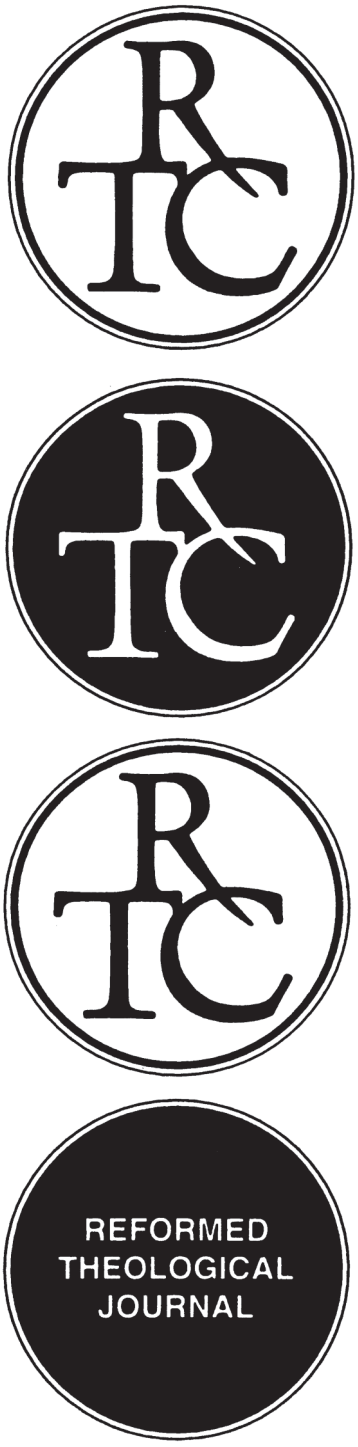

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CONTENTS

BOOK REVIEWS

BOOK NOTICES by David McKay

PERSPECTIVES ON ETHICS: SALVATION, COMMUNITY, CONSCIENCE

David McKay

David McKay is Professor of Systematic Theology, Ethics and Apologetics at the Reformed Theological College, Belfast, and Minister of Shaftesbury Square Reformed Presbyterian Church, Belfast. *Some of the material in this article was delivered in lecture form at the Theological Academy of the Independent Reformed Church of Korea in Anyang, South Korea, and at Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Newcastle on Tyne.*

The Bible never separates theology from ethics. Whenever a theological truth is stated, the practical application and outworking of it are sure to follow. Doctrine is never given for purely abstract contemplation or dispassionate speculation – the truth is always to be lived. This is evident wherever we look in the Scriptures, whether Old Testament or New Testament.

An outstanding Old Testament example is Psalm 119, a psalm in which almost every verse refers to the Word of God. What is of particular note in our present context is the way in which the psalmist constantly speaks of the effect that the Word is to have on the life of God's people. He writes at one point, 'I will keep your law continually, for ever and ever, and I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts' (v.44-45) and later, 'I hope for your salvation, O Lord, and I do your commandments. My soul keeps your testimonies; I love them exceedingly. I keep your precepts and testimonies, for all my ways are before you' (v.166-168).

The New Testament likewise abounds with examples of the intimate connection between doctrine and life. This is evident in the very structure of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. The first three chapters, broadly speaking, set out the great fundamentals of the divine plan of salvation, whilst the remaining three draw out the implications of these truths for Christian discipleship, including relationships in marriage, family and work. The most exalted theology is linked to the most practical aspects of life. The call of James is echoed throughout the New Testament: 'But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves' (James 1:22).

The Bible thus knows of no separation, much less a divorce, between theology and ethics. The two are bound inseparably together. In the Reformed Theological College this is reflected in the combination of the teaching of Systematic Theology with the teaching of Ethics (and Apologetics). The link is not merely one of convenience, but one that acknowledges the connection that pervades divine revelation. Ethics must be grounded in sound theology if it is to equip the people of God for faithful service.

It has to be recognised, however, that much writing on Christian ethics takes the form of expounding 'the Christian view of…' The issue may be marriage, sexuality, medical issues, economic life, or any one of a multitude of specific questions. There is an important place for such study, but there must first be the laying of sound principial foundations before specifics are tackled. The 'big picture' must be discerned as a necessary preliminary to particular applications. If this is not done, the results may be superficial and the interrelationship of diverse ethical challenges will be missed.

The purpose of this short study is to address three 'big picture' issues that are of crucial significance for Christian ethics, namely salvation, community and conscience. As we shall see, each can be rightly understood only from the perspective of the theological principles revealed in the Scriptures.

1. Salvation

(a). The necessity of saving grace

At the centre of Christian ethics are the moral requirements of a holy God – 'You shall be holy, for I am holy' (1 Peter 1:16, quoting Leviticus 11:44). This is a constant theme throughout Scripture. It needs to be understood that holiness is not just a matter of observing rules but a matter of a relationship with God.

The greatest failing of the Pharisees of the New Testament period was their exclusive concentration on the keeping of the details of the Mosaic Law, overlaid with their own traditions, regardless of the state of the heart. The result was, inevitably, legalism, whereby keeping of rules became the basis for a person's right standing before God. In stark contrast to this outlook is the affirmation of Paul in Romans 3:20 'For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.'

Holy living in fact flows out of a relationship with a holy God. A moral life is one lived in fellowship with God, the life of a justified sinner who by God's grace shares in the blessedness of the Covenant of Grace. Such a life reflects God's holiness in obedience to his commands. Despite what many believe, love for God and obedience to his commands are not in tension or conflict, but are inseparably linked. This is made clear by the Lord in John 14:15 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.' The same truth is stated in 1 John 5:3-4 'For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world'.

The question is often posed, 'Can we be moral without God?' Biblical Christianity asserts that ultimately the moral life is impossible apart from a relationship with God, and a consequent keeping of his commandments. This is precisely what human beings lack by nature. The consistent testimony of the Bible is to the fallenness of man, his separation from God and his moral and spiritual deadness Thus we read, 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"'(Psalm 14:1). As David asserts, 'in sin did my mother conceive me' (Psalm 51:5), tracing sin to the first moment of his existence. The seriousness of the situation is stated in Isaiah 64:6 'all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment'. Lest these statements be dismissed as Old Testament pessimism, we note Romans 8:8 'Those who are in the flesh cannot please God' and Paul's verdict in Ephesians 2:1 that before conversion all are 'dead in…trespasses and sins').

Christianity therefore says that its ethics cannot be practised in a way that satisfies God without a complete transformation in the moral agent. Partial renovation does not begin to suffice. Without complete transformation only outward conformity is possible, and since that is not performed to the glory of God, it is not truly 'good'.

Hence the necessity for the saving grace of God which alone can change the human heart (Ephesians 2:8-9). Only the work of re-creation can make possible the moral life. The beginning of Christian ethics is therefore a life-changing encounter with a holy God who graciously brings sinners into a new life by an experience of the saving work of Christ.

(b). Regeneration and justification

The whole rich process of redemption is related to ethics, but some elements are especially relevant. Here we see clearly the interweaving of theology and ethics.

Regeneration: this is the implanting of new spiritual life where once there was only death. When regeneration takes place, there is 'a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17; see also Ephesians 2:1-10). It is the creative power of God that is put forth to change the sinner. Regeneration opens the way for a life of good works (Ephesians 2:10) in conformity with God's revealed will. This marks the beginning of a life which will be shaped, as it develops, to be increasingly, in disposition and character, conformed to God's holiness. The life implanted by God will inevitably show itself in the life of the child of God.

The new life now begun also involves being transformed into the image of the Lord – 'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another' (2 Corinthians 3:18). The source of that transformation is the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit: 'For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.' This has profound ethical implications.

Justification: justification by faith is one of the key Pauline themes, expounded, for example, in Romans 5:1ff. It is rooted in the death of Christ for us 'while we were still sinners' (v.8). It is the righteousness of Christ, in his life of obedience to God's law and in his atoning death on the cross, that provides the basis for God's declaration that those who believe in Christ are 'righteous'. The ethical significance of justification is that it deals with our burden of sin and guilt, laying the foundation on which we can build a life that is pleasing to God. To be constituted righteous in the sight of the Judge means that the believer has a new freedom: 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1).

From New Testament times the biblical doctrine of justification has been accused of promoting immorality (see Romans 3:5-8 for the accusation brought against Paul). The position he is accused of holding is that if grace superabounds (his term) where sin abounded (and so God is glorified), then why not sin all the more so that grace will be all the more gloriously manifested? This represents a fundamental misunderstanding of justification. In fact those justified by grace through faith are regenerate, they are changed people, no longer oriented to sin and self, but instead turned towards God with a new desire and power for obedience.

(c). Union with Christ

A central aspect of salvation, arguably 'the' central aspect, which has great implications for the Christian's moral life is union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. Romans 6:1-4 sets out the basic position. We have been united to Christ in his death, which 'he died to sin, once for all' (v.10). Therefore we have also died to sin once for all: 'How shall we who died to sin still live in it?' (v.2). A radical break with sin and freedom from bondage to sin both result from union with Christ.

It is important to be clear on this matter. In physical death all bonds with the previous life are severed. The dead do not inhabit two worlds simultaneously. Thus as a result of death to sin in union with Christ, Christians no longer live or act in the realm of sin. They no longer live in the 'world' (in the moral and ethical sense of the word). The 'world' is the sphere of Satan's activity: 'the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers' (2 Corinthians 4:4), 'the whole world lies in the power of the evil one' (1

John 5:19). Believers, however, 'have been delivered…from the domain of darkness and transferred…to the kingdom of his beloved Son' (Colossians 1:13). This death to sin is the foundation of the implementation of Christian ethics. A definitive separation from sin has taken place.

The positive outcome of this death in union with Christ is that, by virtue of his resurrection, we are now alive to righteousness (still in union with Christ)**.** This is stressed in Romans 6:4 'We were buried therefore with him…in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life'. The end of the dominion of death for Christ is also the end of that dominion for those in union with him (see v.9 'We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.'). The resurrection of Christ guarantees for believers a life in resurrection power, one of the reasons why the resurrection of Christ is so vital for us. The resurrection is an integral part of the gospel. This leads to the ethical summons of Romans 6:13 'Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness'.

In treating union with Christ Paul emphasises that believers died and rose again with Christ. It is this relationship to the death and resurrection of Christ that supplies the power and dynamic for the Christian's moral life. It is a life of death to sin and newness of obedience. There is power emanating from the death and resurrection of Christ. Note the statement in Westminster Confession 13.1 that believers are 'sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them, : the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness'.

The decisive break with sin through union with Christ in his death and resurrection touches on **2 elements** of New Testament ethical teaching:-

(i) **'our old man was crucified'** (Romans 6:6). In Christian writing on this subject the believer is often portrayed as being both old man and new man simultaneously – we see this e.g. in Calvin's comments on this verse. The view of John Murray (*Principles of Conduct*, pp.212ff) is preferable. He notes that the old man is crucified and therefore dead. We have died to sin and so cannot be dead and alive, old and new, at the same time. Colossians 3:9-10 describes a definitive putting off and putting on: 'you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed'. Murray also argues that Ephesians 4:22-24, rightly exegeted, states the same truth. This is not at all to deny the need for progressive renewal. Growth is necessary and Ephesians 4:23-24 describes renewal of the new man to full conformity with Christ.

(ii) '**sin will have no dominion over you'** (Romans 6:14). These words are both a statement of fact and also a promise. Here is a categorical assurance of victory: the believer can be sure that he cannot and will not return to a position where sin is the dominating power in his life, as it was before conversion. It must, however, be set alongside v.12 'Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies'. There is a responsibility resting on the people of God actively to resist sin, albeit by the strength the Holy Spirit supplies. To be told only the latter can accentuate our sense of struggle and defeat, but set alongside the former it is a call to a moral life that is possible by God's enabling. We are now under the dominion of saving grace, dead to the dominion of sin. Remaining sin does not have power over us and it is contrary to our new nature. In union with Christ a moral life – a godly life - becomes a reality.

2. A Community of Character

(a). An ethics of virtue

Ethics are often thought of in terms of sets of principles and rules dealing with a person's actions. There is, however, much more involved in thoroughly biblical Christian ethics. We must bear in mind, for example, that it is possible to do what is right for purely prudential reasons (staying below the speed limit because of the police car spotted in your rear view mirror) or even from a morally wrong motive (such as enjoying the good opinion of others). Motives, intentions and actions are all morally relevant. They show the kind of person one is, indicating his inner character.

A truly biblical moral evaluation of any action begins with the motives and intentions that lie behind it, and Christian ethics are concerned first with **being** rather than **doing**, with the kind of people we are. Note the Lord's words in Matthew15:19 'For out of the heart come evil thoughts…' and Luke 6:45 'The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks'. God's chief concern is with **who** we are, and that is subsequently expressed in **what** we do. Often we fall into a kind of activism that puts the focus entirely on what we do. The danger then is that we evaluate actions in a superficial way that ignores deeper concerns about motives and intentions, the level at which sin may lie.

Ideals of character. These vary in different moral traditions and ethical systems. Thus Stoics believed that the complete person was the one whose mind was conformed to the inevitable processes of nature and their great virtue was 'apathy' (best understood as 'imperturbability'). The Christian believes that the goal of life is to live as child of God, as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. This is the most happy and satisfying life possible, although it is not lived primarily for those reasons. It is sought because it is God-honouring and therefore right. This basic perspective provides the framework in which Christian character is to be understood.

The fundamental fact about the Christian is that he is a child of God: 'See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are' (1 John 3:1). From that fact flow all the Christian virtues that are to characterise God's children. These are the traits of character that befit one who lives in the family of God and who owes supreme loyalty to the Lord. Christian virtues can be summed up in 2 commands – love for God and love for neighbour (Luke 10:25ff). Both are firmly rooted in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:2 and Leviticus 19:18).

Christian virtues. 'Virtues' are character traits that provide inner sanctions on our particular motives, intentions and actions. They are settled habits of mind which shape every aspect of life. As Christians we do not accept psychological theories that hold to the genetic fixity of character – 'That's the way I am' or even 'That's the way God made me' can become justifications for all kinds of sinful behaviour. Because of the redemptive work of Christ and the grace of God, Christians are committed to character change.

Virtues can be thought of as learned traits of character resulting from a combination of sources. They must begin with the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, otherwise the sinner remains in bondage to sin and Satan. Regeneration and sanctification effect fundamental changes in the character of a redeemed sinner. We also recognise that we are also shaped by our upbringing, by other Christians, by

personal choices and by self-discipline. All of these factors shape who we are and how we live, but the fundamental influences in the life of a child of God are God's grace and the Holy Spirit.

Many virtues are mentioned in Scripture, sometimes in wide-ranging lists such as Galatians 5:22-23 'the fruit of the Spirit' and Colossians 3:12-14 'Put on then…compassion, kindness, humility…' Many more are commended throughout the New Testament, such as purity (2 Corinthians 6:6), contentment (Philippians 4:11-12), the fear of God (2 Corinthians 5:11).

We are particularly blessed in having a divine pattern in Christ himself. Note 1 John 2:6 'whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked'. The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 describes the character of Christ which is to be translated into terms of our daily living. He alone fully exemplifies all the aspects of the fruit listed in the text. There is to be a God-empowered putting off of old sinful habits and a putting on of Christ-like character – Colossians 3:5ff. We are thus not left to wonder how a Christ-like life is to be understood – we can turn to the Gospel records.

(b). The Church and ethics

We do not and we cannot live as isolated individuals – that is not how the Lord has made us. We have been created in the image of a God who is a Trinity of Persons, a unique community yet one God, and so human beings are made for community. We are created for relationships with God and with one another. Thus the Christian faith has community at its heart.

From the outset of the work of redemption in the Old Testament God called a group of people, not a series of isolated individuals. This is clear with regard to Abraham, as recorded in Genesis 12ff. It was not only Abraham who left Haran, but he took 'Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son…and the people that they had acquired in Haran' (Genesis 12:5). The same is evident at Sinai when Israel is constituted as a covenant nation (Exodus 19-20). Thus the Law given through Moses is full of direction for community life, embracing even the most mundane aspects of life, including hygiene and health and safety. God is seen to be the one who graciously generates community and who is experienced in community, as he brings sinners into a covenant relationship with himself. The regulations for public worship and for the great annual festivals bear witness to this. Such provisions do not in any way minimise the need for individual knowledge of the Lord and personal commitment to him.

In the New Testament we see that the death and resurrection of Christ result in the formation of a redeemed community, the Church, the New Covenant people of God. This is confirmed in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). Most of the epistles are addressed to communities that interacted with one another within their own membership and also with the world. This community perspective is reflected in the metaphor of the body, developed by Paul particularly in 1 Corinthians 12:12ff, 'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it' (v27). Isolationism is not an option: 'we are members one of another' (Ephesians 4:25).

Community was therefore the moral matrix for both Israel and the early Church. Questions of character and conduct asked by members were not about some abstract 'universal good' such as the philosophers might have discussed, but about the conduct that was in keeping with who they were as the people of God, the covenant community. Morality and ethics were dimensions of community life, demonstrating concern for how God's people were to relate to one another and to those outside the congregation. Their chief concern was to be with faithfulness to God as the way of life of a people called into covenant fellowship with him.

The **Scriptures** shaped the life of the community of the people of God. The Church was built up as the Holy Spirit applied the Word of God to the community of believers. A moral life was the outcome of the community's faith, the outward expression of the grace of God received in Christ, demonstrated in the lives of its members. The community's task was to train members (by teaching and example) for lives befitting their experience of God and his grace. They were to act as members of a redeemed community, not as a collection of individuals.

(c). The role of the Church in character formation

There are numerous ways in which the Church shapes the lives of God's people and provides for the nurture and service of the godly community. Only a few examples can be noted:

(i) **Forming moral identity**. The Church seeks to help God's people to internalise the moral vision of Scripture to form a kind of moral 'guidance system' for disciples of the Lord. The thinking of believers is to be conformed more and more to the law of God revealed in Scripture, so that decisions and actions that are in harmony with that Word come increasingly 'naturally' to them. The Church provides the context for the authoritative preaching of the Word by pastors and teachers set aside by God for this ministry, who exercise God-given gifts of teaching both in public and in private contexts. This ministry of the Word is to be complemented by the mutual ministry of believers, emphasised by the 'one another' commands of Scripture (e.g. 'stir up one another to love and good works…encouraging one another', Hebrews 10:24-25). Prayer, worship and the sacraments within the setting of the Church are also to strengthen believers. Godly discipline by the elders is also to be seen as a positive element in the moral development of believers, building on the informal discipline within the community. This is a ministry often neglected or devalued in the contemporary Church. All of the means of grace therefore have ethical significance, not just the teaching of Scripture.

(ii) **The bearer of tradition**. Each denomination has a distinctive tradition of theologising and of ethical deliberation - Reformed, Anabaptist and so forth. As that tradition is imparted to members, they become part of it, they develop a rootedness in it and may contribute to its development. This provides a base from which to evaluate other traditions and learn from them. It also gives us a framework for moral development. No denomination or theological tradition has a monopoly of the truth or of ethical wisdom, and so it is vital to remain open to the insights of believers from traditions other than our own.

(iii) **A forum for moral deliberation**. Within the community of faith there are those with expertise and experience that must be used in ethical decision-making (e.g. medical knowledge, business experience, theological training). Within the Church the necessary knowledge is to be brought together and moral perspectives on specific issues formulated. Thus the different parts of the body can contribute to its work and witness. The tendency to rely almost exclusively on the input of theologians is unwise and risks side-lining the gifts of other brothers and sisters who should contribute to ethical deliberation.

(iv) **An agent for action**. The results of ethical deliberation must be translated into practice. That begins within the community of believers. The Church must show consistency in its own practice, before turning its attention to the world. The world will be very quick to pounce on perceived inconsistencies in the Church's practice as an excuse for its own failings, and too often the Church has provided a measure of justification for such attacks.

Within the Church members are equipped to act morally in their own diverse situations, and pastoral support and advice can be provided. As a body, the Church is also to engage in ethical witness to the world, calling authorities to submit to Christ the King, proclaiming biblical standards for public and private life and seeking the preservation or restoration of biblical standards of righteousness. As a community the Church is to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-14), resisting pressures to conform to the values of the surrounding culture. As Paul exhorts, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Romans 12:2).

3. Conscience

In ethical discussion reference is often made to 'conscience'. Appeal may be made to conscience as decisive in decision-making, 'freedom of conscience' is valued highly and on occasion someone may claim that his or her conscience is violated by a certain course of action. How is conscience to be understood from a Christian perspective?

We may begin with a definition: 'Conscience is the inner aspect of the life of the individual where a sense of what is right and wrong is developed. Our conscience prompts us to react according to the code of morality it has learnt either with a sense of guilt or of well-being to proposed or past courses of action. Christians understand conscience as the guardian of the integrity of the person.' (John Gladwin, 'Conscience', in *New Dictionary of Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, IVP, 1995, p.251). This summarises in a concise way some of the biblical basics of the concept of conscience.

(a). Terminology

Our word 'conscience' is derived from the Latin *conscientia* which, like the Greek word *suneidēsis*, means 'knowing with'. It indicates an inner awareness of a moral standard together with a judgment as to whether that standard has been met.

'Conscience' is not an Old Testament word – Hebrew is less given to abstract terminology - but the concept is present in references to the 'heart'. The idea of the conscience is clearly present, for example when we read in 1 Samuel 24:5 that 'David's heart struck him' in relation to cutting the hem of Saul's robe, and in 2 Samuel 24:10 in relation to the census. Although this is not made explicit in the text, conscience is clearly at work with reference to Adam and Eve's disobedience when their eyes are opened and they try to hide from the Lord's presence (Genesis 3:7ff), in the fear of Joseph's brothers after their father's death (Genesis 50:15) and in the exposure of David's sin by Nathan (2 Samuel 12 and Psalm 51). The education of the conscience is indicated in Psalm 119:11 'I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.'

The possession of a conscience is not confined to the regenerate. Notice Abimelech's reference to taking Sarah: 'In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.' (Genesis 20:5). The issue is what values inform a particular conscience?

In the New Testament *suneidēsis* is used several times – in Paul's letters (over twenty times), in Hebrews, in 1 Peter, and twice in Acts on Paul's lips. The only possible occurrence in the Gospels is the textually dubious case of John 8:9, where only a minority of the textual witnesses have the words regarding the

conscience. The use of the term really had to wait until the period of theological elaboration in the post-resurrection Church. However, the action of conscience is frequently evident even though the term is not used explicitly, for example in Acts 19:19 when, with their consciences awakened by God's grace, converted magicians burn their books of spells.

(b). Conscience before conversion

As noted above, the conscience does not function only in the regenerate. This is made clear when we consider Paul's reference to the Gentiles in Romans 2:14-16. They clearly do not have the Law as the Jews do, yet Paul recognises that it is possible on occasion that they 'by nature do what the law requires' (v14).

At first sight this might seem to be a surprising statement. Are the Gentiles not 'dead in…trespasses and sins' (Ephesians 2:1)? How then could they 'do what the law requires'? The explanation is given in v15 'They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them'. Paul is stating that God's image-bearers have an **innate knowledge** of God's holy standard which is present even in those who are strangers to his saving grace. It is a knowledge of right and wrong which renders then accountable to God the Judge. No human being can plead ignorance of the fundamental standard of conduct laid down by the Creator. The written revelation of Scripture of course sets out that standard with full clarity, but it is not revealing something that was previously entirely unknown.

It is the writing of the Law on the heart that gives rise to the operations of conscience. Paul is not saying that conscience is an infallible guide – the effects of sin on man's reading of what is written on his heart must be taken into account for a proper understanding of conscience. Sin infects the conscience and hinders its working. That is one aspect of man's spiritual deadness before conversion. It does nevertheless function. Living in a fallen society adversely affects the conscience and, as Romans 1:18 states, the unregenerate 'by their unrighteousness suppress the truth'. This involves trying to suppress the voice of conscience, but it cannot be eliminated entirely and allows the sinner no true peace.

(c). Conversion and conscience

The Spirit's work in applying the redemption purchased by Christ has profound significance for every part of our being, including the conscience. Note Jesus' statement in John 16:8ff about the work of the Holy Spirit, who would be poured out after the Saviour's resurrection: 'when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness and judgement'. Although no one rigid pattern of conversion is set down in Scripture, it is clear that conviction of sin is a vital element in any true conversion. Why would anyone seek a saviour if he has no sense of guilt regarding sin which requires a saviour?

A striking biblical example is the tax collector in Jesus' parable in Luke 18. In sharp contrast to the self-righteous Pharisee ('God, I thank you that I am not like other men', v11), the tax collector, we are told, 'would not even lift up his eyes to heaven' (v13). Instead he expresses his repentance by beating his breast and crying out to God, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner' (v13). Indeed we might translate his cry as 'God, be merciful to me, *the* sinner'. The result of such repentance, enabled by the grace of God, was that he 'went down to his house justified' – truly converted (v14).

Conviction is generally accomplished by the sinner's confrontation by God's holy standard expressed in his law. In recounting his own experience, Paul says, 'if it had not been for the law, I would not have

known sin' (Romans 7:7). It was the law that exposed the reality of his heart. The sinner is killed by the law of God in order to be made alive in Christ. The result of such a confrontation is repentance (itself a gift of God – 'to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life', Acts 11:18). Such repentance, together with faith, enables entrance into an experience of Christ's saving work. It is a believing repentance that trusts entirely in Christ.

In Scripture this is often related to the conscience. Thus we have the magnificent statement of Paul, 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1). The burden of guilt is lifted as sin is forgiven. We might note also Hebrews 9:14, where the writer asks rhetorically, 'how much more will the blood of Christ…purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?' In true conversion the conscience must first be made bad, by conviction of sin, before it can be made good. A Spirit-directed conscience will then perform vital work in the saved sinner.

(d). Conscience and sanctification

As the grace of God begins to transform every aspect of his life, the Christian loves the Lord and longs to please him. This is expressed in love for the Law of God. Note Jesus' words in John 14:15 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments'. The same truth is expressed by John in 1 John 5:3 'For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments'. There is no conflict, or even tension, between love for God and obedience to his Law. The two are in perfect harmony, with the Law expressing the holiness of the God who is loved.

Since this is the case, conscience can thus be viewed as a friend of God's people since it is a means of helping us to avoid disobedience to our Father's will and is also a stimulus to godly living. The activity of conscience in the believer is therefore a cause for thanksgiving, even when it makes us uncomfortable by exposing our sin. The conscience must be educated by exposure to God's Word, applied by the Holy Spirit, and that is a lifelong process as sanctification progresses. In the context of salvation conscience now performs **several functions:**

(i) **It protects us from self-deception**. As the remnants of sin continue to function within us, we constantly seek ways to justify our sinful actions and avoid the struggle with temptation. Conscience exposes sin for what it is and unmasks our deceptions, allowing no hiding place.

(ii) **It upholds God's perfect standard**. An enlightened conscience examines all areas of life and will not allow us to settle for less than God's requirements. The Lord's call in Matthew 5:48 is, 'You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect'. That is the standard by which we must measure our sanctification. The conscience addresses our sins of omission as much as those of commission.

(iii) **It drives us to Christ**. A consciousness of sin does not lead the believer to despair. Rather, it gives a deeper sense of need for Christ, for his grace and forgiveness. We grieve over our sins, but we also know where to turn for the solution. Our hope is expressed in 1 John 1:9 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. As conscience operates within us, we also recognise more clearly the temptations from which we require protection. Thus fellowship with Christ is strengthened as we struggle with sin. In the wisdom of God, our battle with sin draws us closer to our Saviour for the victory.

In general, conscience makes disobedience *painful* (the more so as we mature) and obedience *joyful*. There is both peace and delight in having 'a clear conscience towards both God and man', as Paul puts it in Acts 24:16.

(e). The nurture of conscience

The activity of conscience can be hindered as well as helped by the believer's actions. Repeated disobedience has a deadening effect on conscience, as well as on our entire spiritual life. If the voice of conscience is continually silenced – by e.g. drugs, alcohol, work, or even church activity – the effects will be serious. Such muting of the conscience leads to increased self-deception and moral insensitivity. This may be evident in an unwillingness to listen to the Word when it rebukes sin. Scripture warns of the danger of persisting in such a course and of having a conscience that eventually is 'seared' (1 Timothy 4:2). Whilst those in view in Paul's statement appear to be in fact unsaved, his words provide a solemn warning to any contemplating such a pathway.

On the other hand, proper use of the means of grace builds biblical sensitivity into the conscience, so that we find decreasing pleasure in sin (Psalm 141:4 'let me not eat of their delicacies'). It is also important to note that as sanctification progresses we are delivered from having a morbidly sensitive conscience bound by human rules. As the Westminster Confession states, 'God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience' (20.2). Drawing on God's gracious provision, we may thus enjoy the freedom Christ gives us, 'holding faith and a good conscience' (1 Timothy 1:19), since 'if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36).

GOADS AND NAILS:
THE WORDS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT GOSPEL PREACHER
(ECCLESIASTES 12:8-14)

Norris Wilson

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We come to the end of another Three Year Intake and we send out these three men as preachers. Yes, they've learned Greek and Hebrew; yes they've studied the Old and New Testaments; yes they've learned Theology, Apologetics and Ethics; yes they've learned Church History and Covenanting Principles, but the end product- towards which all this is leading- is preaching the Infallible Word of the Living God. That's why one whole day of our week is given over to learning to preach. That being so, I thought we might turn to the words of the preacher to preachers- the Hebrew word for 'preacher' is '*qoheleth*', the Greek word is '*ekklesiastes*'- and so it's to the Book of Ecclesiastes that I want us to turn briefly and to its conclusion in Ch. 12: 9-14, and especially verses 9-12.

So what am I saying to these three men who we're sending out to preach? Let your words in the pulpit (or the open air, or online or wherever) be like goads and nails - that's it! But of course there's more - what I want to do is set the text in its context and draw out its teaching under several headings.

1. The Preacher's Context (v.8)

As he comes towards his conclusion the Preacher turns full circle and repeats the refrain with which he began - 'meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless'. What is the meaning of human existence? Where can I find fulfilment?-

'I've tried it all,' he says, 'and still I'm searching - everything I've tried has left me feeling empty inside.' You will remember Ecclesiastes chapters 1-6 when he tells us about his search for meaning - 'Existence itself is meaningless'; the pursuit of knowledge…and wisdom - 'I might as well try and catch the wind'; pleasure ('wine, women and song') - 'I denied myself nothing my eyes desired, I refused my heart no pleasure', hedonism, riches. What have I found? 'Whoever loves money never has money enough.' 'I'll lose myself in my work then' - toil and striving and labour – 'even at night my mind does not rest.' 'Maybe a promotion will help me.' No - that just means there are more people trying to shoot you down- and 'its meaningless'.

Does all this not have a contemporary resonance, a timeless relevance? Men, this is the context of our preaching – it's just that the mad pursuit of money has become more frantic and extreme. It's a tough, wayward world into which we are sending you - even compared to the world I was sent out into in 1979.

The preacher's context – the mad pursuit, the frantic search for meaning.

2. The Preacher's Authority

The world will say, 'Who gives you the right to preach to me? What's the source of your authority?' And the answer, of course, is – the infallible, inerrant, God-breathed, living Word of the living God. Now this doctrine of an infallible Word, by divine inspiration, I would contend, is in our passage – in fact we see the very process of inscripturation.

(i) In verse 10, we see the preacher 'searching to find the right words and what he wrote was upright and true. He was writing words of truth correctly (compare Christ's words, 'Your Word is truth'), i.e. these are true words.

(ii) To confirm that and to see the overruling hand of God in it, we read, in verse 11, 'the words of the wise are given by one Shepherd'. The Shepherd gives the words (verse 10) so while the preacher sought to find suitable words to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ, he wrote words of truth correctly as these words were given to him by the One Shepherd. It is wonderful to know that the Lord is here described as the One Shepherd. He will not lead his sheep astray (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21).

(iii) We see the true Word of God being brought into the canon (the collection of inspired books) – 'The words of the wise (verse 11a), the Proverbs (verse 9) are being collected (verse 11b)'. We also see the importance of recognizing the authority of the Mosaic writings, e.g. the Commandments (verse 13).

(iv) We also note the warning of verse 12 – 'Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to the words of the wise that are collected.' It's tempting to add, and 'of the making of many books there is no end'. 'People feel they've got to add to what God has given, but you, resist this temptation!' The sufficiency of Scripture is paramount here. Life is not just 'under the sun', it's under the Son of God and the Scriptures that bear witness to him. 'Preach the Word'.

3. The Preacher's Message

We hear the words of the preacher, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' But note how verse 9 continues – 'But [and here translations ignore the conjunction, but I think the change of mood merits a *strong* conjunction] *But* the preacher was wise and *also* he *taught knowledge*'. The verb from which we get the noun 'knowledge' is from the verb *yada*, the verb which speaks of the knowledge of *relationship*. The Preacher taught how to know God. His message is that a world that seems to make no sense makes perfect sense when you begin with *the reality of God and his revealed will*. This is a message about:-

(i) The Sovereign Creator (v1 'Remember your *Creator*') who made you from the dust of the ground and gave you a never-dying soul (v7).

(ii) The Lord who Commands (v13, 'Keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man').

(iii) The Supreme Judge - before whom we must stand after death (v7b) to be judged (v14) before being assigned our final destiny, be that heaven or hell (v5b).

(iv) The Caring Shepherd - who feeds his flock upon the Word, the only Shepherd we can trust.

So how can we know this God (v13)? The *call* of the gospel is two-fold:-

(1) Fear God (i.e. loving reverence, and awe-inspired trust).

(2) Keep his commandments (i.e. the whole will of God revealed in Scripture, but especially in the Ten Commandments).

To trust and obey is mankind's whole duty (cf. 1 John 3:21-24). But note the urgency- because time is passing (v1), death is coming (v5b-7), and Judgement is looming (v14, cf Revelation 20:11-15).

4. The Preacher's Preparation

What's it like preparing to preach? It's a privilege, yes, but it's *hard work*. People out there don't really understand the exhaustive wrestling with the text to be sure of its meaning, the agonising over its application, the search for illustrations. It's no wonder someone once said, 'Preaching is two thirds preparation and one third perspiration!' There is also the longing for the unction of the Holy Spirit and the disappointment if we have not glorified our blessed Saviour as we should have. But the preacher in our passage understood, as we will see.

But first a brief Hebrew lesson! In the Hebrew language we have the basic active verb ('qal') e.g. 'he killed'. But then we can have that verb in the Intensive Active ('piel'), e.g. 'he slaughtered' - i.e. Intensive Action. In verses 9-10, as he describes the preparation of the preacher to stand before the people and teach them how to know God, he gives a list of no less than 5 piels in a row! The first one speaks of teaching as an Intensive Action, and the remaining 4 describe his preparation – all *Intensive* Action:-

(i) He pondered (i.e. weighed up, carefully evaluated).

(ii) He searched out (i.e. studied to find).

(iii) He arranged (i.e. set in order)- 'with great care'. (Another brief Hebrew lesson! The writer uses a strong Hebrew expression for emphasis here called the Infinitive Absolute, i.e. 'he arranged his material *using great care*').

(iv) He sought to find pleasing words (or 'searched to find just the right words'). Fellow preachers will know what he is talking about and they will also be able to relate to verse 12, 'Much study wearies the body!'

5. The Preacher's Impact

What is the effect of the words of the Preacher on his hearers? Before we answer that, we've got to settle a question of translation and interpretation. (This is an example of labouring in the Word that we have just thought about under our last heading). Some versions give the translation of verse 11b 'and masters of these collections are like well driven nails', whereas others give the translation of verse 11b, 'like well-driven nails are the collected sayings of the wise'. Are these 'masters of collections' like nails, or are the 'collections of inspired words' like nails? On consideration, I believe the latter interpretation makes more sense, so I have opted for it. So, the inspired Word preached has the effect of a goad, or a nail firmly driven in.

(1) God's Word as a goad. A goad was a long stick with a pointed end, either sharpened or having a metal tip. This was used for prodding and urging on oxen when ploughing (like a kind of accelerator!). In Judges 3, Shamgar used one as a weapon to strike down six hundred Philistines! The word goad was used metaphorically in Acts 26:14 to speak of Paul's behaviour before his conversion. He was stubbornly 'kicking against the goads', that is, he was resisting the voice of God. If an ox kicked back at the goad it was only hurting itself! So Christ says to Paul, 'Why are you doing this? You know I have spoken to you again and again but you have kicked against my voice. What about the time you were there when they stoned Stephen to death? You watched over the clothes of those stoning him to death. I prodded your conscience. I said to you, "Watch how a Christian dies - full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, full of joy, full of forgiveness." You kicked against all of that.' We talk about goading someone in the sense of trying to provoke anger. This is the opposite. The writer to the Hebrew says in Chapter 10:24 'Let us consider how we may spur (or goad) one another towards love and good deeds'.

(2) God's Word as a firmly driven nail. You will know what it's like to watch a joiner nailing something - the satisfying noise of the nail biting into the wood. We have the expression 'he nailed it' (or 'he nailed him' if it's boxing!). The difference between the nail and the goad is that the goad *prods* whereas the nail *pierces*. What the writer is saying is that God's Word has got to be applied *pointedly*. An example is the prophet Nathan confronting king David. David was such a hypocrite - he had covered his tracks, watched Bathsheba grieving for her husband (a good, decent, honourable man) and still David's conscience did not seem to bother him - not, that is, until Nathan told him the parable of the poor man's pet lamb taken by a rich man. Then David burned with anger and cried out, 'That man must pay for this!' And Nathan said, '*You* are the man' and the nail went home. There was a long silence, and then Nathan spelled out the judgement that was coming, and David exclaimed, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' Or think of Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), 'Let all Israel know God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ.' There was the nail going into the hearts of those who had watched the nails driven into Christ's hands and feet. 'When the people heard this they were *cut to the heart* and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers what shall we do?" Peter replied, 'It is time to repent and seek forgiveness…'

We've got to drive the point home especially when it's least expected. Remember that we take 'the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God'. (Ephesians 6:17). This word is 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to the dividing of soul and spirit, joint and marrow, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart' (Hebrews 4:12). As the Reformed Presbyterian Code says to ministers at their ordination, 'In preaching, not to be satisfied with a general statement of doctrine, but to be careful to speak to the conscience in a direct and searching manner' (Code 8.14(3)).

WILLIAM SYMINGTON (1795-1862) ON THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

Stephen Steele

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It would be hard to overestimate the influence of the brothers Andrew and William Symington on the Scottish RP Church. When William, the younger of the two, died in 1862 the *Reformed Presbyterian Magazine* declared that the brothers 'will be ever remembered in our community as the most distinguished ministers who have been raised up to us since the martyrdom of James Renwick'.[1] Andrew's influence came through training generations of ministry students as the denomination's sole Professor of Theology. William's came through his writing, public speaking, and preaching ministry, first in the heartland of the Covenanters in South-West Scotland, and then in a large congregation in Glasgow at the height of the Industrial Revolution. In the words of the late RPCNA pastor Roy Blackwood, they 'led the denomination out of an attitude of narrow provincialism focused on self-preservation and into a sense of missionary responsibility for the Church in Scotland and throughout the world'.[2]

While Andrew has been largely forgotten, his younger brother's memory has been perpetuated by a 26,000 word memoir (initially intended to be much larger) written by two of his sons and a PhD thesis written by Roy Blackwood.[3] Part of Blackwood's thesis was published and popularised by Reformation Heritage in 2009 under the fitting title *William Symington: Penman of the Scottish Covenanters*.[4] These resources make use of the surviving 800+ pages of Symington's unpublished journals.[5]. In 2019, the present author contributed three articles about him to the RPCS denominational magazine to mark the 200th anniversary of his ordination in Stranraer.[6]

One resource which gives us a particular insight into Symington's views on ministry is a 40-page pamphlet published in 1829 detailing the 'charges' delivered at the ordination of James McGill, a young minister who had grown up in his congregation in Stranraer.[7] A unique glimpse of Symington's preaching ministry is found in a book published in Glasgow in 1848 which collated accounts of worship services conducted by 52 of the most prominent ministers in Scotland. As a

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[1] *Reformed Presbyterian Magazine*, June 1862.
[2] R. Blackwood, 'Symington, William' in N. M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), p.808.
[3] 'Memoir of the author' in William Symington, *Messiah the prince* (3rd ed., London, 1881), xiii-ciii; Roy Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington, churchman and theologian, 1795-1862' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1963).
[4] Roy Blackwood and Michael LeFebvre, *William Symington: Penman of the Scottish Covenanters* (Grand Rapids; MI, 2009).
[5] The journal ran from 1816 until his death in 1862, with a few gaps. However, as Roy Blackwood noted in his thesis, 'the Journal for the years 1821 to 1835 has not been found since the sons used it in writing the Memoir' (p.90, n.118).
[6] *Good News*, May 2019; August 2019; November 2019.
[7] William Symington, *Charges delivered at the ordination of the Rev. James M'Gill, July 21st 1829; on occasion of his being invested with the pastoral care of the Reformed Presbyterian congregation, Hightae, Dumfries-shire* (Dumfries, 1829).

result, a detailed description of the morning and afternoon services held in the Great Hamilton Reformed Presbyterian Church on 6 March 1847 has been preserved for posterity.[8]

This article aims to use these resources to give an insight into the principles and practice of the Christian ministry held by the leading nineteenth century Scottish Covenanter and exemplified in his four decades of ministry in two congregations.

Symington's ministry: Context, Conversion and Call

While the Covenanters were grateful that the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 brought the period of persecution to an end and some returned to the fold of the Established Church (which was now Presbyterian), many saw it as a compromised church, remained outside it, and eventually formed the Reformed Presbyterian Church in (later 'of') Scotland.

Until the denomination was formed, the Covenanters who remained outside what they saw as a new church existed as a network of societies. Their first minister joined them in 1706, the first Presbytery was formed in 1743, and a Synod in 1811. Symington's father was one of the elders present when it was constituted.[9]

William Symington was born in Paisley in 1795. He was converted at a Communion season after his second year at the University of Glasgow, around the time he turned 17. At that time the RP Church was still suffering from a shortage of ministers, and one of the effects of it was that the Lord's Supper was celebrated once a year at most. Writing in 1881, his sons note, 'At that time "the Sacrament"…was more of a great and solemn occasion than it is now'.[10] A number of different ministers would have taken part in the services, and crowds of people, often numbering thousands, would have travelled long distances to take part.

After completing his final two years at university, he stayed on in Glasgow, living with a family and tutoring their son for a year. It seems from a reference in a letter written to him in 1816 that he considered emigrating to America, but nothing ever came of it.[11]

While he was tutoring, he began his studies for the ministry. There is no record of what led him to take that step, though his oldest brother Andrew was undoubtedly an influence. Ten years his senior, Andrew was already a minister himself and became like a second father to him. Andrew became the denomination's Professor of Theology the year after Symington was ordained in Stranraer. For 33 years students for the ministry in Ireland were trained under his supervision in Paisley[12]. Summarising those decades, F. S. Leahy writes that Andrew 'had a profound and lasting influence for good on his students and consequently on the churches in Scotland and Ireland'.[13] William's youngest brother, James, also completed ministry training, but died suddenly before he received a call to a congregation.[14]

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[8] John Smith (ed.), *Our Scottish clergy: fifty-two sketches, biographical, theological, & critical; including clergymen of all denominations* (2nd ed., Edinburgh, 1853), p.78-84.
[9] Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington', p.35.
[10] 'Memoir', xxv.
[11] Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington', p.49.
[12] D. D. Ormond, *A kirk and a college in the Craigs of Stirling* (Stirling, 1897), p.64-66.
[13] F. S. Leahy, *A school of the prophets: the history of the Reformed Theological College Belfast 1854-2004* (Belfast, 2004), p.12.
[14] 'Memoir', xix.

At the time, training for ministry consisted in sitting through a term of lectures each autumn.[15] His sons tell us that the intervening months were spent in 'close and earnest study', and his journal records a resolution never to be in bed after six when it was light at that hour, and in winter to be up with the sun. After his four years of training he underwent a yearlong 'probationary tour' around the vacant churches. Logistically, things were very different for him even than they would be a generation or two later. In comparison, his sons described the 1880s as 'these days of rapid and easy travelling'; no doubt they primarily had the railway network in mind.[16]

The young Symington, however, had to rely on a pony with saddle-bags. He called his trusty steed 'the Irishman' and the two of them travelled across the bounds of the church. At this time the communicant membership numbered over 10,000, and ministering to them involved travelling from Perthshire to Galloway and from Berwick to the Western Highlands.[17]

Early preaching

He proved a popular preacher from the beginning. There is no doubt that he was an impressive orator. His sons say that his manner of speaking was more cultivated and graceful than the people had been used to from the older ministers of the denomination.[18] Interestingly, however, he would later instruct students for the ministry to speak naturally – and for an example of natural earnestness he told them to go to the Salt-market and watch the fish-wives bargaining and scolding. He would charge his students, 'Be always natural in speaking. Study elocution, of course, but the best thing such study can do for you is to make your utterance perfectly natural'.[19]

People from other denominations, particularly the Established Church, would also come to hear him – and if he was preaching somewhere for successive weeks, the numbers coming to hear him would increase each week. We have evidence of that from his diary on his first visit to Stranraer, when he came for a month in January 1819.

After his first Sunday he writes, 'Preached to very respectable audience. He adds: 'The day was extremely stormy'. The next week he writes, 'Had a large and respectable audience. House quite packed'. On the third week, numbers had increased again. He writes, 'House immensely crowded, the day being very fine'.[20] The congregation was keen to call him; however, he had also received a call from Airdrie. He chose Stranraer, and was ordained on 18th August, in front of an immense crowd, estimated at between four and five thousand people, which met in the burying ground beside the church.

At the time the population of Stranraer itself was only 2,500, with 33,000 in Wigtownshire as a whole. Even allowing for the tradition of people travelling long distances for ordinations and communions, it shows the extent of Reformed Presbyterian influence in the area.[21]

Once the big event was over the young minister certainly had his work cut out for him. Local newspaper accounts of the day are filled with lurid details of 'child murder by unnatural mothers'

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[15] Ibid., xxi.
[16] 'Ibid., xxxvii.
[17] 'Memoir', xxxvii; Gordon Keddie, 'The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the disruption of 1863; I. Disruption and recovery' in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, xi, no.1 (1993), p.33.
[18] 'Memoir', xxxviii.
[19] Ibid., xciii.
[20] Cited in 'Memoir', xxxix.
[21] Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington', p.53, 56.

and 'melancholy deaths by drowning, starving and drunken riot'.[22] After some time in Stranraer, we find Symington bemoaning the fact that he can't get people to give up card playing and parties on the Sabbath.[23] He was also concerned about the growing drinking culture.[24]

Yet even within the churchgoing population, he didn't find a ready audience. His sons say, 'Evangelical religion was at a low ebb then in that locality. The preachers were but few and far between who testified the Gospel of the grace of God; and the truths...propounded by the young minister sounded strange and startling to many ears'.[25] Another contemporary account says, 'evangelical preaching, at least in the Establishment, was greatly wanting in and around Stranraer as well as generally throughout Galloway'.[26]

Symington's greatest concern, however, was not with the state of other congregations, but with that of his own. Soon after he came to Stranraer, the church building was rebuilt to accommodate the growing crowds coming to hear him. Surprisingly, however, about six months after the new building was opened, we find him down in the dumps. His brother, who had just been visiting, felt the need to write a letter to try and encourage him. It's clear from both William's letter and his own diary that he felt many of those coming to hear him were unconverted and indifferent.[27]

Yet while his preaching was to some a fragrance from death to death, to many others it was a fragrance from life to life. Looking back, his sons wrote that, 'Many were induced to study their Bibles who had seldom before thought of looking into such a book'.[28] One person who lived in Stranraer at the time writes, 'During 1819 to 1822, many whom we knew in circles all around believed, for the Gospel was powerfully sent home to his hearers by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus permanent friendships began - new societies were formed - new lives began'.[29] When considering a call to a congregation in Glasgow in 1836, which was eventually blocked by the Synod, two reasons which inclined him to stay in Stranraer were 'the success which has in some measure attended my ministry' and 'the influence which my labours are supposed by many to exert on the district at large'.[30]

His preaching was described by a future Church of Scotland minister who heard him regularly in Stranraer as 'learned, profound and systematic' and when Symington preached in aid of missionary organisations 'his fame as an eloquent orator…attracted large congregations, formed of all grades of society and of all ecclesiastical denominations, assured as they all came to be, that nothing merely sectarian in church government would be the theme dwelt on, but chiefly "Jesus Christ and him crucified" as the ground and object of the Christian's faith, and the aim of the Christian's exertions'.

Symington was a 'diligent and ripe student, a sagacious and judicious expositor of Scripture, and an earnest and fearless ambassador of Christ'.[31]

However, his ministry in Stranraer was certainly not all plain sailing. Factors which made him consider leaving included 'the little appearance of good being done by my labours, as evinced by the

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[22] Cited in Blackwood, p.53.
[23] 'Memoir', xliii.
[24] Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington', p.84.
[25] 'Memoir', xlii.
[26] Cited in Blackwood, p.54.
[27] 'Memoir', liii-liv.
[28] Ibid., xliii.
[29] Cited in 'Memoir', xlvi
[30] Journal, 6 Oct. 1836.
[31] Cited in 'Memoir', lxi.

worldliness of many & the listlessness in regard to personal godliness which prevails' as well as the lack of 'confidence and congeniality of sentiment and disposition' between him and at least half of his session.[32]

Symington did an immense amount of work not just in his own congregation, but in the wider area. He preached regularly in the villages around Stranraer – sometimes on weekdays, sometimes on Sunday evenings – with the audiences growing as time went on. He helped take part in open air Communion services throughout the Presbytery, with the audiences often numbering in their 1000s. He also helped perpetuate the memory of the Covenanters at special meetings. Twelve years into his ministry he preached a sermon in St Michael's churchyard in Dumfries on 'The Character and Claims of the Scottish Martyrs'.[33] The *Dumfries and Galloway Courier* reported that even though hundreds stayed away because of 'the dread of a wetting', there was still an audience of 3000 people, with 1500 having to be turned away due to lack of room.[34] On another occasion, the same paper reported that 1,000 people walked for miles to hear him speak for four hours in the open air at the tomb of Alexander Linn.[35]

Symington the Pastor

While Symington is known as a preacher, he was also a devoted pastor. He kept a record of his pastoral visitation, quite apart from the constant visits required by baptisms, marriages, illness and death. He held classes for the youth who were considering joining the congregation.[36]

Some of his pastoral advice was done by letter. He wrote the following to a governess – a friend of someone in the congregation – who was struggling with assurance, 'When I place myself on a seat on which I have never before sat, I trust or believe that it will support me; [but] it is not till after I have sat on it that I become assured that it does support me'.

Nor would he let her use the doctrine of predestination as a reason not to believe:

> If on examination you find that you are a subject of grace, you have every reason to conclude that you are elected. But if you have not the comfort of arriving at this conclusion, you have no reason to consider that you are among the nonelect. Your duty is to improve with diligence those means of grace and salvation in the use of which God is pleased to communicate the blessings of his love. You must look to him in the gospel, convinced that they that look shall be saved; you must seek him daily, in the confidence that he never bade any seek his face in vain.[37]

The fact that he would take the time to write to someone outside of his congregation, in the midst of all his other responsibilities, fits with his view of the ministry. In his charges to the young minister being ordained he reminded him,

> Your commission extends over the whole Church of Christ. The people over whom you are placed are certainly entitled to your most devoted exertions, your most earnest

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[32] Journal, 6 Oct. 1836.
[33] The sermon was published at the time and later included in William Symington, *Discourses on public occasions* (Glasgow, 1851), p.71-100.
[34] *Dumfries and Galloway Courier*, 21 June 1831.
[35] *Dumfries and Galloway Courier*, 29 May 1827.
[36] 'Memoir', l.
[37] Cited in 'Memoir', xlvi-xlvii

> prayers, your warmest attachment, but they have no right to monopolise your services…Wherever you meet with a human soul, there you have an object of your ministry; and if you can only be instrumental in guiding a soul into the path of duty, or the regions of bliss, you will count yourself happy, although for this end you may have had to step beyond the boundary of your pastoral charge or of your ecclesiastical connection.[38]

Nor was Symington just helping others because he had time on his hands. When a call to Glasgow came, his first reason for considering going was his 'painful consciousness of not being able to [keep up with] the duties of so large & scattered a congregation; embracing nine parishes and consisting of upwards of 400 members'.[39]

In fact, because of the nature of the RP Church at the time, he was also responsible for the remainders of the loose network of Covenanting societies throughout the region. These included people who were too geographically remote to regularly attend any of the current RP congregations. He began a regular yearly programme of visitation that took him away from home many days at a time, in all kinds of weather. Following one long period of illness he wrote to another minister:, 'My complaints I ascribe to cold and fatigue…the week before Presbytery I rode…through bogs and moors visiting in upper Leswalt, exposed to a keen east wind. The effects of this exertion I had not thrown off when I set off for Castle Douglas.[40]

The results of his visiting and preaching can be seen in new congregations established around this time in Whithorn, Gatehouse of Fleet, Kilbirnie, Sanquhar and Ettrick, along with four others in and around Dumfries.[41]

What does a minister do all week?

What made him so productive? His sons attribute it to his discipline. They say that in preaching, visiting, examining, travelling and holding classes for the young, 'he proceeded on a regular plan…which enabled him to get though a far greater amount of work that could have been accomplished by one less accustomed to act upon system'.[42] This is backed up by W. H. Goold, editor of John Owen's works, who was a Scottish RP, a son in the ministry, and a fellow theology professor. When he died, Goold said of Symington, 'The power and value of system was notably exemplified by our departed father. He owed most of his usefulness in life to what we may designate his peculiar love and faculty of order. His very study was the image of his thoughts - a place for everything, and everything in its place'. Goold went on to say that it was also what made Symington such a success when it came to the area of Systematic Theology.[43]

So what did Symington's 'system' look like? Monday was devoted to visiting, Tuesday to reading and visiting, Wednesday to theological study and church history, Thursday to the morning sermon and Friday to the afternoon sermon, or lecture. He then spent the Saturday committing the sermons to memory.

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[38] Symington, *Charges*, p.18.
[39] Journal, 6 October 1836.
[40] Cited in Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington', p.77. Castle Douglas was where the Presbytery was meeting.
[41] Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington', p.78.
[42] 'Memoir', xlii.
[43] *Reformed Presbyterian Magazine,* March 1862.

Blackwood says,

> The last three days of the week were occupied with the demands of the Services for that particular week, but even here there was a well-defined order in his sermon topics – often a sermon series covering some phase of theology – so that it might be said that at least three days of the week were devoted to a progressive study, an amassing of facts and knowledge relating to the system of divine truth and revelation. In 1821 he began a particular course of study embracing the entire system of theology and the book on Atonement was begun shortly thereafter.[44]

We can drill down even deeper into what each day looked like. In his first journal entry following his ordination, he writes:

> I am now settled in the place where God has appointed me to labour. I have professed to dedicate my all to his service – and that I may the better employ my time and talents to his glory I propose to myself the following plan, to which it shall be my study under grace as far as possible to adhere:
> - Rise at six – read a portion of the Scriptures both in the Old and the New Test. - pray - and apply to study till breakfast.
> - From 10 to 11 Meditate on divine things and pray for myself – congregation and intended partner in life.
> - From 11 till 2 apply myself to the study of Theology relieving it with the languages and Biblical Criticism…
> - From 2 to 3 receive visitors or make calls.
> - After dinner - read works not so immediately connected with Theology; history, newspapers, magazines &c.
> - After tea resume studies – or continue to read – or attend to any other concern as occasion may require or circumstances necessitate
> - Go early to bed if possible.
> The above plan shall be as closely kept as circumstances will permit till I see cause to change it. Perhaps Monday may claim exemptions from strict adherence on account of bodily languor and of necessary duty in visiting the sick. May grace be imparted without which I can never act up to the above plan.[45]

Blackwood comments, 'The unpredictable demands of pastoral work were allowed to break in upon this schedule, and the covenant itself was frequently changed; but to the end of his life it was not abandoned'.[46]

Symington charged McGill:

> Be much in your study and be busy while you are there; for you must know that a man may trifle in his closet as well as anywhere else. It is not the number of hours you are shut up that will tell, but the manner in which these hours are occupied. A man may gain for himself, by habits of seclusion, the name of a hard student, and yet have been all the while busying himself with "trifles light as air". You must dig deep, if you would be a workman that needs not to be ashamed…The very figures by which your office is described convey the idea of laborious exertion…a shepherd, a workman, a watchman, a

[44] Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington', p.61-62.
[45] Journal, 28 August 1819.
[46] Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington', p.57.

> nurse. Considering these things, you will not content yourself with a scanty stock of ideas to be turned over and over, with scarcely any perceptible variety; but you will, by habits of vigorous mental application, study to provide your hearers with a rich and varied repast. Boast not how easily you can prepare for the pulpit, in how short a time you can despatch your preparations, but let your preparations bear the stamp of thought.[47]

Symington practiced what he preached – he viewed the publication of his charges to McGill as a renewal of his own ordination vows ten years before.[48] And rather than contenting himself with a 'scanty stock of ideas', his journal records him keeping up his voracious reading throughout his ministry.

'A thousand sorrows teach a man to preach'

It would be wrong to think of Symington shut up in his study, untouched by the sort of worries that his congregation felt. Reference has already been made to the death of his youngest brother. During his twenty years in Stranraer, he also had financial worries. He may have been a published author and had the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow competing to confer an honorary doctorate on him, but he was on a tiny salary and struggled to make ends meet.

Seventeen years into his ministry, when he first received a call to Glasgow, one of the reasons that led him to consider accepting, was 'the extreme want of liberality in respect to money matters, and the not very handsome treatment I have received in regard to stipend, having been twice promised augmentation by the authorised agents of the congregation without ever having been fulfilled'. And although he calls it an inferior consideration, he also considered going to Glasgow for 'a better prospect of temporal support, for want of which I have felt painful embarrassments & have been unable to make some provision for my family'.[49]

The following year, after an outbreak of typhus which lasted for four months, he wrote in his journal,

> From the infections nature of the disease we were forsaken by those friends whose kind aid we had received in other times of distress. In this I cannot think that they acted right; for if others, on whom we had no such claim and who might have reckoned themselves exempted from the obligation to attend us, had stood also aloof, our whole family must have been left to perish.

His younger brother, Walter, died from the disease, and his eldest brother Andrew lost a son and daughter 'in the prime of youth' and then within a few weeks his wife and one newborn twin. William had gone to Paisley to attend the funeral and with the intention of staying on to preach for his brother, but 'tidings reached him that the scourge had entered his own manse'. He hastened home to find that three of his children had contracted the disease – soon he and the other three children were also infected, and 'the manse was turned into a hospital'.[50]

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[47] Symington, *Charges*, p.18-19.
[48] Symington, *Charges*, p.6.
[49] Journal, 6 October 1836.
[50] 'Memoir', lvii-lix. See also 'Scottish Typhus Epidemic of 1836-40' in George C. Kohn (ed.), *Encyclopedia of plague and pestilence* (3rd ed., New York; NY, 2008), p.345-6.

This only added to his financial burden.

> The expenses incurred during this sickness have been such as my ordinary income could never have enabled me to meet. Had it not been that I had some time of my own, and that the Lord had put it into the hearts of a few friends to aid us I must inevitably have been brought under a heavy load of debt. When all things are taken into account the expense incurred during these few memorable months of affliction cannot be much less than a hundred pounds. The congregation have not done their duty in this matter. But He whose are "the silver and the gold" will not leave us unprovided for. Indeed we have already seen much reason to remark his goodness in this matter. We must not forget that his name is Jehovah-Jireh.[51]

On his first Lord's Day back in the pulpit for over three months he preached on Lamentations 3:22 – 'It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not'.[52]

Against such a background, it is not surprising that at the conclusion of his charges to the young minister he exhorts the congregation to 'be conscientious in ministering to his temporal support'. He warned them not to take shelter under a hypocritical pretence of concern for their minister's spirituality and humility. He said that wealth will not, in itself, make a man proud, nor poverty make him humble. He reminded them that ministerial support is an ordinance of Christ and said that because of this, a wilful contempt of it may blast all the good that might otherwise be obtained from the ministry.[53]

He also warned the congregation that it would be possible for them to break their minister, solemnly warning them, 'You have even his physical life, in some sense, in your power. By condemning his authority, by disregarding his office, by slighting his instructions, by pursuing an ungodly course, you may sink his spirit, break his heart, and send him to an early grave'.[54] A prayer list written six years into his ministry included the 'troublesome' in his congregation as well as 'enemies, or such as act towards me in that character'.[55]

All Symington's other sorrows pale into insignificance, however, compared to what his sons describe as an 'overwhelming calamity' which affected him and his wife for the rest of their lives – the death of their fourth child, Robert, in the manse garden in August 1833.

Robert, who had just turned six, was playing with two of the older children when a stone pillar supporting a sun dial fell on him. He suffered an internal injury, and despite the efforts of three doctors, died within 36 hours.

There are a number of touching details associated with the tragic event. The boy's mother gently asked him a number of questions about his faith in Christ and hope for Heaven. Most of them were catechism questions he had undoubtedly learnt before.[56] Yet she couldn't help asking him a final question: 'Would you not be sorry to leave us all?' He responded by putting his arms around her neck and telling her not to cry because he was going to be with Jesus.

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[51] Journal, 2 April 1837.
[52] 'Memoir', lix.
[53] Symington, *Charges*, p.35-36.
[54] Ibid., p.36-37.
[55] Cited in 'Memoir', lv-lvi.
[56] Cf questions 2, 24 and 26 of *A short catechism for young children by the Rev. John Brown, late minister of the gospel at Haddington* (Edinburgh, n d. [originally published 1764]).

Thinking back to the event as a widow, nearly 30 years later, William's wife Agnes charged her youngest son never to forget a certain friend because of the love he had shown at the time. The sons redact part of his name in their memoir, but she was almost certainly talking about James McGill. McGill, a farmer's son from Portpatrick, had been part of the Stranraer congregation as a 13-year-old when Symington was ordained.

Agnes told to her youngest,

> You were an infant six weeks old when Robert died. Mr. M'Gill had baptized you, and was on his way home when the tidings overtook him. He turned his horse and came back on the Saturday evening (Robert had died in the morning) and preached on the Sabbath. I crept into the vestry with you at my breast, and heard him preach on "Jesus wept." Never forget Mr M'Gill as long as you live.[57]

The touching story relates to our theme not simply because McGill was the young man being ordained to whom Symington had delivered the charges four years, but because it also brings to mind John Piper's perceptive comment, 'I believe in homiletics. But not much. A thousand sorrows teaches a man to preach'.[58]

Wider ministry

Grief drove Symington to writing, both for himself and a wider audience. Among his papers was found a 16 page document called 'Memorial of a severe domestic bereavement', where every detail of the event is recorded – the names of friends who were present, the means used by the three surgeons, the prayers offered; and in which the special marks of God's hand are detailed, with the spiritual lessons he sought to learn. His sons say, 'There is reason to think that this memorial was read by him many times in later years'.[59]

The tragedy also led him to resume writing his first book-length publication, which he had started around a decade before. It was entitled *On the Atonement and Intercession of Jesus Christ* and was published in May 1834, less than a year after Robert's death.[60] It is hard to imagine a more appropriate topic to think about at such a time as Jesus praying for his people – when they can perhaps hardly pray for themselves.

The book was well received, and a second edition was published four months later. Within two years, the book had made its way across the Atlantic where it went through four editions by 1858.[61] By the middle of the century it had become one of the standard works in the field, and even as far away as southeast India, students for the ministry were being trained with it as a primary text.[62]

His second, and best-known book, *Messiah the Prince* – the classic work on the mediatorial kingship of Christ – was also written in Stranraer, and published in 1839.

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[57] 'Memoir', lvii-lviii
[58] https://twitter.com/johnpiper/status/479594761108860928, accessed 7 July 2020.
[59] 'Memoir', lvii.
[60] William Symington, *On the atonement and intercession of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh, 1834).
[61] Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington', p.227
[62] *Reformed Presbyterian Magazine*, March 1862; Blackwood and LeFebvre, *William Symington*, p.129

That book was written at a time when the doctrine of Christ's kingship over the church was becoming particularly relevant. Long running grievances in the national Church were coming to the boil, and would result in the Disruption of 1843, when one third of the ministers in the Church of Scotland left to form the Free Church.

While supportive of the Free Church, and present at the Disruption Assembly, when asked why he didn't join the Free Church himself, Symington famously quoted the exchange between the Apostle Paul and a Roman tribune in the book of Acts. The tribune says, 'With a great sum obtained I this freedom'. Paul replies: 'But I was free born'.[63]

By that time, Symington had moved from Stranraer to Glasgow. An earlier call from the West Campbell Street congregation in Glasgow had been blocked by Synod in 1836, Symington himself had refused their second call a year later, but in 1839 the Great Hamilton Street congregation in Glasgow called him, Synod eventually sustained it and he went. He wrote in his journal, 'It was not without much painful agitation of mind that I came to the decision to change the scene of my labours: but I felt called to make a sacrifice of my feelings to what appeared a clear call of duty. May the Lord order it so that it may be for the good of the church, and may he watch over my poor people at Stranraer!'[64]

And as we look back on his ministry in Stranraer, it gives us the opportunity to ask the question: what would Symington have regarded as ministry success? It does seem clear that he thought ministry success could be measured – at least to some extent. For example, his sons say in their memoir that he held a very decided opinion to the effect that only those who have had some success in preaching ought to train preachers.[65]

In his charges to McGill he tells him both to wish for success, but not to be over-confident of it:

> Be not over-sanguine of success. Work in a spirit of faith, rather than confident expectation…You must desire success with earnestness. No man can expect to be successful who does not wish that he may be so. But that is quite another thing from an over-sanguine expectation, which if indulged for a length of time without a corresponding result, is apt to give place to desponding hopelessness, if not to disgust…The ministry is a "work of faith". You are to know that, whether successful or not, in the ordinary meaning attached to that term, your labour shall not be in vain in the Lord.[66]

When considering moving to Glasgow, one of the reasons he has for staying is, 'The success which has in some measure attended my ministry'.[67] However as noted above, he also lamented that many seemed unchanged by his labours. Yet his negativity is perhaps a reminder that a minister is not best placed to judge either his success or failure, because the evidence suggests that a real revival of true religion took place during the time he was in Stranraer.

A city pulpit

After twenty years in Stranraer, Symington finally made the move to Glasgow. The building in Great Hamilton Street held 1000 people – but his evening sermons were so popular that the church

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[63] 'Memoir', lxxvii.
[64] Journal, 16 May 1839.
[65] 'Memoir', xci.
[66] Symington, *Charges*, p.22.
[67] Journal, 6 Oct. 1836.

couldn't hold everyone wanting to hear him, and so he began a third service in the afternoon. About a year after moving to Glasgow, he wrote in his journal, 'The crowd at evening lecture most overwhelming; many hurt in getting in: hundreds not able to find admission: house filled in five minutes after door opened'. That was for a series on Daniel, which lasted three years. He then spent three years preaching on Joseph, then five years on Revelation.

These 'lectures' were particularly aimed at young people, and one Glasgow newspaper noted, 'We are happy that his instructive course of lectures continues and the interest still increases. To the youth of our town they offer an excellent opportunity of acquiring a correct and concise system of religion and morals'.[68]

A more in-depth – and at points more critical – account of his preaching occurs in the book describing the nation's most prominent ministers – *Our Scottish Clergy*. We're told that on 28th February 1847, he appeared in the Great Hamilton Street pulpit at seven minutes past eleven. By a quarter past the greater part of his large congregation had assembled, but some continued to enter till the half hour. The writer was not impressed.

The service was commenced by singing four verses of a psalm, after which six verses of another psalm were read. It was expounded at considerable length – twenty minutes – and then sung. Two minutes before twelve, the eleventh and twelfth verses of Hebrews chapter six were read as the subject of the lecture.[69] The lecture was finished at five minutes to one – a 55-minute exposition – before the service was concluded by prayer, singing and the benediction. Symington began by setting the verses he was speaking on in the context, both of the chapter itself and of the immediately preceding verses. He spoke about the original meaning of the words and then cross-referenced the other places where Paul – who he assumed wrote Hebrews – talked about a similar subject. He then finished what the writer called 'his excellent lecture', with some points of application.

In the afternoon, the people had assembled by a quarter past two, with every pew full. After singing, a prayer of 'much fervour and very great length' was offered. A chapter was then read, and, after the second singing, Romans 13:14 was announced as the text: 'But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ'. Again, Symington began by setting the text in context, and then divided the subject into two parts. He said that he would first open up what was meant by putting on Christ, and then offer some remarks suggested by the text. Under his first main heading he listed five things that putting on Christ includes. Under his second heading he had four further sub-points, before concluding with a rebuke and an encouragement. Like the lecture, the sermon lasted 55 minutes.

The writer was not so pleased with the afternoon's offering however, criticising both Symington's outline and especially his illustrations. While some of the criticism does seems to be justified, one of the reviewer's problems seemed to be that Symington used everyday illustrations, which the critic felt left him in danger of merging the sublime with the ridiculous. He was concerned that the deep things of God can lose their magnificence by being illustrated in such lowly figures. He said later on that Symington's illustrations are not always lovely, but are at least tangible. He says, 'an occasional wish may be indulged, that the drapery in which they are adorned were a little more chaste and

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[68] Blackwood, 'Wm. Symington', p.130-1.

[69] The terminology reflects the older distinction between a lecture and a sermon, which was still present in the nineteenth century. The lecture tended to be something of a running commentary, or 'some few observations of the chief doctrines' on one of the two chapters that the Directory for Public Worship required to be read. Thomas Leishman (ed.), *The Westminster Directory* (Edinburgh, 1901), xxvi.

delicate, but the images themselves are unmistakeable' and help him show the relevance of divine truth[70].

Symington would likely have been unperturbed by such criticism. He had charged McGill years earlier:

> And, O my Brother, be plain. Be plain in matter – in language – in illustration. You are placed over a plain people who could not be edified by your indulging in metaphysical subtilties, recondite reasonings, ambiguous technicalities, or even high imaginative flights. You may remember the saying of Usher to his students, "What learning will be required to make these things plain!" Here is the legitimate use of learning in a minister of religion – not to mystify, but to simplify; not to impart a dazzling splendour or mysterious obscurity to his discourses, but to enable him to make all things plain.[71]

The reviewer noted that Symington had no notes for his lecture, and presumably not his sermon either. At that time, and for a long time afterwards, the idea of reading a sermon from a prepared manuscript was looked on with horror. The RPCS Testimony, written ten years before, said, 'Sermons ought to be delivered from recollection, after careful study, and in dependence upon the Holy Spirit'.[72] Using a manuscript was seen as a hindrance to what Symington's sons called 'full electric communication' with the hearers. Symington would write out his sermons and then reduce them to notes on a thin slip of paper, which he would go over and over again until he was familiar with them.[73]

As a counterpoint, it is worth noting the experience of another popular Scottish Reformed Presbyterian preacher, J. P. Struthers, who lived around half a century later. After 27 years of ministry he wrote, ''I read my sermon to-day for the first time in my life! I never had even a note in my Bible before. My people looked a bit astonished, and certainly some of them for the first time slept none'. He adds that some of them literally thought he was having a mental breakdown.[74]

Ministering like the master

What else did Symington value in preaching?

Coupled with plainness, he valued earnestness. He charged McGill, 'Be earnest, too, and affectionate. Show your people what you feel. In order to [do] this avoid a lifeless phraseology, a languid elocution, a torpid manner. Let your eye, your tones, your motions, all evince that you speak from the heart'. However, he warned against trying to fake it:

> As the best way to secure this, see that you do feel it. We have no wish you should counterfeit feelings to which your heart is a stranger. This would be to convert the pulpit into a stage, the preacher into an actor, the delivery of the message of Christ into an exhibition of well-studied mimicry.

He asked, 'Is there not enough in the nature of your work – in its connection with the glories of God and the eternal destinies of men – in the awful responsibility attached to it, to make you feel?'. He

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[70] Smith, *Our Scottish Clergy*, p.78-84.
[71] Symington, *Charges*, p.11-12.
[72] *Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland: historical and doctrinal* (Glasgow, 1866) p.225.
[73] 'Memoir', lxxiv-lxxv
[74] J. P. Struthers, *Windows in Heaven*, ed. A L. Struthers (London, n.d. [1926])

concluded, 'A melting tenderness of heart best becomes the servant of him who wept over Jerusalem'.[75]

Symington applied the same need for feeling to pastoral work. Taking the command to 'contend earnestly' he reminded younger men,

> The apostle Paul wasn't ashamed to speak of his tears. Jesus wept. A soft word or a moistened eye may do what no tone of authority, or weight of argument, or force of rhetoric can affect. Cherish then, for your flock, such a strong and hallowed attachment as might find appropriate expression in these words – 'My little children of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you'.[76]

For Symington preaching also had to be Christ-centred. He charged McGill, 'In preaching, give a conspicuous place to the doctrine of the cross. Let 'Christ crucified' be the theme, the charm of everything you say'. He went on, 'Let the atonement of Christ form, not so much one of the doctrines which you preach, as an essential ingredient in all'.

He also warned, 'Surely the preacher of the cross should never deliver a discourse, from which his auditors, were they never to hear another, might not easily gather a knowledge of the way of salvation'.[77]

Symington also urged McGill to tie individual truths into the bigger picture. He said, 'The gospel is a system – not a confused assemblage of disjointed facts and doctrines. It resembles a machine, the various parts of which, in order to their [usefulness], must be placed in a certain relation to one another; disconnected and out of order, they may be rendered not only worthless, but dangerous'.[78]

He also urged McGill not just to preach, but to pray:

> Pray much for your people. You are to be a man of prayer. Pray for them, not in public only, but in secret. Every effort to instruct – to govern – to inspect, must be preceded and followed by an application to the throne of grace. It is not to the strength of your reasoning, or the fervour of your eloquence, but to the blessing of heaven you must look for success. While then, you address the people on behalf of God, you will not neglect to address God on behalf of the people. Every seed that you scatter, water with your prayers and your tears.[79]

This emphasis on prayer was also stressed in one of the rules which his sons say he often pressed on students for the ministry: 'Begin every piece of study and composition with solemn prayer. If interrupted, on resuming the pen lift up your heart afresh'.

He reminded McGill that he must take heed to himself, as well as to the flock. He warned him, 'How contradictory a character is an ungodly minister – serving a Master he hates, preaching a gospel he does not believe, telling of a heaven from which he himself is to be shut out, and denouncing eternal judgements which are to fall in all their tremendous weight on his own head!'

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[75] Symington, *Charges*, p.12.
[76] Ibid., p.21.
[77] Ibid., p.10
[78] Ibid., p.9.
[79] Ibid., p.17-18.

He pointed out, 'You can scarcely look for others to believe you, if you thus show that you do not believe yourself. It will be to little purpose that you preach for Christ one day in the week if you live against him all the rest. A single base action, or unguarded word, or even a proud look may defeat the good of a whole sermon'.[80]

Symington's charges to McGill also included his participation in the courts of the church. He said, 'In church-courts be neither, on the one hand, a forward prater, always talking and often to little other purpose than the discovery of his ignorance; nor, on the other, be an incorrigible mute, whose obstinate taciturnity reduces his vote to a dead make-weight to the decision'. He also warned, 'Beware of becoming a party man. Shew at all times that you are acting conscientiously and from principle'.[81]

Symington concluded his charges to McGill with a reminder both of the difficulties of the gospel ministry and of the encouragements to it.

Firstly, the difficulties. 'Not the least of these is the inaptitude and aversion of the human mind to divine things' (speaking of those being ministered to). He reminded McGill,

> You have moral incapacity and wilful prejudices to contend with. You have to hold up the lamp of revealed truth before men who hate the light it diffuses. You have to speak of God, to men who have not God in all their thoughts…In short you have to minister to beings so naturally opposed to the object of your commission, so wedded to their corruptions, and so insensible to the charms of the state to which you would introduce them, that they could never be prevailed on to make the transition, unless, as in the case of Lot, a Power more than human were to lay upon them and bring them forth and set them without" the reach of danger'.

A second difficulty is that you 'have to meet with such a diversity of characters – the young and the old; the ignorant and the instructed; the learned and the illiterate, the careless and the awakened – in short with men of every natural temperament, of every degree of information, of every moral feature, of every state of spiritual progress. Rightly to divide the word of truth, and to give everyone his portion in due season must, in such a case, be no easy matter'.

A third difficulty is that 'much is expected and required of a minister. Some will be unreasonable enough to expect of you more than is compatible with fallen humanity. They will forget you are a man, and try you by the standard of angels'.

We must also add to these difficulties, he said,

> the deep and awful responsibility of the Christian minister. You watch for souls as one who must give an account. You are a steward – a servant to whom certain talents are entrusted which you are to "occupy till Christ come"…Think frequently of the day of final retribution; imagine yourself and your people standing at the bar of the Judge; and let the thought that, in that day, any one should bear witness to your unfaithfulness, be duly pondered'.[82]

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[80] Ibid., p.23.
[81] Ibid., p.14.
[82] Ibid., p.24-26.

However, Symington finished not with the difficulties, but with the encouragements. Although it is impossible to avoid the conclusion, 'who is sufficient for these things', he also encouraged McGill: 'be not altogether overwhelmed, my dear friend'.

He encouraged him by calling his attention to the glorious object which he was called to promote. There is nothing to be compared to it. 'It is to save lost souls, to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus, to rescue from horrors beyond description, to restore people to the image and favour of God for eternity. Who would not labour – who would not strive to accomplish such an object?'

The work too, is divine. 'Your office is an institution of God. You have been regularly called, and scripturally invested with it. This you may warrantably regard as a pledge of support and of success'.

On top of that, the materials the minister needs are provided.

> The doctrines you are to preach – the duties you are to enjoin - the government you are to exercise – the discipline you are to dispense, are all provided. Nay the very gifts and qualifications requisite for the service are provided. "All things are ready". You have only to gird on the armour and go forth to battle'.

In fact, more than that, 'The Spirit is promised to give you efficacy…You are not required to attempt anything without the aid of this almighty agent…Our sufficiency is of God'.

He finished by encouraging him with the 'distinguished reward of the faithful servant of Christ', saying 'even now you must feel a certain support in the consciousness of being embarked in the noblest human undertaking'. Symington told McGill that when he died, people would visit his grave and say with heartfelt sincerity 'O he was a man of God'.

He concluded: 'In heaven, the society of angels, the presence of God, the approbation of Christ, the sight of those who have been saved by your ministry will constitute a recompense 'the very prospect of which were enough to render you insensible to all the toils, to reconcile you to all the vexations of your office'.[83]

Symington himself entered into that reward thirty-three years later, after twenty years' ministry in Stranraer and twenty-three in Glasgow. His final journal entry, written two weeks before he died, reads, 'Still weak as ever'.[84]

James McGill, who had turned his horse around thirty years before following Robert's death, took his memorial service. He preached on Hebrews 11:4 'He being dead, yet speaketh'.[85] Through his writings that are in print today – and now again through those that are not – William Symington still speaks to gospel ministers.

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[83] Ibid., p.26-28.
[84] Journal, 14 February 1862.
[85] James M'Gill, *"He being dead, yet speaketh;" a sermon, delivered to the Reformed Presbyterian congregation, Great Hamilton Street, Glasgow, Feb 9, 1862, being the Sabbath after the funeral of their late senior pastor, the Rev. William Symington, D.D., Professor of Systematic Theology to the Reformed Presbyterian Church* (Glasgow, n.d. [1862]).

CALVIN THE SACRAMENTALIST

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Wolfgang Capito, Martin Bucer's colleague in Strasburg, wrote in a letter to a friend, 'Future generations will laugh at the pleasure our age takes in quarrelling when we raise such disturbance about the very signs that should unite us'[1]. Sadly, Capito's prophecy has become only too realised during the past five hundred or so years.

Before we begin to examine aspects of John Calvin's teaching on the sacraments,[2] it will be helpful first to make a few more general observations to orient our thinking.

General observations

First, Calvin developed his sacramental theology not in quiet, studied contemplation, but in the midst of 'battle', with Rome, with Luther and later Lutherans, and with the Reformation's left-wing. There is a self-conscious polemic running through all of Calvin's theology.

Second, Calvin's sacramental theology is located, not only within the larger context of the *Institutes*, but within the whole corpus of his writings on the true worship of God. Calvin's understanding of the sacraments cannot be separated from his wider concern to recover for the church true, as opposed to false, worship. For Calvin the sacraments belonged to the wider issue of the church's worship, and getting worship 'right' was imperative, if the church was to exist at all, and God be glorified.

Third, 'Sacramental theology,' as Mark Garcia reminds us, is a 'layered theology'[3], resting, as the 16th century attests, on certain Christological and soteriological premises. At the Marburg Colloquy (1529) the animating concern of Luther and Zwingli was rooted in their understanding of salvation, not the Supper in isolation. It is therefore vital that in reflecting on Calvin's teaching on the sacraments we keep in mind that sacramentology was, for Calvin, intimately linked to soteriology.

Fourth, it is essential that we appreciate the precise context into which and out of which Calvin developed his sacramental theology. For example, is he responding to Romanists, Lutherans, or Zwinglians?[4] This is simply to say that dogmatic theology can never be divorced from the particular history that gave it birth. This is not to confuse the sister loci of systematic and historical theology. It does however remind us that the explication of theology is never a-historical.

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1 Jon D. Payne, *John Owen on the Lord's Supper* (Banner of Truth, Edinburgh 2004), p.19.

2 For a full discussion of Calvin's teaching on the sacraments see Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Fortress Press, Minn., 1993). A brief but useful exposition of Calvin's teaching on the Lord's Supper is Robert Letham's, *The Lord's Supper* (P and R, New Jersey, 2001), p.31ff.

3 Mark Garcia, Unpublished PhD (Edinburgh, 2004), Chapter 4, *Sacraments, Salvation, and the Strata of Union with Christ: Patterns and Parallels in Calvin's Anti-Ubiquitarian Polemic*, p.132.

4 See Sinclair B. Ferguson, 'Calvin on the Lord's Supper' in *Serving the Word of God* (Mentor and Rutherford House, 2002), p.207f.

Fifth, Calvin never forgot that when he was writing to the 'Academy', he was ultimately writing for the church. Martin Bucer's conviction, that 'True theology is not theoretical, but practical. The end of it is living, that is to live a godly life' ('*Vera theologia non theoretica, sed practica est; Finis siquidem eius agere est hoc est vitam vivere deiformem*'), was emulated in Calvin's theological discourses. It would serve the church well if all theological teachers followed Calvin's example!

Sixthly, the intra-Reformed debates about the sacraments owed much to a failure to give 'destiny and contingency' their biblical balance in the explication of God's purposes in embracing helpless infants in his gracious covenant. 'It is impossible to deny,' writes Robert Rayburn, 'that God's covenant with his people, to be their God and the God of their children, as an instrument mediating salvation, has both destiny and contingency thoroughly woven through it.'[5] Too often it appears that our thinking about God's covenant is shaped more by the wreckage of covenant unbelief than the actual promises God made in cutting his covenant with his people.

Calvin's understanding of the sacraments and especially his understanding of the Lord's Supper has not always been well received by later Reformed theologians. Charles Hodge called his view of the Supper 'Peculiar', containing an 'uncongenial foreign element'[6]. Robert Dabney called it 'strange, incomprehensible, and impossible'. William Cunningham called it an 'unintelligible invention'. Van der Leeuw thinks Calvin's interpretation of the sacraments to be 'very complicated' and 'certainly not logical in structure[7]. Calvin himself regularly confessed that the meaning and significance of the Holy Supper left him struggling for words to convey its glory and grace. What we will see as we explore Calvin's understanding of the sacraments is his refusal to reduce the mysteries of the gospel to bare comprehensible statements. In *Institutes* 4.17.10, as he reflects on how believers can have living communion with the glorified God-Man; he wrote, 'What, then, our mind cannot comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space'. To some this may appear 'strange, incomprehensible, and impossible', but to Calvin it expressed the 'unembarrassed supernaturalism'[8] that lay at the heart of the Christian Faith. So, let us explore this 'unembarrassed supernaturalism' that is expressed in Calvin's understanding of the sacraments.

'Unembarrassed supernaturalism'

It has long been appreciated that Calvin's understanding of the relationship between the *signa* and the *res* was shaped and informed by the Chalcedonian Christological formula, *distinctio sed non separatio*. Christ was one Person, with two distinct but inseparable natures. This Conciliar axiom enabled Calvin to assert the distinction between 'reality' and 'sign', but a distinction that in no sense allowed for their separation. Rome's great error, in Calvin's eyes, was to deny the distinction and collapse the *signa* into the *res*. Calvin believed Luther also attributed to the *signa* that which was only true of the *res* when he taught the ubiquity of Christ's body. On the other side of the debate, Calvin was critical of Zwingli who (Calvin believed) had separated the signs and the realities they symbolised, giving the impression that the sacraments were merely, or bare, signs, and not truly means of grace.[9]

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[5] Robert S. Rayburn in *To You and Your Children*: *Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession*, edited by Benjamin K. Wikner (Canon Press, 2005).
[6] Charles Hodge, *The Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper* (1848), p.251-252.
[7] G.C.Berkouwer, *The Sacraments* (Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1969), p.17n.
[8] The phrase is Benjamin B. Warfield's.
[9] See Article 9 of the *Consensus Tigurinus*: 'The Signs and the Things Signified Not Disjoined but Distinct. Wherefore, though we distinguish, as we ought, between the signs and the things signified, yet we do not disjoin the reality from the signs, but acknowledge that all who in faith embrace the promises there offered receive Christ spiritually, with his spiritual gifts, while those who had long been made partakers of Christ continue and renew that communion'.

Brian Gerrish characterizes Calvin's view of the sacraments as 'symbolic instrumentalism', in contrast to Zwingli's 'symbolic memorialism' or Heinrich Bullinger's 'symbolic parallelism'[10]. When the Consensus Tigurinus (1549) was being formulated, Bullinger maintained that Calvin's commitment to speaking of the sacraments as instruments (*instrumenta*) of God's grace was to attribute more to the sacraments than was warranted by Scripture. Calvin disagreed, arguing that through the qualification of the signs through the Word, the sacraments acquired significance in the acts of God[11]. That is, they were only instruments of God's grace when explained by the Word, applied by the Spirit, and received in faith.

It is remarkable, even at a distance of nearly 500 years, to note how Calvin's desire for church unity overrode his deeply personal belief that the sacraments truly were means or 'instruments' of God's grace. Calvin desired to have his conviction that the sacraments were divinely ordained instruments for conferring grace (*sacramenta conferunt gratiam*) included in the Consensus Tigurinus. Bullinger, however, prevailed and the word *instrumentum* was not included in the text. To be fair, Calvin's view, if not his language, was included in the text.[12]

Diarmaid McCulloch remarks that the Consensus Tigurinus is 'a tribute to both Calvin's and Bullinger's common sense and ability to be gracious when circumstances cried out for it'.[13] Far from being the archetypal unbending, theological hard man, Calvin pursued the peace and unity of Christ's church with relentless zeal.

Sacramental language

In recent times there has been a renewed interest in Calvin's teaching on the sacraments. While this renewed interest is to be welcomed, it has often been marked by a less than nuanced appreciation of Calvin's sacramental language. This is seen in two related ways.

First, Calvin's use of 'excessively material'[14] language in his sacramental expositions has been a source of confusion and consternation to many evangelicals. It is undeniably true that Calvin uses 'excessively material' language. For example in *Institutes* 4.17.10, he tells us that 'Christ's flesh, separated from us by such a great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food'. Similarly in his Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:24-25, Calvin writes, 'our souls are nourished by the substance of the body, that we may truly be made one with him, or, what amounts to the same thing, that a life-giving virtue from Christ's flesh is poured into us by the Spirit, though it is at a great distance from us, and is not mixed with us'.[15]

Calvin's language, however, is no more material than that of Scripture. Our Lord Jesus' language in John 6:51-58 is dramatically material: 'unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life'.

See also Mark Garcia, *op. cit.,* p.143ff.

[10] Gerrish, *op. cit.*, 173.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] See Article 14. 'The Whole Accomplished by Christ': 'We conclude, then, that it is Christ alone who in truth baptizes inwardly, who in the Supper makes us partakers of himself, who, in short, fulfils what the sacraments figure, and uses their aid in such manner that the whole effect resides in his Spirit.'

[13] Diarmid McCulloch,

[14] The phrase is Sinclair B. Ferguson's in *The Holy Spirit* (IVP, Leicester, 1996), p.202.

[15] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Originally printed for the Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh; reprinted 1993 by Baker Book House Company), Vol.XX, 379

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 10:16, Paul writes, 'Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a *koinōnia* in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a *koinōnia* in the body of Christ?' Of course, the question, But what does Calvin 'mean' by this material language, remains. This we will consider below.

Second, Calvin's apparently contradictory language has also been a source of difficulty for exegeting his precise understanding of the sacraments. He seems, at times, to speak of the sacraments as 'mere signs' and at other times to suggest they confer grace (*sacramenta conferunt gratiam*)[16]. To think this, however, would be seriously to misunderstand Calvin. The Genevan Reformer is absolutely clear that the sacraments do not ever work *ex opere operato*. Rather they are 'signs and seals' and alone bring benefit to faith.

In his Commentary on John 1:26, Calvin explains the methodology he employed when explaining the sacraments:

> There is a twofold way of speaking in Scripture about the sacraments (*Duplex est in Scriptura de sacramentis loquendi modus*); for sometimes it tells us that they are the laver of regeneration, (Titus iii.5;) that by them our sins are washed away, (1 Peter iii.21;) that we are ingrafted into the body of Christ, that our old man is crucified, and that we rise again to newness of life.[17]

The same point is made at fuller length in his Commentary on Galatians 3:27:

> it is customary for Paul to speak of the sacraments in a twofold way (*Respondeo Paulum de sacramentis bifariam solere loqui*). When he is dealing with hypocrites who boast in the bare sign, he proclaims the emptiness and worthlessness of the outward sign, and strongly attacks their foolish confidence…When, however, he addresses believers, who use the signs properly, he then connects them with the truth which they figure. Why? Because he makes no boast of any false splendour in the sacraments, but what the outward ceremony figures he exhibits in fact. Thus, in agreement with the divine appointment, the truth becomes joined to the signs.[18]

This adroit, even evangelistic approach ('becoming all things to all men that he might by all means save some'!), alerts us to the care that is needed in exegeting Calvin. That is to say, we must always appreciate the particular historical and polemical circumstances into which he is writing.

Because the literature surrounding this subject is literally vast, this essay is restricted substantially to Calvin's mature exposition of the sacraments in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* and to the relevant sections in his *Commentaries*. The polemical treatises and the letters must, of course, also be investigated to give the whole picture of Calvin's teaching, but the *Institutes* gather together Calvin's

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[16] See G.C.Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, p.17, n.9.

[17] John Calvin, *Commentary on The Gospel According to John 1-10*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1959), p.31. See the fine chapter by James J. Cassidy, 'Calvin on Baptism: Baptismal Regeneration or the Duplex Loquendi Modus?', in *Resurrection & Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin Jr.*, edited by Lane G. Tipton & Jeffrey C. Waddington, (P and R, Phillipsburg, 2007), p.534-554.

[18] John Calvin, *Commentary on The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians* (St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1965), p.68.

mature and considered reflections and present us with a coherent exposition of his sacramental theology.

Definition of a sacrament

In a section largely dependent on Augustine, Calvin called the sacraments 'another aid to our faith related to the preaching of the gospel' (*Institutes* 4.14.1). He gives this definition:

> It seems to me that a simple and proper definition would be to say that it [a sacrament] is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men (*Institutes* 4.14.1).

There are at least four points made here:

First, a sacrament is 'an outward sign', a 'visible word'**,** 'a visible form of an invisible grace' (quoting Augustine). Calvin is quick to tell us that it is the preaching of God's Word alone that makes us 'understand what the visible sign means' (*Institutes* 4.14.4). He again quotes Augustine: 'Let the word be added to the element and it will become a sacrament' (*Institutes* 4.14.4). The sacraments can never be substitutes for the Word of the gospel. Rather,

> when we hear the sacramental word mentioned, let us understand the promise, proclaimed in a clear voice by the minister, to lead the people by the hand wherever the sign tends and directs us (*Institutes* 4.14.4).

The question might now be raised: But why did God give his church a 'visible word' in addition to his 'audible word'? Is his Word not sufficient to accomplish in us his saving and sanctifying purpose? Calvin anticipated this question in *Institutes* 4.14.5:

> We either know, they say, or do not know that the word of God which precedes the sacrament is the true will of God. If we know it, we learn nothing new from the sacrament, which comes after. If we do not know it, the sacrament (whose whole force rests in the word) also will not teach it.

In his response, Calvin acknowledged the absolute trustworthiness of the Word of God, but he also rejected the conclusion that the sacraments are superfluous.[19] In Hebrews 6:13ff we read of God's promise to Abraham, a promise that he confirmed with an 'oath'. There is no mention here, of course, of the sacraments, but the principle shines brightly, i.e. the 'addition' of an oath did not in any sense presuppose the untrustworthiness of God's word of promise, rather the opposite! God is 'accommodating' Abraham and added an oath to end all contradiction. Similarly, the sacraments, Calvin argued, have been given, not as unnecessary appendages, but to 'make **us** more certain of the trustworthiness of God's word' (*Institutes* 4.14.6 – *my emphasis*).[20]

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[19] See G.C.Berkouwer, *op cit*, 50ff

[20]. G.C.Berkouwer: 'The purpose of the sacrament is the assurance of salvation, stability rather than instability, proof against doubt, a song of praise about the trustworthiness of God in contrast with the mendacity of man's heart, and a guarded inheritance in the midst of the dangers of this unstable life. Those who do not understand the ways of God because they gaze at the outward sign, live only in their own wisdom. But those who follow his way will learn

Calvin maintained that in the sacraments God 'attests his good will and love towards us more expressly (*my emphasis*) than by the word' (*Institutes* 4.14.6). He used this illustration to make his point: the sacraments, he said, are 'pillars of our faith', and, when added to the Word, give faith a firmer foundation on which to rest (*Institutes* 4.14.6). Do these comments rightly reveal the relationship between Word and sacrament? It may be asked in the light of this statement whether Calvin is suggesting that the visible word is 'a more expressive revelation than the Word'?[21] His words could be interpreted so. The relationship between Word and sacrament, however, should never be conceived of in terms of the sacrament being more meaningful or expressive than the Word. Rather, the relation between Word and sacrament must be seen in the light of the sacraments giving us a clearer or better understanding of the gospel. The sacraments contain nothing that could in any way suggest that God's Word is lacking in its clarity or trustworthiness. As Berkouwer put it,

> The addition of the sacrament is not a critique of the mode of God's spoken revelation, but a critique of man's insensitive, unreceptive, resisting and contradicting heart.[22]

It may be, however, that Calvin is saying no more than what Robert Bruce meant in his famous 1589 sermons in St Giles in Edinburgh:

> Why then is the sacrament appointed? Not that you may get any new thing, but that you may get the same thing better than you had it in the Word. The sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word….That Christ may have more room in which to reside in our narrow hearts than He could have by the hearing of the simple Word, and that we may possess him more fully, is a better thing. The sacraments…serve to seal up and confirm the truth that is in the Word…Although you believed the evidence before, yet by the seals, you believe it better…for the more the outward senses are awakened, the more is the inward heart and mind persuaded to believe. Now the Sacrament awakens all the outward senses, such as the eye, the hand, and all the rest. When the outward senses are moved, without doubt the Holy Spirit concurs, moving the heart all the more…The Word is appointed to work belief, and the Sacrament is appointed to confirm you in this belief…[23]

Second, by means of the sacraments, 'the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us'. A 'sacrament is never without a preceding promise', Calvin wrote, 'but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it' (*Institutes* 4.14.3). It is not that God's Word needs to be confirmed; but that we need our faith to be strengthened. The sacraments are testimonies of the grace of God and 'are like seals of the good will that [God] feels toward us, which by attesting that good will to us, sustain, nourish, confirm and increase our faith' (*Institutes* 4.14.7).

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increasingly that God uses these pledges of his mercy in the weakness of our faith' (*ibid.*, p.156-157). Calvin would have given a hearty, "amen"!

[21] *Ibid.*, p.52.

[22] *Ibid.*, p.53.

[23] Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, ed. T.F.Torrance (Edinburgh, 1958), p.64-65.

In Calvin's recently translated sermons on Acts 1-7[24], he made an extended and vivid comment on the function of the sacrament as a 'seal':

> whoever wishes to withdraw from the sacrament and be content only with the word will be like a man who has a letter with a seal and wishes to break the seal and throw it into the fire, being content only with the Scriptures. Yet we know it is the seal that gives the letter its authority. Such is the Lord's Supper. It acts as a seal of God's promise so that we may be strengthened. Consequently, when we do not show the Supper its proper respect, what honour will we give the word? [25]

The designation of the sacraments as 'seals' is rooted in Romans 4:11, where Paul wrote of Abraham, 'He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised'. The idea of 'seal' and 'sealing' is used widely in the NT e.g. 1 Corinthians 9:2; John 6:27; 2 Corinthians 11-22; Ephesians 1:13-14; Revelation 7:22ff. The word *sphragis* ('seal') has the main idea of establishing trustworthiness. But how are we to understand the sacrament as a seal? It has often been suggested that the way forward is to distinguish sign from seal. So, while everyone who receives the sacrament receives it as a sign of Christ's body and blood, only believers receive it as a seal of his body and blood, confirming to God's elect his covenant promises to them in Christ. It is absolutely true, as Calvin never tires of telling us, that the sacraments are useless and utterly ineffective to those who receive then apart from faith and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. However, as G.C.Berkouwer argues, 'The distinction between sacramental sign and the truth of the sacrament is quite different from the distinction between sign and seal'[26].

It may seem helpful, even obvious, to distinguish sign and seal. Believers receive the 'sign and the seal', but unbelievers only the 'sign'. But this is not what Romans 4:11 teaches. Sign and seal cannot be separated. Indeed we might more accurately speak of a 'sealing sign'. Unbelievers clearly do not receive Jesus Christ, the truth of the sacrament. This does not mean, however, that they do not receive the sacrament as sign and seal. 'Both the sign and the seal,' writes G.C.Berkouwer, 'in the one act of God in the sacrament have bearing on the word of promise; that, then, which is abandoned with respect to the seal, cannot be retained with respect to the sign'.[27] Just as the ministry of God's Word is 'the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life' (2 Corinthians 2:15-16), so the sacraments operate with the same double-edged spiritual dynamic. God's covenant promise is sealed to believers and his covenant curse is sealed to unbelievers. This surely is the ecclesial background to Hebrews 10:26-31. There the writer speaks of a professing Christian who has 'profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has outraged the Spirit of grace'. Such a person was numbered among God's people (cf. v30, 'his people'), but was actually apostate. He possessed the signs and seals of the covenant, but not the Christ who is the substance of the covenant.

In this connection, Calvin made this perceptive comment in his Commentary on Ezekiel 20:20:

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[24] Translated from the Sermons on the *Acts of the Apostles*, ed. By Willem Balke and Wilhelmus H.Th.Moehn, *Supplementa Calviniana*, volume 8; (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1994); first Banner of Truth edition, 2008; trans. Rob Roy McGregor, (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2008), p.64.
[25] *Ibid.,* on Acts 2:42, p.64.
[26] Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, p.145-146.
[27] *Ibid.,* 146.

> Man's unworthiness does not detract anything from them [the sacraments], for they always retain their nature. Baptism is the laver of regeneration, although the whole world should be incredulous: (Tit.iii.5:) the Supper of Christ is the communication of his body and blood, (1Cor.X.16,) although there were not a spark of faith in the world: but we do not perceive the grace which is offered to us; and although spiritual things always remain the same, yet we do not obtain their effect, nor perceive their value, unless we are cautious that our want of faith should not profane what God has consecrated to our salvation[28].

Third, the Lord gives us his sacraments 'to sustain the weakness of our faith'. The sacraments are divine accommodations to our sinful weakness. In a wonderfully vivid and beautifully written passage, Calvin declared:

> But as our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped up on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and at least gives way. Here our merciful Lord, according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings (*Institutes* 4.14.3).

While this is no doubt true, it is surely no less true that the sacraments are also adapted to our humanity per se. Calvin himself seems to acknowledge this. Quoting Chrysostom, he recognised that it is 'because we have souls engrafted in bodies (that) he imparts spiritual things under visible ones' (*Institutes* 4.14.3). This suggests that the sacraments are not merely gracious 'accommodations' to our sinful capacities; more properly, perhaps, they are gracious accommodations to our intrinsic humanity. In the Garden, the Lord gave Adam a tree to confirm and make visible to him his promise (and threat).

It is therefore understandable why Calvin desired to celebrate the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day. The question may indeed be asked: If the sacraments are aids to faith and confirm the promise, why should the preaching of the Word in the worship services of the church not always have them attached to it, to confirm and support our 'tottering faith'?

Fourth, in response to his grace to us in the sacraments, 'we in turn attest our piety toward him'. 'Piety' (*pietas*) is a significant and favourite word for Calvin. He wrote in *Institutes* 1.2.1, 'I call "piety" that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces'. Calvin is always jealous to maintain the gracious character of the sacraments in the life of the church. Piety is rooted in the prior acts and actions of God and is the first and proper response to them. (My minister in Edinburgh while I was studying theology at New College, James Philip, would always say at a baptism, 'Today we affirm again the priority of grace over faith.').

The primary, even principial, reality in the sacraments, lies, not in my receiving, but in the Lord's giving. He stoops down to us to assure us of his 'good will' and to seal that assurance to our believing consciences. It is in this sense alone that the sacraments can be spoken of as 'means of grace'. They are only means of grace as the Holy Spirit uses them to convey his spiritual work. The

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[28] *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel by John Calvin* (Originally printed for the Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh; reprinted 1993 by Baker Book House Company), Vol.XII, p.312.

same thing is true, of course, of preaching and the reading of Scripture. They are not means of grace per se. The Word has no infused power of itself to effect regeneration or accomplish any spiritual good. As Herman Bavinck reminded us,

> Without the agency of the Holy Spirit it (the word) functions as an external call; only with the agency of the Holy Spirit does it function as the internal call and therefore in a saving way.[29]

Like Calvin, we must take great care in speaking of the sacraments, or preaching for that matter, as 'means of grace'. They have no inherent power to convey grace (cf. 1 Thessalonians1:5).[30]

Christ the Substance of the Sacraments:

If we were to isolate one thought that dominates Calvin's understanding of the sacraments it would surely be this: 'Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance (*substantia*) of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him' (*Institutes* 4.14.16)[31]. Calvin has a 'Christo-dynamic' understanding of the sacraments.[32] Ultimately they exist to lift up Christ and to give the people of God a surer grasp of, and deeper communion with, him.

A key word for Calvin in this regard is *exhibere*. The sacraments 'exhibit' Christ to his church. They picture in graphic detail to our senses the grace and glory of the Saviour. 'The sacraments,' he wrote in *Institutes* 4.14.5, '...have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent (God's promises) for us as painted in a picture from life'. The sacraments picture Christ, point to Christ, and through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit lead us to Christ. It is Christ, by his Spirit, who strengthens our 'tottering faith' by communicating himself to us through the *instrumentum* of the sacraments.

The question then necessarily arises: 'But how do believers feed on Christ and have their faith nourished by Christ in the sacraments?'

Feeding on Christ's Flesh and Blood: The Mystery and the Reality

Calvin is adamant that

> …the sacraments properly fulfil their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher [*interior ille magister* cf. *Institutes* 3.1.4, where he speaks of Christ as *Christus ipse interior magister*] comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in. If the Spirit be

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[29] Herman Bavinck, *Saved By Grace: The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration* (Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, 2008), p.liii.

[30] See Article 13 of the *Consensus Tigurinus*: 'God Uses the Instrument, but All the Virtue Is His': 'Wherefore, as Paul reminds us, that neither he that planteth nor he that watereth is any thing, but God alone that giveth the increase; so also it is to be said of the sacraments that they are nothing, because they will profit nothing, unless God in all things make them effectual. They are indeed instruments by which God acts efficaciously when he pleases, yet so that the whole work of our salvation must be ascribed to him alone.'

[31] See also 'Jesus Christ is the Substance of the Sacraments' in 'Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ' in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters* (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2009), p.167f.

[32] See S.B.Ferguson, 'Calvin on the Lord's Supper' in *Serving the Word* eds. David Wright and David Stay (Christian Focus, Fearn, 2002), p.206.

> lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendour of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears (*Institutes* 4.14.9).

The ministry of the sacraments to us is 'empty and trifling, apart from the action of the Spirit' (*Institutes* 4.14.9). 'The sacraments profit not a whit without the power of the Holy Spirit' (*Institutes* 4.14.9). The same, of course, holds for the ministry of the Word!

But what does the Holy Spirit actually do for believers in the sacraments? How do believers feed on Christ in the Supper by the ministry of the Spirit?

Calvin acknowledged that it is impossible to

> reduce to words so great a mystery, which I see that I do not even sufficiently comprehend with my mind…And although my mind can think beyond what my tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the greatness of the thing. Therefore, nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue to express (*Institutes* 4.17.7).

In his Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:24 Calvin anticipates the question that continues to dominate discussions of his teaching to the present time: 'There now remains one difficulty – how is it possible that his body, which is in heaven, is given to us here upon earth?'[33] As Calvin seeks to explain himself, what he does not mean is easier to grasp than what he does mean.

One passage in particular in the *Institutes* takes us to the heart of Calvin's understanding of the 'dynamic' of the Lord's Supper. He writes in 4.17.10,

> To summarise: our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ in the same way that bread and wine keep and sustain physical life...Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind cannot comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.

Calvin in no sense meant that we 'carnally' feed on Christ.[34] For Calvin 'real' presence meant 'true' presence (though he freely conceded that he cannot put in words quite what that means). He is clear, however, that the Christ we feed upon is the glorified, theanthropic Christ, the only Jesus Christ there is, and we do this 'by the secret power of the Holy Spirit'. Again, in his *True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, In Order to Dissipate the Mists of Tileman Heshusius*, Calvin affirms, 'I ingenuously and readily declare that by the incomprehensible agency of the Spirit, spiritual life is infused into us from the substance of the flesh of Christ.[35]

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[33] *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol.XX, p.379.

[34] In his Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:24-25, Calvin writes, 'I conclude, that Christ's body is *really*, (as the common expression is,) – that is, *truly* given to us in the Supper, to be wholesome food for our souls. I use the common form of expression, but my meaning is, that our souls are nourished by the substance of the body, that we may truly be made one with him, or, what amounts to the same thing, that a life-giving virtue from Christ's flesh is poured into us by the Spirit, though it is at a great distance from us, and is not mixed with us'.

[35] 'Clear Explanation Of Sound Doctrine Concerning The Partaking Of The Flesh And Blood Of Christ In The Holy Supper, In Order To Dissipate The Mists Of Tileman Heshusius', in *Treatises On The Sacraments* (Christian Focus Publication, Fearn, 2002), p.502.

How the Spirit feeds us with the *virtus* of Christ's glorified humanity is, however, beyond Calvin; but he does not doubt that he does so. Indeed, Calvin is more than willing to accept different formulations or explanations, so long as they tell believers that what they receive 'under the sacred symbols of the Supper...(is) the thing itself [my emphasis] as nourishment of eternal life' (*Institutes* 4.17.19).

Basic to Calvin's understanding of the Supper is his conviction that Christ is seated at the Father's right hand in his glorified but still true humanity. His body is not ubiquitous. If it were, it would be no true body and our salvation would lie in ruins. To Calvin it is therefore self-evident, and certainly biblical, that Christ does not come down to us in the bread and wine, and somehow transfuse his glorified humanity into them. On the contrary, we are lifted up to him by 'the secret working of the Spirit' (*Institutes* 4.17.31). The Spirit, whom Calvin conceived as the 'bond' or *vinculum*, who unites the believer with the person of the glorified God-Man, is the connection between the signs of water, bread and wine, Christ, and the elect who receive the elements.

Calvin again and again feels the constraint to explain himself:

> Now, if anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it ['Better felt than telt']. Therefore, I here embrace without controversy the truth of God in which I may safely rest. He declares his flesh the food of my soul, his blood its drink (John 6:53ff). I offer my soul to him to be fed with such food. In his Sacred Supper he bids me take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them and that I receive them (*Institutes* 4.17.32).

These quotes take us to the heart, not only of Calvin's understanding of the Supper, but his understanding of the gospel[36]. For Calvin it is only too understandable that we cannot fathom how 'the Spirit truly unites things separated in space'. He wrote, 'For as Christ's whole Kingdom is spiritual, whatever he does with his church must not be subjected to the reason of this world' (*Institutes* 4.17.32). In the sacraments we are dealing with holy and heavenly mysteries that transcend human capacities. This is why he tells us that he 'feels' the power and grace of the sacraments more than he understands them.

Calvin is not telling us that in some way we partake 'carnally' of Christ's glorified body in the Supper[37]. Rather he is telling us that the only Jesus Christ there is, is the *logos ensarkos*, the 'enfleshed word'. Therefore, the only Jesus Christ we communicate with and receive life from, in and through the Spirit is the *logos ensarkos*, who can never be separated from his benefits. So, Calvin wrote,

> if we are lifted up to heaven with our eyes and minds, to seek Christ there in the glory of his Kingdom, as the symbols invite us to him in his wholeness, so under the symbol of

[36] In perhaps the most widely quoted words from the *Institutes,* Calvin writes, 'First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us' (3.1.1)

[37] See *Institutes* 4.17.33: 'They falsely boast that all we teach of spiritual eating is contrary, as they say, to true and real eating, seeing that we pay attention only to the manner, which with them is carnal, while they enclose Christ in the bread. For us the manner is spiritual because the secret power of the Spirit is the bond of our union with Christ'. For Calvin, 'real' eating of Christ is necessarily 'spiritual'.

> bread we shall be fed by his body, under the symbol of wine we shall separately drink his blood, to enjoy him at last in his wholeness...In short, he feeds his people with his own body, the communion of which he bestows upon them by the power of his Spirit. In this manner the body and blood of Christ are shown to us in the sacrament (*Institutes* 4.17.18).

How the Spirit does this by his power is for Calvin an impenetrable mystery – except that he does so, not automatically, but to men and women of faith.

The Sacraments and Faith

It is absolutely fundamental to Calvin that the sacraments offer and confer nothing more than is offered and conferred by God's Word:

> any man is deceived who thinks anything more is conferred upon him through the sacraments than what is offered by God's Word and received by him in true faith (*Institutes* 4.14.14).

For Calvin, the absence of faith, which in itself signals the absence of the Holy Spirit, ensures that the sacraments do not bring an iota of benefit to the unbelieving receiver:

> For whence comes this great power of water that in touching the body it should cleanse the heart, unless the word makes it? Not because it is said, but because it is believed (*Institutes* 4.14.4).

Similarly he writes in *Institutes* 4.14.17 'the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace. But they avail and profit nothing unless received in faith'. In *Institutes* 4.17.33 Calvin states, 'I hold that men bear away from this Sacrament no more than they gather with the vessel of faith.'

The error of a magical conception of the sacraments, the teaching that the sacraments benefit us *ex opere operato* (though Roman theologians added the proviso, 'provided we do not set up a barrier of mortal sin'), is denounced by Calvin as 'deadly and pestilential…diabolical (*Institutes* 4.14.14). 'But what is a sacrament received apart from faith,' he wrote, 'but the most certain ruin of the church?' (*Institutes* 4.14.14). Calvin developed this point in relation to assurance of salvation:

> assurance of salvation does not depend upon participation in the sacrament, as if justification consisted in it. We know that justification is lodged in Christ alone, and that it is communicated to us no less by the preaching of the gospel than by the seal of the sacrament, and without the latter can stand unimpaired (*Institutes* 4.14.14).

Calvin further quoted Augustine to establish his argument:

> In the elect alone the sacraments effect what they represent…Why is it that many receive from the altar and die, and die in receiving? For the Lord's morsel was poison to Judas, not because he received evil, but because an evil man evilly received a good thing,

quoting Augustine on Psalm 77:2 and John's Gospel (see *Institutes* 4.14.15).

This does not mean, however, that the sacraments are robbed of their intrinsic meaning when given to unbelievers:

> Man's unworthiness does not rob the sacraments of their significance. Baptism remains the bath of regeneration even though the whole world was faithless; the Lord's Supper remains the distribution of Christ's body and blood, even though there was not the slightest sparkle of belief left.[38]

Calvin was jealous to maintain the objective reality of the sacraments. In his Commentary on Galatians 3:27, he wrote:

> If anyone asks whether it is possible that, through the fault of men, the sacrament can cease to be what it figures, the reply is easy. Though wicked men may feel no effect, nothing is detracted for the sacraments and they still retain their nature and power. The sacraments present the grace of God both to the good and to the bad; nor do they deceive in promising the grace of the Holy Spirit; believers receive what is offered. By rejecting it, the ungodly render the offer unprofitable to themselves, but they cannot destroy the faithfulness of God and the true meaning of the sacrament.[39]

Calvin went so far as to say 'that the flesh and blood of Christ are no less truly given to the unworthy than to God's elect believers'. This startling statement, at least in modern evangelical ears, is, however, immediately followed by,

> At the same time, it is true, however, that, just as rain falling upon a hard rock flows off because no entrance opens into the stone, the wicked by their hardness so repel God's grace that it does not reach them. Besides, to say that Christ may be received without faith is as inappropriate as to say that a seed may germinate in fire (*Institutes* 4.17.33).

It is vital to Calvin, however, that the grace portrayed in the sacraments is not thought to be undone by the unbelief of the wicked (cf. *Institutes* 4.17.34). The sacrament never loses its objective, God-given reality; but it benefits no-one, except they have faith in Christ.

What, then, are the benefits that believers receive from the sacraments?

In his *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1540), Calvin identified three 'blessings and benefits' that true believers receive when partaking of the bread and wine.

First, we feed on Jesus Christ, who is himself the 'substance of the sacraments':[40] 'For seeing we have him,' Calvin writes, 'all the riches of God which are comprehended in him are exhibited to us, in order that they may be ours'.[41]

Second, the Supper 'admonishes and incites us more strongly to recognise the blessings which we have received, and daily receive form the Lord Jesus, in order that we may ascribe to him the praise which is due'.[42]

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[38] Commentary on Ezekiel 20:20.
[39] John Calvin, *Commentaries on Galatians, etc, op. cit.*, p.68-69.
[40] *Op. cit.*, p.169.
[41] *Op. cit.*, p.173.
[42] *Ibid.*

Third, the Supper gives us 'a most powerful incitement to live holily, and especially to observe charity and brotherly love toward all'.[43] Calvin's point is not that the external sign merely 'inflames our hearts', but that the Lord works in us 'inwardly by his Holy Spirit, in order to give efficacy to his ordinance, which he has destined for that purpose, as an instrument (*instrumentum*) by which he wishes to do his work in us'.[44]

If these three blessings and benefits were held before the church by its pastors, the church would be deeply enriched. In the sacraments we are being reminded, among much else, that Jesus Christ is the sum and substance of all that the Father gives to his children. Samuel Rutherford was only too right when he said that for every one 'look' we make to ourselves, we should make ten 'looks' to our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is Calvin's awareness of the *mysterium tremendum* that lies, not merely in the sacraments, but at the heart of the Christian faith, that captures his understanding of and teaching of the sacraments.[45] There are inexplicable profundities in God's revelation of himself and his gospel, and we encounter those inexplicable profundities in the gift of the sacraments. This is but one reason why the *Institutes* have continued to appeal to the church. It is not a desiccated textbook of Reformed theology. Rather, it is a masterful exposition of the mystery of the Godhead. The 'air' you breathe when reading the *Institutes*, is the co-mingled air of theological profundity and exegetical reverence. It leaves us saying, 'O the depth...' (Romans 11:33-36)!

If there are inconsistencies or even apparent contradictions in Calvin's sacramental theology, it is not hard to understand why. He is always deeply conscious that his mind cannot plumb the depth of the sacramental, indeed of the gospel, mystery.

G. C. Berkouwer sums up the purpose of God in giving sacraments to his church:

> The purpose of the sacrament is the assurance of salvation, stability rather than instability, proof against doubt, a song of praise about the trustworthiness of God in contrast with the mendacity of man's heart, and a guarded inheritance in the midst of the dangers of this unstable life. Those who do not understand the ways of God because they gaze at the outward sign, live only in their own wisdom. But those who follow his way will learn increasingly that God uses these pledges of his mercy in the weakness of our faith[46].

Calvin would have given a hearty 'amen'!

We will give Calvin the last word:

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[43] *Op. cit*., p.173-174.
[44] *Op. cit.*, 174.
[45] He writes to Tileman Heshusius, 'Christ is neither a painter, nor a player, nor a kind of Archimedes, who presents an empty image to amuse the eye, but he truly and in reality performs what he promises by an external symbol. Hence I conclude that the bread which we break is truly the communion of the body of Christ. But as this connection of Christ with his members depends on his incomprehensible energy, I am not ashamed to admire this mystery which I feel and acknowledge to transcend the reach of my mind', in *Tracts and Treatises*, p.507-508.
[46] Berkouwer, *op. cit.,* p.156-157.

> Do not doubt that the Lord accomplishes what his words intimate – that the body, which thou dost not at all behold, is given to thee, as a spiritual repast. It seems incredible, that we should be nourished by Christ's flesh, which is at so great a distance from us. Let us bear in mind, that it is a secret and wonderful work of the Holy Spirit, which it were criminal to measure by the standard of our understanding...Allow him to remain in his heavenly glory, and aspire thou hither, that he may communicate himself to thee...As for the curious, I would have them look somewhere else for the means of satisfying their appetite.[47]

[47] *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol.XX, p.380-381.

BOOK REVIEWS

Reenchanting Humanity. A Theology of Mankind, Owen Strachan, Mentor, 2019, hbk., 418 pages, £31.99.

At first sight the concept of 'reenchanting' may seem a strange one in a book dealing with the biblical understanding on mankind. In his 'Introduction' Strachan, associate professor of Christian Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri, offers an explanation. Borrowing the term 'enchantment' from Charles Taylor's influential 2007 work *A Secular Age*, Strachan applies it to his understanding of the biblical doctrine of humanity. He argues that, flowing from the contemporary belief that people are 'the chance result of impersonal chaos working its dark magic on the universe' (p1), God is removed entirely from the picture and humanity is 'disenchanted'. This Strachan sums up as the idea that, 'We are not made by God, we have no greater purpose in life, spirituality is just mystic make-believe for the emotively oriented, children are a burden, and on the desultory creed goes' (p2). Humanity requires to be 'reenchanted' by a thoroughly biblical understanding of the nature and destiny of human beings. We need to see humanity afresh, with, as it were, biblical eyes, and this Strachan aims to help readers to do. The book, in his own words, is 'a rigorously biblical and theological study of theocentric anthropology' (p3). We are, he believes, dealing with a contest of anthropological visions, Christianity versus neopaganism.

The foundation for this reenchantment of mankind is the biblical concept of man as made in the image of God. Chapter 1 'Image' sets out the truth that humanity is 'A God-Stamped Creature' (p13). In developing this position Strachan (rightly) opts for man as made up of two elements (a body and a soul/spirit) – the view known as 'dichotomy'. As far as the nature of the image is concerned, having noted the various views offered, Strachan opts for an ontological view. Man is to display what God is like and is to function in terms of 'obedient worship'. Ontology is bound up with function, with Christ as the supreme exemplar. It would have been good at this point to have a deeper examination of the meaning of being made in the image of a God who is Trinity, a relational God (an approach closer to this reviewer's perspective). Strachan does allude to the theme of covenant in his understanding of humanity: 'we can commune with God because we are covenanted beings…formed for relationship' (p42), but unfortunately little is offered by way of a biblical understanding of covenant. We can wholeheartedly agree with his conclusion, however, 'By recapturing the biblical account of human origins, we recapture human dignity, human worth, and our own identities' (p50).

Alongside the dignity of humanity it is essential to grasp his present sinful condition and this is addressed in Chapter 2 'Depravity'. In his analysis of the temptation in Eden Strachan makes some telling points. In 'The Serpent's Antiwisdom' he shows that satan offers the prospect of limitlessness and that 'Mankind hungers for secularized immortality' (p66). He rightly affirms clearly the historical nature of the Fall and the ruinous consequences that followed. These, he notes, begin with shame and despair, with an attempt to use physical means (fig leaves) to cover spiritual wickedness. In man's fall Strachan sees both a conscious choosing of evil and a thorough breakdown of the creational order and of the divine design. Adam experiences a fourfold death – judicially, spiritually, physically and eternally, since he has offended an infinite person. The result is 'total depravity' and Strachan delineates six types of sin that characterise fallen humanity.

Space does not permit such a detailed analysis of the content of the remaining seven chapters of the book, but all trace the outworking of the two elements of dignity and depravity examined in the opening two chapters.

Chapter 3 ‘Work’ describes human beings as ‘priests of creation’ and considers the value of God-given work (imitating God the worker), calling, the eschatological perspective on work (it *will* be perfect) and its glorifying Christ. Strachan also considers rest and entertainment in helpful ways, but sadly regards the Sabbath commandment as no longer binding on Christians (p123).

In Chapter 4 ‘Sexuality’ the author deals with a number of crucial issues with which Christians have to wrestle in contemporary culture. He considers, among other matters, God’s design for men and women, the biblical pattern for marriage, parenthood, the challenges posed by modern-day paganism, and biblical teaching on homosexuality and transgenderism. Many good biblical points are made, particularly noting the connection between sexuality and spirituality. Some questions do arise. Strachan’s view of the place of women is deeply conservative, even traditionalist. Thus he states, ‘Manhood in the biblical mind is calibrated for action, for initiative, for responsibility’ (p163) and he quotes with approval Bavinck’s statement, ‘The husband lives in society, the wife lives in her family’ (p163, fn42). The excellent wife of Proverbs 31 is dealt with in two paragraphs and applied entirely to home and family. Nothing is said regarding singleness, unfortunately. Also of concern is Strachan’s comment, ‘While we do not abide by the old-covenant law today, we still reverence it’ (p171, fn54), a view of the OT law with which many Reformed theologians would disagree. The comparison on p176 between the Trinity and the authority relationship between husband and wife has recently been very controversial, particularly in relation to the eternal subordination of Christ and more would need to be said on the issue. It would also have been helpful to have some consideration of the pastoral questions raised by issues such as transgenderism, in addition to the theology at stake.

This review has already gone well beyond its allotted length and so the remaining chapters must be noted only briefly.

Chapter 5 ‘Race and Ethnicity’ traces some of the key biblical themes relating to these issues: the origin of group-based separation, the mission of Israel, the people of God among the peoples of the earth and, in particular, the unity between Jew and Gentile already established by the redemptive work of Christ (as set out in Ephesians 2). As Strachan says, the driving force of history is not hatred but redeeming love: ‘The love by which enemies lay down their weapons, embrace one another, and worship God together as friends and more than friends – as family’ (p244).

In Chapter 6 ‘Technology’ Strachan considers the use of technology by God and man in the Old Testament, technology in the New Testament and finally issues of transhumanism and transgenderism. In Chapter 7 ‘Justice’ Strachan considers issues of justice which arise in connection with Cain’s killing of Abel and in the imprecatory psalms. The Christological fulfilment of these psalms could have been brought to bear fruitfully on the matter of justice. The final section deals helpfully with the central relevance of the cross to divine justice, with a clear affirmation of substitutionary atonement. Chapter 8 considers ‘Contingency’ – the nature of human beings as creatures, their subjection to the flow of time and the inevitability of death. The chapter ends with a profound consideration of the victory of Christ over death and the comprehensive results of that victory for believers. The book concludes with Chapter 9 ‘Christ’, which considers the *teleological* dimension of human nature, the goal towards which God is bringing his people in Christ. Strachan looks at the role of the Holy Spirit in the incarnate life of Christ (a very helpful section) and in the ministry of Christ, Jesus as the Second Adam and the True Image, and finally union with Christ. Strachan does mention the covenantal significance of these subjects, but fuller examination of the covenant in relation to the obedience of Christ (active and passive) and also to believers’ union with Christ would have been profitable.

The length of this review indicates the scope of Strachan’s study and also the stimulus to thought which it offers. Many issues are helpfully dealt with and solid defences of biblical fundamentals such as the

historicity of Adam and his fall are provided. On some issues we would differ from the author, some of which are indicated above, but his concern for biblical fidelity is clear. This substantial volume is a valuable addition to the literature on a subject which is of vital importance but which has not always received the attention it merits.

David McKay

The Puritans: A Transatlantic History, David D. Hall, Princeton University Press, 2019, hbk., 517pages, £27.00.

This is a work of massive scholarship and erudition by the Professor Emeritus of Religious History at Harvard Divinity School. The first thing that struck this reviewer was the huge number of endnotes, amounting to almost a third of the book, over 130 pages. In fact, many of these endnotes are of considerable length, and one of them extends even to more than an entire page of the book! Hence Hall's book is not an easy read for the general reader, but it provides a comprehensive and insightful study of great value to all serious students of Puritanism.

The sub-title of the book is significant; it is a transatlantic study of the Puritan movement bringing England, Scotland, Ireland and America together in an integrated narrative. This is a very helpful approach as all too often the studies of English and American Puritanism have been carried out in isolation from each other. Challenging the misrepresentations of the Puritans is another very valuable feature of Hall's magisterial study. The following is just one example of his determination to treat the Puritans fairly:

> Puritan-style moral reform is dogged by stereotypes and half-truths...the stereotypes that abound in modern Britain and America are mainly the doing of liberal Protestants and secular cultural critics who propagated the image of the Puritan as hostile to the arts, intolerant of dissent, and hyper-legalistic, a paradigm closely tied to a narrative of modernity freeing itself from unnecessary restraints.

Moreover, the author gives a very sympathetic account of Puritan spirituality. He writes that the practical divinity of its adherents 'nurtured a remarkable depth of feeling', focusing not only on the turmoil of sin, but also having a yearning to be 'ravished' by the 'soft and sweet kisses' of Christ.

Even though Hall has been criticised for not devoting more attention to the notorious Salem witch trials, he does not overlook the weaknesses of the Puritan movement. He emphasises the proliferation of internal tensions and debates within it and he also charts its declining influence over the centuries.

Hall has also been criticised for blurring the focus when it comes to the wider context of war and politics within which Puritanism developed, but this is hardly fair. A little more on Ireland would have been welcomed by this reviewer, but it must be accepted that Puritanism in Ireland was relatively insignificant when viewed in the grand scheme of things.

Professor Hall warmly acknowledges the insights he has drawn from evangelical scholars of Puritanism, such as Joel Beeke, Mark Dever and Paul H. Lim. Therefore, although evangelicals might be understandably suspicious of anything emerging from either Harvard Divinity School or Princeton University Press, they should not overlook this predominantly sympathetic and very thought-provoking study of Puritanism. Read with perseverance and discernment, it will yield up much food

for thought and even stir up the heart with gratitude for so much that was admirable in the lives and writings of the Puritans.

Raymond Blair

Matthew, Disciple and Scribe: The First Gospel and Its Portrait of Jesus, Patrick Schreiner, Baker Academic, 2019, pbk., xiv + 289 pages, £19.99.

Recent years in Gospel studies have seen a shift away from such questions as source criticism, historical background, the particular community addressed by the Gospel, to concentrate on the narrative of the Gospel as it stands. This emphasis on the text is one that is to be warmly welcomed. It is to this area that Patrick Schreiner's book on Matthew's Gospel makes an excellent contribution. He asserts that the *form* of the Gospel's presentation of Jesus communicates as well as its content and that we need to pay close attention to *how* Matthew speaks as well as to *what* he says.

Schreiner's central contention is that Matthew 13.52 is an important key to understanding the first Gospel: 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' Matthew is the scribe trained by Jesus himself, bringing out treasures from the new age inaugurated by Jesus and showing how he fulfils the Old Testament. Schreiner's aim is to listen carefully to Matthew's use of the new and the old, asking biblical-theological and hermeneutical questions.

His work is divided into two unequal parts. In the first part (chapters one and two) Schreiner makes the case that Matthew is a disciple and a scribe who follows his teacher and sage of wisdom. In doing so he helpfully shows how the office and function of scribe is wider and richer than many readers of the Gospels might assume - they learned, wrote, interpreted and taught. Matthew is doing all of these things in his Gospel: 'Matthew, as the royal and discipled scribe, stands as the intermediary who transmits the words of the king to shape and form the king's subjects. Following and assisting his king, Matthew creates a new humanity, one in which justice, love and mercy prevail.' (p.36)

As he presents Jesus' life and teaching, Matthew instructs his disciples about the nature of the relationship between the new and the old, and the word that summarises this relationship is 'fulfilment' - not just in the ten explicit fulfilment formulae, but in the very arrival of Jesus as the 'Apocalyptic Sage-Messiah' in whom Jewish history, and all history, is unified. Schreiner has a very useful section (pp.51-60) on Matthew's methods - how he shapes his narrative to highlight that the new completes the old. Central to this are what he calls 'shadow stories' which 'connect large swaths of narrative rather than just points or dots in the story.' (p.55).

The second, and longer, part of the book will probably be the most useful, certainly for the preacher. Indeed, one criticism of the first part is that it may be too short to do all that Schreiner wants to accomplish in it. In this latter section Schreiner applies the principles outlined in chapters one and two and illustrates them using several key themes and characters. He examines Matthew's presentation of Jesus as David, Moses, Abraham and Israel. 'Each of these portraits will examine the new, while continually going back to the old to see the treasures of Matthew's literary style and the wisdom he gained from his teacher' (p.3). For example, 'Jesus is the revered-contested-exiled-faithful-sorrowful one and then enthroned as the Davidic king. This pattern should not be surprising, because David's life follows a similar arrangement. David is also appointed, contested, exiled, and then enthroned' (p.67).

Each of these chapters is rooted in a close reading of Matthew's Gospel in a way that will enrich the preacher's handling of the text, enabling him to bring treasure to his congregation that is new and old. One of the dangers in reading and preaching the Gospels is that what makes them distinctive is lost, so that the same sermon could basically be preached from any of the parallel passages. Schreiner's study brings out what is distinctive about Matthew's presentation of Jesus and gives the preacher the tools he needs both to follow the worked examples of David, Moses, Abraham and Israel and to develop others on his own. This reviewer happened to be reading the section on 'the Righteous-Shepherd Motif' (pp.109-120) on the same week as he was due to preach a sermon on Jesus as the Shepherd of Psalm 23, and so instead of focusing on John 10 as he had intended, much greater prominence was given to the theme in Matthew!

'The purpose of scribal training', according to Schreiner, 'is the formation of a certain type of community, a certain type of individual' (p.251). The better we understand Jesus, the better disciples we will be; and the better we read Matthew, the better we will understand Jesus. *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe* will undoubtedly help the people of God to read Matthew better.

Warren Peel

The Covenanters – A History of the Church in Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution, James King Hewison**,** Banner of Truth Trust, 2019, hbk, Vol.1 504 pages, Vol.2 608 pages, £40.00.

Many books have been published covering this period of church history, but in the opinion of this reviewer, none as excellent as this 2 volume set. Although first published in 1908, it has been out of print for decades. The Christian public is indebted to Banner of Truth Trust for republishing this valuable set which includes numerous illustrations.

The events leading up to the Scottish Reformation, described as '*the year of grace 1559*', are carefully documented. The influence of Patrick Hamilton, George Wishart and John Knox is clearly established. Along with the assistance and support of some Scottish nobles, they were instrumental in bringing gospel truth to Scotland.

The author describes the Reformers and their adherents as 'Covenanters' because covenanting was integral to the Reformation movement from the outset. Religious covenants were signed from as early as 1556 binding the signatories to adhere to and promote the Reformed Faith irrespective of the consequences.

When the Reformation was established in the summer of 1560 interesting details are recorded concerning the compilation and contents of *The Confession of Faith*, *First Book of Discipline*, *The Book of Common Order* and *The Psalter*.

The history clearly reveals that the system of church government envisaged by Knox and the initial Reformers was Presbyterianism. This did not become fully fledged until Andrew Melville arrived on the scene, from Europe, in 1574.

Carefully documented are the many intrigues that took place over the years to reclaim Scotland to the 'See of Rome', (the Spanish Armada in 1588 was an attempt to reclaim England for the Pope). Not only were there conspirators from Rome, but there was the ambivalence of the Scottish monarch himself (James VI). He was by profession a Presbyterian and yet throughout his reign he was subtly

advancing the cause of Episcopacy. Details of his schemes are well documented by Hewison and act as a reminder to Christians in the 21st century that we must be constantly on the alert against the State meddling in the affairs of the Church. The practice of establishing perpetual moderators was one of the subtle ways James used to promote Episcopacy, and then a rigged Assembly in 1618 enacted the '5 Articles of Perth'. The contents of these articles and the reaction of faithful ministers provide useful and relevant information.

The policies of James' son, Charles I (1625-1649), reveal how the future of Presbyterianism was under severe threat by a monarch who believed in *absolutism*, possessing absolute power in both Church and State. We are led through a succession of events in his reign which were monumental in their significance: the attempt to impose Laud's Liturgy (1637); the Signing of the National Covenant (1638); the Glasgow Assembly (1638); the Bishops Wars (1639/40); the English Civil War and the Covenanters involvement (1642-1646); the Solemn League and Covenant (1643); the Westminster Assembly of Divines and the Scottish influence; the Westminster Standards and their favourable acceptance in Scotland. Charles, to a greater or lesser extent, had an involvement in all of these. His being defeated in the Civil War led to his execution in January 1649 and the advent of the Cromwellian Commonwealth.

The Covenanters, having fought alongside Cromwell against the King, in the Civil War, considered the execution of Charles I a breach of Covenant. This led them on a collision course with Cromwell and his well-drilled army. You will have to read Volume 2 to discover the outcome of this deep-seated division.

The general population soon tired of Cromwell and the history records the events leading to the Restoration (1660) – the coronation of Charles II. The Scottish Parliament and Church laid down conditions for the new king. He must be being willing to subscribe the Covenants (National and Solemn League) and establish Presbyterianism before they would accept him. Charles duly obliged (an act of perjury) and with the help of men who had formerly been Covenanters he gained power. Like his father and grandfather he was an 'absolutist' and a reign of terror was experienced by everyone who stood in his way.

The author documents the intense suffering endured by thousands of faithful Covenanters during his reign, (1660-1685) and that of his brother James I (1685-1688). Relief finally came when William and Mary landed at Torbay in November 1688 and ushered in the Glorious Revolution.

These two volumes will prove invaluable to those doing research on Scottish Reformation/Covenanter history. Not only is there a wealth of material in the books themselves, but all the sources are carefully documented in the footnotes. Hewison obviously did meticulous research, '*making*' as he informs his readers, '*a thorough research among unpublished papers and rare pamphlets yet hidden in public archives*'.

To anyone interested in this period of church history I cannot recommend this history too highly. I have been teaching Covenanter history for almost 40 years and yet on reading this material I discovered new facts. This information was most interesting and will stimulate those involved in the ongoing struggle for the recognition of the Crown Rights of King Jesus in Church and State.

Robert McCollum

J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir, Ned B. Stonehouse; The Banner of Truth Trust, Fourth Edition, 2019, hbk., 632 pages, £14:99.

As one who had the great privilege of study at Westminster Seminary (1976-78) this book was a particular treasure and delight, telling in full the life story of a great man of God. Gresham Machen was raised up at a time of crises for Reformed doctrine and Presbyterianism in the United States of America. He was a true 'Valiant for Truth' and a 'Mr Greatheart' rolled into one. Born into a godly home in Baltimore, he kept up a wonderful relationship with his mother, especially by letter. Having sat at the feet of men like B.B. Warfield of Princeton, he came to love the Reformed Faith and dedicated his life to its defence. We read of his travels and study in Germany, where the attack on the faith by 'Higher Criticism' was most keen, and of his early work as a teacher and writer. We read of his personal life - his care for an alcoholic friend, his time at the Front in the First World War, his break-up of a courtship with the love of his life because she would not renounce her liberal views, his love of sport and of mountain climbing. We read the fascinating detail of his stand for the true missionary vision of the church, his books (such as *Christianity and Liberalism* which became a classic), his agonising decision to leave his home denomination and help set up a new one - the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, his vision for a new seminary to hold to the Reformed Faith of the old Princeton. In all of these endeavours Machen did not spare himself and the account of his demise aged 56 is particularly moving, if not harrowing. He had burned himself out for God. What always drove him was his conviction that 'There are many things that change but there is one thing that does not change. It is the word of the living and true God.'

Norris Wilson

The Christ of Wisdom – A Redemptive Historical Exploration of the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament, O. Palmer Robertson, P&R Publishing, 2017, pbk., 407 pages, $19.99.

This final volume in Palmer Robertson's Old Testament series is another excellent addition to every OT student's and teacher's library. As with previous offerings, despite the intimidating length, this book is sweetly presented, lucidly explained, and instinctively conservative, orthodox and Reformed. Free from dogmatism, and thoroughly researched, extensive bibliographies demonstrate a high degree of scholarship.

If interest in wisdom literature has exploded in recent decades, an introductory chapter elevates Israel's divinely sourced wisdom, without compromise, above other Ancient Near Eastern wisdom source approximations. Readers who share the author's own firm convictions on Scripture are signposted to paths which profit the soul and all terminate in Christ.

One of the perplexities in negotiating this tricky terrain, for grammatico-historical expositors, is that, by and large, wisdom books are hard to pinpoint on the redemptive-historical timeline. It is one of the writer's achievements that he strives to date and place all the following chapters on particular books – it is refreshing to follow his persuasive arguments for the most traditional chronologies and settings.

Wisdom, for Robertson, is God's answers to life's 'how to?' questions. In the chapter on Job we are taught 'How to Puzzle' - warm, golden, rays beam upon what is for most, an otherwise slightly obscure book. The chapter on Ecclesiastes, which shows us 'How to cope with life's frustrations', with its earthy, Edenic, ground-rules, is, in the opinion of the current reviewer, the brightest, clear-headed, solution on offer from scholarship (at this point it is generally muddle-headed and unconvincing). Like a warm knife through butter, Robertson at a single stroke cuts through endless reams and layers of

Lamentations fragmentation fostered by a limping, Qinah-metre, approach: follow this master tour-guide, along his one-for-all path, as theology is unpacked and community, culture, church and the Christian are taught 'How to Weep' with realism, repentance and hope.

His chapter on Proverbs is 'worth its weight in gold' – the author gathers up otherwise scattered sayings into a straightforward outline of largely Solomonic material arranged finally by Hezekianic sages. He properly places wisdom in its non-secular, covenantal, Yahwistic faith of blessing and curse upon a righteous or wicked path. The crown prince of Israel had to be taught and chastened by his father: church children, then, will do well to heed their parents as Torah is firmly, lovingly and methodically applied to every aspect of daily experience. It is this wisdom that holds out promise of a path of life, success and peace, free from woman-folly's allures and grasp, in a cosmos that the Most-Wise Christ, the 'Persona' of chapter 8, has constructed and controls.

His final chapter on 'How to Love, in Song of Songs, will raise a few eyebrows among those committed to an allegorical or typological approach. Not all will find it easy to embrace the poetic description of Christ-saved, physical, monogamous, Edenic, original, marital, love which he argues for, with caveats. Before dismissing this presentation as a sop to our over-eroticised age, we should observe how he aims to direct readers to Christ who redeems God's good gift of love, lost through sin, and how (in his view) sensuality is downplayed by Solomon in a series of discrete, euphemistic, cover-up, metaphors which avoid actual, literal, corporeal, descriptions. He also adds a note of caution about suitable reader-age – we should give ear to an appeal that it is far preferable to have parents and churches teach the truth than allow marital love to be twisted monstrously by the state. This chapter sounds like a heart cry to reclaim our marital carnage culture. If his appeal to Christ in the Song falls short of Husbandry of the Church, this is a nuanced, spiritually-minded, alternative to more recent, less-candid, expositions.

I highly commend this book and plan to use it for my students – it will bring structure, light and help to minsters, elders, students, Master's candidates, Sabbath-school teachers and those who like in-depth reading. Click on your mouse, order the book, and learn, more clearly, how to walk, puzzle, cope, weep and love for life!

Andrew Kerr

BOOK NOTICES

Sermons on 2 Timothy, John Calvin, translated by Robert White, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2018, hbk., 463 pages, £16.00.

Robert White, who taught in the department of French Studies at the University of Sydney, continues to produce excellent translations of the sermons of John Calvin and with *Sermons on 2 Timothy* brings to a conclusion his translation of Calvin's exposition of the Pastoral Epistles. The sermons, preached in 1555, were taken down in shorthand and transcribed for publication.in 1561. An English translation was published in 1579 and a facsimile has been in print for a number of years from Banner of Truth. Now readers have easy access to Calvin's verse by verse exposition in a translation that reflects faithfully the eloquent, vigorous original. White's version is thoroughly contemporary in language, yet takes us as close as possible to the voice of Calvin in Geneva, wrestling with the challenges of reforming the church in dangerous days. The sermons are of course not just of historical interest – they take us to the pastoral heart of the Apostle Paul and provide profound instruction in Christian living in the context of the community of the church. White has again done an outstanding job and has provided a fine resource for the church.

The History and Theology of Calvinism, Curt Daniel, EP Books, 2019, hbk., 906 pages, £35.00.

Many years of study have gone into this weighty volume which covers a vast field in a most accessible form. Daniel, a pastor in Springfield, Illinois, describes it as 'a middle-level handbook' (p.25), situated between short introductory works and multi-volume specialist publications. It nevertheless contains a treasure trove of material on all aspects of Calvinism. The history of Calvinism is examined in 19 chapters, covering the period of 'Pre-Calvinism' (Augustine, Bradwardine and others) up to the twentieth century. The coverage is international, although Britain and the United States occupy the lion's share of the space. The second part of the book offers a comprehensive survey in 55 chapters of virtually all aspects of Calvinistic theology. The first section considers elements of the biblical view of the sovereignty of God. The second part looks in turn at the 'Five Points', dealing with the core of God's ordained way of salvation. The 12 chapters of the final section, 'Miscellaneous Doctrines', are quite diverse, including Scripture, the two natures of Christ, the Law, apologetics, evangelism and the practical application of Calvinism. The latter chapters serve to underline the fact that this is not a dry academic treatise but a survey of a living 'world and life view'. In a volume of this size and scope any reader will finds points of difference. Issues of modern history give rise to some queries, not least regarding who is included and who is not. We might quibble as to whether twentieth century Calvinism in Northern Ireland is accurately represented by Ian Paisley, W. J. Grier and the Evangelical Bookshop. With respect to the theological sections, this reviewer would have liked to see a more central place given to Covenant Theology, rather than having it dealt with in a single 'miscellaneous' chapter. These are relatively small matters, however, in comparison with the riches offered in a fine volume that offers such thorough instruction. If any reader is left unsatisfied, he might want to work his way through the 134 pages of bibliography that are provided.

Loving Wisdom. A Guide to Philosophy and Christian Faith, Paul Copan, 2nd. Edition, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010, pbk., 376 pages, $29.99.

In recent years many introductions to philosophy written from a Christian perspective have been published, reflecting a resurgence of Christian involvement in the discipline, especially the philosophy of religion. *Loving Wisdom* is a revision of a 2007 publication which has now been taken up by a mainstream publisher. Copan teaches philosophy and ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University, Florida, and has written numerous books on various aspects of philosophy, apologetics and theology. He begins this survey with 6 chapters on 'Preliminaries on Philosophy and Faith', covering matters such as faith and religion, the need for God and 'wired for God'. The rest of the book is divided into 4 sections – God, Creation, Fall, Redemption and Re-creation. All the main elements of philosophy of religion are covered, including the attributes of God (4 chapters), the problems with naturalism, God as Designer and Source of Goodness, the problem of evil, the incarnation and the atonement, Jesus' uniqueness, body, soul and immortality. An unusual feature of the book is Copan's extensive interaction with Scripture, to a much greater extent than in many textbooks on the subject. The treatment is solidly evangelical, but at various points not distinctively Reformed, and readers should bear this in mind. There is, as we would expect, scope for disagreement with Copan on particular issues, but his clear and accessible presentation makes such disagreement fruitful. The book provides a helpful and very up to date introduction to philosophy of religion.

Preaching Without Fear or Favour. Previously Unpublished Sermons on Hebrews 11, Robert Bruce, translated and edited by David Searle, Christian Heritage, 2019, hbk., 600 pages, £29.99.

What have 28 sermons on Hebrews 11 preached by a Scottish Reformed minister in Edinburgh sometime between 1590 and 1592 to say to Christians today? The answer is – a very great deal. David Searle has done us a great service by providing a modern English version of these sermons on Hebrews 11 preached in St Giles Kirk in Edinburgh by Robert Bruce (c.1554-1631). Bruce was a leading figure in the progress of the Reformation in Scotland and one who was deeply embroiled in the turbulent events of his time. In particular he found himself in conflict with King James VI, who sought to make life difficult and ministry costly for Bruce, despite his once having made the minister a Privy Councillor. In a comprehensive introduction Searle considers Bruce's eventful life, his theology, and his preaching, noting his high view of Scripture, his sermon structure, his homely language and his scholarship. It has been a labour of love on David Searle's part to transliterate the 340 pages of Braid Scots manuscript sermons, in sixteenth century script, and then translate them into modern English. The translation reads extremely well and gives as good an impression of Bruce's preaching as we will ever be able to get. The sermons are lengthy expositions, demonstrating Bruce's abilities as a scholar and an exegete, and full of application, demonstrating Bruce's pastoral heart. This is not just a valuable historical document, although it certainly is that: it is a heart-warming spiritual treasury to edify the people of God in our own day.

God, Creation and Salvation. Studies in Reformed Theology, Oliver D. Crisp, T & T Clark, pbk., 2020, 224 pages, £26.99.

Oliver Crisp's numerous writings on systematic and historical theology have shown him to be a thinker able to engage at the highest level with complex theological and philosophical issues, mainly within what may broadly be termed the Reformed tradition. In this collection of nine essays Crisp considers key issues in the areas of the task of theology and the doctrines of creation and salvation, in dialogue with significant theologians of the past. He portrays his approach in terms of an Anselmian 'Faith seeking understanding', aiming to manifest a similar spirit to Anselm, and writing 'with the same concern for a kind of analytic pellucidity as well as a sensitivity to the history, complexity, and texture of theology'. Part 1 of the book consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 examines 'Challenges for Systematic Theology', considering its explanatory ambition, its conceptual content, the 'Balkanized' nature of modern systematic theology and its integrity. Chapter 2 engages with John Calvin, choosing four doctrines to which he made a particular contribution – the doctrine of the knowledge of God, union with Christ, election and the Lord's Supper. Crisp is both appreciative and critical, showing a sympathy for Barth's understanding of election which many will not share. Part 2 of the book comprises three chapters. Chapter 3 turns to Jonathan Edwards, on whom Crisp has frequently written. Here he considers Edwards' idealist metaphysic and his view of all things existing as ideas in the mind of God, together with his occasionalism and his view of continuous creation. Those who know Edwards only from his sermons and writings on, for example, revival, will be in for a few surprises. The following chapters examine John Girardeau on theological anthropology and human free will and Huldrych Zwingli on original sin. Part 3 is made up of four chapters in which Crisp considers in turn the Word's assumption of human flesh in the incarnation, the vicarious humanity of Christ, Christ's acquired guilt in the atonement and theological ethics, the latter two chapters taking Edwards as a starting point for reflection. There is much here to stimulate thought, and the depth of Crisp's analysis and positive proposals demand considerable effort from readers. His definition of 'Reformed' is wide, including figures such as Karl Barth, and his conclusions do not always fit the positions of the historic Reformed confessions. If readers have a solid theological foundation and understand the nature of the material they are tackling, then there is considerable profit to be had from engaging critically with Crisp. This is decidedly not a book for beginners.

Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards, Paul Helm, Reformation Heritage Books, pbk., 2018, 282 pages, $30.00

Many of the big ethical issues that we have to wrestle with today raise the question, 'What is man?' Our view of abortion, euthanasia, genetic interventions and a host of other problems will be shaped primarily by our view of human nature. Paul Helm, who has done significant work in both theology and philosophy, in his latest book brings his wide-ranging expertise to bear on the way in which the term 'human nature' is to be understood. In some contemporary philosophy the very existence of a fixed human nature is denied and human beings are viewed as clusters of properties with no solid 'core'. On the basis of biblical revelation, Helm argues for the existence of a 'human nature' and proceeds to examine how the nature was understood by the theologians and philosophers 'from Calvin to Edwards'. As he states, 'we shall be interested in human nature as equivalent to the "soul" in its metaphysics and its powers and capacities, including its relation to the body' (p.xii). Central to this study is the 'faculty psychology' which thought of the soul in terms of reason, will and emotions. Helm begins with the roots of such thinking in patristic and medieval sources and then goes on to look at issues including body and soul, morality and agency, faculty psychology and

Reformed polemics, and developments of this perspective in Edwards and Locke. The study is not chronological but thematic, and touches on a great range of vital issues in theology as well as philosophy. Among other things, Helm demonstrates the diversity that existed among those equally committed to biblical authority on these matters. This is a mind-stretching study that will undoubtedly generate much further thought and study of the biblical view of human nature.

David McKay