourself. If God's sheep feed on 'His Servant', and learn to trust 'their Sovereign', so 'the saints' fulfil their mission, the church will be stronger, God will get glory and, by grace alone, I will have accomplished a little of what I sought at the outset.

<sup>42</sup> See Harman, p.116-118, for an excellent, digestible, summary of 'The Burdens against the Gentile Nations'. Yet be careful not to leave this section too threadbare, as God's sovereignty over the nations, ruling all things for his church, is one of Isaiah's main themes, and a chief source of spiritual joy to the church, as Owen in his commentary on Hebrews, noted long ago.

<sup>43</sup> Williamson, p.375.

# Appendix 1: Outline of Isaiah 1-12

	1B		2A		4B		6A		6C		7B		8B		9A		10B		11		12	
	Safety Offer		Future Zion		Glorified Branch		Holy King		Stump Survives		Sign Spurned		Trust LORD		King Coming		Remnant Returns		Branch Kingdom		Saving Song	
Judah Judged		Faithless Zion		Pride Humbled & Judah Judged		Ruined Vineyard		Judah Judged		Faith Test		Assyria Coming		Israel Judged		Assyria Judged						
1A		1C		2B-4A		5		6B		7A		8A		9B		10A						
<b>SIN</b>												<b>SALVATION</b>										
<b>REBEL KINGDOM</b>												<b>REMNANT KINGDOM</b>										
<b>REDEEMPTIVE HISTORICAL PROGRESS OF KINGDOM OF DAVID</b>																						

# Appendix 2: Outline of Isaiah 13-27

									14A								18B				19B								23B		25-27	
	Jacob Returns & Rules																Cush Tribute												Tyre & Sidon Repaired in 70 Years		Feast, Life & Replant	
Babylon Overthrown by Medes Later		Babylon Taunt	Assyria Broken in Judah	Philistia Muted Joy	Moab Ruined Past & Present	Damascus & Israel Ruined but Idols Abandoned	Cush Trimmed	Egypt Implosion, Drought & Confusion		Sign Against Egypt & Cush at Ashdod	Babylon Fallen	Arabia Fallen Within Year	Jerusalem Judgment Delay then Done for Former Flight	Tyre & Sidon Ruined	Whole Earth Judged																	
13		14B	14C	14D	15-16	17	18A	19	20	21A	21B	22	23A	24																		
Future Overthrow & Return		Present Invasion					Future Ruin & Redemption		Present Invasion								Future Judgment	Future Salvation														
Medo-Persia		Assyria					Eschaton Reversal		Assyria								Medo-Persia	Eschaton														
Progress of Purpose for Nations																	Goal Reached															

# Appendix 3: Outline of Isaiah 28-39

	<b>28B</b>						<b>30B</b>			<b>31B</b>	<b>32A</b>		<b>33A</b>		<b>33C</b>		<b>35</b>		<b>37</b>	<b>38</b>		
	Zion Stone		Zion Rescue & Assyria Fall		Zion Rescue & Assyria Fall		Zion's King		Zion's Purge		Zion Safe		Zion's Vengeance & Judgment Edom		Zion Return		Hezekiah Prays & Zion Safe		Hezekiah Sick & Hezekiah Healed			
Ephraim War & Words					Egypt Useless						Zion's Women		Zion's Fire				Assyria Invade & Terms Offer					Babel Envoy
<b>28A</b>		<b>29</b>	<b>30A</b>		<b>31A</b>			<b>32B</b>		<b>33B</b>		<b>34</b>		<b>36</b>								<b>39</b>
<b>SOVEREIGN THREAT</b>																						
<b>ASSYRIAN INVASION &amp; EGYPTIAN TEMPTATION</b>																						
<b>TEST CASE TWO</b>																						
<b>REDEMPTIVE HISTORICAL PROGRESS OF KINGDOM OF DAVID</b>																						

# Appendix 4: Outline of Isaiah 40-55

40	Sovereign Salvation																				
41	Sovereign Salvation Performed & Predicted																				
42	Servant Call, Joy & Failure																				
43	Servant Redeemed & Sins Forgiven																				
44	Trust Redeemer not Idols																				
45	Salvation thru Cyrus so Nation see Only God																				
46	No Other God																				
47																					
48	Israel must Admit Sovereign in Salvation																				
49	Rejected Servant Saves & Draws																				
50	Follow Obedient Servant																				
51	Comfort & Curse																				
52	Redeemed to Repent & Rely																				
53	Justification through Sufferings of Servant																				
54	Global Covenant of Peace																				
55	Free Invitation to Banquet spread by Servant																				
<b>Reconciled through Servant's Sufferings</b>																					
<b>The Gospel Period</b>																					
<b>CHRIST</b>																					
<b>REDEMPITIVE HISTORICAL PROGRESS</b>																					

Babylon Ruined

47

**Babylon Judged**

**Comforted by Nation Salvation**

**The Persian Period**

**CYRUS**

**Reconciled through Servant's Sufferings**

**The Gospel Period**

**CHRIST**

**REDEMPITIVE HISTORICAL PROGRESS**

## Appendix 5: Outline of Isaiah 56-66

56	Outcast Salvation				59B	60	61	62	63A	63B	64	65B	66A	66B	66C	66D	
		Israel Leaders			Redemption	Zionism	Messiah	Marriage	Vengeance	Exodus	Revival	New Creation	Contrite	Zion's Joy	Global Glory	Hell	
			Transgressors														
		57A	57B	59A											39	65A	
Israel Defined by Holiness					Redemption & Salvation					Prayer for the End					The Future		
REDEMPTIVE HISTORICAL PROGRESS																	

# REPLACEMENT THEOLOGY?

**Jonathan McCollum**

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## **Introduction**

The status of modern Israel and the Jewish people within redemptive history is an emotive issue. It has led to disagreements among believers which have sadly produced more heat than light at times.

On one extreme are those whose view of the Jewish people appears to be shaped more by prejudice than by an earnest examination of biblical teaching. D. A. Carson recognises this as a snare the church must counteract when he describes a ‘deeply ingrained and odious anti-Semitism that seeps through much of Western culture’.<sup>1</sup>

On the other extreme are those who label the establishment of the modern nation of Israel as part of the ongoing fulfilment of God’s revealed will and who view political support for that nation as a necessary Christian duty. Unease with this line of thinking is expressed by Desmond Tutu who contends that in some circles, ‘the Israeli government is placed on a pedestal, and to criticise it is to be immediately dubbed anti-semitic’.<sup>2</sup>

In reality the vast majority of believers lie somewhere between these two poles. However, while most rightly avoid the excesses of the most extreme positions, some contributions to this debate have still been highly unhelpful. For example, Christian Witness to Israel refuse to follow the extreme path that others have taken in extending unconditional support to the actions of modern Israel. Commendably they are earnest in their proclamation that there can be no salvation for the Jewish people outside of faith in Jesus Christ.

However, they do differ from other believers in certain ways. They hold that the modern Jewish people have a particular, privileged position within God’s redemptive purposes. This is a view which, while being at odds with many other Christian bodies, finds some support within Reformed thought, and it could be argued that their subscription to this interpretation of Scripture accounts for much of their zeal for mission work in Israel.

However, given the differences in opinion of many evangelical Christians, including many supporters of CWI, it is surely unwise and uncharitable to allege that those who disagree with their interpretation are ‘not thinking biblically’, give ‘scant attention’ to Jewish mission, and unwittingly believe ‘anti-Semitic theology’.<sup>3</sup> While accusations such as these are regrettable, they ought to spur us on to search the Scriptures and discover what God has revealed to us about the contemporary Jewish people.

## **Approaching the issue**

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p337

<sup>2</sup> *The Guardian*, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2002

<sup>3</sup> *Christian Witness to Israel*, *The Herald*, Winter 2008

This issue has deep roots. The view that one has of the Jewish people today does not simply rest on how he interprets a handful of relevant texts, but is inevitably dictated by the hermeneutic with which he approaches Scripture as a whole.

Before looking at the more specific question of the status of the Jewish people, the two most prominent frameworks must be briefly examined - dispensationalism and covenant theology. Subscribers to these two views are likely to differ radically on the salvific status of the Jewish people, the moral legitimacy of the Israeli State, and the prospects for mission amongst the Jews.

It should be noted that it is possible to reject a hermeneutic, yet also appropriate elements of its teaching. For example someone could genuinely repudiate dispensationalism, yet still hold beliefs which have been influenced more by dispensational teaching than by classical Reformed thought.

### **Dispensationalism**

Dispensationalism arose out of the Brethren movement which became prominent around 1830.<sup>4</sup> It is a departure from the beliefs held by the vast majority of the Christian church for the vast majority of its history and at least originally was acknowledged to be so by its adherents.

Even within dispensationalism there is a diversity of views, with some classed as 'classic' and others as 'progressive' dispensationalists.<sup>5</sup>

O.T. Allis identified 9 characteristics of dispensationalist theology, three of which are especially relevant to this paper:

6. The church is composed of those, and those only, who are saved between Pentecost and the rapture.
7. The Church age is a mystery period (a parenthesis dispensation unknown to prophecy).
9. After the rapture a Jewish remnant will take the place of the Church as God's agent on earth for the conversion of Israel and the Gentiles.<sup>6</sup>

Dispensationalism portrays a definite separation between Israel and the Church. The Church is seen in parenthetical terms - an interlude in God's plan for Israel. This necessitates God having two distinct redemptive plans, one for Israel and another for the Church.

### **Covenant Theology**

Covenant theology stands in marked contrast to dispensationalism.

It is difficult to conceive of two evangelical perspectives on Old Testament faith differing more radically. The covenantal perspective stresses the unity and continuity of redemptive history; the dispensational perspective stresses the discontinuity of

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<sup>4</sup> William E. Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism*, p1

<sup>5</sup> Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, (Postscript from 1993)

<sup>6</sup> O.T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p9



redemptive history.<sup>7</sup>

This is the theology of the Westminster Standards. Granted, it allows for God's covenant to be administered differently during different time periods<sup>8</sup> but also stresses that it has always had Jesus Christ as its focus, both before<sup>9</sup> and after<sup>10</sup> the incarnation. The Confession explicitly states:

There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.<sup>11</sup>

According to Reformed theology therefore, the Church does not have its beginning at Pentecost, but is made up of believers from both before and after this event. The present church age is not a parenthetical period, but is explicitly in view throughout the Old Testament period in God's dealings with Israel - his Old Testament Church.

By briefly examining the "big picture" of Scripture it becomes clear that only Covenant Theology can provide a hermeneutic which is faithful to how redemptive history unfolds.

(i) God is a God of order

'For God is not a God of confusion but of peace'. (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Scripture clearly portrays the Lord as a God of order. It is legitimate to infer from this that his works will reflect that orderly character. Moreover, the fact that God purports to be unchanging (James 1:17; Malachi 3:6, Numbers 23:19) surely implies that his work must similarly reflect that unchanging nature. It would be inconsistent with his character for God to change his plan on account of some unforeseen external stimulus or to fall back on some form of contingency plan.

It is difficult to see how our unchanging, orderly God could be the God of dispensationalism.

(ii) The Covenant is one

This unchangeableness and order is clearly seen in God's covenanting with his people. He inaugurated the Covenant of Grace in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:15) and the rest of Scripture clearly portrays the fulfilment of the promises given there.

God's revelation of his purposes is further developed when he covenants with Abraham. Even at this early stage promises are made which will increasingly come into focus as redemptive history advances. For example, God clearly shows that the covenant blessings are not restricted to Abraham's genetic descendants (the Jewish people), but are extended to "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3).

It is equally clear that this covenant is not a temporary measure that can be discarded or replaced (Genesis 17:7) - it is an everlasting covenant and must continue no matter what transpires. In that context, any future covenant dealings by God with his people must be built on the covenant with Abraham, rather than abrogating it. That is the light in which we are to read of God's covenant with

<sup>7</sup> Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, p509

<sup>8</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.5

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> WCF, 7.6

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

Moses and David.

This is confirmed in the New Testament: ‘the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void’ (Galatians 3:17).

This is also reflected in the writings of John Calvin: ‘It then follows, that the first covenant was inviolable...God could never have made a new, that is, a contrary or a different covenant.’<sup>12</sup>

Sadly this unity is often ignored or misunderstood today. Perhaps this is in part because of the tendency of some to interpret Scripture in a baldly literal way, without wrestling with the redemptive-historical context within which passages are found.

This failure to grapple with biblical context gives rise to other errors. For example, it could potentially lead a student to limit the promises to Abraham to the physical land in which he walked, at the expense of the spiritual blessings that were his. These blessings are greater by far, but are harder for the human mind to envisage. The New Testament corrects our perspective: ‘he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God’ (Hebrews 11:10); ‘The earthly blessings thus bestowed were intended by God himself to guide them to a heavenly hope.’<sup>13</sup>

Reading the Old Testament in the light of this unity affords us a glimpse of the greatness of God. It allows us to see him working out his perfect, eternal purpose exactly as he planned, without being inconvenienced or blindsided in any way by the sin or circumstances of that era. It reminds us of God’s total sovereignty and incomparable wisdom and ultimately it should lead us to worship.

### (iii) There is one Saviour - Jesus Christ

The Covenant of Grace, instituted in Eden and developed in the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> This is not an example of modern eisegesis, but rather was explicitly recognised by New Testament believers. For example, Zechariah clearly saw the unborn Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of God’s promises to David (Luke 1:69) and as proof of God’s covenant faithfulness to Abraham (Luke 1:72-73). Likewise Mary viewed the incarnation in covenantal terms:

He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
as he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.  
(Luke 1:54-55)

Jesus himself was conscious of his position as the focal point of the covenant with Abraham, as evidenced by his saying, ‘Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad’ (John 8:56).

This doctrine went on to be a feature of the apostolic teaching of Peter (Acts 3:25-26) and Paul (Gal 3:16). The clear teaching of Scripture is that God has one plan of salvation, which is centred on Jesus Christ, who is the serpent crusher of Genesis 3:15, the Abrahamic offspring of Genesis 12:7,

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, Commentary on Jeremiah, chapter 31

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 2.11.1

<sup>14</sup> WCF, 7.5

and the Davidic king of 2 Samuel 7:13.

### **The covenant people are one**

It stands to reason therefore that God is likely to have one redeemed people, rather than many unconnected groups. This is the stance of Covenant Theology and this is what is repeatedly emphasised in Scripture.

#### (i) The imagery of Scripture

In both Old and New Testament God provides us with images to help us understand his relationship with his people. These images help to reinforce the point that there is but one group, the church, redeemed by Jesus Christ.

#### *The Bride of Christ*

Scripture portrays God's redeemed people as the bride of Christ (Psalm 45:9; Ephesians 5:25; Revelation 21:9). In the light of the biblical principle of monogyny it is inconceivable that Christ could have two distinct peoples - that would be to take more than one bride.

#### *One Body in Christ*

The Church is said to be one body with Christ as the head. To allow for Christ to have a Christian people and a Jewish people undermines the very heart of this imagery. (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12:5; Colossians 1:18)

#### *The Olive Tree*

In Romans 11, Paul speaks about the spiritual status of both Jews and Gentiles by likening God's people to an olive tree. It is significant that when Gentiles received salvation, they did not form a second olive tree, but rather were grafted into the first. Also of note is the fact that those Jews who did not believe were 'broken off' - they had no place in the covenant people of God. 'There is the same true olive stock from Adam to the present day and to the end of time.'<sup>15</sup>

#### (ii) Old Testament designations applied to the church

Peter, writing to believers says, 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession' (1 Peter 2:9). It is noteworthy that he uses the language of Old Testament Israel and applies it directly to believers in Jesus Christ. God labels Israel as his chosen people in Isaiah 43:20. Exodus 19:6 describes Israel as 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation', while Exodus 19:5 indicates that Israel is the Lord's treasured possession.

Strikingly, the Christian Church is also likened to the temple. Indeed, Paul takes verses which applied to Old Testament Israel and applies them directly to the Corinthian believers (Leviticus 26:12; Exodus 29:45). 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (2 Corinthians 6:16).

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<sup>15</sup> F.S. Leahy, *God, Satan and the Jews*, p25

Moreover, the New Testament usage of the word *ekklēsia* when referring to the Church mirrors the Septuagint usage of the same word to translate *qahal*, which in the Old Testament was a reference to the gathered people of Israel.

(iii) Universal scope of Old Testament mission

As previously mentioned, right from the offset God's covenant blessings were outward looking. For example, Abraham was so named because he was to be the father of 'many nations' (Genesis 17:4). God promised him that 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:3).

This remains a feature of Jewish thought in the psalms (e.g. 45:17; 72:11,17). It is seen in the striking way that God extends or promises to extend salvation even to sworn enemies of Israel, such as Egypt and Nineveh (Isaiah 19 and Jonah 3). It could barely be more explicit than in the second servant song of Isaiah:

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;  
I will make you as a light for the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.  
(Isaiah 49:6)

Salvation and the blessings of the covenant were never intended to be limited to ethnic Israel. Mission and salvation to the nations were in view throughout the Old Testament. Christ's commission to his disciples (Matthew 28:19) was the next logical step in the light of what had gone before.

(iv) Universal scope of the New Testament

In Romans 5, Paul acknowledges that sin brought condemnation to all men because of the actions of just one man. However, he also teaches that Christ, acting as our federal head brings justification to many. 'Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous' (Romans 5:18-19).

While Paul also states this truth in 1 Corinthians 15, it is interesting that he chose to include it in his Letter to the Romans. The epistle appears to be written against the backdrop of tension between Jewish and Gentile believers, and this passage makes it clear that there is only one distinction that ultimately makes a difference - the distinction between those who are in Adam and those who are in Christ. Ethnic distinctions are ultimately trivial in comparison.

(v) Old Testament and New Testament conditions of salvation are the same

Believers from Christ's death and resurrection onwards have a more detailed salvation of how our salvation was accomplished. However, we cannot drive a wedge between our salvation now and the salvation of Old Testament believers. Abraham was saved in exactly the same way as the Ephesian believers were - by faith: 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness' (Romans 4:3); 'For by grace you have been saved through faith' (Ephesians 2:8).

Just as now, believers prior to Christ's first coming had faith in him, the promised Messiah.<sup>16</sup> This is implicit in Christ's assertion that, 'Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad' (John 8:56).

While the Jewish people would not have known the exact details, the key elements of this salvation would have been discernible to those of faith. 'Israel was schooled in the great principle of forgiveness through the substitutionary death of a perfect sacrifice.'<sup>17</sup>

Specifically, the bearing of sin by the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement would have taught that 'salvation comes to the sinner who turns for forgiveness from his own efforts, who approaches God through the sacrificial death of a perfect substitute offered in his stead, and whose sins are imputed to the sacrifice.'<sup>18</sup> Similar conclusions ought to have been drawn from verses such as Isaiah 53:5-6.

While instructing Timothy in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Paul notes that, 'from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (2 Timothy 3:15). These sacred writings would of course have been the Old Testament. Paul explicitly states that the salvation which proclaimed them is the same salvation that New Testament believers have in Jesus Christ. Hence,

There is one covenant of grace which raises up one redeemed people of God from Eden until the last day. The blessings which New Testament believers receive are founded on God's covenant with Abraham and, behind that, the covenant promise in Genesis 3:15<sup>19</sup>

### **Ethnic Israel today**

We can use the term "Israel" in several different ways. For example, we can use the word in a spiritual sense, to refer to God's chosen ones who have been redeemed by his grace and set apart from other inhabitants of the world. Contrary to the claims of some<sup>20</sup>, this is not a recent invention, but rather has been the consistent of the Church for millennia. For example, Justin Martyr, who ministered in the second century said,

The true spiritual Israel, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (who in uncircumcision was approved of and blessed by God on account of his faith, and called the father of many nations), are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ.<sup>21</sup>

However, the term can also have a national or ethnic meaning. Israel exists today as a state, and the Jewish people exist today as a race. Do they continue to hold a special position in the covenant of redemption?

#### (i) Covenant disobedience

In the Old Testament, God never promised to bless the nation of Israel unconditionally. As his

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<sup>16</sup> WCF, 7.5

<sup>17</sup> Reymond, p531

<sup>18</sup> Reymond, p532

<sup>19</sup> David McKay, *The Bond of Love*, p325

<sup>20</sup> H. Wayne House, *The Future of National Israel*, *Biblioteca Sacra* 166 (October – December 2009), p462

<sup>21</sup> *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Edited by Philip Schaff), chapter 9

special people they were under covenant obligations to give him the obedience and praise that are due to him. Passages such as Deuteronomy 28 outline the blessings that can be expected were the covenant obligations to be met and the curses that would be incurred if Israel was disobedient.

Jesus is the eternal God of the Old Testament (John 1:1), he is the exact imprint of his nature (Hebrews 1:3). Whoever has seen Jesus has seen the Father (John 14:9), and by implication whoever has rejected Jesus has also rejected the Father who sent him (John 6:40).

It is a tragedy that the vast majority of ethnic Jews to have lived in the last two thousand years have not acknowledged Jesus as the Christ. As such, they have no right to claim a relationship with the God of their physical forefathers, as they do not do so through the one mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). Abraham rejoiced when he saw Jesus' day. Any Jew who fails to follow his example fails to remain faithful to the provisions of the covenant.

#### (ii) The Significance of Tongues

Among the covenant curses laid out by God was the following: 'The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand' (Deuteronomy 28:49; see also Isaiah 28:11). Judah experienced this particular punishment when the Lord used Babylon as his instrument for chastisement ten centuries later (Jeremiah 5:15).

Therefore, throughout the Old Testament, the sound of foreign languages within the bounds of Israel's territory would have instinctively been recognised as unwelcome news. The sound signified the fact that God was displeased with Israel and that he was punishing them for disobedience.

This makes the miracle at Pentecost in Acts 2 all the more significant. It is true that the many thousands of people who heard Peter preach were Jews, but the fact that they heard in these foreign languages was a real indication of God's grace to the nations of the world.

Moreover, the fact that these foreign languages were heard within the bounds of Jerusalem could be seen as a sign of God's displeasure with national Israel. They could be under no doubt that they were not the sole objects of God's affection - God was choosing to deal with the nations. 'At Pentecost the church was taken from the swaddling-clothes of the Jewish nation and became supranational, no longer to be identified with one nation as in the past.'<sup>22</sup>

This is in keeping with Christ's parable of the tenants: 'Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits' (Matthew 21:43).

#### (iii) Hardened minds

Paul, who of all people could not be accused of anti-Semitism (Philippians 3:5), offered a devastating critique of Jewish religion. He makes it clear that Christ is the key to understanding the Old Testament, and those Jews who do not know Christ do not truly know the God of their own Scriptures. 'Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts' (2 Corinthians 3:15). Are they truly any better off than the fool who says within his heart that there is no God? (Psalm 14:1).

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<sup>22</sup> F.S. Leahy, *ibid.*, p29.

## (iv) Romans 9-11

These chapters present a great interpretative challenge. Much has been written about them and I will not attempt to reach any conclusions about a future *en masse* conversion of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, there are some things within the passage which are more clear.

For one thing, Paul makes a clear distinction between ‘those who are descended from Israel and ‘Israel’ (9:6), between the children of the flesh and the children of promise. Paul demonstrates that the whole way through the Old Testament, beginning with Ishmael and Isaac, some of Abraham’s descendants have been elect, and others have been reprobate. He shows that this continues into the New Testament age.

In chapter 10, Paul shows that salvation is available to any member of the Jewish race *who believes*, but sadly the bulk of the people rejected this salvation. ‘For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness’ (10:3).

In chapter 11, making use of the metaphor of the olive tree, Paul describes unbelieving Jews as being branches that are broken off (11:17). That is not to say that they are without hope - if they believe in the future, they will be grafted in (11:23). Their hope lies in embracing Jesus Christ, just as the grafted, gentile branches have.

## (v) Galatians

‘For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise’ (Galatians 3:27-29).

Paul is not obliterating any distinction between Jew and Greek here, any more than he is obliterating the difference between the genders. What he is saying is that there is no such things as ‘Jewish believers’ and ‘Gentile believers’ - they have equality and unity in Christ. It is legitimate to infer that the reverse is also true - in a sense there is no such thing as Jewish unbelievers and Gentile unbelievers - rather their one defining characteristic is that they have not been baptised into Christ.

## (vi) Ephesians

At one time national Israel was separated from the gentiles. However, that is in the past - Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. This means, as Paul is at pains to explain, believing Gentiles are now part of ‘the commonwealth of Israel’. In the light of what the rest of the New Testament says about the Jews, this passage contains an implicit and tragic irony - there are those who are Jewish born and bred who are strangers to the covenants of promise and who are further from the commonwealth of Israel than believers from other nations.

**Is this anti-Semitism?**

The status of Israel today is a contentious issue and the perspective of Covenant Theology has been rejected by many and countered with vitriol by some.

One allegation that is frequently made is that those who hold to the Reformed viewpoint ‘take away’ the promises God made to the Jewish people.<sup>23</sup> Often the pejorative term ‘replacement theology’ is used to describe our view.

However, those who argue in this way expose their ignorance of the teaching of covenant theology. They make several assumptions which cannot be justified. For one thing, they assume a ‘dispensational, Israelo-centric way of thinking’.<sup>24</sup> They assume that the temporary, national institutional was always intended by God to be a permanent arrangement.

However, this is in contrast to what we have seen of God’s covenantal dealings. The original promise made to Adam (Genesis 3:15) was that there would be a Saviour. ‘The national people was only a means to that end, not an end in itself.’<sup>25</sup>

To take on this dispensational way of thinking is to elevate the national institution to a position it does not deserve and downplay the fulfilled promise of a Saviour. In addition, the very covenant promises given to Abraham surely indicate that neither God intended nor the patriarchs employed such an ‘Israelo-centric’ way of thinking.

While we should graciously respond to brothers who accuse us of being in error, we ought not to concede the false premises under which they operate. We do not believe in ‘replacement’ theology, because to believe in that requires us to separate the people of God artificially. God’s people have not been abandoned or replaced. Unbelievers within their midst have been cut off from the salvific promises of the covenant, as they were in the Old Testament. Those Jews who respond in faith continue to enjoy the blessings of the covenant, just as they have throughout history.

Moreover, the allegation that we would force Jews to abandon their Jewishness is completely without truth. The Jewish people have a rich culture and amazing history. They can rightly cherish this, but ‘the Jew must learn not to depend, even in part, on his Jewishness as a means of salvation.’<sup>26</sup> In fact, far from forcing the Jewish people to abandon their blessings, the gospel calls on them to receive blessing that is greater by far. Patrick Fairbairn writes,

It is folly to speak of robbing the Jew by putting him on a level with the believer in Christ: for to put him there is to raise him to the highest standing that a child of humanity can enjoy.<sup>27</sup>

## **Practical application**

This issue is not merely an academic matter. The view that we take will impact on how we live our lives. Here are some practical applications:

### (i) Our reading of the Old Testament

Covenant theologians, seeing the unity of the people of God through the ages, derive great

<sup>23</sup> The Future of National Israel, p466

<sup>24</sup> R. Scott Clark, “The Heidelberg”, August 2008

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> F.S. Leahy, *ibid.*, p38

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Fairbairn, Exposition of Ezekiel, p411



encouragement from the promises that God gives to his Old Testament Church.

However, if we adopt an erroneous view that Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church are two separate bodies, we rob ourselves of this encouragement.

Now consider the hard-line dispensationalists, those who do not apply large sections of the Bible to themselves. If they are wrong, the damage they are doing is very serious. They are depriving themselves of the nourishment that Christians ought to receive from many portions of the Bible. When they are in positions of prominence, they damage others also. They are distancing themselves from promises and commands that they ought to take seriously. They are undercutting the ability of the word of God to come home to people's lives as God intended.<sup>28</sup>

That is why we who teach must be careful to grasp the relationship between God's covenant people in the two testaments. We must be diligent in preaching from both parts of Scripture, and must be explicit in explaining the connection between the two. If we do not then our people will be damaged as a result.

In connection to the promises of God, the overly simplistic, literalistic reading that is inherent in dispensationalism is also harmful. A correct understanding leads us to see elements of our own experience in the lives of Old Testament saints. For example, Abraham looked forward to the city whose designer and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10), just as we look forward to the same heavenly city of Revelation 21:2.

However, if we consider Abraham to have simply been seeking an earthly possession of land, we will find it more difficult to learn from how he responded to testing (Genesis 22) and how he mourned (Genesis 23) because his experience will seem somewhat alien to us. We will not derive strength from or be led to praise by the heavenly hope which enabled him to suffer with faith.

Our opponents hold that the land of Canaan was considered by the Israelites as supreme and final happiness, and now, since Christ was manifested, typifies to us the heavenly inheritance; whereas we maintain that, in the earthly possession which the Israelites enjoyed, they beheld, as in a mirror, the future inheritance which they believed to be reserved for them in heaven.<sup>29</sup>

As Reformed Presbyterians we should be especially eager to emphasise the continuity between God's people in the two testaments. If an artificial separation is allowed to persist in our thinking, the psalms will seem foreign, and arguments for more 'Christ-centred' worship will seem particularly appealing.

(ii) Delighting in God's character

When we look at the 'big picture' of Scripture through the lens of covenant theology, we are invariably struck by God's character made manifest in his dealings with his people.

We see how God, almost paradoxically, blesses all the families of the earth through the offspring of one man and note that his wisdom far surpasses human understanding.

<sup>28</sup> Understanding Dispensationalists, chapter 4

<sup>29</sup> Institutes of the Christian Religion, 2.11.1

We see how the nation of Israel repeatedly rebelled against God, and yet how God's sovereignty ensures that in no way was the plan of redemption undermined.

We see how the in-breaking of Christ's kingdom in the Gospels and the spectacular spread of the gospel in Acts confirm the covenant faithfulness of the God of the Old Testament.

If we lose sight of the continuity of God's dealings, we will not be moved to praise him in the way we ought.

(iii) Zeal for Jewish mission

F. S. Leahy notes that dispensational thought is 'certainly no stimulus to the evangelising of the Jews'.<sup>30</sup> A correct understanding of God's redemptive plan leads us to see the Jewish people as they are - people who are blessed with a rich cultural tradition and with the Word of God, but a people who are like any other - in need of salvation. This should in turn lead to earnest prayer for the salvation of lost and needy sinners.

(iv) Emphasising our own need for faith

It is sobering to think of the Jewish people, blessed with the Old Testament Scriptures, refusing to recognise the promised Messiah. To view the Jews as anything other than an unbelieving and lost people group is to minimise the striking nature of their predicament.

Yet there are many in gospel preaching churches who are in a very similar situation. They enjoy the blessings of being within the covenant community, they have heard God's revelation, and yet they are without faith. Seeing the lostness of the Jewish people prompts us to examine our own hearts and to proclaim the message of salvation to our own people with vigour. 'Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required' (Luke 12:48).

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<sup>30</sup> F.S. Leahy, *ibid.*, p39.

# NOT REFORMED AND NOT SAFE: A SUMMARY CRITIQUE OF PAEDOCOMMUNION<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

Some of our churches are being troubled by those who argue that all baptised infants should be brought to the Lord's Table as soon as they are able to eat, a practice known as paedocommunion.<sup>2</sup> This practice, and the Federal Vision (FV) theology that is often associated with it, have been the occasion of prolonged theological conflict in its native land of America. The battle has been fought over the past four decades and matters are now more or less settled - all the main member denominations of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Conference (NAPARC) have issued rulings against the Federal Vision and have sidelined the practice of paedocommunion.<sup>3</sup> The chief instigators, men such as James Jordan, Peter Leithart and Douglas Wilson, have largely retreated to their own denomination, the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC).<sup>4</sup>

The situation in Europe, however, remains unsettled, so the promoters of this doctrine think they have a wide open door to spread their teaching here. This is particularly the case in Eastern Europe, where the context of sacerdotal Roman religion and Eastern Orthodoxy - which has historically practised paedocommunion - aids their acceptance. Through the industrious missionary activity of some prominent advocates, this doctrine is gaining ground in nations such as Belarus, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Russia and the Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> However, as the fact that this teaching originated in the United States suggests, such teaching does not need to have these factors in order to gain a foothold.

Naturally, advocates of paedocommunion will argue that what they teach is true. They claim that paedocommunion was widely practised by the early church, is taught by Scripture, is perfectly consistent with Reformed theology, and will be good for the church. Was there ever any error that did *not* make such claims? As the ordained guardians of Christ's flock, however, it is our responsibility to scrutinise such claims. When we do, we shall see that paedocommunion was never practised by the Reformed, that it is clearly contradicted by the good and necessary consequences of Scripture, is flatly inconsistent with our Reformed confessions, and has dangerous practical and theological implications. In other words, it is not Reformed and not safe. We shall cover the material under the following four headings: historical, biblical, theological, and practical application

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper entitled "Children at the Table: A Summary Critique of Paedocommunion" given at the 2016 meeting of the European Conference of Reformed Churches. The title was assigned, but it hopefully serves to point the reader to Cornelis P. Venema's excellent work, *Children at the Lord's Table?: Assessing the Case for Paedocommunion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> I shall be using the term paedocommunion as synonymous with *infant* communion, as is usually assumed in the English speaking world. Note that there is an important distinction to be made between this concept and allowing young people to be admitted when they meet the biblical requirements rather than imposing an arbitrary age requirements of late teens or early adulthood.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of the denominational responses, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_Vision](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Vision).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://crechurches.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> See the CREC's Joint Eastern European Project, <http://crechurches.org/missions/#jeep>.

## 1. Historical

Advocates for paedocommunion place a lot of weight on historical precedent. Yet we must admit that in the annals of church history one can find precedent for just about anything. There was, for instance, a time when virtually all of Christendom embraced Arianism - this is why Athanasius was said to be *contra mundum* - yet we would not argue from this aberration that Arianism should be restored. So the question is not whether there is *any* precedent in church history for paedocommunion, but rather what were the circumstances surrounding this precedent? This is the question that we should consider as we briefly survey the evidence.

### a) Paedocommunion's claim to the early church.

Christian Keigel, who in 1975 penned one of the first modern Western publications in favour of paedocommunion, asks, 'Why not let baptized infants and children *back into* the Lord's Supper? This request is not nearly so strange once it is understood that infant observance of the Lord's Supper was widespread in the early church.'<sup>6</sup> Federal Vision architect James Jordan asserts that, 'Infants and small children participated in the Lord's Supper in the Western Church until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.'<sup>7</sup> What do we make of such claims?

First, any claim that paedocommunion was a widespread practice in the early church is highly dubious simply because no credible evidence for the practice from the first two hundred years of church history is forthcoming. The earliest Patristic writing advocates can point to is Cyprian's treatise *On the Lapsed* (251). This treatise no doubt describes an infant being served communion, but whether the incident makes for the most solid precedent to follow is another matter. The context is the time immediately after the persecution under the Emperor Decius (r. 249–51). Cyprian indicates the low condition of the church at this time: 'Let us rather consider our offenses, revolving our doings and the secrets of our mind; let us weigh the deserts of our conscience; let it come back upon our heart that we have not walked in the Lord's ways, and have cast away God's law, and have never been willing to keep His precepts and saving counsels.'<sup>8</sup> So this was not a situation of the church speaking in her spiritual prosperity, but in the immediate aftermath of widespread confusion and declension.

The incident Cyprian relates is, by all accounts, a strange one. In the midst of the persecution some Christian parents had left behind their infant daughter, who was then handed over to the authorities. 'They gave it, in the presence of an idol whither the people flocked (because it was not yet able to eat flesh on account of its years), bread mingled with wine...' The girl was later restored to her family, and was subsequently taken to church wherein the Lord's Supper was being administered:

When, however, the solemnities were finished, and the deacon began to offer the cup to those present, and when, as the rest received it, its turn approached, the little child, by the instinct of the divine majesty, turned away its face, compressed its mouth with resisting lips, and refused the cup. Still the deacon persisted, and, although against her efforts, forced on her some of the sacrament of the cup. Then there followed a sobbing and vomiting. In a profane body and mouth the Eucharist could not remain; the draught sanctified in the blood of the Lord burst forth from the polluted stomach.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Christian L. Keidel, "Is the Lord's Supper for Children?," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 3 (1975): p.301-41, p.301; emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> Jordan, James. "Thesis on Paedocommunion," *The Geneva Papers* Special Edition (1982), p.1.

<sup>8</sup> Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, section 21 in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, ed., *The Ante-Nice Fathers*.

<sup>9</sup> Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, section 25 in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, ed., *The Ante-Nice Fathers*.

Judge for yourself the merits of this evidence. Matthew Winzer concludes that, ‘So far from being indicative of a universal practice, it conveys an isolated and singular incident that required explanation.’<sup>10</sup> He also notes that what is actually being reported is forced communion, something contemporary advocates for paedocommunion do not usually argue for.<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding these many irregularities that limit the significance of this reference we concede that by this point there was at least one church that would serve infants at least one element of the Lord’s Supper on at least one occasion. The question is on what basis theologically? Sadly, two centuries were more than enough time for error to creep into the doctrine of the church. One need only to read Cyprian’s *On the Baptism of Infants* to see that his sacramentology was more than a little infected with sacerdotal assumptions.<sup>12</sup> In consonance with his clearly sacerdotal understanding of the ministry, it seems that Cyprian believed that the sacraments convey grace apart from faith.<sup>13</sup> Thus his practice of paedocommunion was likely predicated upon a false theology.

What can we say about the larger picture through the first five centuries? In contrast to the practise of infant baptism during this period, where the evidence is widespread and incontrovertible, the evidence for paedocommunion is spotty and ambiguous.<sup>14</sup>

**b) Paedocommunion was eventually accepted by the Eastern Church and, for a time, by the Western Church.**

By the time of the end of the fifth century, however, it seems that infant communion had become an established practice.<sup>15</sup> The practice probably waxed and waned over the succeeding centuries until 1215, at which point the Fourth Lateran Council ruled that the minimum age for admission to the mass would henceforth be seven years old. The precise reason for this ruling is debated. The fear that infants might desecrate the sacrament no doubt played some role, but so also did the rise of a more discriminate communion in the Roman Church generally. On the other hand, paedocommunion in the Eastern Church continued on to the present day.

So while it is true that paedocommunion has historical precedent, the question remains whether the circumstances make it a good precedent to follow. Indeed, the fact that the Medieval Roman Church and the present-day Eastern Orthodox Church embrace the practice would seem reason more to regard it with suspicion than to accept it uncritically.

**c) Paedocommunion was rejected by the Reformers.**

One of the first denominational responses to paedocommunion - the Reformed Church in the United States’ (RCUS) 1977 report - aptly summarises the situation at the Reformation: ‘While the Reformers did restore the cup to the laity, they did not return to the position of infant communion

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Winzer, “The True History of Paedo-Communion,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007): p.27-36; p.32.

<sup>11</sup> Winzer, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Cyprian, Epistle 58, to Fidus, *On the Baptism of Infants*, in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, ed., *The Ante-Nice Fathers*.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Cyprian (d. 258) goes still further, and applies all the privileges, duties, and responsibilities of the Aaronic priesthood to the officers of the Christian church, and constantly calls them *sacerdotes* and *sacerdotium*. He may therefore be called the proper father of the sacerdotal conception of the Christian ministry as a mediating agency between God and the people.’ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol. II*, p.119.

<sup>14</sup> See the charitable treatment in Cornelis P. Venema, *Children at the Lord’s Table?: Assessing the Case for Paedocommunion*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Among other evidence, we have a pronouncement from Gennadius of Marseilles in the year 495 that suggests this state of affairs.

since they rejected the [sacerdotal] view of the sacraments and required that a degree of discernment accompany participation in the Lord's Supper.<sup>16</sup> The point is that the Reformers did not passively carry on whatever tradition was then current in the Western Church regarding the Supper; they rightly restored one old practice (communion in both kinds) while rightly rejecting another (paedocommunion.)

The Reformers were aware of the possibility of paedocommunion, but universally rejected it.<sup>17</sup> Why? Let us hear John Calvin reprove the false logic of paedocommunion in the *Institutes*:

At length they object, that there is not greater reason for admitting infants to baptism than to the Lord's Supper, to which, however, they are never admitted: as if Scripture did not in every way draw a wide distinction between them...For if we attend to the peculiar nature of baptism, it is a kind of entrance, and as it were initiation into the Church, by which we are ranked among the people of God, a sign of our spiritual regeneration, by which we are again born to be children of God; whereas, on the contrary, the Supper is intended for those of riper years, who, having passed the tender period of infancy, are fit to bear solid food. This distinction is very clearly pointed out in Scripture. For there, as far as regards baptism, the Lord makes no selection of age, whereas he does not admit all to partake of the Supper, but confines it to those who are fit to discern the body and blood of the Lord, to examine their own conscience, to show forth the Lord's death, and understand its power. Can we wish anything clearer than what the apostle says, when he thus exhorts, "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup"? (1 Cor. 11:28.) Examination, therefore, must precede, and this it were vain to expect from infants. Again, "He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." If they cannot partake worthily without being able duly to discern the sanctity of the Lord's body, why should we stretch out poison to our young children instead of vivifying food? Then what is our Lord's injunction? "Do this in remembrance of me." And what the inference which the apostle draws from this? "As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come." How, pray, can we require infants to commemorate any event of which they have no understanding; how require them "to show forth the Lord's death," of the nature and benefit of which they have no idea?...Had these men the least particle of soundness in their brain, would they be thus blind as to a matter so very clear and obvious?"<sup>18</sup>

Thus Calvin's resounding rebuttal to those who are 'blind as to a matter so very clear and obvious.'

Moving beyond the time of the Reformation itself, it is a simple matter of fact that Reformed churches have never adopted the practice. The 1977 RCUS report goes on to say, 'To our knowledge, infant communion was never a practice in the Reformed churches.'<sup>19</sup> R. Scott Clark, in his series of value-added reviews on Venema's *Children at the Table*, says "...it is beyond doubt and admitted by all intelligent proponents of paedocommunion that the Reformed Churches do not and never have confessed paedocommunion."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Reformed Churches in the United States, 'Report on Infant Communion', 1977.

<sup>17</sup> The case of Wolfgang Musculus will be discussed below.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.30.

<sup>19</sup> Reformed Churches in the United States, 'Report on Infant Communion', 1977.

<sup>20</sup> R. Scott Clark, "Children at the Lord's Table?", <http://heidelblog.net/2009/04/children-at-the-lords-table-1/>, accessed 24 May, 2016.

Wolfgang Musculus is sometimes cited as an opposing opinion among the Reformers.<sup>21</sup> Three things should be observed on this point. First, and most importantly, even advocates of paedocommunion have to admit that, "...Musculus himself did not advocate a return to the practice of paedocommunion."<sup>22</sup> This is putting it somewhat mildly; Musculus wrote, "I will not be author to any man, to go about to bring in the communion of infants into the church again."<sup>23</sup> Thus, to use Musculus as support for reintroducing this practice would be to trample upon his own express intent. Secondly, it is useful to see that Musculus actually accepts some of the key arguments employed by paedocommunion advocates today yet, in stark contrast to the overheated rhetoric sometimes found in titles such as *Daddy, Why Was I Excommunicated?*, he sees no urgent need to bring infants to the table.<sup>24</sup> Thirdly, even if he had said more than he did, he would have been a singular voice - the exception that proves the rule. Finally, it was not that the framers of the orthodox Reformed faith accidentally omitted paedocommunion because there were unaware of the possibility; they had in fact heard of it from a very able man. They rejected it nonetheless.

The bottom line is that the practice of paedocommunion remained unknown among the Reformed churches for the first four and a half centuries of our history.

#### **d) Paedocommunion among the Reformed churches is a novelty of recent vintage.**

To come to any history of paedocommunion being advocated and practised among Reformed churches, we have to come to 1970s Westminster Seminary and to the larger controversy surrounding Norman Shepherd.<sup>25</sup> From there, the strands of a new sacerdotal religion begin to coalesce in the Auburn Avenue conference material of the early 2000s which would become the Federal Vision.<sup>26</sup> The decisive debate in denominations such as the PCA took place soon after this time, as one by one the Reformed denominations took turns rejecting this movement. Purely in historical terms, we can say with great confidence that this is not a Reformed practice but rather a novelty of recent vintage.

## **2. Biblical**

Let us now consider the Scriptural evidence regarding paedocommunion.

#### **a) Paedocommunion's equation between the Passover and the Lord's Supper is invalid.**

Did young children partake of the Passover? Calvin did not think so. In the section quoted above, he goes on to explain the implications of what is said in Exodus 12:26: '...the Passover...did not admit all kinds of guests promiscuously, but was duly eaten only by those who were of *an age*

<sup>21</sup> See Musculus, *Loci Communes Sacrae Theologiae*, as abstracted on the pro-paedocommunion website [http://paedocommunion.com/articles/musculus\\_common\\_places.php](http://paedocommunion.com/articles/musculus_common_places.php).

<sup>22</sup> Tim Gallant, [http://paedocommunion.com/articles/musculus\\_common\\_places.php](http://paedocommunion.com/articles/musculus_common_places.php), accessed 26 May, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> '...nec author cuiquam esse uolo, ut infantium communionem postliminio in ecclesiam reducere conetur.' Musculus, 'de Coena Domini,' II. 'Quibus Administranda Sit Coena Domini, & Quibus Non Sit,' *Loci Communes Theologiae* (Basel, 1567), p. 808. Translation by John Mann (London, 1578), p.764.

<sup>24</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Daddy, Why Was I Excommunicated?* (Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1992).

Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs: Why the Lord's Table Should Be Restored to Covenant Children*, (Pactum Reformada: Grande Prairie, AB, Canada, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, the aforementioned Christian L. Keidel, 'Is the Lord's Supper for Children?', *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no.3 (1975): p. 301-41.

<sup>26</sup> See Waters, Guy Prentiss. *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2006).

*sufficient to ask the meaning of it* (Exod. 12:26).<sup>27</sup> In other words, the command for the parents to explain to their children when asked is predicated upon the children first being able to ask with understanding.

It should also be recognised that the biblical Passover was closely linked to a seven-day feast - the Feast of Unleavened Bread - and included multiple elements at different times. It is, for instance, entirely possible that young children participated in certain aspects of this larger celebration but not in the elements most closely parallel to the Lord's Supper. Moreover, the mere possibility of such a disparity should alert us to the larger issue: there are significant discontinuities as well as continuities between the Passover and the Lord's Supper. Defenders of orthodoxy have sometimes tied themselves in knots trying to get out of the paedocommunist's equation that whatever applied to any part of the Passover must apply monolithically to the Lord's Supper.<sup>28</sup> Yet the equation so stated is not valid. In addition to the prolonged duration and multiple elements and stages of celebration, there is the issue of frequency - the Passover was observed only once every year whereas the Lord's Supper is observed frequently. Furthermore, the Passover was intended to serve as a sustenance meal whereas it was a dangerous mistake for the Corinthians to treat the Lord's Supper as if it were ('What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?' (1Co 11:22)). Quite simply, although we can speak of parallels and of fulfilment, the Lord's Supper is *not the same thing as the Passover*.

For such reasons R. Scott Clark reminds us that, 'the Supper has no exact analogy in the old covenant.'<sup>29</sup> Indeed, if there were an exact and precise analogy between these institutions, we would expect to find in our sufficient Scriptures the sort of explicit warnings in the Old Testament regarding the Passover as we have for the Lord's Supper in the New. These instructions, perhaps with some reiteration predicated upon this precise parallel, would have sufficed for the New Testament church. Yet this is not what we find. Rather, the existence of the lengthy text in 1 Corinthians 11 that makes no reference to the Passover bears implicit testimony to the real discontinuities.

In any case, it is a cardinal tenant of Reformed hermeneutics that the clearer text of Scripture must interpret the less clear. That means that texts of Scripture that deal directly with the Lord's Supper must have the final say on how the Lord's Supper is to be administered and received, and others must be interpreted in light of them.

#### **b) Paedocommunion must impose an illegitimate contextual control to overcome the strictures of 1 Corinthians 11**

1 Corinthians 11 presents a very formidable obstacle standing in the way of those who would bring toddlers to the Lord's Supper. Naturally, this obstacle must be somehow overcome. Ray Sutton writes, 'Many have said that the "self-examination" and "discernment" required therein cannot be practised by children....Closer examination of the passage, however, indicates a more *corporalistic* interpretation.' He claims that the problem is not with individuals who fail to discern the Lord's body, but rather with the whole church's actions involving pride and factionalism:

The verses which are normally used in preparation for communion are generally taken out of context. 'Self examination' and 'discernment' are applied across the board. But

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.30; emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> Leonard J. Coppes, *Daddy, May I Take Communion?*, 1988.

<sup>29</sup> R. Scott Clark, 'Children at the Lord's Table?', <http://heidelblog.net/2009/04/children-at-the-lords-table-8/>, accessed 24 May, 2016.



only the context can clarify what Paul says about how the Lord's Supper is to be observed....However one takes the passage, *it must be consistent with this context.*"<sup>30</sup>

By thus monolithically imposing a corporate context upon the passage, the paedocommunion advocate conveniently evacuates the text of its clear implications for individual participants. Scott Clark notes that, 'Their view depends considerably upon their reconstruction of the circumstances prompting Paul's response...The problem was not "unworthy" participants but ungodly pride and factionalism....Advocates of paedocommunion argue that what the Corinthians failed to discern was their membership in Christ.'<sup>31</sup>

This is all very convenient. Assuming this particular context (which happens to be at odds with the context the church has traditionally understood from the text) and assuming that this purported context must define the outer limits of what Paul could possibly have been addressing in the text that follows predetermines the desired outcome. If this sounds familiar, it should. Similar procedures lie at the heart of the New Perspective on Paul that is so beloved by Federal Vision adherents. It should perhaps come as no surprise that N.T. Wright himself also happens to be a proponent of paedocommunion.<sup>32</sup> Such hermeneutical trickery is antithetical to any legitimate notion of Reformed interpretation, and its enlistment in support of paedocommunion is alone reason enough to reject it.

### c) Notwithstanding, Paedocommunion is flatly inconsistent with 1 Corinthians 11

If not the falsely constructed corporate context, what is the basic category of error the Corinthians were guilty of?<sup>33</sup> Read the text:

<sup>20</sup> Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. <sup>21</sup> For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of *others*; and one is hungry and another is drunk. <sup>22</sup> What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise *you*.

They are using the Supper as something else other than its intended design, as an ordinary meal ('What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?') or in addition to this, as a means of being unkind to those who have less than they ('Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing?'). In either case, the guilty parties are 'not eat[ing] the Lord's Supper'; they have mistaken it for something else and have therefore brought upon themselves judgment.

Two things are to be observed from this information. First, the abuse was true of some but not all of the Corinthians. This categorically eliminates the possibility of a monolithically corporate construction. Secondly, now it would seem that there were adults who were making this mistake. This does not suggest that children are incapable of making such a mistake, but rather that even adults could. It is clear from the outset that there must be the cognitive capacity not to make this mistake in order for there to be a safe participation in the Supper. This is, of course, interrelated

<sup>30</sup> Ray R. Sutton, 'Presuppositions of Paedocommunion.' *The Geneva Papers*, Special Edition (1982), p.3.

<sup>31</sup> R. Scott Clark, 'Children at the Lord's Table?', <http://heidblog.net/2009/04/children-at-the-lords-table-8/>, accessed 24 May, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> See, <http://paedocommunion.com/whoswho/>, accessed 24 May, 2016; 'Federal Vision' [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_Vision](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Vision), accessed 8 June 2016.

<sup>33</sup> See George W. Knight III, 'The Lord's Supper: Abuses, Words of Institution and Warnings,' *Ordained Servant* 14, no. 2 (2005): p. 40-46.

with the three active verbs Paul requires of participants, all of which are cognitive in nature: discerning, remembering and proclaiming. How confident are we that a young child would never, ever mistake the Lord's Supper for an ordinary meal? Beyond that, how confident are we that he would be capable of the 'discerning,' 'remembering' and 'proclaiming' Paul goes on to demand of partakers? The answer should be obvious: no, and no. Warnings must be taken seriously. There is the real possibility of 'eating and drinking damnation' for those who do not discern. What loving parent in their right mind would wish to expose their young child to this?

### 3. Theological

Moving on now to more theological considerations, how well does this practice cohere with the orthodox Reformed system of theology?

#### a) Paedocommunion coheres well with sacerdotal assumptions

First of all, we should just recall that the original impetus for paedocommunion historically was sacerdotal. The 1977 Report of the RCUS notes, 'Infant communion was practised in the Christian Church from the third to the eighth centuries, and in some areas as late as the twelfth century. The basis for this practice, however, was not covenantal but sacramental or sacerdotal...'<sup>34</sup> The connection between sacerdotal doctrine and paedocommunion is more than accidental, as we have noted above regarding Cyprian. The fundamental nature of the connection is pretty simple: if we believe that the means of grace operate by faith alone, we have no agenda to overthrow the warnings of 1 Corinthians 11 and admit infants to the Table. But if we think that the sacraments convey grace apart from faith, we have a good reason to consider paedocommunion. Indeed, where has paedocommunion ever arisen in the absence of sacerdotalism? Certainly not in the contemporary American scene, where sacerdotal Federal Vision theology and paedocommunion go together like carrots and peas.

#### b) Paedocommunion is based upon a false logical parallel with baptism,

Ray Sutton writes, 'For several years this subject has been a concern because Reformed churches see a discontinuity in the sacraments regarding children. Baptists often level the charge of inconsistency at paedobaptists. Such a criticism initiated the following study in that it was believed paedocommunion warranted investigation.'<sup>35</sup> To some extent, this may well have been the nature of the discussion in the Westminster Seminary of the 1970s - not a desire to recover Reformed practice, but the need to answer the specious logical arguments of Baptist fellow students.

Of course, as we read in Calvin above, this logical parallel is not valid. We need not add anything to what he said very powerfully in the *Institutes*, as quoted above, but I would just mention that there is a good reason why we have two different sacraments: *because they exist for different sacramental ends*. One is initiatory, passively received, and portrays covenantal promise whereas the other is ongoing, actively participated in, and portrays covenantal communion and proclamation. Given such radical differences in the nature and purposes of these sacraments, is it any wonder that there would be differing regulations for who is admitted to them and under which circumstances? Even professing believers may rightly be excluded from the table when they are in open and defiant sin, whereas a baby may be baptised in the very act of loudly protesting the act - the nature of the sacrament is consistent with the manner of its administration and reception.

<sup>34</sup> Reformed Churches in the United States, 'Report on Infant Communion', 1977.

<sup>35</sup> Ray R. Sutton, 'Presuppositions of Paedocommunion. *The Geneva Papers*, Special Edition (1982).

**c) Paedocommunion is incompatible with confessional standards at numerous points.**

Paedocommunion is contradicted in the clearest way by Westminster Larger Catechism 177:

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper differ, in that baptism is to be administered but once, with water, to be a sign and seal of our regeneration and ingrafting into Christ, and that even to infants; whereas the Lord's supper is to be administered often, in the elements of bread and wine, to represent and exhibit Christ as spiritual nourishment to the soul, and to confirm our continuance and growth in him, *and that only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves.*

Let us just note the ways in which this statement amounts to an explicit prohibition of paedocommunion. The Westminster divines here consider the possibility of a false symmetry between the sacraments forming the basis for a symmetrical administration, so they draw a clear contrast. On the one hand, baptism is to be administered 'even to infants,' whereas on the other hand the Lord's Supper is to be administered 'only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves.' Note also the double qualification: it is not some ability to discern which might theoretically be available to infants but an ability that is inextricably related to age. For anyone having a sincere desire to conform to confessional Reformed standards, Westminster Larger Catechism 177 should be more than enough to rule out paedocommunion.

We must be very clear, however, that Westminster Larger Catechism 177 is no isolated proof text, as if one could omit this point without falling afoul of any other. Rather, at each and every point that the Standards have anything to say related to who may come to the Lord's Supper the implications of the statement are utterly incompatible with paedocommunion. As but an incomplete survey, consider the following. Whereas Westminster Confession of Faith 28.4 extends baptism to the infants of believers apart from their own profession of faith, 29.1 defines the Lord's Supper as being for 'true believers' only. The standards make reference to 'worthy receivers' and those who 'worthily communicate' (WCF 29.7, WLC 168 and 170), making clear that *unworthy* reception and communication are sadly possible.

The divines employed this terminology because their sacramentology is predicated upon a discriminate administration and reception of the Lord's Table, again in contrast to the situation with baptism. Westminster Confession of Faith 29.8 speaks of 'ignorant' men receiving the Lord's Supper to their damnation, meaning that the Supper demands knowledge that not even all baptised adults possess, let alone all infants. Then there is the statement in Westminster Larger Catechism 173,

Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's Supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction and manifest their reformation.

Thus even an outward profession of faith is not alone sufficient, but must be accompanied with commensurate knowledge and conduct. Likewise, in Westminster Larger Catechism 169 there are the words, '...In thankful remembrance that the body of Christ was broken and given, and his blood shed for them.' In order to *remember* something, you must of course know it in the first place. Such qualifications are flatly inconsistent with paedocommunion.

Even more telling are the expectations articulated for preparation to receive the Lord's Supper:

They that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are, before they come, to prepare themselves thereunto, by examining themselves of their being in Christ, of their sins and wants; of the truth and measure of their knowledge, faith, repentance; love to God and the brethren, charity to all men, forgiving those that have done them wrong; of their desires after Christ, and of their new obedience, and by renewing the exercise of these graces, by serious meditation, and fervent prayer (WLC 171).

I will not try the reader's patience by detailing each item on this long list of highly demanding tasks here enumerated, but suffice it to say that no infant could ever hope to fulfil them.

And then there are the reception and post-reception questions found in WLC 174 and 175:

It is required of them that receive the sacrament of the Lord's supper, that, during the time of the administration of it, with all holy reverence and attention they wait upon God in that ordinance, diligently observe the sacramental elements and actions, heedfully discern the Lord's body, and affectionately meditate on his death and sufferings, and thereby stir up themselves to a vigorous exercise of their graces... (WLC 174).

The duty of Christians, after they have received the sacrament of the Lord's supper, is seriously to consider how they have behaved themselves therein, and with what success... (WLC 175).

By what stretch of the imagination could anyone conceive that infants are capable of upholding these requirements? It should be obvious that a young child is not capable of fulfilling such requirements, precisely because the Standards did not intend for them to receive the Supper. This all leads Lane Keister to ask, 'How Hostile is Paedocommunion to Our Standards?'<sup>36</sup>

Thus far the Westminster Standards. I shall now briefly touch upon The Three Forms of Unity. Although The Three Forms are not as elaborate as Westminster and lack an explicit statement along the lines of Westminster Larger Catechism 177, they articulate the very same underlying Reformed sacramentology, one that is at odds with paedocommunion. Consider, for instance, what is involved in fulfilling the requirements of Heidelberg Catechism, Question 81. The Lord's Supper is 'for those who are truly displeased with themselves for their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them for the sake of Christ' and "who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life.' On the other hand, 'hypocrites and such as turn not to God with sincere hearts eat and drink judgment to themselves.' Neither does the Heidelberg Catechism allow us to lose sight of the stakes involved as we read in Question 82:

Q. Are they also to be admitted to this supper who, by their confession and life, show themselves to be unbelieving and ungodly?

A. No; for in this way the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation; wherefore the Christian Church is in duty bound, according to the ordinance of Christ and His apostles, to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they show amendment of life.

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<sup>36</sup> Lane Keister, <https://greenbaggins.wordpress.com/2012/05/31/how-hostile-is-paedo-communion-to-our-standards/>.

Those who partake of the Lord's Supper must have a confession as well as manner of life that are consistent with being a believer. This understanding is confirmed in that the main author of the Heidelberg Catechism, Zacharias Ursinus, explicitly teaches against paedocommunion in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*.<sup>37</sup> Finally, note that the Belgic Confession, Article 25, teaches much the same as Heidelberg. Thus, we see that the Three Forms of Unity cohere entirely with what was previously discussed regarding the Westminster Standards. The framers of our Reformed confessions were convinced that the instructions given to us demand such requirements, requirements that could never conceivably be fulfilled by an infant.

**d) Paedocommunion will either be held inconsistently with Reformed theology, or else it will lead to a consistent theology that is not Reformed.**

Some would argue that it is entirely possible to practice paedocommunion without there being any implications for other aspects of confessional Reformed orthodoxy. The short answer is 'no'. Practice is inevitably connected to a coherent system of theology. Peter Leithart, writing in the provocatively titled book *Daddy, Why Was I Excommunicated?*, makes the astute observation that 'the significance for the system of Reformed doctrine' of a 'belief in paedocommunion...is vast.' It has implications for:

...such major areas of theology as the doctrine of the Church, the meaning of the covenant, the relationship of the covenant to eternal election, the doctrines of perseverance and assurance, the relationship of faith and the sacraments, the relationship of faith and understanding, the relationship of faith and works, and other questions of great theological significance. [...] For these reasons...paedocommunion is rightly seen as a profound challenge to the prevailing thought and practice. If true, paedocommunion requires the contemporary Reformed churches to undergo a far-reaching repentance.<sup>38</sup>

We can be thankful for Leithart's honesty here. He would proceed to do exactly what he signalled in 1992: to recast theology in a way that is fully consistent with the implications of paedocommunion. We call this theology the Federal Vision, and it is opposed to Reformed orthodoxy at virtually every point. And one way that we understand the Federal Vision is simply the desire to be consistent doctrinally with a practice these men had already embraced. Paedocommunion is, in this sense, a gateway drug to the Federal Vision.

#### **4. Practical Application**

Let us now consider the three following items of application.

**a) A plea for the discipline of those who practise paedocommunion**

In this paper, I am speaking to those who are in confessional Reformed denominations, to those who have confessions of faith precisely because they mean something. We believe that they communicate the truth of God's Word. They do us no good if they are not upheld by church discipline. Although this is not always pleasant, neither is what the virulent and often schismatic advocates of paedocommunion have done to the church. Some have said that we should not focus on what we are holding on to, but rather on what we can give. This is a false dichotomy; if we do not hold on to 'the faith once delivered to the saints,' we will have nothing to give. Just like our

<sup>37</sup> Z. Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*.

<sup>38</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Daddy, Why Was I Excommunicated?* Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1992, p.5-6.

bodies, the church has an immune system designed to preserve life by keeping out what is harmful. Theological debate and church discipline serve to protect Christ's body, the Church. It is laudable to focus on mission, but the church cannot help anyone if she is diseased.

### **b) A plea for diligent catechesis rather than indiscriminate laxity**

One of the appeals of paedocommunion is its sheer ease. Instead of the hard work of Christian nurture and the discomfort of spiritual scrutiny, there is the wonderfully simple and easy admission to the table of all baptised infants. Yet this ease - or rather this laxity - is itself highly problematic, because it undermines the Church's motivation for catechesis. F. N. Lee points to this problem when he asserts that 'paedocommunion ultimately leads to an uncatechized Church (which Calvin says cannot long continue...).' <sup>39</sup>

There is a certain irony in the paedocommunionists' rhetoric. They make highly emotional appeals that we should, "Feed my lambs" in paedocommunion. Yet the effect of their teaching is almost certainly to enervate the right motivation parents and churches have to feed them diligently the much-needed milk of Christian nurture rather than the poison of indiscriminate communion. There is no short cut to the hard work of diligent catechesis, laying the foundation for a beneficial reception of the Lord's Table. It might also be worth reiterating at this point Venema's apt observation,

The historic view does not deny that the children of the covenant are invited to the Lord's Table. As a matter of fact, if their baptism means anything, it means that they are invited to respond in faith to the Lord's gracious promise, which would qualify them to receive the sacrament that nourishes their faith. Therefore, the only thing preventing such children, or any others, from coming to the Table is the absence of an appropriate response to the invitation. <sup>40</sup>

### **c) A plea for experiential religion rather than formalism**

False teaching sometimes gains a foothold among us when the church strays even minutely from the full-orbed Biblical truth. In the case of paedocommunion, one area of weakness could be the relatively high age - often nineteen - that some Reformed churches have adopted as the standard age to admit to the Table. Related to this is the tendency in some churches to accept into communicant membership essentially everyone of this age who completes the required training. No doubt there are good intentions behind such traditions, but if we mechanistically receive covenant children to the Supper at one (high) arbitrary age, should we wonder if others receive them at another (low) arbitrary age?

Perhaps we would do well to consider anew the model that Calvin envisioned:

A child of ten would present himself to the church to declare his confession of faith, would be examined in each article, and answer to each; if he were ignorant of anything, he would be taught. Thus, while the church looks on as a witness, he would profess the one true and sincere faith, in which the believing folk with one mind worship the one God. <sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> F. N. Lee, 'Summary Against Paedocommunion', The Works of Rev. Prof. Dr. F.N. Lee online.

<sup>40</sup> Venema, *ibid*, p.2.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.19.13.

To be clear, I do not wish to propose a new automatic age of ten. The point is just to say that Calvin's vision is intended to bring a child to the table as soon as he is spiritually and intellectually able to fulfil the requirements of 1 Corinthians 11, and this age could be less than nineteen. Indeed, I would argue that the age could vary significantly. The criterion is not so much age as what has historically been called among Anglophone churches a 'credible profession of faith'. So instead of formalism of any kind or degree whatsoever I would again plea for the religion of Calvin, Owen, Maastricht and Edwards: the religion known as experiential Calvinism.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See my "'A Point of Infinite Consequence": Jonathan Edwards's Experimental Calvinism On Trial,' *Banner of Truth*, July-August 2016.

# JEREMIAH BURROUGHS ON THE INFINITE EXCELLENCY OF GOD

**Jim Davison**

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## **Introduction**

The sermons preached by Jeremiah Burroughs and published as *Irenicum: Healing the Divisions Among God's People*, are rightly recognised as one of the great series of Puritan sermons. Burroughs' purpose in these sermons was first to show the harmful effects of divisions and second to give directions whereby peace and unity may be spread throughout the Commonwealth of England. But it was not a concern for peace and unity *per se* or that life could simply be lived out in a more tranquil manner that motivated Burroughs.<sup>1</sup> It was, rather, that God, man's Creator, might thereby have the glory of which he alone is worthy. For Burroughs, like his fellow Puritan ministers, this was the primary purpose of life. The clearest evidence of Puritan teaching on this subject comes in the answer to the first question in the Westminster Assembly's *Shorter Catechism*: "Man's chief end is to glorify God", and this was emphasised consistently by the Puritans in their sermons.

This same emphasis is found in a little known work by Burroughs called *The Saints Treasury*,<sup>2</sup> first published in 1654, eight years after his death. Here Burroughs expounds the subjects of God's incomparable holiness and excellency, based on the words of Exodus 15:11 "*Who is like unto thee, O Lord, amongst the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?*". The words come in the middle of Moses' song, "occasioned upon the goodness of God in delivering His people from Egypt and carrying them through the Red Sea." Burroughs describes the song as "a spiritual" song which is "most excellent...full of elegance...a most delightful song." It is also a song with an "exceeding variety" of subject matter, including that which is "eucharistical, triumphant, [and] prophetic."<sup>3</sup>

The song also has a symbolic tone for Burroughs: "It is a symbolic song, as the deliverance of God's people out of Egypt so a type of the deliverance of God's people from the bondage of Antichrist." The importance of this song for Burroughs rests in the fact that this song "shall be sung over again when the bondage of Antichrist is removed." Making it more personal Burroughs says, "[This song will be sung] when we shall be delivered from Antichristian bondage." The basis for this last comment is Revelation 15:3 and it leads Burroughs to suggest that "it would be good for us to acquaint ourselves with this song."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Burroughs could not be classed as a pacifist, as is evident from two sermons he preached in 1642 in defence of the right of the godly to take up arms in defence of true religion and their liberties. It is also very evident from these two sermons that Burroughs was on the side of Parliament in its conflict with King Charles I. The two sermons were published in 1643 with the title: *The Glorious name of God – The Lord of Hosts*. There is also evidence in Burroughs' *Exposition of Hosea* that he was not a pacifist, when, in a reference to the Irish, he proclaims that "vengeance will come for that blood that has been shed of our brethren in Ireland upon any whosoever has been instrumental in it" (p.36).

<sup>2</sup> Burroughs, *The Saints Treasury* (1654). The work is a collection of five sermons by Burroughs on various subjects.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.2. Following this last quote Burroughs has this interesting comment: "it is a pity we have not had such an excellent song as this turned into metre to be sung in our congregations" (p.2). Is this an indication that Burroughs may not have been very musical; otherwise he could have produced the necessary metre himself?

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.2.



This line of thought is not continued as Burroughs moves from these general eschatological comments to the more particular meaning of his text. In the text Burroughs notes four things that advance God's name: 1) there is none like unto the Lord; 2) He is glorious in holiness, 3) He is fearful in praises; and 4) in doing wonders. However, only the first two are expounded. It was Burroughs' intention to handle only the third of these four phrases, but because he "saw that there was much of God in the two former ones," he "thought it useful to show...what there is of God in them and was unwilling to pass them by."<sup>5</sup>

Burroughs begins by first noting that the words of the text are "put by way of interrogation," which may be by way of admiration or by way of negation. By admiration in that Moses and the people were so "struck with astonishment at the glory of God now manifested by the great works he had done" that they sing out in admiration, "Who is like unto thee, O Lord?" The words are also to be understood by way of negation as they carry within them the response, "there is none like unto Thee." For Burroughs this "lifting up of God's name above all things whatsoever" is the first expression of the glory of God. Among the Scripture references in support of his argument Burroughs cites Psalm 86:8, "Among the gods there is none like unto Thee, O Lord, neither are there any works like unto Thy works", and further exalts God as he quotes verses 9-12 of the same Psalm.<sup>6</sup>

The reason why there is none like unto the God of Scripture is clearly spelled out by Burroughs when he says, "whatever is in God is God Himself. This is the property of God." In this way God differs from any creature because "there is no creature that has any excellency in it that reaches to this excellency, that whatever is in the creature is the being of it, all creatures being made of several things." Likewise, "there is a universal goodness in God," which is not in any creature, because "one creature has one good in it and another, another [good in it]." Furthermore, "It is peculiar to God to communicate as much of Himself as He wills, which no creature can do." Indeed, God "can make the creature to which He communicates His goodness to be as sensible of His goodness as He pleases, which no creature can do." This is so different from the creature, for while a creature can "communicate good to another it cannot make that creature as sensible of that good as it wills."<sup>7</sup>

This ability to make the creature as sensible of the good God communicates as God pleases is paralleled in the ability of God "to make the creature upon whom He inflicts an evil to be as sensible of that evil as He wills." Only God can do this, for while "one can hurt another...he cannot make him as sensible of that hurt as he pleases." For Burroughs God "alone can do good and He alone can do evil and therefore there is none like Him." In setting God apart in this manner Burroughs so exalts God that he can insist that "none is to be worshipped as the Lord. There is none to be honoured as the Lord."<sup>8</sup>

## The Holiness of God

A further reason why the God of Scripture must be glorified by the creature is to be found in the words "*glorious in holiness*", which Burroughs now gives consideration to. Burroughs makes the point that some render the words "glorious in holy things", which gives the understanding that God is "glorious in His holy angels, glorious in His holy saints, glorious in His holy Word, glorious in His holy ordinances, [and] glorious in His holy worship." Burroughs accepts the possibility of this rendering, but he indicates that he will treat the words as they are in the text and this under three

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.3, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.6.

headings: 1) what the holiness of God is; 2) how God is said to be glorious in holiness; and 3) why God has this title given to him.<sup>9</sup>

First, however, Burroughs gives two ways by which we may understand holiness in God: 1) in a negative way, “by what it is not [rather] than what it is”, as when it is said that God’s holiness is that whereby “His nature is free from all kinds of mixture, from the least soil and filth of sin.” Then in a positive way: “It is the infinite rectitude and perfection of the will of God especially whereby He wills and works all things suitable to the infinite excellence of His own being.” Furthermore, “the excellency of God is the highest and, therefore, the rule of all excellency, and the will of God, being always suitable to His own infinite excellency and unable to vary in the least from it,...is the rule of all holiness.” But, before starting his exposition, Burroughs makes a very important point regarding God’s attributes when he says that God “is glorious in all His attributes and works, and, the truth is, there is not one thing in God more glorious than another, every attribute of God being in itself equally glorious.”<sup>10</sup>

Burroughs is so insistent in exalting God on the basis of his holiness that he says, “God’s holiness is a declaration, as it were, of Himself.” This is explained in the following words: “God, being of and from Himself and having Himself as His own last end, gives Himself up to Himself and wills Himself as the highest and utmost end, and so wills all things in order to Himself as the last and highest end.” Holiness is “the special end of all His works.” In other words, “that He might be honoured as a holy God and that He might have a holy people to honour Him here and to all eternity.” Indeed, “when the creature is enabled to will God as the highest end and all things in subordination to Him, the creature is then said to be holy because it has a stamp of God upon it.” For this reason God’s people “look upon God in His holiness as the special ground of His praise and exaltation.”<sup>11</sup>

In recognising Burroughs’ desire to exalt God by way of God’s own majestic holiness it is impossible not to see his insistence also on the godly life. Evidence of this comes in the form of a question and answer session in the sermon. The first question asks what it is in God that “draws the heart to him, and causes the soul to love God, to bless God, and to delight in God”. The second question suggests a possible answer to the first: “Is it that God will show mercy to you, pardon your sin, save your soul and bring you to heaven?” Such things, Burroughs accepts, should manifest love for God and cause us to bless God, but, he insists, “it is the very person of God Himself that our hearts must be taken with;...it must be the person of God in His excellency.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, God as a holy God is that which must attract us to him!

If the heart is to be taken up primarily by the person of God, as Burroughs positively argues, then the following questions come to be asked very naturally: “[Has] the lustre of the infinite holiness of God ever shone upon your heart and drawn your heart to God?” “Has your heart [ever] leaped at the sight of the brightness of His holiness?” “Is this why you love Him?” To answer these last questions in a positive way would indicate that “you know God correctly and your heart has been correctly drawn to him,”<sup>13</sup> says Burroughs. Furthermore, he insists:

If the beauty of God’s holiness is that which draws your heart forth in love to God, then proportionally it will be the beauty of holiness in all holy things that will draw your heart to love and delight in them. Then you will look upon His saints as glorious in holiness, upon His worship and Word and ordinances as glorious in holiness, and so

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.13, 14, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 14, 17, 18, 14, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.20

your heart will be drawn to them.<sup>14</sup>

Holiness, for Burroughs, is “the very principle of eternal life” and “the proper object of God’s delight.” Indeed, he says, “let a man be what he will, if God sees any impression of holiness in him, the soul of God closes with that soul.” This is one reason why Burroughs urges his hearers to “show forth the beauty of holiness in their conduct.” It shows that they are in communion with God. There is, however, a second reason which flows from this, namely, that others seeing the impression of holiness may conclude that if “one beam of holiness is so delightful in a person, then how glorious in holiness is God Himself.” In a further exhortation to godliness Burroughs says, “Let us walk so holily before others that they can read holiness in our conduct and be forced to say certainly the God of this people is a holy God.”<sup>15</sup>

What we have been considering, namely, the excellency of God, is further expounded by Burroughs in three other sermons under the title *The Nature of God*. These sermons were published by some friends in 1660 together with two other treatises of Burroughs: *The Excellency of Christ* and *The Excellency of Man’s Immortal Soul*. The published title for all three treatises is *Gospel Revelation*.<sup>16</sup> The sermons on the nature of God are based on part of verse 13 of Psalm 148, “His name alone is excellent”, and in each of them Burroughs, again, presents a very exalted view of God, with evident similarities to the sermon just considered.

### **The Excellency of God**

Two doctrines are expounded in the first of the three sermons: “A gracious heart is not satisfied with praising God only for His works, but rises higher to praise Him, and especially to praise Him for Himself” and “God is a most excellent being above all things.” The distinction Burroughs makes in the first doctrine is explained by the way grace works: “Grace does not love God so much for what God gives to it, as for what God is Himself.” To ensure his hearers understand what he is saying Burroughs identifies two kinds of grace, “true sanctifying grace and common grace”, and then comments, “Common grace makes me love God for what I receive from Him, or for what I hope to receive from Him; but sanctifying grace makes me love God for what He is in Himself, more than what I receive or expect to receive.”<sup>17</sup>

This is an important distinction and one Burroughs expands upon when he shows that sinners may fear God “though there be no grace” when they witness the manifestation of God’s “power and dreadfulness in His works.” Contrary to this is where there is sanctifying grace for “such a one fears God more, because of the excellency he sees in God.” This is also true in regard to the “desires of the heart after God”, for a heart that shows love because of what it might get in return is a “false love.” Does a wife love her husband or a son his father because of what they have from the husband or father, rather than the person of the husband or father? Such love, notes Burroughs, “is a false love” and “so the heart is but false with God that loves God, and that desires after God, more for anything that God does, than for what God is.”<sup>18</sup>

In turning to his second doctrine (God is a most excellent being above all things) Burroughs states that it is his task to “endeavour to present God in the excellency of His being and therefore the proper subject of all our devotion and love.” Conscious of the magnitude of his task, however, Burroughs marks the limitation he is faced with in handling such a glorious subject: “You must

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.20-21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.23, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Burroughs, *Gospel Revelation* (1660).

<sup>17</sup> Burroughs, ‘The Nature of God’ in *Gospel Revelation*, p.2-3, 5, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.4, 5.

know that there is infinitely more than either the tongue of man or angel can express. [Indeed,] when we have done all we can, there is more in God that is beyond what we can say, or angels could preach unto you.” Such a statement must not be seen as a display of false modesty by Burroughs, but a genuine realisation of the awesomeness of God which he wants to communicate to his hearers. The illustration given to show the excellency of God is a very helpful one. The excellency of God “is more than the glorious light of the sun is more than a little glittering of a glow-worm in the night.”<sup>19</sup>

For answers to the question, “What makes God such an excellent being?” we need look no further than the reasons given by Burroughs in the remainder of this sermon, and in the following one, for they are all-embracing. We note that the reasons given in these two sermons, although expressed in different ways, are very similar to those given in the first sermon that treats of the excellency of God. Because of this similarity we will examine only a few of the eighteen reasons given by Burroughs in the two sermons under consideration. Among the reasons given we note the following: 1) “[God] is, and there is none else beside him”; 2) “God is a present being”; 3) “the being of God is in every place”; 4) “God is a being that is all sufficient in Himself”; 5) God’s excellency is eternally, immutably and essentially in Him; 6) “all things depend upon God”; and 7) “God is the highest end of all things.”<sup>20</sup>

Burroughs begins his exposition of the first reason by reference to Exodus 3:14, where God gives himself the name “I am that I am”, which he translates as “I am the being that I am”. This for Burroughs sets God apart from all other creatures who are “but a shadow of being.” Indeed, “all the nations of the world” are as “the small dust in the balance.” Not content with this comparison Burroughs becomes very emphatic when he says, “nay they are nothing at all; nay I must go lower, they are less than nothing.” Such a conclusion prompts Burroughs to declare that “the name of God is alone excellent”, because “He is such a being, as in comparison to Him there is nothing that is worthy of the name of a being.” These comments are followed by Burroughs encouraging his hearers when they get home to read Isaiah 40, because “it will be a good chapter to read in your families, to set out the greatness of God...a God you have to deal with in all your ways.”<sup>21</sup>

By the phrase “I am” Burroughs highlights another difference between God and the creature and argues that by it we are to understand that in respect to God’s being “there is nothing past, there is nothing to come...He is always present.” In other words, when the creature looks back that is still the present for God and when the creature looks forward that also is the present for God. Burroughs also applies this eternal present to Christ in regard to his divine nature: “Christ in His divine nature has no succession of being at all; we cannot say that God has so many years added to Him since the world began.” Continuing, Burroughs reminds his hearers that, “God was as eternal before the world was as He is now, or ever shall be.”<sup>22</sup>

A further reason for God’s excellency is that the being of God is in every place. Here Burroughs notes first that, “God is not in every place only virtually by His power, that is, working, but He is in every place essentially.” Neither is God “in every place by motion, from one place to another, and so gradually in all places.” On the contrary “God is every moment in every place.” Likewise, God is not “one part in one place and another [part] in another place.” Rather, “all of God is everywhere, all that God is, is in every place.” Continuing, Burroughs exclaims that if “God should make ten thousand worlds more, He would fill all those as well as He does this [one]...without any

<sup>19</sup> Burroughs, ‘The Nature of God’ in *Gospel Revelation*, p.5. The illustration of the sun and the glow-worm is also used in Burroughs’ fourth sermon on “The Excellency of Christ” in *Gospel Revelation*, p.112.

<sup>20</sup> Burroughs, “The Nature of God” in *Gospel Revelation*, p.6, 7, 8, 9, 15, 16, 26

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.6, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p.8.

motion.” And not only so, but “in that same instant in which they [the ten thousand worlds] were made that immense being of His would fill them all up.”<sup>23</sup>

These brief descriptions of some of God’s attributes, presented, it must be said, without any technical theological language, are surely in themselves sufficient reasons to worship such an excellent God. But Burroughs does not stop at them in his pursuit of exalting God, although he acknowledges that each “one of them might require a large tractate.” Burroughs shows that, “God is a being that is all-sufficient in Himself.” The important point is made that “before the world was, God was as blessed in Himself as He now is”, whereas “we poor creatures...stand in need of a thousand things continually.” And not only the necessities of life, but the companionship of other creatures: “we stand in need of the meanest creatures, and if God should take away the use of some mean contemptible creature our lives would be made miserable to us.”<sup>24</sup>

This is the excellency of God’s being, “He has need of nothing, He has all within Himself” and therefore “when all the angels and saints shall be blessing God in heaven, yet they can add nothing to God’s glory.” Here another very important point is made, but it is not clear whether it is made by Burroughs or by those friends who published the sermons. The reason for saying this is that the point is made by way of a statement in the margin and not in the body of the text, and there is some indication that Burroughs may not have prepared the sermons for publication.<sup>25</sup> It is, however, a statement with which Burroughs would have concurred. It is in reference to God’s glory and reads: “God has an essential and an attributed glory, His attributed glory is augmented or diminished by man’s obedience or disobedience, therefore sinners are said to rob God of His glory, and the saints to give Him glory, but His essential glory cannot be increased or diminished.”<sup>26</sup>

Burroughs goes on to note that all the excellency that is in God, is “infinitely in Him”, “eternally in Him”, and “immutably in Him”. Regarding the first point Burroughs urges his hearers not to limit God by saying that God is “a great God”; they should say that God is an “infinitely” great God. Therefore, God’s knowledge, wisdom, holiness, justice, and truth “must be looked upon without any bounds whatsoever.” And touching God’s excellency being eternal we note that a creature may have such an excellency, but, asks Burroughs, “How long has it had it?” Responding to his own question he says, “It was not long before but it was nothing.” However, there is the recognition that “the souls and bodies of the saints will be eternally with God and the souls and bodies of the ungodly shall be eternally in Hell.”<sup>27</sup>

## The Immutability of God

Of the immutability of God or God being unchanging in his being, Burroughs argues that, “There can be no addition, no subtraction, add anything to Him and you destroy Him, take away anything from Him and you destroy His being, alter anything in Him and He ceases to be God.” Unlike man who has “no shadow of constancy” there is “no shadow of change with God”, for all excellency in God is in God essentially. Burroughs accepts that if you “bring the creature in one disposition to God...the love of God and the delight of God is in it” and if you “bring the creature in another disposition to God...the wrath of God is upon it. Yet God is the same.” This is explained in an easy

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.8, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.9.

<sup>25</sup> See Ibid, p.10. Those sermons prepared and published by Burroughs himself tend to have references to non-scriptural sources, but there is very little of this in *Gospel Revelation*, which was published long after Burroughs’ death in 1646.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.9, 10. The last sentiment in this paragraph was well expressed by John Donne, a contemporary of Burroughs, when he penned the words, “no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main” (‘Meditation XVII’ in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, 1624).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.14,15, 14, 15

to understand way: “If you bring a piece of wax to the sun, it melts it; [but if you bring] clay, it hardens it, but the sun is still the same.”<sup>28</sup>

But it is not only that these attributes are in God infinitely, eternally and immutably, each of which “is a mighty swallowing consideration” in itself, they are also universally in God. That is, “all the excellencies that are in all creatures in heaven and earth, they are in Him virtually and eminently, He has them all in His own being.” An understanding of these excellences would help us grasp that “whatsoever can be truly said of God, it is God Himself.” By this Burroughs means that “God’s wisdom is God Himself” and “God’s mercy is God Himself.” For Burroughs these constitute the “very essence and being of God Himself.” This is so unlike the man, who may have wisdom, goodness and power, but these do not constitute the being of a man: “a man’s wisdom is not his being...one may be separated from the other.”<sup>29</sup>

Burroughs makes another important point when he states that all the excellencies in God are in “God originally”, and “not by participation”. And as the creature has no excellency in itself but by participation this leads Burroughs to conclude that, “God is the fountain of all excellency to all creatures whatsoever.” Indeed, “if there be any good in any creature, it is but the beam of this Sun, and a drop from this infinite Ocean, it all flows from that Sea of all good,” he says. Now if all things come from the infinite goodness of God, it follows that all creatures “have their absolute dependency upon God.” In support of his argument Burroughs quotes Acts 17:28, “For in Him we live, and move and have our being.” Such is this dependence by the creature on God that “there is no comparison to be made between God and any creature, or anything else.”<sup>30</sup> The infinite God cannot be compared with finite creatures.

Having given seventeen reasons for what makes God such an excellent being Burroughs, in his eighteenth and final reason, draws all together by showing that, “[God] is the highest end for which all creatures had their being.” Such is the importance of God’s glory that Burroughs exclaims, “Cursed be that creature that shall challenge to be the highest end of any good thing whatsoever; this makes it to be a cursed thing for any man to make himself to be his last end, to make his name, honour or credit to be the end that he aims at.” Contrary to this, insists Burroughs, “we must be sure to lift up God as the highest end of all because He is excellent above all”, for “there is infinitely more in God, and God is infinitely higher than ever we thought of.”<sup>31</sup>

### Application of Doctrines Taught

God in his excellency as described by Burroughs moves him to proclaim, “This God is our God, this is the God we profess to serve, that we profess to worship, and these are to be the thoughts that we are to have of God when we come before Him.” This leads him to turn to the application or use of the doctrine he has set before his hearers.<sup>32</sup>

**a) Our Low Thoughts of God:** The first use is to recognise “what infinite cause we all have to be ashamed of those low thoughts we have of God.” Indeed, “we may see cause to be ashamed of the poor and low thoughts that we have had of this infinite majesty,” says Burroughs. The point being made is that God cannot be sanctified without these “high thoughts” of his infinite majesty. Not that God can only be sanctified when we have apprehended “every one of these things of God”; it is when we have “apprehended what is possible for us to apprehend [of God] here in this world.”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.14, 15, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.16

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.20, 21.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.25.

<sup>32</sup> In the original edition of *Gospel Revelation* the application or use begins towards the end of sermon 2, but, more helpfully in the layout of the modern edition they are all together in the chapter that deals with all the uses together.

But that said, “We are to be ashamed that we have not such apprehensions of God as we might possibly have.”<sup>33</sup>

Such low thoughts “show you the dreadful evil there is in sin.” Now this is no marvel to Burroughs for “we have fallen so far from [God].” Here he takes his hearers back to where it all went wrong: “At first Adam did know all these things perfectly:...it was the happiness of Adam in his first creation to be able to look upon the face of God and know what such things as these meant.” But since that dark tragic day in the garden, man is not only in the dark, Scripture declares him to be “darkness itself, Eph 5:8.”<sup>34</sup>

**b) Know the Evil of Sin:** The second use of the doctrine being expounded by Burroughs is that it enables us to know the “dreadful evil there is in sin”: such an evil because it strikes against the infinite majesty that is God. Not willing to be misunderstood on this point Burroughs spells out clearly what he means:

Know sinner, and the Lord smite this upon your heart, you that are a wicked man and ungodly man all the days of your life, you have done nothing else but fight against this God, this infinite and glorious God, you have been an enemy all the days of your life and every time you renew your sins, you do nothing else but strike at this infinite God and provoke the wrath of this infinite Deity against your body and soul.

This is man’s natural state since the Fall of Adam, but it will not deprive God of the glory that is due to him from his creatures. Burroughs is adamant about this: God will have his glory “from every creature, one way or the other,” for “the word has proceeded out of His mouth in righteousness, that every knee must bow unto Him and every tongue must confess this God, Isaiah 45:23; Rom 14:11.”<sup>35</sup>

What a lamentable, but justified, state it will be if God should “make you an object upon whom to exercise all that infinite power that there is in God, to bring evil and misery and torments upon you for your sin” and “send you down to eternal miseries.” And this God is able to do, for “He has you under His feet this moment and the sword of His justice is at your very heart and can take your heart’s blood when He pleases.” Indeed, if God comes upon you in judgement, to have his glory, “to force it out of you, better ten thousand times that you had never been born,” says Burroughs.<sup>36</sup>

These are very hard words, words that are not often heard today from the pulpit, but ever the physician of the soul Burroughs does not leave his hearers with such words. He goes on to urge them to humble themselves “under the mighty hand of God, 1 Pet 5:6” and say, “Thou O Lord art alone excellent and thy glory is above the heavens and the earth, and the desire of our souls is to lift up thy name as the excellent thing above all creatures.” Furthermore, that man or woman is truly blessed who “comes to see this to be his or her excellency, namely, that I might lift up God’s name in the place where He has placed me.”<sup>37</sup>

Importantly Burroughs notes that although he should tell his hearers “never so much of the terrors of the Law and of Hell fire ... [they] can never know what the evil of sin” fully means. Not, that is,

<sup>33</sup> Burroughs, “The Nature of God” in *Gospel Revelation*, pp.26, 27.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28, 17

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p.28, 29. Some friends of Burroughs published his series of sermons on the subject of sin a few years after his death as *The Evil of Evils or the Exceeding Sinfulness of Sin* (1654). In it Burroughs shows, among other things, how there is more evil in the least sin than in the greatest affliction; Sin is most opposite to God and most opposite to man’s good. It was edited by Dr Don Kistler and republished by Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992 (now part of Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids).

<sup>36</sup> Burroughs, ‘The Nature of God’ in *Gospel Revelation*, p.29

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p.29, 30

until they behold God “as He is upon His throne in this excellency of His name above all things.” Burroughs gives two examples to press home his point. The first is David who, although he was guilty of adultery and the murder of Uriah, confessed his sins with these words: “Against thee, thee only have I sinned and done this evil, Psalm 51:4.” The second example is Daniel when he would make intercession for the people; he begins his prayer by acknowledging his and the people’s sin against God, “We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgements, Dan 9:5.”<sup>38</sup>

What Burroughs is endeavouring to get across to his hearers is that sin is evil, because, ultimately, all sin is against the infinitely majestic First Being. This leads Burroughs to ask, “Are there any wretched creatures that will dare to presume to rebel against Thee who are so great, that will dare yet to set their will against Thy will and to prefer their lusts before Thee?” If there are such people, and there are, then there is “infinite reason that [such] wicked wretched creatures should be for ever consumed.” Burroughs is not overstating the sinfulness of the human heart, but he is putting it in context as he has set forth the infinite excellency of God as revealed in Scripture. And in this context there are none who are righteous in the sight of God all-glorious and God is therefore just in the justice He exercises.<sup>39</sup>

**c) Our Relationship with God:** This exalted view of God and the darkness of man leads Burroughs to highlight a third use of the doctrine, namely, how we are to view ourselves in relation to God: “the higher we see God to be, the lower we should be in our own eyes”, for “there is nothing will take down the spirit of man more than God.” In support of his argument Burroughs quotes Job 42:5-6, “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eyes seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.” Burroughs also reminds us of the similar words of Isaiah: “Woe unto me! for I am undone ... for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts, Isaiah 6:5”.<sup>40</sup>

Truly, argues Burroughs, such a sight of this exalted God would certainly “move you to fall down before Him and abhor yourselves in dust and ashes.” Yes, a “sight of the glory of God...will wonderfully humble the human heart.” But when this does not happen, it is reasonable to accept that “such a one does not know God” and has “never had a sight of the glory of God.” There is an emphasis here on seeing God which moves Burroughs to exclaim, “Oh! that God would give such a sight of Himself to all your souls, to those proud, stout, and rebellious sinners that have gone on in the ways of rebellion against Him!”<sup>41</sup>

**d) The Cause of Man’s Darkness:** Burroughs understands that at the heart of man’s failure to bow before God all glorious is pride and vanity, and this leads to his fourth use, namely, by seeing the excellency there is in God, it will show the vanity of the creature and especially the “vanity of all creature comforts.” This may be shown by the “strength of reason...and by experience.” The first by the fact that if God did but touch a man’s “body and place him upon his sickbed”, he would conclude, “Had I all the world at my command, I could have no comfort in it.” The second example is when men “who are rich and great die...[they] carry nothing with them” out of this world. This shows that there is no contentment; nor continuance in anything in the world’ and this moves Burroughs to exclaim, “Oh, how vain the world is.”<sup>42</sup>

Here there is an acceptance by Burroughs that some men may think they “know somewhat of God” yet still “the excellency of the creature is glorious” in their eyes. But this is false thinking, it is like

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p31, 32

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.33

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.34, 35

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.34, 35, 34

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.36



the man who “had lived in a dark dungeon, under the ground all the days of his life and never had the glimpse of any light whatsoever since he was born.” Now if such a man was to see the light from a candle, he would admire its glory. But bring him into the open where he can see “the glory of the sun, [then] the glory of the candle would be nothing to him.” The lesson Burroughs is seeking to teach here is that when the “soul that has had a sight of God, [it] comes to see that all things in the world are but darkness to him.”<sup>43</sup>

Two examples are given that of Abraham, who when “the God of glory appeared unto him, was content to forsake all his friends and country,” and Moses, “who might have had all the glory and riches of Egypt”, but this he forsook at the “sight of God, that God that is invisible.” For Burroughs these two examples are sufficient evidence that the sight of this all glorious God he has been setting before his congregation “puts a mighty magnanimity upon a man’s heart” and “the oftener anyone has the sight of the great God...the greater will such men’s and women’s spirits be.” Not only so, but in seeing God alone to be excellent, they will be raised to such a height that “all the world will not satisfy such a soul.”<sup>44</sup>

**e) Get a Sight of God Beyond Natural Sight:** Burroughs’ response to what he has been saying reveals a genuine heartfelt concern for his hearers, as he exhorts them to “labour to search into this Excellency so far as we may and God gives us leave” (use five). But note the limitation – “so far as we may and God gives us leave.” This is a clear reminder, first, that the natural man cannot fully comprehend the infinite majesty of God, for man is finite and second, man cannot truly know God without God revealing himself to man. Burroughs, however, is quick to point out that “God has revealed much of Himself to us in the Scripture.” But even though we cannot infinitely know God, “there is nothing so sweet, so amiable, so lovely, [and] so delightful unto a rational creature (if it be purged from the filthiness and corruption of sin) as the sight of the infinite First Being.”<sup>45</sup>

People take delight in different things, such as architecture, art, music, and many other things, including the natural world. They may also have great knowledge of these things, but “the sight of God has all sights in it that may delight the soul and give content to the heart of man or angel.” Therefore, urges Burroughs, “Learn to know this God, who alone is excellent, and be not discouraged at those things that have been spoken, though they are above your reach at first.” Burroughs has in mind here those who “have little minded all this while, but merely to understand” their trades and how they “may get a shilling or two to provide” for their families. They are “poor people who can never come to get learning, to have the knowledge of arts and sciences and such things.”<sup>46</sup>

But it must be emphasised that Burroughs is not looking upon these people as inferior or with disdain, for he responds to his own comments with these wonderful words to them: “If you have clean hearts you are blessed in this, God has said you shall see Him” – “Blessed are the poor in heart for they shall see God”, Matthew 5:8.<sup>47</sup> They may not have much of this world’s goods or learning, but what does this count against what God says of those who “labour to know God more”: “I will set him on high, because he has known my name” Psalm 91:14. Yes, “Let there be what they will in outward things” if they have the desire to know God, “The Lord does take pleasure to make such a soul to be so high.” Oh, what marvellous comfort and contentment such a soul may

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.37

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.38, 39

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p.39

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.39, 40

<sup>47</sup> Burroughs forty-one sermons on the Beatitudes were published as *The Saints’ Happiness* in 1660 and reprinted by Soli Deo Gloria Publications in 1992 (SDG is now part of Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids)

have in knowing that he is “high in the very thoughts of God!”<sup>48</sup> Accepting the truth of this last comment then surely the highest good – knowing God – ought to be sought above all other things, for in it our real blessedness consists. But how are we to know God?

**f) A Point of Marvellous Consequence:** A little earlier Burroughs urged his hearers to “Learn to know this God, who alone is excellent.” Now he turns to show how this is to be accomplished by reference to the apostle Paul who counted “all things dung and dross...for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ.” Here is Burroughs’ road map for truly knowing God; it is “in the knowledge of Christ [that] God is known.” Yes, if you would “study the knowledge of God, it must be in Christ, [for] you can never know God but in Christ.” This is supported by quoting Matthew 11:27, “man knows the Father, but the Son and him to whom the Son shall reveal Him.” These two brief comments that set forth Christ, the Son of God, as the indispensable conduit to our understanding of God could be easily passed over, but the way Burroughs encloses them with Scripture gives them a real emphasis. Putting it another way Burroughs says, “It must be Christ that must reveal the glory of God to our souls, or else, we can never come to know Him savingly.”<sup>49</sup>

Having pointed out how the seeker can know God Burroughs presents his sixth use of the doctrine relating to the excellency of God’s nature: “Labour to keep the sense of the infinite distance that there is between God and His creatures always in our hearts.” Here is a point of “marvellous consequence” that will help us to “sanctify God in all our ways.” What Burroughs means here is that because there is an “infinite disproportion between the excellency of God and the excellency that there is any creature” so there should be a “kind of infiniteness” in the working of our hearts after God. Burroughs, accepts that “properly [speaking] it cannot be infinite” as all creatures are finite, but he is convinced that there is such a “principle of grace” in a “converted soul” that if it were possible, a believer “would fain...work infinitely after God.” Stating it another way it simply means where there is “the least dram of true grace...such a soul does never bound itself in working after God” and in this there may be a “kind of infiniteness.”<sup>50</sup>

Having set out the glorious excellency of God’s nature and the many ways by which we can benefit from knowing God, Burroughs turns to his penultimate use: the believer’s exalted position in the world. Here Burroughs sets out his premise: “men conceive their excellency to be according to the excellency of him whom they serve; as a man’s God is, so is he.” From this Burroughs argues that as God alone is excellent, then “the people of God are therefore excellent.” But by this he does not mean excellent to the extent that God is excellent; such a thought would be anathema to him.<sup>51</sup>

This last comment needs a little clarification. We need to remember that Burroughs has already identified excellency with glory and set forth two types of glory: God’s essential glory – that which cannot be added to because it is perfect; and God’s attributed glory – that which can be added to or subtracted from according to the creature’s worship of God or its failure to do so (see above). For this reason, we are to understand the words “According to the rise in God’s excellency” refers to that excellency that may be attributed to God. It is in relation to this that Burroughs refers to “the rise of the excellency of His saints”, but even here it is “in proportion they rise in their excellency as God rises in His.” Expressing it another way Burroughs says, “Surely if God’s name alone be excellent, then in a proportion God’s people alone are the excellent people upon the earth.” It may also be said that “the excellency of God is manifested over them to do them good” and that God

<sup>48</sup> Burroughs, “The Nature of God” in *Gospel Revelation*, p.40.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.40. In *Gospel Reconciliation* Burroughs handles the subject of Christ being the only mediator between God and man in six sermons. See also “Jeremiah Burroughs on the Excellency of Christ the Mediator” in *Puritan Reformed Journal* 6,1 (2014), p.155-174.

<sup>50</sup> Burroughs, “The Nature of God” in *Gospel Revelation*, p.40, 41, 42

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.43

delights to show “the greatness of His excellency for the good of His people.”<sup>52</sup>

There is, in these few comments, a real “abundance of soul-satisfying encouragements to all the saints of God in any of their afflicted conditions.” But while comfort and joy may be taken from them Burroughs is still adamant that it is in God himself that his people may stand and not necessarily his provision for them: “[When] whatsoever troubles are about them, they are to stand and rejoice themselves in the name of the Lord, in the strength of the Lord, and in the majesty of the Lord their God.” It is in the name of God that cause enough is found “to serve this God in all your ways, and to worship Him as a God whose name is alone excellent,” says Burroughs. Furthermore, “the name of God alone is excellent and His glory is above the earth and heavens” and this should put “courage and boldness into their hearts before all the world.”<sup>53</sup>

In these sermons Burroughs has painted a wonderful picture of God in the excellency of his nature. He has also exhorted his hearers to rejoice in the fact that they can have “happiness enough in God [Himself]” apart from the exalted position they have with God in Christ Jesus. But he is so very aware that man is such an inconsistent creature that he gives a timely reminder and a word of warning to the people of God, as he brings his sermon to a close:

Know what the name of God is that you profess and meditate how excellent it is and let this be a strong argument to keep you from sin: when any temptation comes, oh set this against it, shall I pollute the name of God that is infinitely excellent?

Oh, take heed that this blessed name of God that alone is excellent is not dishonoured and polluted by you.... You, who profess yourselves Christians and profess godliness more than others, know that you have the name of God upon you. Oh, woe to you that ever you were born, if you should be instruments of polluting the name of God!<sup>54</sup>

Now if such a serious warning is given to God’s people, how greater a warning is it to those who do not know God and who are not his people? Burroughs has spoken of the highest good, namely, the duty of every creature to glorify God and asks this penetrating question: “Have you done anything to lift up this glorious name of God in the place where God has placed you?” Anticipating a possible disclaimer to his question Burroughs says,

It may be that you have not thought that this was your work; but this is the work that God expects from you; that you should give up yourself to the study by all means that possibly you can to lift up God’s name and deny your own name no matter though it be cast into the dirt, so be it the name of God be lifted up with this resolution: “Oh, that you would but go away and that this one note might stick in your hearts, ‘I am convinced that the name of God is infinitely glorious and therefore, for the time to come, through His grace, whatsoever becomes of me, yet I will do what I can to lift up His name’.”<sup>55</sup>

In unfolding the glorious excellency of God in his nature Burroughs has been, surely, a most insightful instructor and we can do no better than conclude this examination of the doctrine of the infinite excellency of God with his own final words on the subject: “Consider what has been said in the text and may the Lord give you understanding.”<sup>56</sup>

### *Soli Deo Gloria*

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.44, 43, 44

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.44, 45

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.45, 46

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.46, 47

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.47

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536-1609*, Scott M. Manetsch, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology, Oxford University Press, 2013, pbk., 428 pages, £23.50.

The promotional comments on the back cover of this book whetted my appetite for its contents. For example *Reformation 21* gives this commendation:

This is a quite superb book. It is not only outstanding as a well-written piece of original historical research. It is also most informative concerning the reasons why Reformed and Presbyterian churches came to think about the ministry in the ways they do.

I had high expectations as I began to read and I was certainly not disappointed. It is set in the context of Geneva and covers the years 1536-1609 in relation to the Reformation and the development of the Reformed Church within that French speaking city and its environs. Particular attention is given to John Calvin and the pastors who were his contemporaries, for example Pierre Viret and Guillaume Farel, and his successors, for example Theodore Beza and Lambert Daneau.

The history of the Reformation in Geneva is well documented and illustrates how the preaching of the gospel was instrumental as the means God used to bring about a spiritual transformation in church and state. In the words of the author,

In the span of two years (1533-35), Geneva had renounced its bishop, cleansed its churches of 'idolatry' and ran off hundreds of Catholic religious personnel. The city on the shores of Lac Léman had decisively broken from her Catholic past.

The detailed work of reformation still had to be implemented. We see how Calvin and his company of pastors, working with the conviction of 'sola scriptura', put into effect biblical principles with respect to every aspect of life within Geneva.

Calvin recognised that 'worship' was a key aspect of the devotional aspect of a Reformed Church. As worship in Geneva developed, Manetsch recognizes that Calvin and his friends employed 'the regulative principle', although that term would not be coined until centuries later. Of particular interest is the content and practice of the praise element of worship in Geneva. We are informed that 'the worship service began with a cantor leading the congregation in singing a Psalm *a capella* from the Geneva Psalter.' Calvin, we are told, recognised not only the place of the Psalms in worship but the impact they made on the worshipper.

These Psalms, Calvin believed, were crucial in that they stirred the hearts of those assembled to look to God and glorify his name with holy ardor.

Preaching was central to life in the Reformed city, having both morning and afternoon sermons on the Lord's Day and week-day services every morning before work began. There were complaints about the long sermons. To curtail long winded preachers the city council installed forty-five minute hourglasses in all the city's churches! This was to ensure that the week-day sermon remained an acceptable length and that services ended promptly on the hour so as to enable people to get to work punctually.

Calvin and those who were his successors placed a high priority on the ministry of the Word. This involved a detailed exposition of the passage, coupled with a thoughtful application of the truth for people at every stage in life and in their respective callings.

Pastoral care was taken very seriously in Geneva. The minister with an elder would visit each family annually with other visits being made occasionally through the year. During visits members of the household would be asked to explain their faith and show that they possessed a knowledge of the catechism. The ministry of spiritual consolation was a prominent aspect of their pastoral care. Comfort was given to parents mourning the death of a child; encouragement was provided for husbands and wives experiencing personal tragedy, and consolation was given to men and women who were ill or dying. Examples of their prayers demonstrate the pastoral care and affection that existed between the pastors and the members of their congregations. They were men who were prepared to die in the process of caring for their members. This was particularly true during times when the plague swept through Geneva.

A review of this book would be incomplete without a reference to discipline. This was exact and rigorous. Failure to attend worship usually meant suspension from the sacraments. Under family and cultural pressures some church members fell prey to some Roman Catholic superstitious practices. They were brought before the consistory, the session, and suitably admonished. An interesting aspect of life in Geneva is the cooperation that existed between the elders and the magistrates (church and council) with respect to discipline. Occasionally the magistrates would disagree with elders indicating that the discipline was too severe.

It is evident on reading this volume that the footprints of John Calvin made a deep impression in Geneva, not only until his death, but in the succeeding decades. This is not surprising because Calvin was held in very high esteem by his colleagues. On his deathbed he warned them to be on their guard against any religious innovation in the future. Some young ministers did challenge Calvin's theology, but the company of pastors quickly dealt with them - some being deposed from the ministry and banished from Geneva.

I can truly say that this is the best book of its kind that I have ever read and contains a wealth of information which will help men serving Christ in ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will certainly find a place in my pastoral theology classes and the students can expect to find it on their required reading list.

Robert McCollum

*James Durham (1622-1658) And the Gospel Offer in its Seventeenth-Century Context*, Donald John MacLean, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2015, hbk., 317 pages, €79.99.

The reviewer should perhaps declare an interest (albeit small) in this volume. When an author makes several positive references to material on the input of the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly which I wrote a few years ago, it is difficult not to feel well disposed to his work from the outset. That said, however, this is an excellent study of a significant yet neglected figure and his views on a very important subject, namely the free offer of the gospel.

Sadly, within the Reformed family there have been different views regarding the free offer of the gospel. Most have held that God freely and sincerely offers salvation to all who believe on the Lord

Jesus Christ, and that the sinner's warrant for coming to Christ for salvation is simply that, as a sinner, he is called by the gospel to come. This is the view set out, for example, in *The Sum of Saving Knowledge* penned by David Dickson and James Durham and often bound with the official confessional documents produced by the Westminster Assembly. There have been those, however, who have denied the existence of such a free offer on the ground that the sacrifice of Christ was made only for the elect and so salvation can be sincerely offered only to the elect. In the USA, for example, Herman Hoeksema and his theological descendants in the Protestant Reformed Churches, hold such a view. This is not a minor dispute, going as it does to the heart of the gospel and having profound effects on gospel preaching. Can a preacher invite *any* sinner to embrace Jesus as Saviour?

Donald John MacLean, Research Supervisor at Wales Evangelical School of Theology and Visiting Lecturer at City University in London, has provided in this volume, based on his doctoral research, a fine study of the theology of James Durham and also a wide-ranging survey of Reformed thinking on the free offer from the early seventeenth century up to the Hoeksema controversy in the twentieth century. As such it is a major contribution to our understanding of a vital area of doctrine and its historical development within the Reformed community.

In answer to the question, 'Why Durham?' MacLean offers several responses. First, there is an abundance of material in Durham's writings relating to the free offer. A sermon series, *Christ Crucified*, on Isaiah 53:1 considers the subject in depth, as do several theological essays in his *Commentary on Revelation*. Durham also expressed wholehearted commitment to the Westminster Standards, was ordained in the year the Church of Scotland adopted the *Westminster Confession* and co-authored *The Sum of Saving Knowledge* with David Dickson. His setting the free offer in the context of covenant theology also mirrors the approach of the *Confession*, and he was highly respected by his contemporaries, particularly with reference to his treatment of this subject. He was a man in harmony with our confessional position.

The book is divided into five chapters, Chapter One being an overview of the free offer in Reformed theology and creeds before Durham. This embraces creeds such as the *Irish Articles* (1615) and the *Canons of the Synod of Dort* (1619), along with the contributions of William Ames, John Ball, the Westminster Assembly and Scots such as Knox and Rollock. It is clear that a well-meant, sincere offer of salvation as an element in the revealed will of God was a basic part of Reformed thinking at this time. A fundamental distinction between the secret will of God (relating to predestination) and the revealed will of God is shown to be of great significance, as is an increasing role for covenantal thinking.

Chapter Two surveys Durham's life, writings and theology. In particular MacLean considers his views of the nature and extent of the atonement and his understanding of the Covenants of Redemption, Works and Grace, all vital to a correct formulation of the free offer. Chapter Three then examines in detail Durham's understanding of the free offer, grounding it in the Covenant of Grace and the revealed will of God. Especially helpful is Maclean's examination of the place of the free offer in the preaching of Durham. He concludes that 'Durham saw the proclamation of the free offer of the gospel as the primary function of the preacher' and notes that his own preaching was 'replete with exhortations to come to Christ and appeals for an immediate embrace of Christ as saviour' (p.172).

The study broadens out again in Chapter Four with an examination of the free offer in the theology of Durham's contemporaries. Among those considered are Obadiah Sedgwick, Thomas Manton, David Dickson and Samuel Rutherford. Despite various differences on other matters, all shared the basic views of Durham on the free offer and its place in gospel preaching. Chapter Five covers the period

from the Marrow Controversy in Scotland in the eighteenth century up to the debates in the Christian Reformed Church in America in the twentieth century, in which Louis Berkhof was much involved, which culminated in the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches led by Herman Hoeksema.

This is a rich and illuminating study, to which a short review can do scant justice. Not only is the theology of James Durham carefully examined, but the views of a wide range of Reformed theologians and confessional documents are considered in detail. MacLean's scholarship is of the highest order, yet clearly and accessibly expressed. The issues relating to the free offer, including our understanding of the nature of the atonement, the will of God and the role of covenant, are of fundamental significance to theology, preaching and Christian living, and so this very stimulating piece of research is most welcome.

David McKay

*Ichthus. Jesus Christ, God's Son, The Saviour*, Sinclair B. Ferguson and Derek W. H. Thomas, Banner of Truth Trust, 2016, pbk., 166 pages, £6.50.

Early Christians used *Ichthus*, the Greek word for fish as a shorthand method of professing their faith in Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Saviour. Hence the title used for this short volume which takes the reader on a 'tour of nine of the key events in Jesus' life and ministry'.

Unusually, this is a book with two authors, Sinclair Ferguson and Derek Thomas. These men, both experienced preachers and highly regarded authors, have combined to write a succinct book which is both doctrinally clear and devotionally rich. The book aims at a wide readership, from the mature Christian to the person who is beginning seriously to address questions about Jesus.

The nine chapters take us from the manger and the marvellous truth of the incarnation to Christ's glorious return. Each chapter is a brief exposition of a New Testament passage and covers in sequence the significant moments in the life and ministry of Jesus. As is to be expected from these two authors, there is a great deal in this book to instruct the mind and warm the reader's heart. Christian readers will be given a greater awareness of Christ's work and ought at the same time find their faith in Christ and love for him deepened.

It was obviously a conscious decision of the publishers and presumably of the authors, that there should be no indication as to which man wrote which particular chapter. Though this information might be of interest to some readers, the absence of it does not detract in any way from the flow of the book.

The stated objective of the authors is that the book 'will be a help to believers because of what it says about our Master but also that it will be read by those who are not – or not yet – believers.' This reviewer believes that they have indeed achieved that worthy objective.

Knox Hyndman

*The Miracles of Jesus. How the Savior's Mighty Acts Serve as Signs of Redemption*, Vern Poythress, Crossway, 2016, pbk., 271 pages, \$19.99.

Is it legitimate to apply Jesus' calming of the storm to people struggling in the midst of the 'storms of life'? For any preachers who have wrestled with the question of how to apply the miracles, or how to avoid bland sameness in the application of each individual story, this book by Vern Poythress, Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary, will be an invaluable help. There are not many recent books like this one. Most recent evangelical books on the subject of miracles have tended to focus on the debate about whether or not they happened. Not many have sought to explain and apply the miracles. R. D. Phillips is a notable exception to this – his treatment of the miracles in Luke's Gospel is rooted in an understanding of them as 'redemptive analogies' (in *Mighty to Save. Discovering God's Grace in the Miracles of Jesus*, P&R, 2001). Poythress self-confessedly follows in his steps, but whereas Phillips *assumed* this approach to the miracles, Poythress makes it explicit and provides a hermeneutical model that can be applied to all miracle stories in the Gospels.

Poythress assumes from the outset the reality of the miracles and the historical reliability of the New Testament record of them. He begins with a chapter on the reality of the miracles which is too brief to do more than outline the case (he is not trying to do any more than this), but which does provide useful bibliographical notes on where to find more detailed discussion of the subject.

In part II of the book Poythress lays out his methodology for interpreting the miracles in 60 pages, before applying his model in part III to every miracle in the Gospel of Matthew, spending about 4-5 pages on each one. This is an excellent pedagogical approach, since the hermeneutical theory is illustrated and demonstrated over and over again.

Poythress argues that before we can apply a miracle story to ourselves we need to see it as foreshadowing and anticipating the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He establishes how the miracles functioned as signs of redemption from Jesus' own interpretation of them in John's Gospel, and then moves on to demonstrate that they function in the same way in the Synoptic Gospels as well.

Quoting Phillips, Poythress writes, 'These miracles are not merely illustrations of Christ's goodness and power but are living sermons regarding the nature and purpose of his saving work.' He continues later, '[The miracles] not only *depict* redemption; in some respects they also *embody* it. People with whom Christ interacted were "redeemed" in some sense...The miracles have a connection to the climactic work of Christ in his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. And from there we may observe a link forward to the application of redemption to us in our day...Altogether we have three instances of the pattern of redemption, namely the miracle, the resurrection of Christ, and the application now' (p.58). Poythress goes on to show how this application should be made to the individual believer (at conversion, daily and then at the bodily resurrection) and also to the church (at Pentecost, daily and at the second coming). There should be no danger of the preacher running short of material for a sermon on a miracle!

The preacher will also be greatly stimulated by Poythress's nuanced separating out of the broader implications of the miracles in various circles of meaning and how they echo creation and the Old Testament. Taking the feeding of the five thousand as an example, he shows how Jesus provided both physical and spiritual food for the people there that day; then all through his earthly ministry he offered spiritual food through his teaching; in his death and resurrection his body became a source of spiritual



nourishment; in the present age the message of the gospel is being multiplied as it is offered to the nations; the broadest circle of implications includes the entirety of redemptive history, issuing in the consummation, when everlasting nourishment is supplied, as represented by the tree of life and the marriage supper of the Lamb. (Somewhat surprisingly Poythress makes no mention of the Lord's Supper in this survey).

The pastor will also find great help with discriminating application of the miracles in chapters 8 and 38, where Poythress suggests a wide range of specific and very down-to-earth circumstances the miracles might speak to, such as the tedium of washing dishes, the discipline of a child, failing a test, an exciting romantic date, feelings of 'dirtiness' after sexual abuse or immorality, facing terminal cancer in a loved one, the frenetic busyness of life, suicidal thoughts, the paralysis of guilt and depression.

The inevitable brevity of the treatment of each miracle in a book of this size means that there is little discussion of the surrounding context of each miracle story in Matthew, but this will prove to be a standard guide to the study and teaching of the Lord's miracles for many years to come.

Warren Peel

## BOOK NOTICES

*The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, Johannes Cocceius, translated by Casey Carmichael, introduced by Willem J. van Asselt, Reformation Heritage Books, 2016, hbk., xxxv and 408 pages, \$50.00.

In the development of Covenant Theology in the Reformed tradition Johannes Cocceius occupies a very significant, albeit controversial, place. Born in Bremen in 1603, Cocceius was a biblical scholar who taught at the universities of Bremen, Franeker and Leiden. His chief work, translated here as *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, first published in 1648, developed an historical approach to the doctrine of the covenants: he ‘sought to formulate a covenant theory that described all of salvation history by introducing the overall structure of consecutive covenants’ (van Asselt, p.xix). Cocceius began with the Covenant of Works in Eden and then sought to trace a series of ‘abrogations’ of that covenant, by sin, by the Covenant of Grace, by the promulgation of the New Testament in the type of the Old Economy, in the death of the body and, finally, in the resurrection of the body. Within that historical framework he managed to deal with most of the main topics which now comprise ‘systematic theology’. Cocceius became embroiled in a number of controversies, particularly with the followers of another Reformed theologian, Gisbertus Voetius. Cocceius’ strong emphasis on the *progression* of redemptive history clashed with the Voetian stress on the substantial *uniformity* of salvation for believers in the Old and New Dispensations. This is a very significant work for the understanding of the development of Covenant Theology and the issues it addresses are of perennial concern. It is a privilege to have Cocceius’ work available in Casey Carmichael’s translation, along with an excellent introduction from Willem van Asselt, one of the foremost experts in this period of Reformed thought. Reformation Heritage Publications have now produced three fine volumes in their ‘Classic Reformed Theology’ series and the church is in their debt.

*The Fatherhood of God in John Calvin’s Thought*, Karin Spiecker Stetina, Paternoster, 2016, pbk., 130 pages, £14.99.

This is a particularly interesting, and indeed significant, study given the prevalence of feminist attacks on conservative theological views of women, and, at the extremes, on the Bible’s own view of women. Stetina, who is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University in California, provides readers with a concise but scholarly evaluation of Calvin’s view of the Fatherhood of God and also of the right use of female imagery applied to God in Scripture. The opening chapter sets the scene with a consideration of Calvin’s earthly experience of fatherhood, with his parents and his spiritual fathers, then looking at his own roles as husband, father and spiritual father. The second chapter is vital, setting out Calvin’s epistemology, rooted in the inerrant Word of God given by the miraculous agency of the Holy Spirit. Stetina then considers briefly historical conceptions of the Fatherhood of God, before evaluating Calvin’s conception, including his view of God’s redemptive adoption of his children. The remainder of the study looks first at the use of feminine imagery and God-language from the Church Fathers to the Scholastics and then, against this background, at Calvin’s treatment of female imagery particularly in the Psalms and the prophets.. It is clear that Calvin’s views are carefully shaped by God’s revelation of Scripture, exactly what we would expect in the light of his biblically grounded epistemology. This is a most helpful addition to the crowded field of Calvin studies.

*Sanctification. Explorations in Theology and Practice*, edited by Kelly M. Kopic, IVP(USA), 2014, pbk., 275 pages, \$28.00.

Drawn largely from papers presented at the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference a few years ago, the chapters of this book address from a variety of angles the subject of sanctification. In particular the authors are aiming to balance the free grace of God that saves sinners and also the call for those saved to pursue lives of holiness. The authors come from a wide range of constituencies in the broadly Reformed tradition, including Henri Blocher, Bruce McCormack, Michael Horton, Oliver O'Donovan, Kelly Kopic (the editor) and others perhaps less well-known to some readers. After an opening exposition of Colossians 3:5-17 entitled 'Holiness: Restoring God's Image' by Derek Tidball, the book is divided into three parts. Part One is entitled 'Sanctified *By Grace Through Faith In Union with Christ*' and covers subjects such as a Reformed response to Antinomianism, sanctification by faith, covenantal union and communion, and a comparison of Barth and Wesley on 'Christian Perfection'. Part Two is entitled 'Human Agency and Sanctification's Relationship to Ethics' and covers the respective roles of the Spirit and human agency in sanctification, and sanctification and ethics, especially in the theology of Herman Bavinck. Part Three offers 'Theological and Pastoral Meditations on Sanctification', dealing with gospel holiness; faith, hope and love; sonship, identity and transformation, and finally sanctification through preaching, with a focus on John Chrysostom. The wide variety of contributors is an indication that a variety of perspectives is represented here, and some chapters are of greater interest than others. Much depends on the reader's own interests and viewpoint. There is, however, much to stimulate and challenge in these pages.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, Dallas M. Roarke, edited by Bob E. Patterson, Hendrickson Publishers (distributed in the UK by Alban Books), 2016, pbk., 127 pages, £9.99.

*Karl Barth. Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, David L Mueller, edited by Bob E. Patterson, Hendrickson Publishers (distributed in the UK by Alban Books), 2016, pbk., 155 pages, £9.99.

*Emil Brunner. Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, J. Edward Humphrey, edited by Bob E. Patterson, Hendrickson Publishers (distributed in the UK by Alban Books), 2016, pbk., 171 pages, £9.99.

Although this may appear to be a new series of studies on some of the most significant modern theologians, these volumes were in fact first published in the 1970s. Many books and articles on each of these figures have been produced in the intervening years. Why should such a series now be republished? Hendrickson justifies the decision to republish by noting the continuing value of the material they contain and also the fact that in many cases the books were written by theologians who studied under the men in question. In a sense these books are themselves part of the ongoing responses of the theological world to such seminal figures as Barth and Brunner and so are published in their original form. Although serious students of these theologians will have to take into account more recent studies, it is true that these volumes provide concise and clear introductory overviews of the theologians concerned and so offer a useful starting point for anyone who wishes to understand the various currents making up the complex and often confusing river of 'modern theology'. In particular a grasp of the work of pioneers such as Bonhoeffer, Barth and Brunner will go far in explaining why modern theology takes the many forms that it does. As long as the nature of these volumes is understood, they will be of value to anyone seeking to grapple with modern theological thinking.

*The Church. A Theological and Historical Account*, Gerald Bray, Baker Academic, 2016, pbk., 278 pages, \$24.99.

There are many books expounding the doctrine of the church, from a wide variety of Christian traditions, and just as many histories of the church. Gerald Bray's latest publication is different, refreshingly so. His own description of his book is 'an attempt to understand how and why the different Christian bodies that now exist have come to understand the church in the ways that they have and why they persist with their own interpretations of ecclesiology even when they know that by doing so they are perpetuating the disunity of the Christian world' (p.viii). Bray pursues this project in seven chapters, beginning with the origins of the church, rightly starting in the Old Testament and then considering whether Jesus intended to establish a church (answer 'yes') and next examining the New Testament church of the apostles. The subsequent chapters survey 'The Persecuted Church' in the post-apostolic period, 'The Imperial Church' as it developed in the Middle Ages, 'The Crisis of the Imperial Church' tracing the developments leading up to the Reformation, and 'What Is the Church?' covering the years after the Reformation. In the final chapter, 'What Should the Church Be?', Bray offers his own stimulating and penetrating evaluation of the present and future state of the church. Although whole-heartedly committed to his Evangelical Anglican position, Bray is a man of wide sympathies and, as his other writings amply show, one deeply and widely read in the history of theology. As a result he has produced a volume that is informative and provides much food for thought. When readers do diverge from his views, it will be with a clear understanding of the issues involved and the reasons for Bray's own conclusions.

*Jonathan Edwards among the Theologians*, Oliver D. Crisp, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015, pbk., 198 pages, £16.99.

The tide of publications on the theology of Jonathan Edwards continues unabated. The increasing quantity, however, does not mean that the quality has diminished. Having made a number of contributions to Edwards scholarship, Oliver Crisp of Fuller Seminary has brought together in this volume a number of essays previously published in a variety of journals and multi-author works all of which bring Edwards into dialogue with other significant theologians through the ages. Thus after an introductory chapter on 'Edwards and Reformed Theology', we have Anselm and Edwards on the doctrine of God, Edwards on the excellence of the Trinity, Arminius and Edwards on creation, Girardeau and Edwards on free will, Edwards on original sin, Bellamy and Edwards on the atonement and Edwards on preaching. Each chapter demonstrates something of the richness and complexity of Edwards' thought, as well as Crisp's sharp analytical skills, producing thought-provoking examinations of some key doctrines. The most challenging chapter is the final one, entitled 'On the Orthodoxy of Jonathan Edwards', in which Crisp offers two alternative readings of Edwards' philosophical doctrine of the nature of God, one of which leads to panentheism and the other to pantheism – the reader is left with an unenviable choice! Many who know Edwards only as the preacher and the theologian of revival fail to realise the complexities and conundrums that his profound theologising raises. Crisp's volume offers a fruitful path to engagement with this theological giant of the Reformed tradition.

*Ecclesiastes. A Quest for Meaning?*, John D. Currid, Evangelical Press, 2015, pbk., 155 pages, £9.99.

*Ecclesiastes* is a perplexing book, offering a variety of challenges to Bible readers and preachers. Solid help is needed, and John Currid's contribution to the 'Welwyn Commentary Series' from Evangelical Press is particularly welcome. Some godly commentators of the past, with the best of intentions, have made the Preacher of *Ecclesiastes* sound rather more of a man free from doubts than he actually appears to be in the biblical text. Currid, however, allows Solomon (whom he accepts as the author of the book) to speak for himself – recounting his search for the meaning of life in the things of this world and his finding what he sought in God, the only source of life's meaning as our sovereign Creator and Redeemer. This is, in many ways, one of the OT books which speaks most readily to contemporary culture. Currid's exposition is thorough, clear and most helpful, amply justifying his claim that 'no book in the Old Testament is, in reality, as joyful as *Ecclesiastes*' (p.5). He rightly contends that, 'When the reader properly understands the argument in the book, he will be led to joy and will be filled with adoration for God.' This is a valuable addition to resources for understanding a book that is of an importance far beyond its size.

*1, 2, 3 John. A Mentor Expository Commentary*, Terry L. Johnson, Mentor, 2016, hbk., 236 pages, £22.99.

In 30 concise (6 or 7 pages long) expositions, Terry Johnson, Senior Pastor of the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia, covers the contents of John's three letters in a practical and illuminating way. As Johnson shows in his introduction, the goal of these letters was 'to establish Christian certainties' (p.4) in churches which had been troubled by false teachers who had sown confusion and uncertainty. Solid grounds for Christian assurance are provided in John's explanation of God's work of grace and his presentation of what have come to be thought of as 'tests' of sharing in that grace. These tests Johnson describes as theological (right belief), moral (righteous living) and social (genuine Christian love). In the course of his writing John weaves these themes together into searching yet tremendously encouraging letters of perennial value to the people of God. Johnson's expositions originated in series of sermons preached several times in congregations and as a result are readable, clear and full of practical application. Johnson has done his 'homework' well, but his scholarship is never put on display to impress. Although preachers will naturally want to do their own study of the original text, they will find Johnson's expositions stimulating and a fine supplement to the standard commentaries. Any Christian will profit from reading them thoughtfully and prayerfully.

*Cutting to the Heart. Applying the Bible in teaching and preaching*, Chris Green, IVP, 2015, pbk., 245 pages, £14.99.

Matters of biblical interpretation are fundamental to sound teaching and preaching, and indeed godly living. There are many resources available to help with exegesis and hermeneutics to determine the meaning of the biblical text, and also with methods of communication to expound the text, but there is much less material to help with issues of application in preaching and teaching. In his latest book Chris Green, Vicar at St James, Muswell Hill, London, aims to provide help in the area of biblical application. He states clearly that the Bible by its very nature always has 'objective relevance' since it is the Word of God. The preacher has the responsibility, however, of showing the Bible's 'subjective relevance' to his congregation, such that the people are gripped by the Word. In one sense, as Green recognises, 'No preacher can make this happen – it is God's sovereign prerogative' (p.36).

Nevertheless God uses means – the preacher’s words – and so preachers and teachers have the responsibility to do their best to apply the Word accurately and in a relevant manner. To assist in this task Green structures his 21 chapters around 6 questions: ‘Why has God given us a relevant Bible?’ ‘How is the Bible supposed to be relevant?’ ‘How does the Bible apply the Bible?’ ‘How does the Bible address the heart?’ ‘How does the Bible engage our attention?’ and ‘How does the Bible apply to different kinds of people?’ He provides a wealth of stimulating material that will help preachers and teachers to fulfil their calling for the edification of God’s people. There is much to challenge in these pages – Green’s contention, for example, that too much application relates only to the ‘church world’ in which preachers live, neglecting the world in which his people live from Monday to Saturday. He engages with a wide range of contemporary thinking on biblical hermeneutics and application, unafraid to take the view he believes is best, and, although they will not agree with all his conclusions, readers will understand how he reached them and will be pushed to defend their own position carefully. Green’s aim is to ‘help the normal preacher preparing normal sermons in a normal church’ (p.10). He has succeeded well.

*Augustine. Conversions and Confessions*, Robin Lane Fox, Allen Lane, 2015, hbk., 657 pages, £30.00.

Robin Lane Fox was until 2014 Reader in Ancient History in Oxford University and has previously written on early Christianity in its setting in the late classical world. As an outstanding classicist he is well qualified to examine the *Confessions* of Augustine, written some ten years after his conversion, against the background of the fourth century Roman world. Augustine’s *Confessions* has been a profoundly influential work, giving fascinating insights into the religious development of a man whose writings have shaped Christian theology in many ways, some good, some less so (as the Reformers such as Calvin understood). Fox engages closely with Augustine’s life and writings, particularly with the *Confessions*, offering many new insights into the influences that shaped Augustine. He is able to draw on the latest scholarship, including recently discovered letters and sermons by Augustine himself which provide new perspectives on his religious experience. Some of the significant areas which Fox treats in details are Augustine’s years among the Manichees, his engagement with pagan philosophy, especially Platonism, and his relationships with the variety of friends, Christian and pagan, around him in Milan. The role of his mother Monnica is of great importance, and his relationship with his (unnamed) concubine also offers insights into his spiritual development. As foils to Augustine’s viewpoint, Fox also draws on the experiences of two of his contemporaries, Libanius, a pagan teacher of rhetoric from Antioch, and Synesius, a Christian bishop from Cyrene. In Fox’s view the *Confessions* were the result of a gradual process of development on Augustine’s part, not a sudden change of perspective, but were written as a single swift composition. He offers many stimulating insights into the man and the book, opening up fruitful lines of thought that enrich our understanding of this hugely significant theologian and churchman. His scholarship is wide and deep, as the endnotes amply testify. Sadly Fox does not share Augustine’s faith and so cannot not enter into his experience in a personal way. He also embraces many of the current secular academic views of Scripture and theology which surface in his writing from time to time. With these *caveats*, Fox’s book can be recommended as a major resource for understanding Augustine when used alongside the standard studies which have more sympathy for Augustine’s faith and theology.

David McKay