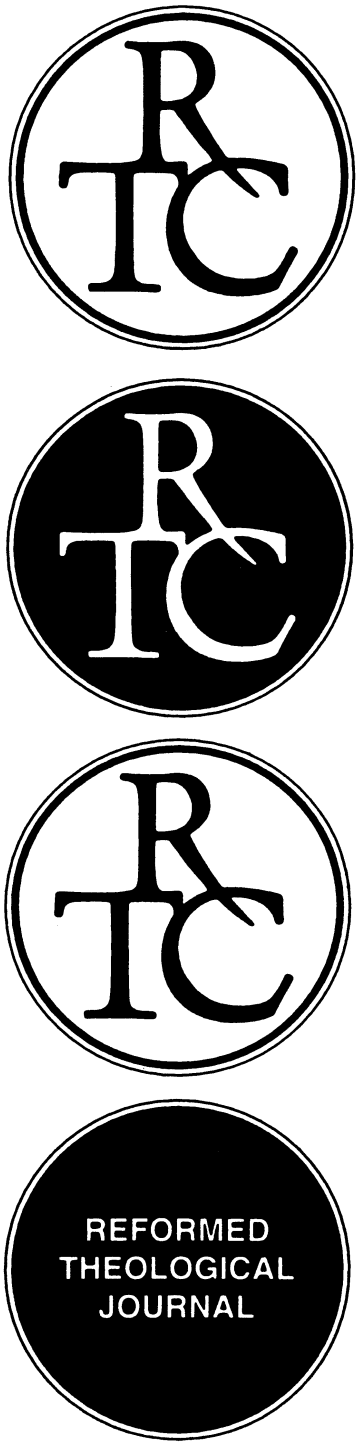

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‘A PRACTICE WHICH IS FRAUGHT WITH MISERY AND RUIN TO MULTITUDES’

Thomas Houston’s denunciation of horse racing analysed and evaluated.

Raymond Blair

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Horse racing is a huge industry in these islands. Last year in the United Kingdom the annual turnover for all off-course betting was in the region of 4 billion pounds.[1] In the Republic of Ireland a few years ago, it was estimated that the horse racing industry was worth up to 1.8 billion euro to the Irish economy.[2] And horse racing is a very fashionable sport; it is even nicknamed ‘the sport of kings’. Apart from animal rights activists, criticisms of it nowadays are few and far between. However, this was by no means always the case and in the course of the 19th century in particular there was much opposition to the sport from within the church both in Britain and in Ireland. It is the purpose of this article to examine the stringent criticism of it by Rev. Thomas Houston D.D., a leading voice within the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland. In 1853 Houston published a short book entitled *The Races: the evils connected with Horse-Racing and the Steeple-Chase and their demoralizing effects* in which *inter alia* he denounced the racing of horses as ‘a practice which is fraught with misery and ruin to multitudes’.[3]

This book was also included in the four-volume edition of Houston’s collected works published in 1876. In this article, a brief overview will be given of the life and writings of Thomas Houston, the wider context in which his denunciation of horse racing was issued will be described, the contents of the book will be summarised, and then the relevance of his work to our modern society will be evaluated.

Rev. Thomas Houston D.D. (1803-1882)

Rev. Thomas Houston served as the pastor of Knockbracken Reformed Presbyterian Church, on the outskirts of Belfast, for over 50 years. His theological acumen was recognised by the denomination when he was appointed in 1854 as the Professor of Church History and Exegetical and Pastoral Theology in the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Hall. Moreover, his gifts as a theologian can also be seen in the considerable body of writing that issued from his pen. For example, in that four volume edition of his collected writings, in which his denunciation of horse racing was reprinted, other issues of great importance were addressed in a very able manner. These included *A Practical Treatise on Baptism*, *Spiritual Consolation in Difficult Times* and *The Adoption of Sons*. Indeed, in addition to those included in that collection of works, at least three others are worthy of notice – *The Lord’s*

[1] Statistica.com Sport & Recreation, 2020.

[2] *Irish Examiner* 8 September 2017.

[3] Houston, *The Races* in Works, *Doctrinal and Practical,* p.338.

Supper: its nature, ends, and obligation (1878), *The Dominion and Glory of the Redeemer* (1880), and *The Intercession of Christ* (1882).[4]

It should be apparent from the above list that Houston tackled some profound theological subjects in his writings and that he also sought to apply his theological insight in a very practical manner. Noteworthy is this regard is his aforementioned treatise in which he sought to bring spiritual consolation to his readers as they lived in the midst of difficult times. He is also known to have been very active in promoting the Temperance cause.[5] And that desire to apply the principles of Christian theology and morality to everyday life can once again be seen at work in his broadside against horse racing.

As far as it can be traced, his book about *The Races* was not that widely reviewed, but those who did review it were appreciative of his skills as an author and his concern for the well-being of society. Three examples will suffice to illustrate this point. Firstly, the *Banner of Ulster,* an influential newspaper having a wide readership predominantly within the Presbyterian community in the middle of the 19th century, commended Houston's work as being 'by no means a dry didactic essay, or a piece of monotonous sermonising', while also acknowledging 'its merits as a work of social reform. It also observed that despite the widespread concern that prevailed in relation to horse racing, 'so little has been directly published on the subject'.[6] The *Banner of Ulster* recognised that Houston was filling a gap which needed to be filled.

In the second place, Houston's work was reviewed by the *Downpatrick Recorder*. This local newspaper may have been inspired to review the book owing to the fact that there was a racecourse on its doorstep. In any case, the reviewer gave a very positive in his evaluation of Houston's contribution – 'the subject is ably handled, objections answered and arguments duly enforced'.[7]

Then thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, given its national profile, the *Belfast News-Letter*, allocated space to a review of Houston's book. It began the review with this recommendation of the author: 'the pious and zealous author who is instant in season and out of season in the promotion of the religious and social reform of the community'.[8] The reviewer went on to express confidence in the Legislature's readiness to introduce necessary reform into the sport of horse racing. Therefore, it implicitly disagreed with Houston's call for the total abolition of the practice, but at the same time the fact that a newspaper, with such a wide readership among the upper classes - who were as a general rule very approving of horse racing - was willing to commend him as a social reformer, is of some significance.

It is difficult to establish if Houston's book was widely read; given the seemingly low number of reviews, it may not have reached a very wide audience. As we shall see, however, it was definitely written amidst an atmosphere of widespread concern in Ulster about the evils associated with horse racing.

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[4] For more on the life and ministry of Thomas Houston see Stephen Steele, "Thomas Houston: Covenanter and Evangelical" in *Reformed Theological Journal*, 26 (2010) and W. D. J. McKay, "The Intercession of Christ in the theology of Thomas Houston" in *Banner of Truth* no.491 (2004).

[5] Steele, "Thomas Houston: Covenanter and Evangelical".

[6] *Banner of Ulster* 30 September 1853.

[7] *Downpatrick Recorder* 1 July 1854.

[8] *Belfast News-Letter* 14 October 1853.

The context in which Houston's work appeared

In Britain as a whole, reservations about horse racing seem to have been quite extensive. As far back as 1790 in fact, one of the leading figures in the evangelicalism, William Wilberforce, refused the stewardship of York races because of his concerns about the practice. After his conversion, he gave up his racehorse and ceased gambling. Rev. Francis Close (1797-1882), an Anglican rector in the town, was nicknamed 'the evangelical pope of Cheltenham' because of his strident opposition to that famous racecourse. Within the ranks of Methodism there were many who voiced vociferous opposition to the practice. For instance, a popular tract was published in 1851 entitled *What I saw at Manchester races*, whose author identified himself as 'An old Jockey'.[9] Further afield, a book was published in Charleston in 1837 whose title made clear the anonymous author's vehement opposition to the sport, *Horse Racing and Christian Principle and Duty Incompatible.* It began by pointing out that shortly after issuing the Declaration of Independence the American congress had earnestly recommended that the several States take measures 'for the suppression of horse-racing and other such practices as are productive of idleness, dissipation and a general depravity of principles and manners.'[10]

A scholarly analysis of the opposition to horse-racing in 19th century Britain reached the verdict that such opposition was strongest among Non-Conformists and that the Church of England was much less concerned about the matter. In fact, quite a few clergymen in the Established Church are known to have been keen followers of the sport. While precise data is unavailable, the impression is that Roman Catholic clergy were rarely to be found in the ranks of the opposition.[11]

Nevertheless, Houston was by no means a lone voice in his denunciation of the sport, and this was especially the case when it came to Ulster. In the 1830s and 40s, the Londonderry races came under extensive attack. Thus it was reported in August of 1835 that the Dean of Derry and seventeen of his fellow-clergymen in the vicinity of the city had presented an address to the members of their congregations 'on the evils arising from horse-racing'.[12] Five years later, a local newspaper recorded the demand issued by the Presbyterian minister of the city for an end to races which they denounced as being 'subservient to the cause of vice and irreligion'. That same year, the same newspaper lamented that 'notwithstanding the opposition of the sober-minded inhabitants of the city, these races commenced yesterday'.[13] It is then worthy of notice that a recent book about the history of the Londonderry races records the fact that the races at that location ceased for a number of years in the 1840s and this was at least partly due to the determined opposition to them on the part of the evangelical community.[14]

Opposition to racing was not confined to the Londonderry region. A lot of controversy arose over the races at the Maze racecourse, on the outskirts of Lisburn. The local Presbyterian minister, Rev. Alexander Henderson was particularly active in expressing opposition to them. In August of 1841 he wrote to the *Belfast Chronicle,* urging the 'thinking portion of the community" to unite for the total overthrow "of the monstrous evils of horse racing'.[15] And this was not a matter of fleeting concern to Mr Henderson; a decade later, he held a meeting in Lisburn at which he produced a document signed

[9] Mike Huggens, *Flat Racing and British Society*, p.216.
[10] Anonymous, *Horse Racing and Christian Principle and Duty, Incompatible*, p.3.
[11] Huggens, Op.cit., p.205.
[12] *Saunders's News-Letter* 18 August 1835.
[13] *Londonderry Standard* 12 August and 9 September 1840.
[14] Tom Deeney, *The History of Ballyarnett Racecourse and the Derry/Londonderry Races* (2012).
[15] *Belfast Chronicle* 9 August 1841.

by seven of the leading employers in the town in which they exhorted their employees not to attend the racecourse.[16]

Nor was Rev Henderson a lone protestor against horse racing within the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. That this was far from being the case can be seen from the fact that in 1842 the General Assembly gave consideration to an overture from the previous year that was condemnatory of the sport. It was to the effect that the Assembly 'deeply impressed with the great evils attendant upon horse-racing, do petition the Legislature, praying them to adopt such measures as would be most effective in abolishing the disgraceful practice.' As can be seen from this, it was not a matter of merely reforming the abuses associated with the sport; the Assembly wanted the abolition of what was regarded as a disgraceful practice. [17]

It should also be noted that Dr Henry Cooke, probably the most influential Presbyterian cleric in 19th century Ireland, then addressed the Assembly on 'the evils of horse-racing'. It would appear that his address was unanimously approved and it was agreed to establish a committee to prepare a memorial to the Queen and Parliament, 'praying for their influence to be exerted in putting down this demoralizing practice.'[18] Nor was Henry Cooke's campaign against the sport confined to the floor of the General Assembly. A year later, he preached in Lisburn Presbyterian Church on the issue; in the course of his address he referred to the sporting assembly at the Maze as being 'the devil's jubilee'.[19] Furthermore, seven years later, he was in Holywood in County Down, where he preached a sermon on the evils of horse-racing, a discourse 'lasting an hour and a half" and which was described as "as a thrilling and powerful exposure of the cruelties of the horse race.'[20]

The campaign against horse racing in Ulster in the early 1840s went well beyond the bounds of the Presbyterian Church. In October of 1843 a very large gathering took place in the Commercial Buildings in Belfast attended by members from a range of denominations. One of its main organisers was Rev. Josias Wilson, a Presbyterian minister in the city, one of whose sermons is actually mentioned in a footnote in Houston's book.[21] One of the newspapers observed that it was one of 'the largest meetings we have ever seen in the place'. The meeting expressed grave concern about the fact that the railway company had recently erected placards offering to transport people to the races at almost half the normal rate.

One of the main speakers at the meeting, a very outspoken evangelical clergyman in the Church of Ireland, put forward an interesting argument that

> to men were given for calm enjoyment the beauties of valley, mountain, and river, the pleasures of the pencil and sacred song, the enjoyment of tales of the works of God in distant lands, and they should not be carried away by that which had not one redeeming quality.

Before the meeting drew to a close, it was resolved to issue an address on the issue to their brethren of all denominations. The address was published in several newspapers and it provided detailed explanation for their opposition to horse racing.[22]

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[16] *Belfast News-Letter* 19 September 1851.
[17] *Northern Whig* 7 July 1842.
[18] Ibid, 7 July 1842.
[19] *Londonderry Standard* 19 July 1843.
[20] *Banner of Ulster* 5 April 1850.
[21] Houston, *The Races*, p.334.
[22] *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* 25 October 1843.

Nor was the opposition in Ulster confined to the evangelical community. The Belfast Branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was quite active around this time as well in calling for the abolition of the sport. Thus, in the advertising columns of the *Northern Whig* (another influential provincial newspaper), there is to be found the following notice:

> The Belfast Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in order to assist in calling attention to the evils of Steeple-Chasing and Horse-Racing, hereby offer a prize of Ten Pounds for the best essay on the above-mentioned subjects.[23]

This action on the part of the Belfast branch was in line with the broader campaign by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals against the sport. For example, in 1851 it sponsored the publication by John Harrison of a pamphlet entitled *An essay on the evils of Steeple-Chasing.* And it is interesting to notice that Houston's book makes some very positive comments about the activities of this organisation. He commends it in the following manner,

> of the philanthropic schemes of our day, few are more deserving of the friendly regard and cordial support of Christians of every name than the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.[24]

Hence, it can be seen that Houston's opposition to horse racing was part of a wider movement in 19th century Britain, a movement extending to many denominations and a movement in line with the philanthropic spirit of the Victorian age. And it should be added that his outlook was also in line with a long-established stance within the Reformed Presbyterian Church both in Ireland and in Scotland. In a Testimony about the biblical principles to be upheld by the Scottish church dating from 1821, the following is to be found,

> We testify against the following practical evils as incompatible with the purity of the gospel, and the holiness and circumspection of Christian character...drunkenness; tippling; gambling; cards and dice; private and public lotteries, horse-racing, brawling and fighting....[25]

And moving forward, two decades after Houston's death, and five decades after the first publication of his book on the issue, the Testimony of the Irish Reformed Presbyterian Church classifies the practice as belonging to 'practical and prevalent evils'.[26]

Understanding this wider context helps to explain why Houston directed his pen against the practice of horse-racing. And not of least importance was the fact that his congregation at Knockbracken was not far removed geographically from the Maze racecourse; he took up his pen against an evil on his own doorstep, and perhaps even out of a pastoral concern for the members of his own congregation! Next, we must turn from the context in which Houston wrote his book to an overview of the book itself.

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[23] *Northern Whig* 4 May 1852.
[24] Houston, *The Races*, p.371.
[25] *History, Principles and Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland* (1821).
[26] *Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland* (1901), p.72.

A summary of Houston's book

Houston goes about his task in a very coherent manner, beginning with a few introductory remarks, then dealing with the issue in four sections, and ending with the inclusion of four short appendices.

In his introduction, he shows himself aware of the difficulty involved in addressing such a topic. He admits that his book is 'not expected to excite any general interest or to be regarded with general favour by almost any class of the community' given that it is confronting such 'a fashionable amusement' which is of such long standing and so widely prevalent. He recognises that it is likely to be looked upon by the privileged classes as 'unwarrantable and presumptuous interference'. He laments the fact that 'the pulpit and the press, those powerful reformers, are in great measure silent in relation to the practice' and that 'scarcely a warning voice is uttered in the sanctuary against it'.

Observing that there has been no 'vigorous or sustained attempt to grapple with an evil of great magnitude', Houston opines that Christians ought to 'bring their Christianity to bear upon the amusements and fashionable practices of the day'. He then bemoans the fact that the Queen's name, 'a Christian lady, adorned with every private and domestic virtue' should be associated with 'an institution which is abhorrent to Christian principle, and which occasions the prodigality, beggary, and ruin of thousands...'[27] So, Houston's deep hostility to horse racing is very evident even from his introductory remarks.

In the first main section of his book, Houston seeks to refute the arguments which were most commonly advanced to defend the racing of horses. Three such arguments are set forth in some detail. The first of these has to do with the antiquity of the sport. He makes it clear that he is an admirer of the horse and of the role that it has played in the advancement of human civilization. He even cites an extract from the Book of Job which portrays the war-horse, and classifies it as 'picturesque, magnificent, and strikingly truthful'.[28] The antiquity of the sport is not denied and its place in the ancient Olympics is acknowledged. However, Houston claims that while antiquity might be pleaded in favour of horse racing, 'it deserves to be remarked that it originated among crude and pagan nations'. The author then bolsters this claim by asserting that the racecourse has been most frequented and promoted by 'princes and others in high station whose lives generally were examples of everything but what was becoming and praiseworthy.' Not surprisingly, the reign of Charles II is cited as an example of this, a reign characterised by 'unbridled licentiousness' and an era that saw 'the extension of racing in England'. Then, Houston endeavours to seal this part of his case with the insightful observation that 'customs of long-standing, even sanctioned by extensive popular favour, when tried by any correct standard of morality, are found to be offensive and deleterious.'[29]

Having responded to the argument from antiquity, the plea that horse racing is necessary for improving the breed of horses is then dealt with. Houston does accept that there is a place for the careful training of horses, but he maintains that horse racing is not at all the best method of training them. Breeding may be improved and the good qualities of the horse developed without resorting to the racecourse. He points out that many horses that might be usefully employed for other purposes end up being injured and rendered unfit for anything else. At this juncture, the author goes beyond the utilitarian arguments that he mainly relied upon in the earlier parts of his book; he directs attention to the theological principle that man was divinely appointed to be natural protector and guardian of the lower creatures.

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[27] Houston, *The Races*, p.330.
[28] Houston, *The Races*, p.331.
[29] Houston, *The Races*, p.334.

But by subjecting horses to the rigours and dangers of the racecourse, humans have perverted and abused the role entrusted to them.

Houston then draws the first main section of the book to a close by addressing the third argument often used to defend horse racing, namely that it was advocated as a necessary amusement for people in different classes of society. In response to this, he first of all maintains that among the better-off, the practice leads to 'dissipation, extravagant expenditure and prodigality'. And in relation to those whom he calls 'the lower classes', Houston affirms that it 'generates a love for sensual indulgence, produces idleness, stimulates dangerous and destructive passions, and leads to vice of every kind'.[30] Resorting once again to a theological argument, the point is made that recreations worthy of immortal, accountable beings, should enlarge the intellect, promote bodily health and purity, and be consistent with the commands to love God supremely and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Houston opines that horse racing fails all of these tests and that it does not therefore qualify as a legitimate amusement for any class of person. Even more seriously, involvement in the practice can plunge people 'into a vortex of evils', leading not only to misery in this world but to destruction in the world to come.[31] Not surprisingly, for one approaching the subject from a theological perspective, the races are not just seen as promoting social evil, but as being a source of spiritual evil.

Moving on to the second main section of Houston's book, the focus is centred on the extensive popularity of horse racing. He points to the 'national festivals of the turf' and to the fact that almost every county in Britain and Ireland had its racecourse and that some had several of them.[32] The granting of public money to support the practice is deplored; the example is given that in the Irish Estimates of the previous session of Parliament, the sum of £1,850 was allocated by the Treasury to finance races in Ireland, and this in a country where 'multitudes are starving, and vast numbers forced to emigrate'.[33] Given that Houston was writing in the immediate aftermath of the Great Famine, such a view is hardly surprising.

A particular reason for concern on the part of the author had to do with the fact that some of the principal races were attended by no fewer than 30,000, and sometimes by as many as 100,000 people. And to make matters worse, what the author calls 'the very barbarous species of races - the steeple-chase' had apparently greatly increased in various parts of Ireland. In all of these ways, the degree to which horse racing was being extensively carried on is highlighted thereby giving rise to the dire consequence that 'the temporal welfare, usefulness and souls' safety of thousands upon thousands are affected'.[34]

In the third section of his book - which is by far the longest - Houston points to the evil impact of horse racing upon those who patronised it and those who supported it. Before dealing with these evils, however, a theological foundation is once again laid down. The main truth enunciated is expressed in the following manner:

> Any action or course of conduct, which, although not formally forbidden in Divine Law, is plainly opposed to some of its express precepts, must be evil in its nature, and ought not to be practiced.[35]

[30] Houston, *The Races*, p.336.
[31] Houston, *The Races*, p.337.
[32] Houston, *The Races*, p.339.
[33] Houston, *The Races*, p.341.
[34] Houston, *The Races*, p.344.
[35] Houston, *The Races*, p.345.

Such express precepts, supported by biblical references, involve not being conformed to the world, doing good to all men, abstaining from all appearance of evil, not being partakers in others' sins, and doing all to the glory of God. It is on this basis that Houston defends himself against the allegation – an allegation even more likely to be brought against his book in our modern times than it was during the Victorian era – that it is 'puritanical or pharisaical' to apply such precepts to fashionable amusements.[36]

Then, as regards the practical evils arising from horse racing, six of these are set forth in some detail. In doing this, Houston guards himself against the charge of being unreasonable by accepting the fact that respectable and virtuous people do take part in upholding the races, believing them to be a 'harmless and salutary amusement'.[37] But the riposte is then made that such well-meaning individuals are ignorant of the evils associated with the sport.

The **first** evil at which the finger is pointed is that of idleness; that the racecourse was guilty of the 'murdering of time to an incredible degree'.[38] The tendency of racing festivals to occupy whole days and weeks is lamented and jockeys and others involved in the training of horses are said to be known idlers!

As is evident from some of his other writings, Houston had a special concern for the well-being of young people, so it comes as no surprise when he proclaims that the practice of frequenting racecourses was 'most pernicious' to the youth of the land. As a consequence, the young and impressionable were said to be contracting 'fixed habits of aversion to steady industry'. Moreover, such idleness is regarded as being 'mischievous and ruinous' to society at large.[39]

The misspending of money, with its associated vices of theft and dishonesty, is the **second** evil to be mentioned. The charge is made that 'everything connected with races is conducted in the way of wasteful and extravagant expenditure'. Houston sees this as impacting severely upon the lower classes; they

> squander on base and low pleasure, the money which is absolutely required for their own subsistence, or for the comfort and support of immediate friends and relatives.[40]

Houston also believed that the racecourse was the scene 'of every species of dishonesty and theft'. There are complaints about the competition being conducted on an unfair basis. And the presence of 'thieves in the garb of gentlemen' and of the 'lower fraternity of the same craft' is not overlooked.[41]

Sabbath profanation is the **third** evil that Houston writes about. He begins his treatment of this issue by affirming the purpose and benefits of Sabbath observance. He then outlines the ways in which horse racing is guilty of 'trampling underfoot one of the most merciful institutions of heaven'.[42] Not only is the Sabbath day being desecrated directly by activities on the racecourse on that day, but Houston argues that it is also violated indirectly, in that attendees at the racecourse are often so jaded that they neglect the worship of God on the weekends after the running of the races. He concludes his

[36] Houston, *The Races*, p.346.
[37] Houston, *The Races*, p.350.
[38] Houston, *The Races*, p.355.
[39] Houston, *The Races*, p.356.
[40] Houston, *The Races*, p.359.
[41] Houston, *The Races*, p.360.
[42] Houston, *The Races*, p.364.

case with the assertion that the abolition of horse racing would remove one of the principal sources of Sabbath desecration.

Houston then discusses the proliferation of drunkenness as being the **fourth** evil linked to the practice of horse racing. 'Races', he maintains, 'are universally associated with drinking to excess.' Even those who manage to win money at the racecourse are said to 'squander their ill-gotten gain in fits of drunkenness'. The conclusion is reached that if horse racing were abandoned, 'one large and deep fountain of intemperance' would be dried up.[43]

In the **fifth** place, Houston sees cruelty to animals and loss of life to riders and to others as yet another evil outcome of horse racing. He admits that it is to some extent true that a well-trained horse can take delight in the racecourse, but that such a consideration is far outweighed by the large number of horses killed or disabled by the activity. While he had no statistics to hand, the author had the impression that the average life of a racehorse was much shorter than that of similar animals who were properly cared for. Proverbs 12:10 is then cited, 'a righteous man regardeth the life of his beast.'

On a similar note, the danger posed to the lives and health of human beings is highlighted. Houston accepts that some necessary employments do involve a considerable risk to human life – mining, sea-faring and defensive war are given as examples – but racing cannot be justified on this basis. This is because there is no duty to engage in it; it is of no use to society; and it is embarked upon in fulfilment of 'low, selfish indulgence'.[44]

The **sixth** evil that Houston identifies as being associated with horse racing is predictable. He directs the attention of the reader to 'gambling, with its fearful consequences'. He starts his assault on gambling by saying that

> there has always been among all people a very powerful desire to seek to acquire money by an easier and speedier way than by honest and persevering labour.

He calls it 'an inveterate propensity of our fallen nature' and that 'the passion for this vice once indulged becomes all absorbing and all-devouring.'[45]

One of the obvious consequences of excessive betting upon horse racing is highlighted; the tendency among the rich to squander their fortunes upon it. Houston claims that out of the vast range of properties that had ended up in the Irish Encumbered Estates Court, a large number came into that ruinous condition by the extravagance of racing and gambling. And on a broader scale,

> by this treacherous seductive, maddening vice, many once virtuous and honourable persons are hurried down to certain and irremediable destruction.[46]

Having dealt with the vices associated with racing, in the final section of his book Houston turned his attention to a particular version of such racing, namely the steeplechase. In regard to the steeplechase, he was undoubtedly correct in his contention that 'the risk of injury and loss of life is tenfold greater than in ordinary racing'. He also contended, with perhaps some justification, that the steeplechase was frequently organised by more reckless and unprincipled characters than those who managed racing on

[43] Houston, *The Races*, p.369.
[44] Houston, *The Races*, p.376.
[45] Houston, *The Races*, p.380.
[46] Houston, *The Races*, p.386.

the flat. He concluded his dismissal of it by claiming that the 'barbarous practice of the steeplechase would not be tolerated in civilized society.' He expressed the hope that the time would come when it would be regarded as 'a relic of savage life, or as the sport of madmen.'[47]

Houston draws his book to a close with four short appendices. They have to do with the following issues: the connection of the immoral Press with racing, the duty of Employers to discountenance races; sudden deaths occurring at races; and a picture of the degradation of gambling.[48]

An evaluation of Houston's book

Having focused on the author of the book, the context in which it was written, and having outlined its main contents, we ought to consider what relevance and value it has for our modern society. Clearly horse racing is more or less as popular now as it was in the mid-nineteenth century. Steeplechasing also retains its popularity even though it is now much better regulated than it was in Houston's time. However, it is undoubtedly the case that some of his arguments are not of relevance in our modern world. To give an obvious example of this, one need only point to his objection to steeplechasing on the basis of it ruining agricultural land. Nowadays, steeplechasing is confined to specifically designated racecourses, and no agricultural land is at risk from the activity. One might argue of course that the land being allocated to racecourses could be much better used in growing food.

One might also query the manner in which Houston distinguishes so sharply between the effects of racing upon different classes in society. He appears to suggest that it was only the lower classes that had their passions unduly inflamed by the excitement of the chase; psychologists might argue that one's passions can be unduly inflamed irrespective of one's status in society.

Yet again, the suggestion that employers might deter their employees from attending the races would hardly be acceptable amidst the more egalitarian ethos of modern times. It would tend to be regarded as undue interference on the part of employers and might end up in them being brought before a Labour Court.

But how about the six evils that Houston attributed to horse racing? How relevant are they to the modern-day practice of the sport? Idleness tends to be an overlooked vice nowadays, but in the light of biblical teaching, it should not be treated as an issue of no importance. The extent to which modern-day horse-racing promotes idleness is a question worthy of consideration, albeit a question that is difficult to answer.

As regards the prodigal misspending of money, this issue of concern surely has a continuing relevance. Nowadays with the ever-increasing access to online gambling, vast sums can be very quickly expended without even having to leave one's own home. Moreover, concerns about dishonesty in regard to the conduct of races are still with us. As an instance of this, one might consult a recently published book by Brian Lee, entitled, *Racing Rogues: the Scams, Scandals and Gambles of Horse Racing in Wales.*[49]

As regards the issue of Sabbath profanation, the pattern in recent years of holding race meetings on all seven days of the week ties in with Houston's concerns. This, however, would definitely be a sphere in which biblical teaching and contemporary behaviour are widely at variance. It would be hard to get

[47] Houston, *The Races*, p.394.
[48] Houston, *The Races*, p.395-97.
[49] B. Lee, *The Scams, Scandals and Gambles of Horse Racing in Wales* (2016). See also, S. Reiss, *The Sport of Kings and the Kings of Crime* (2011).

a hearing for such concerns in a day and age when the Sabbath Day is treated like any other day. Our society needs to be given a fresh appreciation for what Houston called 'one of most merciful institutions of heaven.'

As regards the issue of drunkenness, it is fair to say that policing measures and regulations are more strictly enforced nowadays than they were in the Victorian era. Yet it is still undoubtedly the case that the excessive consumption of alcohol and the fun of the chase often go hand in hand.

As regards concerns about cruelty to animals and harmfulness to human beings, this is definitely an issue that resonates with modern-day men and women. A scholarly study on objections to horse racing sums this up very well:

> opposition to racing has switched from a concern about the misdeeds of humans to one about the welfare of horses. Opposition to racing now comes mainly from animal rights activists.[50]

And as regards concerns about gambling, despite the passing of some legislation in the years since Houston penned his book, it is still a vexed issue in the minds of many. The problem is enhanced by the fact that betting companies sponsor many of the races. Addiction to gambling is definitely a cause of much misery in our society and horse racing provides one of the main outlets for those held in thrall by it. Houston's work still has a lot of value to say to men and women who are wrestling with this deleterious form of addiction.

Quite apart from the continuing relevance of the evils denounced by Houston in relation to horse racing, his book should give us food for thought on a broader level. Houston had the insight and courage to challenge the status of what was a very 'fashionable amusement*'* in his society, and it would be wise of us to consider what 'fashionable amusements' in our society ought to be critiqued by those who want God to be honoured and who desire to see the earthly and eternal welfare of men and woman safeguarded. Could there be ways in which we are amusing ourselves to death? Perhaps, therefore, Houston's book may not only be of value as a searchlight upon our attitudes to horse-racing; it may also alert us to the dangers posed by other 'fashionable amusements' which are fraught with misery and ruin to multitudes of men and women of our day and age.

[50] *Encyclopedia of British Horse Racing*, ed. Kay and Vamplew (2012), p.19.

STUDYING DISCOURSE GRAMMAR IN NEW TESTAMENT GREEK WITH BIBLEMESH: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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> 'The BibleMesh Institute offers affordable online training for local churches, schools, and ministries by incorporating excellent instruction and cutting-edge technology, while aiming to cultivate a Great Commandment, Great Commission, and Great Tradition culture through mentorship and global Christian community.'

So reads the vision statement of the BibleMesh Institute (www.biblemesh.com), an online education website that seeks to serve the global Church. It has expanded considerably over the last decade or so to incorporate a wide range of lingustic and theological courses catering for a broad spectrum of abilities and backgrounds.

Over the last eight weeks I have been working through one of the advanced Greek courses on offer: 'Analyzing the Narrative Discourse of Mark 1-8'. In this article I want to review the course itself for the benefit of others who might be looking for this kind of online resource and then to introduce the topic of discourse grammar in New Testament Greek to readers (especially pastors) who may not have heard of it.

The Structure of the Course

BibleMesh offers a variety of courses according to the student's level of proficiency. The 'First Steps' course is for absolute beginners who don't yet know the Greek alphabet. Each subsequent course (Greek Reading 1-3) builds on the preceding one, introducing more grammatical concepts and increasing the student's working vocabulary, while focusing on translation from the New Testament itself right from the beginning. The teaching is done in using a variety of tools - lectures by gifted teachers, written articles, quiz software that 'learns' what words and concepts the student has trouble with, regular tests to track progress and a final exam to consolidate all the ground covered. The whole platform is an extremely well-produced, professional piece of work. If a pastor never had the opportunity to study Greek or Hebrew while at seminary, or if his languages have rusted away to the point where he struggles to tell the difference between an aorist and a hiphil (in which case they are rusty indeed!), one of these courses would be an excellent place to go. There are comparable courses in Hebrew, with Spanish language versions of both the Greek and Hebrew courses.

The course in discourse grammar is based on Mark 1-8, and is described as 'advanced', 'suitable for those who have completed Greek Reading levels 1-3, or who have previously studied Greek at an advanced level and are looking to refresh their knowledge.' It costs $249 (which in April 2021 translated into £148). The recommended time required for the course is two to three months, but the student has six months from the date of purchase to complete it. ($299 buys twelve months access, and $399 buys the 'transcript service package'). At present there is no equivalent course in discourse grammar for Hebrew, which is somewhat surprising since Hebrew studies have been making use of discourse analysis much longer than Greek.

There are eight units (one for each of the first eight chapters of Mark's Gospel) and each unit has five sections. Since I was on a study leave sabbatical for two months, I was able to work steadily at the course, one section per day, one unit per week. Each section took about an hour to complete, including time to make and review notes on the lesson. It comprises several elements:

(a) The option of listening to the Greek text for the assigned passage being read. BibleMesh adopts the modern Greek pronunciation system, which may be more than a little disorientating for students (like me) brought up on the Erasmian system. There is a strong case to be made for teaching the modern Greek pronunciation,[1] but for those who are not used to it, it can be somewhat confusing. (It must be said, however, that no matter how confusing it may be, it is a treat to hear Greek being read as a living and beautiful language.)

(b) The introduction of new vocabulary words, which are then tested at the same time as reviewing already-known words. This course introduces words that appear in Mark 1-8 up to 24-29 times in the New Testament as a whole. BibleMesh uses a powerful and innovative piece of learning software called Cerego, an 'adaptive learning platform' whose 'cognitive science-backed algorithm creates unique learning paths suited to the exact needs of each learner…Cerego is like having a personal tutor, who knows how much progress you are making and what would be best to review at any given moment in order to build strong and stable memories.'[2] The software can be linked to your phone and email, so that you can receive reminders when it's time to review vocabulary, and the app can be downloaded to your phone as well for ease of use.

I would imagine that most students whose Greek is advanced enough to benefit from this particular course will find that most of the vocabulary reviewed is very familiar, but although I did complete all the vocabulary quizzes (it never does any harm to refresh and review vocabulary, especially as you enter middle age!), this component could be omitted without penalty. It should be remembered also that this particular course is part of a trajectory of vocabulary learning that has been in progress since level one and is thus designed for the student who has followed the track from the very beginning.

The vocabulary is asked in various forms: both in Greek to English and English to Greek. Usually the student is asked to choose the correct option from five possibilities, but sometimes he will be asked to fill in blank spaces with a Greek word or to listen to a Greek word being pronounced and type it in. This can be very challenging if you are unfamiliar with the modern Greek pronunciation. There is a big difference, for example, between the Erasmian pronunciation of *euthus* ('you-thoos') and the modern Greek ('ev-thees')! But the style of questioning can be adjusted in the settings so that this type of question is not asked.

(c) Each lesson is based on the next consecutive section of Mark's Gospel, a passage usually about ten verses long. There are some grammatical notes for the verses to assist with translation, usually shedding light on the trickier constructions and more obscure forms, but these are not extensive. It is taken for granted that the student has a fair degree of proficiency

[1] For an up to date and thorough discussion of this subject, cf. Randall Buth, 'The Role of Pronunciation in New Testament Greek Studies' in *Linguistics and New Testament Greek: Key Issues in the Current Debate*, David Alan Black & Benjamin L. Merkle (eds.) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 2020), p.169-93. See also Constantine R. Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek: New Insights for Reading the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), p.192-208.
[2] From the Cerego website, www.cerego.com, accessed Monday 21 June, 2021, at 17:23.

in translation and so most morphological and syntactical information is not provided. The student types in his translation of the passage and once he enters it BibleMesh reveals its suggested translation for comparison.

It is hard to see how else translation could be marked, but again this assumes a fair degree of ability on the part of the student to be able to understand the reason why his translation may not resemble the one suggested. This aspect of the course could be made more useful if a video in the style of Rob Plummer's 'Daily Dose of Greek' accompanied the passage, walking the student through the grammar and translation of the text, but only accessible after the student has submitted his own attempt at translation.

(d) The next component in the section is the most important element - the reason for the whole course: the student reads an article on discourse grammar specially written by the two authors of the course, which builds up cumulatively into a basic introduction to the whole subject. These articles are each about 1000 words long on average and focus on one particular topic of discourse grammar illustrated in the passage just translated. Each of the eight units treats a different area of discourse grammar.

The authors of the course are Dr Mark Dubis, Professor of Biblical Studies at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, and Dr Nicholas Ellis, who taught Biblical and Hellenistic Greek at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford from 2009 to 2014. Both men combine years of teaching experience with a keen interest in linguistics, exegesis and theology. There are also three consultant specialists, well known in the field of linguistics: Michael Aubrey, Christopher Fresch and Stephen Levinsohn.

I was a little disappointed when I realised that this teaching was not communicated by a recorded lecture. The other BibleMesh Greek courses featured teaching videos, and it seems to me that something is lost by not having a person presenting the material. The teaching of a concept is almost always improved by hearing and seeing as well as reading about it. Having a person to guide the student through each lesson, explaining things with emphasis, illustrations and asides, could only have improved the experience. A transcript of the lesson could still have been made available in the format it currently is.

That is not to say that the material was in any way unclear. It is extremely well written - lucid and accessible. The development and flow of the subject is excellent. These were entirely new concepts to me, but I was able to make sense of them without too much difficulty. The addition of video lectures would, however, enhance the learning experience and help the student feel more like he is being taught rather than teaching himself.

Each lesson is illustrated, as far as possible, using the text of Mark just translated, which means that the Greek is fresh in the student's mind, complete with its surrounding context. This is much better than choosing examples taken from different authors and genres to which the student comes cold.

(e) Each grammar lesson is then tested by a short quiz of seven questions. Each unit is followed by a longer test of fifteen questions on all the material from the five lessons in the unit, as well as five vocabulary questions. The grades on each test are logged so that the student can track his progress. At the end of the course there is an exam which tests the student's understanding of all the material.

There is a host of resources available to the student in a 'reference library', which includes summaries of grammar, morphology, vocabulary, syntax and a complete transcript of all the lessons on discourse grammar from Mark 1-8. There are also numerous videos by such eminent experts in the field as Buist Fanning, Constantine Campbell, Mark Dubis (one of the authors of this particular course), Randall Buth, Stanley Porter and Steven Runge, which are interesting and informative.

An additional benefit of BibleMesh is that, as well as affording the option of pursuing a degree online, many of its courses can count as credit towards partnering college and seminary requirements.

The Content of the Course

In the introduction to a recent excellent book on the current state of linguistics and New Testament Greek, David Alan Black writes, 'One of the most notable features of New Testament Greek scholarship during the past ten to twenty years has been the recovery of our temporarily mislaid interest in the science of linguistics…But now many of us who teach Greek are convinced that God has given us insights from the science of linguistics that can and should inform our traditional approaches to exegesis.'[3]

In that same chapter, Black later quotes an analysis of the relationship between linguistics and New Testament Greek that he had written in 1991 and revised in 2001[4], highlighting nine potentially fruitful areas of research for Greek scholars. The ninth area that he mentions is discourse analysis. In 2001 he asserted that 'Traditional studies of New Testament Greek have tended to ignore the macrostructure of a given text (the "forest"), emphasizing instead the trees and the tiny saplings…Discourse analysis is especially helpful in doing exegesis above the sentence level and promises to become a standard instrument in the pastor's toolbox.'[5] Commenting on the progress in discourse analysis by 2020 he writes, 'The practice of discourse analysis among New Testament scholars is perhaps as common today as it was uncommon three or four decades ago.'[6]

As he begins his two-chapter discussion of discourse analysis in *Advances in the Study of Greek: New Insights for Reading the New Testament,* Constantine Campbell writes, 'Discourse analysis is a burgeoning field and one of the most exciting new areas of research related to Greek exegesis.'[7] New Testament Greek has been late to adopt its insights, but it is quickly making up for lost time. So what exactly is discourse analysis? Campbell describes it as 'an interdisciplinary approach to understanding how units of text relate to one another in order to create the theme, message, and structure of a text.'[8] It deals with the text above the sentence level.

In spite of having studied Greek since high school through university, and having taught it at the Reformed Theological College for the last ten years, I confess that it is only relatively recently that I have come across this area of the subject. Traditionally Greek grammar is divided into 'morphology' and 'syntax'. Morphology has to do with the form (*morphē*) of words: the various case endings, aspect

[3] David Alan Black, 'Where Did We Come From?' in Black and Merkle (2020),p.2f.
[4] David Alan Black, 'The Study of New Testament Greek in the Light of Ancient and Modern Linguistics,' in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues,* David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (eds.) (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), p.230-52.
[5] Black and Merkle (2020), p.8.
[6] Black and Merkle (2020), p.8.
[7] Campbell (2015), p.148.
[8] Campbell (2015), p.148f.

markers and paradigms. Syntax describes how words and phrases work in combination with one another to create meaning. But increasingly New Testament Greek scholars are convinced that the insights of linguistics need to be integrated into the study of Greek.

> Whereas syntax and morphology detail the *what* of communication, discourse grammar is more concerned with the *why* and *how*…It also shows how a discourse comes together as a whole. The goal of discourse grammar is to describe how the features of a discourse guide the reader though the discourse, helping the reader to understand how the various parts of the discourse fit into the overarching whole. Although this level of grammatical study has often been left unexplored, it is an invaluable pursuit as it illuminates how the various features of a discourse, whether at the word, clause, sentence, or paragraph level, work together to help the reader to understand and process the text coherently. Paying attention to these features thereby allows us to more closely follow a New Testament author's flow of thought.[9]

It should be easy therefore to see the relevance and usefulness of this discipline to exegesis. As Campbell puts it,

> The most distinctive contribution that discourse analysis brings alongside literary and rhetorical analysis is its robustly linguistic nature. It generally moves from the grammar and syntax of a text out to these larger textual concerns, rather than starting with the big picture… Discourse analysis operates with a linguistically robust methodology that provides somewhat objective criteria by which to adjudicate exegetical issues.[10]

There are a variety of (not necessarily incompatible) approaches within the field of discourse analysis itself. BibleMesh presents the approach developed by Stephen H. Levinsohn and his disciple Steven Runge, which is a *functionalist* approach to language.[11] It is 'an attempt to discover and describe what linguistic structures are used for: the functions they serve, the factors that condition their use.'[12] Runge gives an example of what this looks like in practice:

> We traditionally label a present-tense verb used in a context where a past-tense verb is expected in English as a "historical present."…Although such labeling does describe the usage to some extent, it tells us little about why the Greek writer would use such a form or about the specific effect that it achieves. Traditional descriptive frameworks often tell us more about how Greek and English differ than they do about Greek *as Greek.* Discourse grammar provides principles for understanding why a writer would use a historical present…It provides a descriptive framework that is flexible and robust enough to elegantly capture the complexity of discourse phenomena in a concise and practical description.[13]

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[9] 'Morphology, Syntax, and Discourse Grammar', *Advanced Greek: Analyzing the Narrative Discourse of Mark 1-8*

[10] Campbell (2015), p.149. On the relevance of discourse grammar to exegesis, especially as opposed to the approach of traditional grammars, see Nicholas J. Ellis, 'Biblical Exegesis and Linguistics: a Prodigal History' in Black & Merkle (2015), p.227-45, especially p.242-3.

[11] For an overview and evaluation of the various linguistic schools, see Stanley E. Porter, 'Linguistic Schools' in Black & Merkle (2020). For a description and evaluation that is more focused on Levinsohn and Runge in particular, see chapter 8 of Campbell (2015), 'Discourse Analysis II: Levinsohn and Runge,' p.163-91. The key books by Levinsohn and Runge are: Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek* (2nd ed.; Dallas: SIL International, 2000) and Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2010).

[12] Levinsohn (2000), p.vii.

[13] Runge (2010), p.4.

Levinsohn sets out his theoretical approach to Greek in the introduction to his *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek*.[14] Since Levinsohn's work underlies (and is constantly referenced in) the BibleMesh course, let me summarise the points he makes here.

As we have already noted, it is a *functional* approach. Quoting Robert A. Dooley, Levinsohn defines the functional approach as 'an attempt to discover and describe what linguistic structures are used for: the functions they serve, the factors that condition their use.'[15] He goes on to explain the functional approach by contrasting it with a structural one which describes linguistic structures for their own sake. He illustrates this difference with reference to default word order. A structural approach might state that Greek uses six possible orders of subject, object and verb but never address the question of when to use which. 'A functional approach, on the other hand…presupposes a structural analysis and concentrates on identifying the factors that determine the selection of one order over against another.'[16] This, it seems to me, is a much more interesting, useful and satisfying question to answer.

One of the basic principles of a functional approach is that choice implies meaning. Levinsohn laments (as perhaps many curious students of Greek have done!) that too often 'stylistic variation' is just a fancy way of saying 'I don't know!' Levinsohn argues that when an author chooses to express himself in one way as opposed to another it is for a deliberate purpose - a purpose, moreover, which we can discern. For example, the subject of the verb in Greek sometimes precedes and sometimes follows its verb. This is not just a question of style - there is a linguistic reason behind it which would have been obvious to a native speaker's ear, but which requires more effort on our part to hear; and with effort we *can* hear it. Sometimes in the New Testament names include the article (*ho Iēsous*) and sometimes do not (*Iēsous*) - is this random? Is it 'stylistic variation'? Or is there a significant, discoverable, linguistic explanation for it? Practitioners of discourse analysis insist that there is.

Here is a summary of the topics covered in the course, along with some practical examples of how they might be useful for exegesis.

1. The place of conjunctions in discourse

The lessons in unit one focused on the conjunctions *de, kai, gar* and *alla.* One of the mistakes students of any language can easily make is to assume there is a one-to-one equivalence between the vocabulary of two languages. So *kai* means 'and' and *de* means 'and' or 'but,' depending on the context; *gar* means 'for' and *alla* means 'but.' A much more fruitful approach, however, is to understand the role these conjunctions play in Greek, rather than treating them as code for an English word. This functional approach to how language actually works is at the heart of discourse grammar.

So the humble and ubiquitous particle *de*, which occurs some 2,792 times in the New Testament and which is often ignored completely in translations, performs the important job of segmenting discourse into smaller and more manageable chunks. It signals that what follows is a *progression* or *development* in the story or the argument, at least in the author's mind. Surely this is something we would do well to pay attention to in exegesis? It can be used at the level of clauses or even phrases, as well as between larger movements or scenes. Often the development signalled may well be a contrast with what went before, but not necessarily.

[14] Levinsohn (2000), p.vii-x. Porter complains of its brevity in his essay 'Linguistic Schools' in Black & Merkle (2015): '[Levinsohn's] approach is very light on theoretical foundations, with the major work by Levinsohn devoting only four (admittedly large) pages to establishing its linguistic foundation and the subsequent volume by Runge not containing much more information.' (p.29f.).
[15] Levinsohn (2000), p.vii.
[16] Levinsohn (2000), p.viii.

Kai can also be translated 'and', but its function is different from that of *de*. *Kai* is the default coordinating connective in Greek narrative and is used to connect two items of equal status. These items might be words, phrases, clauses, sentences or paragraphs, but the point is that they are of *equal* status. Thus 'when you encounter καί, you should realize that the author wants you to closely connect what follows the καί to something that precedes it.'[17]

Gar is often translated 'for' and for that reason is often thought to have a causal connection to what precedes it, but this is not accurate. The *function* of *gar* is to signal explanatory information that supports or strengthens what precedes it. Understanding this will provide a fuller exegetical grasp of a passage. '…it is important to note that *gar* itself does not communicate a causal semantic constraint. The particle *gar* is used only to introduce explanatory information. Any element of causality in the text is due to what is implied by the semantics of the context, not to *gar*.'[18] And yet how many pastors are guilty of subconsciously reading *gar* as if it simply means 'because'?

Alla is used in Greek to signal a correction. It is almost always translated 'but', which is fine but could mislead us as to the real purpose of *alla*, which is 'to instruct the reader to regard what follows as a corrective to some preceding element…'[19] What Dubis and Ellis say about *alla* applies equally to all Greek conjunctions - indeed to all of Greek language: '…knowing translation glosses are not enough when trying to understand what the author is *doing* with his language and *why* he is doing it.'[20] This is the essence of discourse grammar.

Hopefully it is clear even from these very brief summaries how valuable these insights are for exegesis. We want to hear what the author (and Author) wants us to hear in Scripture - no more, no less - right down to the very least of all the connectives. We believe in plenary verbal inspiration, so we affirm that every *de*, *kai* and *gar* was inspired by the Spirit just as much as every *theos*, *kurios* and *sōzō*. To take just one example, on the exegetical significance of *de*, listen to what Runge has to say: '[citing Dooley and Levinsohn],

> "the material so marked [by *de*] represents a new development in the story or argument, as far as the author's purpose is concerned." Since there is typically flexibility about how to chunk the text into developments, closely attending to these authorial decisions should inform our exegesis. The shaping and organization of the content provide exegetical clues about the writer's conceptualization of the content and purposes.[21]

2. Background and Foreground

In unit two we are introduced to the concepts of background and foreground in narrative. Background is the information you need to make sense of the story - setting the scene and providing the framework within which the action takes place and advances, while foreground is the information that tells the story and advances it. This distinction may seem obvious, but it is fascinating to see how Greek grammar distinguishes between background and foreground in narrative. For example, this often accounts for the choice of aspect in the verb. Past perfective (i.e. aorist) indicatives almost always

[17] 'And what? Understanding Καί', *Advanced Greek: Analyzing the Narrative Discourse of Mark 1-8*
[18] 'The Function of *Gar*: Signalling Explanatory Information', fn.1.
[19] 'Understanding *Alla*: Signalling a Correction', *Advanced Greek: Analyzing the Narrative Discourse of Mark 1-8*
[20] 'Understanding *Alla*: Signalling a Correction', *Advanced Greek: Analyzing the Narrative Discourse of Mark 1-8*
[21] Runge (2010), p.30f.

describe the foreground storyline while past imperfective (i.e. imperfect) indicatives are typically background at the beginning of an episode and foreground at the end.

3. Default and Marked Constructions

In a much quoted remark about prominence, Robert Longacre observed that 'Discourse without prominence would be like pointing to a piece of black cardboard and insisting that it was a picture of black camels crossing black sands at midnight.' Unit two introduces the idea of 'markedness' - a departure from what is expected or default, and this is developed further in unit three.

The historical present is a key example of this, since it is commonly used in foreground narrative where we would expect to find the aorist. All readers of the Greek New Testament are familiar with this usage, and often the explanation is that it 'adds vividness' to the narrative. Proponents of discourse grammar contend, however, that the function of the historical present is to draw attention to a significant event or speech in the *subsequent* narrative. It points not to the action of its own verb, but to something later - the *climax* and *focal point* of the episode.

Another illustration of this from Mark's Gospel is that when a participial form of *legō* follows another speech verb, the speech appears to be marked as prominent, for example in Mark 3.11: *ekrazon legontes hoti su ei ho huios tou theou.*

One final illustration of a prominence marker is the use of the name of Jesus. As a default, whenever Jesus is the subject of a clause in the Gospels he is usually only the implicit subject of a third singular verb. This is in no way to diminish his importance, but rather just the opposite - Jesus is the central and most important character in the Gospels. Since this is the default usage, to use a full noun phrase such as *ho Iēsous*, is a marked usage which carries various nuances with it. It may be used to highlight important speech or events, or it may indicate the beginning of a new unit of discourse (e.g. Mark 8.27).

4. Word Order

Word order is one of the most important issues for a right understanding of markedness, because unless we are clear about what is normal we will not recognise departures from the norm. (To be more precise, the term 'constituent order' is preferable to 'word order' because subjects, objects and even verbs can be more than one word.) English has a very rigid default order (subject, verb, object) from which it is unusual to deviate. Greek is much more flexible in its constituent order, but that does not mean that it doesn't have a default order - it does: verb, subject, object (VSO). When a constituent is moved in front of the verb ('fronting' a constituent), it usually serves one of two purposes: either it marks information as being particularly significant ('marked focus') or it marks information that is going to be discussed in the following text (a 'point of departure'). It typically signals that the focus of the text has shifted from something else to this.

It should not be hard to see the relevance of this for exegesis. Especially as preachers of the Word of God we believe in expository preaching - preaching that arises from the text of Scripture, that is controlled and shaped by the emphases of the passage. The burden of the sermon should be the burden of the particular passage we are preaching. Discourse grammar helps us to discern this burden more clearly and follow the storyline of the narrative or the steps of the argument more closely.

5. Boundary Features

Where does a unit of text begin and end? This is a key question for preachers, not just because we need to decide how much of a passage to preach in consecutive exposition, but also because, as we have just observed, the main theme of our sermon ought to flow from the main theme of the passage. 'The chief characterization of a major unit of text is the coherence of a single theme within it.'[22] But other factors can play a supporting role in signalling where a discrete unit begins and ends. The most important of these is a point of departure, but there are at least twelve other linguistic indicators that one unit is closing and a new one is opening.[23] The BibleMesh course elaborates on one of these in particular: the use of *erchomai* to create a new 'deictic centre' (a locational point of reference which participants are described as moving 'to' or 'from'). A shift of this kind involves discontinuity with what has gone before and so often corresponds to the opening of a new episode.

[22] Campbell (2015), p.173.

[23] (1) Connectives and asyndeton; (2) Summary statements; (3) Chiastic structures or similar structure); (4) Inclusio; (5) Rhetorical questions; (6) "Redundant" noun phrases; (7) Vocatives; (8) Changes of cast (i.e., the participants interacting with the main character); (9) Change in the role of the main character; (10) Verbal changes (tense, aspect, mood, person); (11) Back Reference (beginning a sentence by referring to previous events); (12) Use of *erchomai* to change the "deictic center." 'Introduction to Boundary Features,' *Advanced Greek: Analyzing the Narrative Discourse of Mark 1-8*

Conclusion

Having spent many hours with the BibleMesh course on discourse grammar over the last two months, I wholeheartedly commend it to anyone who has a reasonable level of competence in New Testament Greek - certainly anyone who has a seminary training in Greek (even if it was a few years ago now) should be able to benefit from this course. I recommend it to pastors in particular who are working with the original language in their preparation for preaching from New Testament narrative - it will deepen and enrich your understanding of the text and help you to read it with greater sensitivity and exegetical precision. This course would be an ideal component for a period of study leave - eight weeks is ideal, but it could certainly be compressed into a shorter period. Or if you are able to carve an hour a day out of your normal schedule then it could be fitted into a quieter period of ministry.

For those (especially pastors) who have never had the opportunity to learn Greek or Hebrew, I thoroughly recommend the beginners' courses in both languages that BibleMesh offers.

I would encourage pastors to engage with the ever-increasing and accessible material on linguistics in general and discourse analysis in particular, and to incorporate this discipline into your exegetical work. Discourse analysis features more and more in newer exegetical commentaries.[24] Online resources are also proliferating, in the form of blogs, the BibleMesh website itself, and especially Runge's *Lexham Discourse Greek New Testament* which applies his discourse-analytical approach to the whole New Testament.[25] The Lord has lavished all kinds of riches upon us at this point in history and we should lay hold of every means available to us for understanding his infallible Word more accurately. Working through this fascinating subject with BibleMesh will provide you with an ideal way in to this Aladdin's Cave of discourse analysis!

And to those of us tasked with the responsibility of teaching New Testament Greek to new generations of students - we especially should strive to mine all the insights this discipline can yield. We should try to break free from the straitjackets of traditional ways of thinking about Greek and be open to new ideas. Look for ways to supplement (not replace) traditional grammars with grammar 'above the sentence.'[26]

[24] E.g. the *Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament* series, the *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* series and Runge's *High Definition Commentary* series.

[25] *The Lexham Discourse Greek New Testament* is available in electronic form only as part of the Logos Bible Software system (Runge is Professor in residence at Logos Software).

[26] As Daniel B. Wallace says, in his Foreword to Runge's book on Discourse Grammar (2010), '*Discourse Grammar* is a complement to traditional grammars, rather than in competition with them, although there are times when Runge chastises traditional grammarians (including me) for missing the forest for the trees.' Runge (2010), p.xvi.

FOR GOODNESS' SAKE

WORDS, DEEDS AND MISSION: A GUIDE FOR DEACONS

'Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth' (1 John 3:17)

Joel Loughridge

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Social justice, social action, ministries of mercy: words that can stir strong emotions and a wide range of reactions. Some decry the Church's lack of action, while others warn of a drift into a social gospel. Many want the Church to do more deeds, others want the Church to focus more on words. How do words and deeds fit together in the mission and work of the Church?[1] As a Church can we do good deeds just for the sake of doing good?

Take a typical example faced by Reformed Churches: some enthusiastic people in an established Church are concerned by their congregation's lack of answers to the following questions:

- In what practical ways is the Church showing their love and God's love to their neighbours? (Luke 10:27)
- How is the Church loving in deed as well as word? (1 John 3:18)
- How is the Church 'doing good to everyone'? (Galatians 6:10)

They approach Session with a plan to partner with a local charity in opening their premises once a week and providing a warm lunch for the homeless in the town. All goes well until at a church meeting some members get up and complain that the ministry is not really helping people because the gospel isn't proclaimed; that church members are so busy in the kitchen preparing meals that they never get out to speak to people; therefore this ministry is a waste of time and resources. Is this ministry a waste of time? Is it not enough that this Church is doing good for goodness' sake?

It's an issue often faced when a congregation appoints deacons for the first time. In the run-up to their election, it has likely been stressed that part of their role is to meet physical needs, both within the congregation and outside (Acts 6:1-7). Yet as they begin to discuss this aspect of their work some of the following issues are likely to be raised:

- 'Doesn't the Welfare State look after these things?'
- 'We can't help everyone in need, so how can we limit whom we help? We can't discriminate.'
- 'Most of the people around us aren't really destitute.'
- 'We haven't enough resources to spare to help people outside.'
- 'Sure, their greatest need is forgiveness of sin, so why waste time ministering to the body?'
- 'Many people are in poverty because of their own lifestyle choices – it's their own fault.'
- 'If we can't meet all needs, aren't we better focusing on the Word, rather than discriminating?'

[1] Within this paper I use the terms 'deed', 'deed ministry', 'social action', 'social justice' and 'ministries of mercy' interchangeably. Likewise, I use the terms 'word', 'word ministry', 'preaching' and 'evangelism' interchangeably. While some of the words do have some different shades of meaning, I will use them as fairly blunt instruments in order to keep the scope of the paper broad. The fundamental issue we are considering is how the Church's words and deeds fit with its mission and its work.

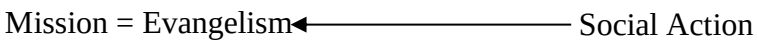
It boils down to the questions: What is the mission of the Church? What is its role in the world? How is it to fulfil the tasks given to it? Is it to minister by words, or by deeds, or by both? If both, then what is the relationship between the two? Is one a means to the other? Is one more important than the other?

There is a whole range of views across the Church, and, more specifically, within Evangelicalism. It's hard to classify the range. They fall right across the whole spectrum from 'Social Gospel' on the left, to 'Preach the Word only' on the right. Along the spectrum there are several key stopping points (though not everyone stops exactly at one of these points).

Position 1

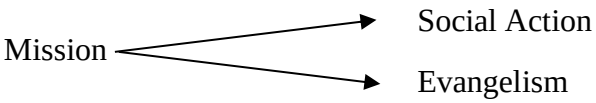
Evangelism = Social Action
This position is not the same as that which sees the mission of the Church as bringing a social gospel. But rather it is thinking that by doing social action we *are* evangelising.

Position 2



Others think of the mission of the Church as evangelism and that social action is merely a way of creating *a means of bringing the Word* to people.

Position 3

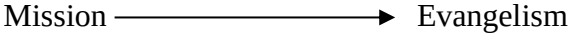


Others see the mission of the Church as doing *both*. This is the typical evangelical position today.

Position 4

Some today see the mission of the Church as *transforming society*, powered by both evangelism and social action. This position, or one like it, is what goes by the term 'missional' today.

Position 5



Some see the mission of the Church as *solely evangelism*. More particularly, some see the role of the Church as solely preaching the Word, since 'faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of God' (Romans 10:17). This view is summed up by Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones:

> The way to tackle the problem of evil is not by tackling sins but sin. And the only way to tackle sin is to convert the sinner. And the only power that can do that is the Gospel. Therefore *the sole business of Christian people in reference to the evils about them is to convert sinners and the sole way to do that is by preaching the Gospel."*[2] [Emphasis mine]
>
> It is not a solution for the problem of man's bodily and temporal needs. Man has necessities far more urgent than the avoidance of physical calamities and material losses.[3]

To the typical Reformed Christian this sounds stirring. To be involved in society is the suspicious activity of liberals who want to water down the gospel; 'Preach the Word!'

But how does this fit with the many commands in Scripture, especially the Old Testament, to care for the needy, with Jesus' example, and with the example of the Church from the first deacons through to today, via Wilberforce's legislative changes and Dr Barnardo's orphanages?[4]

As a Church, can we do good deeds just for the sake of doing good? To answer this we need to consider four areas:

- What motivations do we have to do mercy?
- What is the scope of our mercy?
- What is the mission of the Church?
- How do words and deeds interact?

The Motivations to Mercy

Why should Christians and the Church do good and be involved in doing good?

Motivation to Mercy - the Effects of Sin and Redemption

Sin is simple to define: 'Sin is disobeying or not conforming to God's law in any way' (Shorter Catechism question 14); but its implications are profound. Our sin has had a fourfold impact - on our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others and with creation.

We are alienated from *God*. Sinful people cannot dwell with a holy God. Hence Adam and Eve hid from God after rebelling against his rule (Genesis 3:8); then they were expelled from Eden (Genesis 3:24). At Sinai Israel was not allowed to approach God (Exodus 19:20-22). All the curtains and barriers around the Tabernacle reminded them that, although God was in their midst, he was separated or alienated from them. This is the fundamental source of all our problems - all other problems flow from it.

We are alienated from *ourselves*. Sin leads to guilt, shame and fear (Genesis 3:8-10), where once there was peace. Created to know and serve God, our separation from him profoundly alters our view of ourselves, leading us to seek purpose, relationship and self-worth in things apart from God. These

[2] Iain Murray, *D.M. Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years*, p.198.
[3] Iain Murray, *D.M. Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith*, p.27.
[4] An understanding of the history of social action within evangelicalism is helpful to understand why this subject produces such strong reactions, and why we are in the position we are in. A short history is provided in the Appendix.

things cannot fill the God-shaped hole in our lives. As a result we experience loss of meaning, insecurity and lack of self-worth.

We are alienated from *others*. Self-centred humans fight with each other (James 4:1-3). Like ships sailing in a formation; if the steering gears are out of order then they cannot avoid collisions. Our alienation from God and ourselves sets us on a collision course with each other. All social problems are the result of sin, directly or indirectly.

We are alienated from *creation*. The ground is cursed because of our sin (Genesis 3:17), creation subject to futility and in bondage to corruption (Romans 8:19-22). Sin's curse and impact make it difficult for us to fulfil the 'Cultural Mandate' given us by God: 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' (Genesis 1:28).

Sin touches so much more than just our souls, it corrupts every aspect of life. Think of it as four concentric circles, with our alienation from God at the centre and the effects of sin radiating out like ripples in a pond, to ourselves, others and creation.

So, likewise, God's saving work transforms so much more than just our souls. It transforms every aspect of life. The Bible knows nothing of the distinction between the material as 'bad' and the immaterial as 'good'. Since God's concern is not limited to our souls, neither should our concern for people and the world. Christians' lives should show the totality of God's saving care in relation to our relationships to God, ourselves, others and creation.

Motivation to Mercy - it is Commanded by God

Many Scriptures make clear God's command to care for others. Christ taught that the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:39). This is a summary of the second table of the Law (Commandments 5-10). Therefore, the duty of neighbour-love is required of all, not just of Christians. Obedience to God requires love for your neighbour.

Leviticus 19:9-18, which Christ was quoting in Matthew 22, spells out what loving your neighbour looks like with your possessions (9-10), words (11-12), actions (13-14), judgements (15-16) and attitudes (17-18).

Israel is often rebuked by the prophets for her failure to fulfil this social command. They spell out what it should look like:

> Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause' (Isaiah 1:16-17)
>
> Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:6-7)
>
> He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Obedience to God's commands requires us to do good in the world. It is more than not doing evil to others, it entails doing good to them – 'as you love yourself'.

Motivation to Mercy - the Welfare of the Culture Impacts on our Welfare

> But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:7)

This verse is often used to support the fact that we should be seeking the welfare of our city. The Hebrew word used is *shalom*, which means wholeness, completeness, soundness, well-being. At its fullest it means 'Complete reconciliation…the fullest flourishing in every dimension – physical, emotional, social, spiritual – because all relationships are right, perfect and filled with joy.'[5]

Thus many modern writers interpret Jeremiah 29 as calling us to work towards the eternal blessedness of the cities in which we live by engaging in their social structures. The fulness of the New Heavens and New Earth and eternal security in and with God – this is what we are to be seeking for our cities. *Ultimate eternal peace* for our cities.

However, *shalom* does not always have this full meaning,[6] and it seems unlikely that this is what the Jews are to be seeking for Babylon. Jeremiah 50-51 (see especially 50:2, 9; 51:64) makes it clear that God's purpose for Babylon is not ultimate eternal peace, but destruction. The Jews are to seek Babylon's welfare, not for Babylon's sake, but for their own sake: 'in its welfare you will find your welfare' (Jeremiah 29:7).

Jeremiah 29 does teach us to seek the welfare of the city, but primarily *for our own sake*. When life is well in the city, life is well with God's people. As exiles and strangers in the world we are to engage the culture in which we live, especially by prayer, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life (1 Peter 2:11; 1 Timothy 2:1-2). Obviously, we are to seek the welfare of all men for their sake and not just our own sake, but not on the basis of Jeremiah 29. Rather, it is done on the basis of God's command 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

Motivation to Mercy - Wise Living

The book of Proverbs makes the link between wisdom, righteousness and social justice:

> A righteous man knows the rights of the poor; a wicked man does not understand such knowledge (Proverbs 29:7).
>
> Whoever despises his neighbour is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor (Proverbs 14:21)
>
> Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor (Proverbs 22:9).

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[5] Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, p.174.

[6] Genesis 43:27 – 'shalom' refers to the simple health and well-being of Jacob. 1 Kings 5:12 – 'shalom' refers to peace between King Solomon and Hiram.

While Proverbs views life through the lens of Israel, its principles are less particularly Jewish than the rest of the Old Testament, and more generally about mankind. This means that their application is more general than just the theocratic nation of Israel. Much of what the Law and Prophets say applies directly to Israel and indirectly to mankind. But Proverbs applies directly to mankind, not just Israel. The above verses show that having a concern for social justice is an integral part of living wisely.[7]

Motivation to Mercy - the Character of God

Psalm 146:7-9 says that God is the one who: gives justice to the oppressed; provides for the poor; liberates the prisoner; raises the lowly; watches over sojourners, widows and fatherless – the marginalised and vulnerable (see also Deuteronomy 10:12-19). If God is like this, so must his people be.

In light of God's character described in Psalm 146, and throughout the Bible, coupled with repeated strong warnings to the rich (e.g. James 5:1-6), can we speak, as some do, of 'God's preferential option or bias for the poor'? This language can be misleading, implying it is better in God's eyes to be poor than rich, or that there is something intrinsically wrong with being rich.

> Not all the poor are objects of preference. Poverty may be the result of foolishness or rebellion [Proverbs 10:4], while wealth may be the result of Godly wisdom and blessing (Proverbs 8:12, 18).[8]

The Bible's view of wealth and poverty is complex:[9]

- The poor seemed to be on safer ground around Jesus, yet the Bible is full of examples of godly rich people.
- Riches are a blessing from God, yet put you in great spiritual danger.
- Jesus and the prophets had little positive to say about the rich, yet God placed Adam and Eve in a paradise of plenty.

So we must be careful in speaking about the Bible's view of wealth and poverty and 'God's preference for the poor'. John Stott thinks that it would be better to speak of 'God's mission priority' for the poor:

> Because of God's own care for the poor, and because of their exploitation by the unscrupulous and their neglect by the church, they should now receive a positive or reverse discrimination. The church should concentrate its mission where the need is greatest.[10]

However, Stott's language is even more misleading than what he seeks to correct. There is no hint in the New Testament that Jesus or the Apostles gave the poor a priority in mission. There are two other explanations for God's seeming preference or bias to the poor.

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[7] Some use Job as an example of care for the needy (e.g. Job 31:13-38) in this category as he is the 'least Jewish of all OT Books'. But it overlooks the fact that Job was no mere private citizen – he was a judge and a prince, like a king (Job 29:7-9,25).

[8] Duane Litfen, *Word Versus Deed*, p.213.

[9] For a good illustration of the complexities see Kevin De Young and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* p.177.

[10] John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, p.308.

First, God is a God of justice, who sides with the unjustly treated:

> It is not that God is biased in some way, still less that the poor are more deserving because of their poverty. Rather because he is a God of justice, God opposes those who perpetrate injustice and he sides with the victims of oppression.[11]

Second, wealth tends to lead to pride, which is contrary to God's ways of working in the world:

> The poor, by contrast, are far more conscious of their need and thus more willing to entrust themselves to God. According to the Bible, God refuses to accommodate human pride. He *"prefers," therefore, to bypass the proud and achieve his purposes through those who lack status and power in the world.* The issue is not that the poor are the neediest and thus the first in line for God's care; an infinite God scarcely needs us to queue for his attention. There is something larger and more significant at stake. "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise… what is weak in the world to shame the strong…what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)…If we may speak at all about a divine "preference for the poor" it's not simply that the poor are materially lacking; God is drawn to the poor because it is from their number that he typically finds those willing to abandon themselves to him in love and faith.[12] [Emphasis added]

Therefore, we can in some respects speak of God's preference for the poor, but not in the way that many do. However, God's character, particularly his justice, means his children, who are to bear the family likeness, should have a particular concern for the poor and vulnerable.

Motivation to Mercy - Showing the World What God is Like

Since justice, mercy and care for the vulnerable reflect God's character, by doing these things we are not only like him but we show him to the world:

> As people of the Kingdom we are to be salt and light in a fallen world. That is, we are to be *different,* and by those good deeds together with our true words, we are to testify to God's character.[13]

Motivation to Mercy - Showing the Fruit of the Spirit

Good works are the result of God's Spirit dwelling in us (Galatians 5:22-23). If we are Christians we cannot *not* do good.

Motivation to Mercy - Winning a Hearing for the Gospel

We will return to this point later because it lies at the heart of the discussion about our words and deeds. But to make the point that good deeds win a hearing for the gospel, consider Paul's detailed practical instructions about godly living in Titus and the three purposes he gives:

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[11] Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor,* p.19.
[12] Litfen, p.214.
[13] DeYoung and Gilbert, p.226.

- '...so that the word of God may not be reviled' (2:5).
- '...so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing to say against us' (2:8).
- '...so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour' (2:10).

'In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven' (Matthew 5:16).

Motivation to Mercy - the Example of Jesus

Jesus' own ministry was characterised by being mighty in word and deed (Luke 24:19). Matthew 4:23 describes his ministry as teaching, proclaiming and healing.

Yet, we must be careful about drawing a straight line between Jesus' work and our work. We will see later that our mission is not the same as Jesus' mission. Nor must we draw a straight line between the works that the disciples were sent out to do in Matthew 10 and what Jesus sends us to do. Jesus' deeds, and those he sent the disciples to do in Matthew 10, were particular signs for that particular time. The language of Matthew 10:8 deliberately echoes Isaiah 35 – these acts are signs of God coming to save his people. They are signs that the Kingdom has come. And the Kingdom has uniquely come in the presence of the King – Jesus. So Jesus' ministry, and the ministry he sends the apostles out to do, are to point to the coming of the Divine King.

Matthew also links Jesus' miraculous works to his work of atonement at the cross. In Matthew 8:17 he uses the language of Isaiah 53 to speak of Jesus' healings. But Isaiah 53 speaks primarily of Christ's work in bearing our sins. He is deliberately drawing a link in our minds between Jesus' healings and his work on the cross. These mighty deeds point to spiritual realities achieved at the cross.

Jesus' great deeds marked him as a prophet, as *the prophet*, standing in the great tradition of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:10-11) and Elijah (1 Kings 17:23-24). This is particularly noted by the disciples on the Emmaus Road: '...a man who was a *prophet* mighty in deed and word' (Luke 24:19).

It is also simplistic to say, 'The Apostles did good, so we must do good.' This is the very mistake Charismatics make when they say, 'Jesus and the Apostles healed so we must heal.' They fail to recognise the *particular* purpose of the *apostles'* deeds: pointing to the King's presence (as outlined above) and authenticating the special witness of the apostles and their apostolic message (Acts 2:22; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Romans 15:18-19 and Hebrews 2:3-4).[14] Jesus and the Apostles' mighty deeds had a particular purpose and function that has now passed.

Yet the meaning of Jesus' miracles and mighty deeds is not exhausted by describing them as pointers to the King, pointers to spiritual realities and authentications of God's messengers and message. The feeding of the 4,000 in a desolate place was a sign to his identity as the God of the Old Testament who miraculously provided bread in the wilderness. But it was also motivated by compassion (Matthew 15:32). Jesus was stirred to act by the compassion he felt when he saw the people like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). Jesus' ministry was marked by both words and deeds. He was a man mighty in word and deed (Luke 24:19).

[14] See John MacArthur, *Strange Fire,* p.173f for a fuller defence of this.

Motivation to Mercy - Our Treatment by Jesus

In Luke 10 Jesus uses the Parable of the Good Samaritan to show the extent of the love that is required by God. First of all, he sets an impossibly high standard of law-keeping to inherit eternal life – perfect love for God and for your neighbour. Furthermore, the neighbours we are to love are anybody in need, even our enemies. Yet in his telling of the parable, he cleverly puts *the Jew* in the position of need. It is a Jew who needs help from the Samaritan, not the Samaritan from the Jew. The listener is meant to see that *he is the one in need* of help from his enemy. His only hope of rescue is in mercy from one who is his enemy.

Tim Keller says, 'In the parable Jesus is humbling us with the mercy God *requires* [meeting the second great commandment] so that we can receive the mercy God *offers*.'[15] The parable shows us the pattern of God's mercy. We are the one lying helpless in the road, spiritually bankrupt and dead, unable to meet the demands of the Law. Jesus Christ is our natural enemy (because of our breaking of his Law) who stops and shows us costly mercy.

Reflecting on the mercy we have received deals with three common objections to mercy ministries. Firstly, that the needy person is responsible for their own position. This may be true. But we were responsible for our own position as enemies of God (Romans 5:10) when Jesus showed mercy to us. Secondly, the needy person may have a poor character, be ungrateful and undeserving. So were we when we received mercy - we had a poor character and did not deserve mercy. We were still in our sins when Christ died for us. Thirdly, we may say our money is our own. So might Christ have said his blood was his own.

An understanding of who we were and how we got there, alongside an understanding of who we are now and how we got here, will drive us to show *costly mercy to the needy, even our enemies.*

Motivation to Mercy - Our Standing Before God

We stand as guilty sinners before God, deserving everlasting wrath as punishment. But for those who repent and believe in Jesus, he has stood in their place. All the punishment we deserve was poured out on him at the cross. All the blessing he earned, by his perfect law-keeping, is given to us. This is justification by faith. We stand loved and treated by God as if we had kept the law the way Jesus did. We are 'justified by faith apart from works of the law' (Romans 3:28).

But James asks us:

> What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?...So faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead. (James 2:14,17).

While seeming to contradict each other, James and Paul actually complement each other. We *get into* relationship with God by faith, but the *proof* that we have faith is a changed life of good works. True faith will always produce a changed life. James 2:15-16 describes these works as providing for the needs of poor brothers. Keller sums it up well: 'A life poured out in deeds of service to the poor is the inevitable sign of any real, true justifying gospel faith.'[16]

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[15] Tim Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, p.67.
[16] Keller, *Generous Justice*, p.99.

Understanding this will give us fresh motivations for acting mercifully.

God could not just disregard the Law's demands, so had to send his Son to meet the requirements of the broken Law. Thus the Law, which *demands* love for your neighbour, cannot be treated lightly. Jesus died because of our failure to love our neighbour as ourselves.

We are the spiritually poor (Matthew 5:3), morally bankrupt with no means to pay our debts before God. We were helpless and did not pull ourselves up spiritually. This should give us deep sympathy with the poor who are economically bankrupt and cannot pull themselves up. We should see a reflection of ourselves – we who needed a gracious spiritual intervention: 'So our hearts should go out without an ounce of superiority or indifference.'[17]

It gives us a new message for the poor. For those whom society labels as failures, without hope of getting out of the cycle of failure, we can say that before God, by his gracious action, their status can be that of one loved unconditionally, irrespective of achievements in life.

Clearly when we understand our standing before God, our view of and our message to the needy are radically transformed.

The Scope of Mercy

If the above reasons build the case that we should be people of deeds, the next question is: to whom? Should we discriminate between Christians and non-Christians? Are we responsible for all the poor in our society and in the world?

Many modern writers give the impression that it is our responsibility to ensure all the poor in society are cared for, and that we do great injustices if we do not. But it is beyond doubt that the vast majority of the Bible's references to care for the poor is to the needy within the covenant, that is, within God's people. Our first duty of care is to the Church, and we do have a responsibility to see that all within the covenant community are cared for. But not all the scriptural references are to those inside the Church. We are to love our neighbour, even our enemy. Paul's simple instruction sums up perfectly the Bible's teaching: 'As we have opportunity, let us do good *to everyone*, and *especially* to those who are of the household of faith' (Galatians 6:10).

We must not overlook the first part of the verse: 'As we have opportunity'. The closer the need, the greater the opportunity, and the greater the obligation to do good. Our opportunities are limited by space, time, kinship and familiarity. Thus, the needy in our neighbourhood have a greater claim on most of us than the slums of Rio. Understanding this principle of 'moral proximity'[18] frees us *from* much guilt and frees us *to* caring for those who need us most.

[17] *Ibid.*, p.103.
[18] DeYoung and Gilbert, p.183.

Critical Distinctions

Having seen that we should minister by deed as well as word, we come shortly to look at the key question of how word and deed relate. But before we come to that question, we need to make a few distinctions.

The Mission of the Church and the Work of the Church

It is important to distinguish between the *mission* of the Church and the *work* of the Church. If we don't, we can end up talking past each other. Some may define the mission of the Church as:

- Glorifying God and enjoying him forever,
- Loving God and loving your neighbour,
- Trusting and obeying.

These are broad definitions. The problem is that, if we define the mission of the Church as everything the Church does, then nothing is mission. We need to make a distinction between what the Church *does* and what the Church is *sent* out into the world to accomplish. There are many things that the Church does, but there are not many things that the Church is sent to do.

The Church's *work* is to worship, to order (sacraments and discipline) and to serve. But mission is not every work we do in obedience to Christ or in his name – *mission* is what we are sent to accomplish.

The Church and Individual Christians

While the terms are not ideal, we need to make a distinction between 'the Church' as an institution and 'the church' as comprised of individual Christians. There is a sense in which all Christians everywhere are 'the church', but 'the Church' as an institution is more than just a bunch of individual Christians. The Church as an institution is marked by the preaching of the Word, the sacraments and discipline. It is comprised of members who have covenanted together and is ruled over by officers. It is a definite body, given commands by Christ its head. The Church is not commanded to do all that individual Christians are commanded to do. For example, individual Christians are to love their wives. The Church does not have a wife to love! Neither are individual Christians commanded to do all the Church is commanded to do.

Lack of clarity over these distinctions is probably the root of much of the current disagreement over the mission of the Church.

The Mission of the Church

With these distinctions made we can now look at what is the mission of the Church. What is the institution of the Church sent out into the world to do?

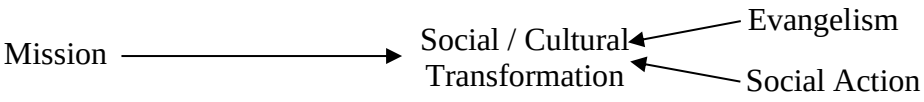
Missional theology

Many evangelicals today define the mission of the Church as something like 'partnering with God in his redemptive mission in the world.'[19] Genesis 12:1-3 is taken as God's commission to Abraham, and so to the Church. 'Go and bless' - a command for the children of Abraham to help the nations experience all the good gifts that God longs for them to enjoy.

Others take Exodus 19:5-6 as the Church's mission: 'God confers on Israel the role of being his priesthood in the midst of the nations…Just as it was the role of the priests to bless the Israelites, so it would be the role of Israel as a whole ultimately to be a blessing to the nations.'[20]

Others take Luke 4:18-19 as setting forth Jesus' mission as Messiah and social liberator, transforming social structures and bringing God's creation back to Shalom.

These views reflect the thought that our mission is to *participate in God's mission in the world*.[21] God is bringing his Kingdom and we partner with him to transform society and redeem culture (Position 4):



This is what is known broadly as 'missional theology'. Sometimes 'missional' has a narrow use, describing an approach to mission which asks the question, 'What would a missionary to this place look like?' But often it has this wider sense of partnering in God's mission.

However, DeYoung and Gilbert carefully deal with these passages and show that Genesis 12 is not a community-blessing programme purveyed by the chosen family. Rather the chosen family are recipients of blessing. Regarding Exodus 19, they give five reasons why the phrase 'kingdom of priests' does not mean Israel will mediate God's blessings by incarnational presence. They also show that Jesus' mission, laid out in Luke 4, is not a mission of structural change and social transformation, but a mission to *announce* the good news of his saving power and merciful reign to all those broken-hearted – that is, poor – enough to believe.

The Great Commission

De Young and Gilbert proceed to give five reasons why we should focus on the Great Commission to get our theology of mission:

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[19] Reggie McNeill, cited in DeYoung and Gilbert, p.20.
[20] Chris Wright, *The Mission of God*, p.331.
[21] *Ibid.*, p.23.

- It is better to ground what we *must* do in mission on Scripture's explicit commands. Much thinking in missions today makes the mistake of assuming whatever God is doing in the world we must be doing.
- We should look to the New Testament for a theology of mission more than the Old. While it is not being devoid of mission theology, in the Old Testament the people of God are never exhorted to engage in intentional cross-cultural mission.
- Jesus, as Head of the Church, has the right to send the Church, as he was sent by the Father (John 20:21)
- The placement of the Great Commission passages indicates strategic importance.
- The Great Commission passages sum up many of the major themes of the Gospels.

Thus it is appropriate to focus on the Great Commission passages[22] to determine the mission of the Church.

Probably the most debated passage is John 20:21, where Jesus says: 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' How does the exalted Christ carry out his mission through us? John Stott's reading of this passage has been very influential. Stott held that our mission is to be 'incarnational'. We agree that mission should be 'incarnational' in the sense of living amongst people and emulating Jesus' humility and sacrifice. But often more is meant by 'incarnational' – it means modelling our mission on Christ and 'therefore our mission, like his, is to be one of *service*' [Emphasis added][23] This 'service' is *meeting human need*, whether spiritual or physical. It leads to a position where evangelism and social action are full partners in Christian mission (Position 3 above. Position 4 has really grown out of position 3.)

However, 'service' is too broad a definition of Jesus' mission. Jesus' mission was the *proclamation* of the gospel through teaching, the *corroboration* of the gospel through miracles and the *accomplishment* of the gospel in his death and resurrection. John portrays Jesus' mission as: being sent to save people from condemnation (3:17), being lifted up so that believers could have eternal life (3:14-14) and that whoever feeds on him might live forever (6:57-58). In Mark, Jesus declares he came to preach (1:38), call sinners (2:17), and give his life as a ransom for many (10:45).

Furthermore, it is unwise to assume that, because we are sent as Jesus is sent, that we have the same mission. *What Jesus came to do was absolutely unique.* Our role is to *bear witness* to what he has done.

DeYoung and Gilbert conclude, after presenting evidence from the Great Commission passages, the early church in Acts, and the Life of the Apostle Paul, that the mission of the Church is:

> To go into the world and make disciples by declaring the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of the Father.[24]

This is what the Church has been *sent* to do. This is not the same as everything the Church *does*. The mission includes teaching disciples to observe all that Jesus has commanded. But that doesn't mean

[22] Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 13:10; 14:9; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8; John 20:21.
[23] Stott, quoted in DeYoung and Gilbert, p.54.
[24] DeYoung and Gilbert, p.62.

that everything we do in obedience to Christ should be understood as part of the Church's mission. The mission is more specific than that. 'It is best to speak of the mission of the church, strictly conceived, as being the proclamation of the Word.'[25]

As Covenanters committed to the Lordship of Christ, we would agree with much of what someone like Chris Wright says about the totality of God's mission in redeeming everything in creation.[26] But we disagree with what he means by, 'God's calling of the church…to be the *agent* of God's blessing to the nations.' In missional theology this often means *doing* all that God does, *in his place* in the world, but that is not so. The Church is the *witness* to God's mission, the witness to all that God does.

> The Christian church, in reference to the world, is fitted to be a witness; it is neither designed nor adapted to be a substitute for Christ...[it is] the witness on this earth, silently by its public ordinances, or articulately by its preached word, pointing upward to Christ, avowing its own insufficency and dependence, and bearing testimony to His power and grace.[27]

This is not to say *individual Christians* cannot and should not engage with culture, seek peace and justice or work to show the results of Christ's Kingship in every area of life.

> More broadly conceived, it is the work of Christians in the world to minister in word and deed and to gather together to do justice.[28]

This is not just our responsibility as subjects of the King, living in his kingdom, in obedience to him, but also in fulfilling the 'Cultural Mandate' given by the King to mankind at creation to fill the earth and subdue it. But we must not confuse the 'Cultural Mandate' given to all mankind with the Great Commission given to the Church.

It is part of the Church's work to help believers shape every area of their lives with the gospel, teaching them to obey everything that God has commanded. But 'The church as an institution doesn't need to do everything it equips its members to do.'[29]

The Kingdom of God - his rule over his people - will be fully established only when he returns in glory, by his hand alone. It does not grow or expand, but it can break in more and more in this present age. We do not build it, nor establish it, nor usher it in, nor even build for the Kingdom, but rather we bear witness to the fact that it has come, we call the world to enter its blessings and declare to them how they can do so. 'We are subjects and heralds, not agents of the Kingdom.'[30]

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[25] Keller, *Generous Justice*, p.216n, 128.
[26] Wright, p.67. He gives 5 bullet points summarising God's mission, four of which we would agree with.
[27] James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, Vol. I, p.87.
[28] Keller, *Generous Justice*, p.216n, 128.
[29] *Ibid.*, p.144. It should be noted that Keller is somewhat confusing on the mission of the Church. His earlier book *Ministries of Mercy* seems to advocate that it is the church's mission to bring the Kingdom: 'the church is to be an agent of the Kingdom. It is not only to model it, but it is to spread it' (p.54). 'The ministry of mercy is an expression of the mission of the church' (p.83). He is accused of teaching a twofold mission of the church in the world by Peter Naylor in *Engaging with Keller* (p.136). This seems fair given the quotes supplied. Yet Keller's words in the above two notes are quoted approvingly by DeYoung and Gilbert (p.231), who are arguing for a single mission for the church. Perhaps Keller could be clearer and more precise in talking of the Church, its mission and individual Christians. Perhaps Peter Naylor could be more generous. Keller is not alone though in not being very clear on the mission of the Church and the work of individual believers. Litfen begins *Word Versus Deed* by fudging the distinction - not very helpful for a book on an issue where the distinction is vital! I suspect that a lot of the current discussion would be helped if people were clearer on it.
[30] DeYoung and Gilbert, p.139.

Conclusion: Words AND Deeds

So, having seen that we are to do acts of mercy, but that it is the mission of the Church to make disciples by proclaiming the Gospel, how do we relate the two?

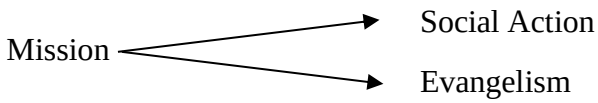
Position 1

Evangelism = Social action

This is more subtle than the old liberal 'Social Gospel'. It saw no need for evangelism; the good news *was* social change. But more subtly, people can fall prey to thinking they are evangelising when they are only doing good, i.e. serving at the foodbank *is* evangelism.

There are two key differences between social action and evangelism. Firstly, social action is effecting change in history, evangelism is effecting eschatological change. Changes wrought by social action can be undone. Changes wrought by evangelism cannot. Secondly, social action, at its best is about harnessing resources within a community. Evangelism is about acknowledging our helplessness and seeking a solution from outside – God. We reject any view which equates them. Word and deed are separate; the gospel must be *proclaimed.*

Position 3



We reject Stott's view, and the view of mainstream evangelicalism, that the Church is to do both as its mission, that they are partners standing independent of the other, and each is an end in itself.

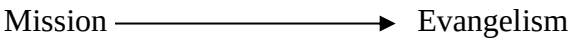
The mission of the Church is to proclaim the gospel. Although Stott and others would say that these are like two wings on a bird and so inseparable, Keller rightly points out that:

> while Stott clearly does not envision social concern being completely divorced from evangelism, his statement seems to open up the possibility.[31]

Even Tim Chester, who seems on the surface to agree with Stott, acknowledges that:

> Many evangelicals want to argue they are equal activities. They describe them as two wings of a bird or the blades of a pair of scissors. While evangelism and social action are partners in many situations, it is inadequate to think of them as corresponding activities of equal impact…Social action can demonstrate the gospel, but without the gospel message it is like a signpost pointing nowhere, indeed, in the wrong direction.[32]

Position 5



[31] Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, p.118, n.6.
[32] Chester, p.65.

We also reject what we have described as Lloyd-Jones' view that, 'our sole business in reference to the evils about [us] is to convert sinners and the sole way to do that is by preaching the gospel.'[33]

We have seen many reasons from Scripture that Christians should be involved in social action. While acknowledging this view springs from a faith in the power of the Gospel to save sinners, it fails to account for how integral works are to our faith: 'So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead' (James 2:17). Our deeds are a testimony to the veracity of our faith.

Position 2

Mission = Evangelism ◄——————— Mercy

Reformed people, who don't go as far as Lloyd-Jones, yet holding to the primacy of evangelism, tend to end up with mercy as a means to this end. In this case social action is conducted to get names for the evangelism ministry.

There is an element of truth in this view - we do mercy to win a hearing for the gospel, the proclamation of which is primary. But to relegate it as *a mere means to an end* does not do justice to the importance of mercy in showing God's character, in following Jesus' example, or in obeying God's command to love our neighbour.

A New Position

To form a right understanding of the role of social action in the mission of the Church we must hold several things in tension:

- Social action and evangelism are *separate* activities.
- *Proclamation is central* because it addresses the most radical and fundamental need – our alienation from God. This is what we've been *sent* to do. 'Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ' (Romans 10:17).
- Evangelism and social action are *inseparable* (James 2:17)

This leaves us with a position something like this:

Evangelism is primary over deeds as the mission given to the Church by her King. Yet this is *accompanied* by social action, in its own right. It should always surround the witness of the Church, yet never be primary.

[33] Iain Murray, *D.M. Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years,* p. 198.

> Proclamation should be central, but a centre implies a context and our proclamation should take place in the context of a life of love.[34]
>
> We are of the strong opinion that the Bible teaches that we Christians are to be a people of both declaration and demonstration, and that our churches are to be communities of both declaration and demonstration.[35]

If we are Christians whose compassion is stirred by the needs of the whole person - physical, emotional and spiritual – then readily sharing the gospel will always be at the forefront of our minds. We will understand that this is the most loving thing we can do.

Conversely, doing good to people without explaining the gospel is still a good thing - it's driven by Christ's kingship in all of life. Even if it's only physical help, it glorifies God. Yet we must also appreciate that this is not fulfilling the Church's mission. 'It is simply doing what redeemed humans do.'[36] Good for goodness' sake? Yes.

Getting the Balance

At the close of their book, DeYoung and Gilbert help us reach a balanced view. Given that the Church's mission is the proclamation of the Word, which ought to be accompanied by good deeds: *the Church should spend its time and resources on projects that more directly, rather than less directly, fulfil its mission.*

They give a helpful example:

> Imagine a company whose mission it is to make and sell widgets. Would it be *illegitimate* for that company to spend some of its resources holding a company picnic for its employees? No. Actually, the company's leaders may well decide that a picnic will further the company's mission of selling widgets by raising company morale, fostering teamwork, and so on. Of course, the picnic furthers that mission more *indirectly* than buying airtime for a widget commercial, but it still furthers the mission.[37] [Emphasis original.]

This means that not all Church activities will always be a direct fulfilment of its mission. But leaders will lean towards activities that more directly support the mission of the Church. When discipleship is central, we will always be asking how the good deeds we undertake will give us an opportunity to bear witness to Jesus Christ. 'Ultimately, if the church doesn't preach Christ crucified…no one and nothing else will.'[38]

So, in the example given at the start, of a Church ministry providing warm meals but little to no opportunity to bring the Word, is this sort of ministry acceptable for the Church? It is acceptable to do good for goodness' sake. But is it wise use of Church resources to pour a lot into a ministry that does not directly support its mission? Ultimately only the elders and deacons can answer that. It is their responsibility to evaluate all ministries in terms of how they tend towards directly supporting the mission.

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[34] Chester, p.66.
[35] DeYoung and Gilbert, p.223.
[36] *Ibid.*, p.229.
[37] *Ibid.*, p.234.
[38] *Ibid.*, p.238.

The Church is not the only vehicle for doing good in the world. And so other non-church organisations, Christian or non-Christian can be used to fulfil our duties as individual Christians - to work out the Kingship of Christ in every area of life and to love our neighbour as ourselves.[39] *But these must not distract from, nor substitute for, our involvement in the Church. It is the only vehicle for mission.* The Church can also work alongside other organisations, but again only as a means of fulfilling our mission, either directly or indirectly. The Church must keep its narrow focus on the task given her by her Lord.

This is where the task of deacons is so important. From their institution they were to enable the Church to do the good that she ought to, yet let her keep her focus on the mission given.

> [The apostles said] It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:3-4)

The King and Head of the Church has, in his infinite wisdom, built in a mechanism in the Church's structure to maintain this balance. So do the good the Church ought to do, adorn the ministry of the Word with good deeds, and enable the elders to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word – these are the things which work towards the great mission the King left us to do – 'Make disciples of all nations.'

[39] It should go without saying that a Christian organisation is *generally* a better vehicle for this.

Appendix

A Brief History of Social Action and Evangelicalism[40]

To understand why social action generates such strong opinions we must understand something of its history. Before we discuss this issue in more depth it is important to understand the history of social justice, because often men like Martin Lloyd-Jones were reacting against particular dangers. Evangelicals have a long history of commitment to social justice. The Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century began a long tradition of Christian involvement in social issues, including John Wesley, William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect. The 19th Century missionary expansion was marked by a mission of both words and deeds.

The Enlightenment movement of the 18th century elevated human reason above all else. The Romantic movement of the 19th century was a reaction against this. It moved the focus to human emotions and the spiritual. It created a separate sphere for spiritual truth in personal beliefs, whilst everything else (politics, science and economics) was governed by reason. Christian faith became a private matter, with no impact on public life. This laid the foundation for a great pendulum swing between 1900 and 1930 as evangelicals moved away from social action for 5 reasons:

- The fight against theological liberalism – evangelicals concentrated on defending God's Word.
- Rejection of the Social Gospel – which sought to bring about God's Kingdom/salvation through social and political action.
- The First World War laid bare the evils of man and seemed to show that human society was irreformable.
- The rise of premillennialism led to a belief that the world was beyond improvement and only the return of Jesus would put it right – 'no point polishing brass on a sinking ship'.
- Christianity spread amongst the middle classes and with it concern for the poor and powerless decreased.

However, Carl Henry's book *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947) probably began the pendulum swinging back, culminating in the International Congress on World Evangelisation in 1974 at Lausanne, Switzerland. The Lausanne Covenant said:

> Evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty…in the church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary.

Flowing out of the Lausanne Covenant, the 1982 'Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility' clarified the position further, explaining the relationship in three ways:

- Social activity is the consequence of evangelism.
- Social activity can be a bridge to evangelism.
- Social activity is the partner of evangelism – like two wings on a bird. (Position 3 in our scheme.)

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[40] Much of this material is summarised from John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 4th edition, p.25-32; and Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor*, chapters 2 and 4.

This idea was further clarified as 'Integral Mission' by the Micah Network, a group of 250 Christian Relief agencies:

> Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the Gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world we betray the Word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the Word of God we have nothing to bring to the world.

This position is the prevailing view among evangelicals today.[41]

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GOSPEL CONFIDENCE

Jeremy Walker

Jeremy Walker is pastor of Maidenbower Baptist Church, Crawley.

He was something of a Presbyterian statesman. He happened to be passing through a congregation in which I was also present. He heard the minister preach a straightforward sermon calling for repentance and faith. He made a comment afterward, to the effect that he was surprised to find anyone trying to play the role of an evangelist in such a place as this and during such days as these.

Perhaps he was tired. I know that when we are worn with care and many days it is easy to think the worst. Perhaps he was distressed. I know other men who have seen God's favour elsewhere grieving at the lack of gospel appetite in our society. Maybe he was misheard! Perhaps he was just wrong. I have heard the same kind of borderline-hopelessness countless times.

I have seen it and heard it in casual conversation between pastors, over dinner tables and even from the platform at conferences. It seeps out in our conversations and petitions and is reflected in the life of many churches. Men who pray and preach with an eye to something higher are quietly and not-so-quietly dismissed as enthusiasts and ranters.

I recall preaching at a pastors' conference when an unguarded frustration slipped out of my mouth: 'It almost seems like the highest goal our churches have is to die more slowly.' And that spirit grips not just pastors and preachers, but whole congregations and denominations. It bleeds out in the prayer meetings, as we hear the half-quotes and the bleak misinterpretations, as we remind ourselves with mournful sighs that we live in a day of small things. The echoing subtext is that there is not much point.

Circumstantial theology

There is a real danger that our circumstances will drive our theology down a dangerous road. Something of this may be evident at the end of the seventeenth century and into the early years of the eighteenth. English Presbyterianism, under various ugly influences, was sliding into Unitarianism. Meanwhile, many of the Particular Baptists were drifting into hyper-Calvinism. It is fascinating to surmise why that might be the case.

It is worth remembering that the Glorious Revolution of 1689, for all the liberties that it brought, left a sharp sword dangling by a thread above the heads of Dissenters. The Act of Toleration of that year, so gratefully received by those who had been subject to the rigours of state persecution in the previous decades, was a potentially flimsy protection. It was, essentially, a legal umbrella. At the time, all the demands and strictures of what we often call the Clarendon Code - the Corporation Act (1661), the Act of Uniformity (1662), the Conventicle Act (1664), and the Five Mile Act (1665) - all remained on the statute books. These were legislative measures designed to oppress and crush those who would not conform to the rubrics and regulations of the national church at the time. The Act of Toleration opened an umbrella designed to keep the storm of the Clarendon Code at bay. If the government ever chose to furl that umbrella, the fury of the storm could quickly fall again on the unprotected heads of the Nonconformists.

In this context, the impositions that the government of the day imposed probably felt like concessions the church of Christ could make. However, I wonder if the force of those concessions is revealed in everything from the theology to the architecture of those congregations. Look at the buildings of the day, with their great swinging and folding doors, designed to be thrown back to allow the authorities to see that no seditious behaviour was taking place behind closed doors. The churches were free to gather, but they were not free to proselytise. The people could come to them, if they wished, but they could not go to the people. Other legislation persisted, pressing Dissenters into second-class citizens in the social structures of the day.

Perhaps more dangerously, I wonder if the pressures of their circumstances are revealed in their theology. The Baptists of that period developed a theology that presented the church as a garden enclosed, drawing on the imagery of the Song of Solomon 4:12: 'A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.' I have a suspicion, hard to prove, that some Baptist preachers and theologians may have found it unconsciously easier to craft theological emphases that justified their behaviour under these circumstances than they did to hold fast to everything and keep fighting at the very moment in which they had been granted some relief. Perhaps those subtle shifts seemed to lie more on the fringes of their system than at its core.

On one level, I would not blame them for this. Read only a few histories of the sufferings of non-conforming Presbyterians and Independents (Congregationalists and Baptists) and one can quickly understand how any kind of freedoms might have been attractive enough to embrace and defend. However, the net effect seems to have been, over time, a hardening and a chilling. True, while among others the very truth of God was being shaded and denied, the nature of God and the doctrines of his grace were being maintained among the Baptists. But they were like jewels locked away in a chest, family treasures to be taken out from time to time and relished, but nothing to offer to others. After a while, the church which should have been the pillar and ground of the truth, was in danger of becoming the vault and shroud of the truth.

That suggestion is contentious, I know, but I ask simply that you admit the plausibility of the possibility. My point, then, is this: are we in danger of doing the same sort of thing?

What's the point?

Are we in danger of fitting our theology and practice, our faith and life, into a form that answers to our circumstances? Or are we interpreting and responding to our circumstances according to a theology that is governed by the Word of God? Have we persuaded ourselves that we are living in a day of small things, and so our preaching and our praying, our labouring and our serving, reflect that underlying conviction? Have we lost our confidence in the gospel to accomplish God's purposes in building the kingdom of Christ Jesus? Is this one of the reasons for the proliferation of apologetic ministries built upon a veneration of the human mind and a practical evidentialism? Does this lie behind the ongoing and sometimes increasing obsession with the kind of presentation that catches the eye and hooks the ear, without necessarily penetrating the soul? Could this lie behind the decline of forceful gospel preaching, and the insistence on a kind of rolling exposition, all good stuff but often lacking point and thrust? Many evangelistic endeavours are dismissed as old-school. We have every reason, so we may think, to sink into a numbing lassitude when urged to put in some hard yards for the sake of the gospel. Could this be the reason why, when we do hear a sermon aimed at the conscience, calling for repentance and faith, we sigh a little and - without faith ourselves - conclude that it is all pointless in such a place as this and during such days as these? After all, what is the point?

If anyone might have reached such a conclusion based on circumstances alone, it might have been the apostle Paul as he contemplated his arrival in Rome. And yet, writing to the believers who have already made their home in the capital of the empire, he makes his intention plain: 'So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also' (Romans 1:15). Far from fear and uncertainty, Paul heads to Rome with expectant eagerness. It is one of the great ancient centres of godless politics, economics, culture, intellect and immorality. If the gospel were going to prove a waste of time and energy anywhere, it would be pagan Rome. Paul will nevertheless go there not to gawp as a tourist but to gospel as an evangelist. And he could not be more ready! He is poised for the preaching of God's good news. Can you imagine how the strategists of today might offer him some counsel! Perhaps they would applaud him standing at the headwaters of culture so that the streams can trickle down, but preaching the gospel might not quite be the way to go. Perhaps he should start a discussion group, or maybe walk around the city a bit to soak in society's expectations and get into the groove of their thinking…you know, a bit like he did in Athens (Acts 17:16)! Can you imagine the doubts, dissuasions and discouragements to which Paul might have been subjected! And so Paul vindicates his intention with a declaration, based on an assertion, grounded in a foundation.

The unashamed apostle

The declaration is simple: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.' This is why and what he will preach in Rome. Paul knows that in the world the gospel faces a general contempt. It is 'to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness' (1Corinthians 1:23). Natural men consider it foolish or offensive, or both. Nothing much has changed today, for the nature and character of mankind is no different now. It offends and provokes the proud mind and heart of fallen men because it is utterly contrary to all our fallen instincts and expectations. Paul glories in this despised gospel. He is properly proud of it, not ashamed to bring the Word of God concerning Christ to Rome. He will bring in all its fulness and freeness the gospel of God which he promised before through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:1–4).

Of course, Paul can make this gospel inoffensive. He can preach around it so that the offence of the cross ceases (Galatians 5:11). And, of course, when he does so, it will cease to be operative. Does he, then, want his message to be the offensive and effective gospel, or an inoffensive and ineffective substitute? He is not ashamed of the gospel of God, in all its offensiveness to human power and wisdom and righteousness. He goes on to explain why.

How does Paul back up his declaration? What lies behind it is a bold assertion. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Romans 1:16). Despised by men, it remains the dynamite of God! This gospel of Jesus Christ is the message in which and by which God Almighty is at work in the world to save sinners. It is the instrument of the divine triumph, able not only to stand against all the might of imperial Rome but actually to overcome it, heart by heart. Through the proclamation of this good news sinners are saved, whether they were born Jews or Greeks. All who believe, from whatever background or circumstance - whether those privileged Jews or those godless Greeks who are described in Romans 2 - are saved by God's power at work through the gospel. But why is this the case?

So we come to the foundation. Paul keeps digging down, and the ground becomes ever firmer and manifestly able to take the pressure of his intention. Paul's basic confidence is that God's power brings God's truth to bear on man's heart. The substance of this good news of Christ bears the weight of

Paul's confident declaration and bold assertion. That substance is simply this: that God himself has revealed in Christ his Son a divine righteousness. By means of that righteousness, the sinner who in himself is abiding under the wrath of God (see v18) may be restored to a right relationship with God.

This is revealed truth. God himself is the author of this good news. Salvation by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone could have been known by no other means. It is the very same message as was revealed in the prophets of the Old Testament: the just shall live by faith. God's message of salvation has not altered through the ages. Merely human righteousness, even at its best, does not and cannot satisfy a holy God. In Christ, therefore, a God-righteousness is provided, a perfect righteousness to be laid hold of by faith. By this righteousness so obtained men are justified in the sight of God, and pass from death to life. 'The Lord redeems the soul of his servants, and none of those who trust in him shall be condemned' (Psalm 34:22). It was so with Abraham. It was so with David. It is so with us.

Against the pride and self-reliance of men is set this good news: God has provided in Jesus Christ a divine righteousness with which he is perfectly satisfied, and which - when grasped in and by faith - secures eternal life for all who believe.

It is this very doctrine which Paul intends to declare in Rome. It is this doctrine of which he provides a substantial foretaste in his letter to the Romans. It is the gospel he preached in every town and city to which he travelled. It is the gospel by which many were soundly converted by God's mighty power, being brought under conviction of sin and fleeing to Jesus Christ for mercy.

This gospel is the declaration of divine deeds revealed in divine truth coming with divine power to provide divine righteousness. Paul was not ashamed of this gospel. He had no need to be! And what need have we to be ashamed!

The economic, cultural, intellectual, political and moral climate of our day is no more favourable to us than Paul's was to him as he headed for Rome. Can we say as Paul, with Paul, that we have confidence in this gospel? God's deeds have not altered. God's truth has not changed. God's power has not diminished. Christ's righteousness is as pure and perfect as it ever was and will be. But how easily we can become ashamed of this gospel! We do not glory in it for ourselves or in dealing with others.

Ashamed of the gospel?

Consider some of the ways in which we show ourselves to be ashamed of God's gospel. The first, for some of us, is by our own failure to embrace that gospel in faith. This is the most fundamental way in which we show that we are embarrassed by its contents. Christ crucified, the slaughtered Lamb of God, is not wise enough or powerful enough in our eyes to merit our confidence. We neglect it, turning away from what is in truth so great a salvation. We reject it, concluding that it is insubstantial, unnecessary, or insufficient, perhaps needing some supplement drawn from our own thoughts or efforts. We perhaps even despise it, mocking the blessing secured and the mercy held out by the incarnate God. If this is our state, then this very moment we ought to turn from our sins, even the sin of being ashamed of the Lord Jesus, and to cast ourselves upon him for mercy.

We might have thought, though, that anyone who has come to Christ for saving favour would, from that point on, never be ashamed of Jesus Christ, never treat it lightly or give up on it. And yet we do.

Shallow knowledge

Perhaps show we are ashamed of it by a shallow knowledge of the truth. Do we ever explore the treasury of the gospel? In this mystery of God in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). We are called to plumb the depths of matchless mercy and glorious grace. Shall we rest satisfied with shallow apprehensions and slight comprehensions of the truth of God's so-great salvation? Let us rather be searching out the truth as it is in Jesus? Just because the riches of Christ are finally unsearchable (Ephesians 3:8) does not for a moment mean that we should not at all be searching them. You would not ignore a room full of treasures simply because you could not count or carry all of them at once! We need to enter into this study with faith and hope and love. It is not and never can be a merely intellectual exercise. There are heights and depths to God's grace which we need to explore, the great truths of our redemption as the work of our great Redeemer. This is the whole heart reaching after a whole Christ, and delighting to see more and more of the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). For this, we need to be prayerfully searching the Scriptures, eagerly drinking in the pure water of God's word as it is preached, engaging in holy conference with other believers…making the most of every means of grace that we might grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).

Personal doubts

We might show we are ashamed of the gospel be entertaining doubts about it personally. In one of Charles Schulz's Peanuts cartoon strips, Charlie Brown is trying to teach another of the kids how to swim. Standing by the pool, Charlie Brown calls instructions, telling him there's nothing to worry about. One of the girls walks past and asks why Charlie Brown doesn't get into the pool himself and show him how it's done. 'Not me,' replies Charlie Brown, 'I'm terrified of water.' I wonder if that is too close to our experience with the gospel. We are poor adverts for the very Christ we claim to advocate! We will not venture on him, and let no other trust intrude. How can we confidently offer to others that which we cannot really trust ourselves? A Christian constantly racked with doubts and fears about whether or not he or she is really saved inspires faith in no-one! It is like asking someone to hang on to a rope that you believe will break under your own weight - you will find it hard to communicate a compelling argument, especially if you refuse to test it yourself. Will this Christ save sinners? Have you put your faith in him? Then God's power is at work to save you, and your doubts and fears have no merit. Rather, they dishonour the God of your salvation. Put them away! Show that you are not ashamed of the gospel by a complete, confident and assured trust in all those promises which are yes and amen in Christ Jesus.

Gloomy lives

We also show a lack of confidence in God's gospel when we fail to live in accordance with its truth. Too many professing Christians live at a poor, dying rate, as if we were only half saved. We may not believe that Jesus can be Saviour and not also Lord, but we act as if it might be so. And so we dwell in gloom, existing on the very borders of sin, trying not to transgress too much. How far short we still fall of his glory! If we are saved from our sins through Christ Jesus our Lord then we are citizens of heaven. Our lives should be correspondingly heavenly. We are heirs of eternal life through faith in our Lord. We have been freed from the guilt and power of sin, and should no longer walk in the darkness, but in newness of life and the light of the gospel. If we are not ashamed of the gospel then we ought not to sink to the level of an ungodly world, but ought to pursue and perfect holiness in the fear of God (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Cowardly hearts

We demonstrate that we are ashamed of the gospel when we are not willing to defend it. How often we hear the glorious gospel of God's grace in Christ derided, undermined, dismissed or perverted. Have we drunk too deeply of the spirit of our age. We may not say that everyone has their own truth, but our failure to stand up for God's enduring truth may suggest that we are not so persuaded of its substance after all. Are we not ashamed of how often and how easily we hear the name of God taken in vain. Those who know their catechism will appreciate that this is more than merely concern about open blasphemy. We ought to have a properly high regard, a holy reverence, for God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word and works. And which of his works is more awesome than redemption through the death of his Son? To trample on the gospel is to deny God's names, to smear his titles, to dismiss his attributes, to disdain his ordinances, to reject his word and to turn your back upon his works. Is it right for the children to allow the name of their Father to be trampled upon? Should the citizens of heaven shrug off insults to their King? Even if our souls did not hang upon the gospel, still God's glory is pinned to it. Again, this is not merely an intellectual defence, a cool apologetic argument. This is an earnest contending for the glory of God in his gospel, and the honour of our Christ. Are we ready to stand up for the Lord Jesus at the cost of our comfort, our reputation, our peace, our ease, our jobs, our liberty, perhaps even our lives? If that sounds melodramatic, simply watch the vice turn in contemporary society, and ask how long it will be before more and more faithful saints feel the squeeze. That pressure will be felt in the pulpit too.

Modified ministry

In that respect, as in others, we can reveal our shame of the gospel when we are tempted to smooth off its rough edges or modify it for the present day. It is indeed an old rugged cross, and it has a tendency to leave splinters in carnal flesh. Are we tempted, whether from the pulpit or on the street, in the workplace or at home, to try to plane and sand it down? Perhaps we find it easy to be bold in the church building, surrounded by supportive believers, but the courage drains from us when (if?) we take this gospel to the world. Are we actually afraid that it is outmoded? We can be very subtle about this. That helps the conscience, for we might be able to persuade ourselves that we are being faithful while actually trimming the edges of the news of salvation through faith in a crucified Christ. You hear it in some of the language that has crept into modern evangelicalism. We are no longer damnable sinners but mere broken creatures. Christ no longer dies for our sins; he simply absorbs our pain. We have dulled the edge of the truth to make it more palatable. Perhaps we feel the need to dress Christ up a little, to make him more attractive to the eye of the world, to present him in a way that we think men might like rather than we know they need. Charles Spurgeon said,

> you that know the Lord need not be told that he is to this day despised and rejected of men. Call yourself a Christian, and forget what Christianity is, and you will have easy times of it. Instead of preaching the simple gospel of Christ, get fine music, and fix up fine shows, turn the place of worship into a conservatory, or a theatre, and there will be no persecution for you. Of course not, that is not Jesus Christ; but preach Jesus Christ, and see if all the dogs will not howl at you directly.[1]

How often we try to preach a gospel that stops the dogs howling, but at what cost? We cannot offer any sinner any blessing apart from or outside of Christ Jesus and him crucified. If we hide the heart

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[1] C. H. Spurgeon, 'The Nazarene and the Sect of the Nazarenes,' in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1881), 27:671.

of the gospel, we will render it ineffective. If we are not ashamed of the gospel, we must preach it fully and accurately, in reliance on divine power.

Fearful souls

Following on again, we show we are ashamed of the gospel when we are slow to declare it to sinners. Again, perhaps we are afraid of their snarls and scowls. Let us be honest: when was the last time that we testified of Christ? What plans do we have as believers to make Christ known? What is our scheme for gospel witness as a church or churches, individually or in cooperation with likeminded brothers? We may feel that we are inept ourselves. Perhaps the best we can do is to invite people to our church services (which might be the closest thing we get to, 'Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did' [John 4:29 *cf.* v39]). If that is what we do, good, but what will they hear when they get there? And is there more that we can say? As God's people, according to gift, grace and opportunity, we need to be ready to tell people of a God-righteousness provided in Christ for all repenting and believing sinners who come to him. We shy away from that which is the power of God to salvation, and then lament that we bear so little fruit.

Low expectations

So, finally, we show we are ashamed of God's gospel by our low expectations of that same gospel preached. It may be that we have simply stopped believing that it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes. But if we will not speak this saving truth, can we expect any fruit? We must believe what the Lord himself says. Here is Spurgeon again:

> No man ever comes to Christ unless Christ draws him, and the only magnet that Christ ever uses is himself. I do believe that we slander Christ when we think that we are to draw the people by something else but the preaching of Christ crucified. We know that the greatest crowd in London has been held together these thirty years by nothing but the preaching of Christ crucified. Where is our music? Where is our oratory? Where is anything of attractive architecture, or beauty of ritual? 'A bare service,' they call it. Yes, but Christ makes up for all deficiencies. Preach Christ, and men will be drawn to him, for so the text says, 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.'[2]

Gospel confidence

This is gospel confidence! Do we actually believe, not with a mere Spurgeon, but with a real apostle, with one who was an eye-witness of his majesty, with a man who gave his days, his strength, his life to serving the Saviour who had plucked him as a brand from the burning? Remember Paul's testimony:

> And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life (1Timothy 1:12–16).

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[2] C. H. Spurgeon, 'The Crisis of This World,' in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1893), 39:596.

Do we believe that? We might well and should feel, like Paul, that if God can save me then he can save anyone! If the elect had already been gathered in, then the end would already have come. Let us not imagine that the day of grace is past. We cannot fall into the trap of looking for the 'likely candidates' - the men and women inclined by nature to believe and trained by nurture to fit seamlessly into our nice and neat congregational life. They do not exist! Gospel success lies neither in those to whom we preach nor in the one who does the preaching. Our hope is in the power of God at work through the gospel preached, the smile of the Spirit upon the declaration of God's saving truth.

This is God's good news. He is the author. Christ is the centre. Righteousness is its content. Its power is divine. With such a gospel, we should preach, speak, pray and wait expectantly.

We can either try God in the right way or test him in the wrong way. We can believe what he says and venture accordingly, expecting that the word that proceeds from his mouth shall not return to him void, but shall accomplish what he pleases, and prosper in the thing for which he sent it (Isaiah 55:11). Or we can tell God, in effect, that his word falls to the ground.

This is not triumphalism but simple confidence in God's means to accomplish God's ends. So later Paul points to the experience of the Roman saints, in common with all: 'But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness' (Romans 6:17–18). Every child of God can enter in with thankful joy to the same testimony, and look out with the same expectation, that the same gospel preached by Paul, declared without shame today, will continue to prove the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith.'

THE OFFICE OF DEACON IN THE SCOTTISH PRESBYTERIAN TRADITION

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Introduction

In the New Testament the Greek word *diakonia* means service or ministry toward others but in the noun form has a broad sense and a more technical sense and so can translate as *servant* or refer to an office thus, *deacon*, and this fact can contribute to some confusion. As Christ came to serve, so all Christian life involves service or ministry. However, in only three of the thirty instances in the New Testament does the term unambiguously refer to the office of deacon. These three references all belong at the earliest to around AD 63 and reflect a more organised church life. 1 Timothy 3:8,13 outlines the qualification for office, and Philippians 1:1 addresses the church in Philippi with its overseers (= elders) and deacons.

The first evidence of church organisation is in Acts 6:1-7 about AD 34. Some Greek-speaking Jewish widows were missing out in the daily provision which may be taken as the ministry of the word and/or the provision of food or funds. John N. Collins suggests:

> ...they were neither free to attend large gatherings in the temple forecourts nor linguistically equipped to understand what these Aramaic preachers were saying when they returned from the temple to speak in the intimacy of the household (5:42). Accordingly, the Hellenist's widows were in need of preachers who could teach them in Greek, and preferably at home when Greek speakers came together at their tables (6:2).[1]

The apostles stated that it was not proper for them to leave the ministry of the word 'to serve tables' [*diaconein trapezais*] which means either to distribute food or money[2] or both to the poor believers from the resources given to the apostles (4.35,37; 5:2). The choice of seven men in Acts 6:1-7 is commonly, but by no means universally, regarded as the foundation of the deacon office[3] although the term does not appear. T. M. Lindsay, citing among others, Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, IV, viii, 14 & 38, argued that the term 'the seven' is a technical one referring to the typical ruling council in a Jewish village. On this view, the seven are best described as elders who also had responsibilities later allocated to deacons. This interpretation accounts for the preaching activities of Stephen and Philip as well as the gift collected by the Church in Antioch for the poor believers in Jerusalem being sent about AD 43 to *the elders* at Jerusalem according to Acts 11:30. This is the first mention of elders in the Christian movement. One assumes them to be the same class of officers as those appointed in Acts 6.[4] The decision left the apostles free to carry out their primary role more effectively as special

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[1] John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), p.57. Other significant studies covering a range of view include James Monroe Barnett, *The Diaconate a Full and Equal Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1995) and Bart J. Koet, Edwina Murphy and Esko Ryökäs (eds.), *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity: The First Two Centuries (*Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

[2] The Greek word for a bank even today is *trapeza*.

[3] A good example of this is Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* Vol. IV (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p.345-347.

[4] T. M. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1902), p.113ff.

foundational witnesses of Christ in prayer and preaching although it did not mean complete exclusion of the apostles' concern in this area (e.g. Galatians 2:20). The church prospered under this arrangement (6.7).

But in the course of time the workload of the elders who were set apart by Paul in each church he founded (Acts 14:23, dated around AD 49) would also be sufficient to justify setting apart others to manage the financial matters and the care of the poor. This would be a natural evolution from the apostolic example, especially given it is to the elders that the oversight of the church is committed in the absence of the apostles (cf. Acts 20:26ff.). And so progressively it becomes the practice for deacons to be appointed. The qualifications for elders and deacons (1 Timothy 3) are similar, requiring spiritual maturity and good character, but, unlike the elder, the deacon does not need to be able to teach. His office is one right in itself and not simply a mere stepping-stone to a 'higher' office. The two great needs – spiritual and material – are therefore provided for.

In 1 Timothy 3:11 the Greek word *gunaikas* can be translated women or wives, wives being more suitable in the context about male deacons (note especially verse 12). The meaning is not that the deacon office included females but that the deacons' wives had to be of a certain character. One notes what was the calling of any Christian woman who was 'beyond reproach': 'well known known for her good deeds such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds' (1 Timothy 5:10, NIV). Only such could be put on the financial support list for widows referred to in 1 Timothy 5, but the implication is that the wives of deacons would exhibit such behaviour too being 'worthy of respect, not malicious talkers, but temperate and trustworthy in everything'. They can help other women where there are often specific problems, whether, sickness, pregnancy or childbirth, and advise their husband accordingly.

Elders are frequently represented as having governing roles, and notably in the decisions of the Council at Jerusalem in AD 49, but the deacon is referred to sparingly. In 1 Timothy 3 Paul is setting out the pattern for Timothy to follow in his pastoral work in Ephesus circa AD 64. About the same time Titus in Crete is urged to appoint elders in every town (Titus 1:5) but there is no reference to deacons, likely because the church there was only recently established. The Philippian Church had deacons, but it seems to have been a well-off church with a significant interest in outreach and giving so the appointment of deacons was a natural development.

> Apparently, as in Jerusalem with the apostles, it was assumed that in Crete the bishops/presbyters would also care for the needy until such a time as the work became too great and men qualified to serve as *diakonoi* were available. The same approach was followed in Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 14:23), and concern for 'the weak' was still perceived as the responsibility of the bishops/elders in Miletus (Acts 20:35), whether these men administered such aid or not.[5]

While it is common to read l Timothy as if it simply progresses through a number of pastoral issues, I think it is a bit more involved than that. It appears that there is a chiastic structure, a rhetorical practice quite common in biblical literature and very suitable in an oral culture too to aid comprehension and memorisation. I identify three distinct sections that move toward a central theme then out again with three sections corresponding through language and ideas to the first three.

[5] George W. Knight III, C*ommentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p.175.

A. 'Fight the good fight', not swerving from the faith [l:6,18] (1:1-20)
B. Godliness in the membership of the congregation (2:1-15)
C. Godliness: leadership 'without reproach' [3:2] (3:1-13)
D. **Godliness in God's house** 3:14-5:2
C[1] Godliness - widows 'without reproach' [5:7] (5:3-16
B[1] Godliness in the leadership of the Congregation (5:17-25)
A[1] 'Fight the good fight' - not going astray from the faith [6:10,12] (6:1-21)

Whatever the detailed merit or otherwise of this outline it serves to emphasise the undoubted chief theme of the letter: godliness is to be characteristic of God's household (3:15). It is conduct shaped by the work accomplished by Christ, announced and acknowledged, as in 3:16. That needs to be kept very much in view. Godliness in the congregation is the feature of B, but the corresponding section B[1] focusses on the elders. The rulers as well as the rule are subject to the rule of Christ. That C and C[1] are parallel might suggest that in some sense the needy widows supported by the church have a vital role at least as examplars, since the church acknowledged they were beyond reproach by providing financial support.

Prior to the circumstances necessitating the events of Acts 6:1-7 one imagines the apostles would have had some suitable persons assisting and following their instructions without formal office. The New Testament developments show deacons as a distinct office are not essential in the absolute sense except in so far as their task cannot be done satisfactorily by the elders. Nevertheless, the elders should not be so consumed with temporal concerns that the spiritual life of the congregation suffers. In larger churches with many needy or significant assets to manage deacons would be very desirable for the practical matters involved in implementing the policy set by the eldership.

The involvement of women as deacons/servants is often regarded as authorised in the New Testament, although others dispute this and regard people like Phoebe (Romans 16:1), who is called a *deacon* or *servant,* as utilising her gifts in carrying out a deacon-like service without holding official office. Of course, the role of deacons evolved and changed over time as with other matters of church order. The earliest reference we have to women as deacons is usually claimed for Pliny's *Letter to Emperor Trajan* dated about AD 112 in which the civil servant in Bithynia reports on his investigation of Christians:

> Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses [*ministrae*]. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition. I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you.[6]

But was the widow's role an official office like elder and male deacon, or was it a function according to gifts? This distinction is not always appreciated. Of course, all office, including, if you will, the office of every believer, requires appropriate gifts but not all with suitable gifts are called to be elder or deacon. All gifts are to be used for the common good and the building up of the body of Christ in love – part of the responsibility of every believer. Clearly, the elders are the rulers under Christ and responsible for all that occurs, including the actions of any deacons, as well as the exercise of specific tasks by others.

Among some who regarded the men appointed in Acts 6:1-7 as the first deacons, some explained their preaching as arising from their exceptional qualities, but others held that the deacon was an adjunct to the preaching office. The eventual three offices of diocesan bishop, priest and deacon became the

[6] Cited from christianhistoryinstitute.org <christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/pliny>, accessed 16 December 2020.

norm, the deacon being seen as a male assistant to the priest. Thus both the ambiguity of the word translated deacon or servant, and the varying understandings of the role of the deacon, complicate the discussion.

The Reformed

The Reformed who applied the rule of faith to matters of church government (thus not the Church of England) generally rejected the medieval view of church order and emphasised that the government of the church was in the hands of elders (some of these being preachers) and alongside them were deacons to manage the property and income of the church according to the judgment and appointment of the eldership.

The Deacons' task

In the *First Book of Discipline* of the reformed Scottish Church (1560) we read:

> The office of Deacons, as before is said, is to receive the rents etc, gather the alms of the kirk, and distribute the same, as by the ministers and kirk shall be appointed. They may also assist in judgment with the ministers and elders and may be admitted to read in assembly, if they be required and able thereto.[7]

In the second sentence of the above quotation a wider role is allowed to deacons that was not granted in Calvin's Geneva but was practised, following Martin Bucer's teaching, in the early French and Dutch churches as well as in the Church of Scotland.[8] The wider role for deacons was not universally practised in Scotland and did not extend to Presbyteries (regional assemblies) when these were formed in Scotland in 1581.[9] The *Second Book of Discipline* (1578) speaks of 'Deacons or Distributors' (II.2) as one of the ordinary functions or offices and states:

> Their office and power is to receive and distribute the whole ecclesiastical goods unto them to whom they are appointed. This they ought to do according to the judgement and appointment of the presbyteries or elderships (of the which the deacons are not) that the patrimony of the kirk and poor be not converted to private men's use nor wrongly distributed. [VIII: 6,7] [10]

Thus Samuel Rutherford, in his notable book *Lex Rex: The Law and the Prince* published in 1644, states the second of 50 false allegations against Presbyterian government in his preface:

> The second lie, that deacons, who only attend tables, are joint rulers with pastors.[11]

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[7] James K. Cameron, *The First Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: Covenanters Press, 2005), p.179, n.23, p.180-181. Note also under the Seventh Head (Ecclesiastical Discipline) that the Deacons could be present with the elders.
[8] James Kirk, *The Second Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: Covenanters Press, 2005), p.207 and the authorities there quoted.
[9] Kirk, p.208 and the authorities there quoted.
[10] Robert A. Cage, *The Scottish Poor Law 1745-1845* (Scottish Academic Press, 1981) provides the best coverage of the Protestant civil legislation running from the law of 1579 [*Act Anent the Punishment of Strong and Idle Beggars and Provision for the Sustentation of the Poor*] until it was superseded in 1845. All parishes were to be responsible for their own poor and disabled but only certain categories of poor were proper objects of poor relief. Useful is W. R. Foster, *The Church Before the Covenants: The Church of Scotland 1596-1638* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic press, 1975), p.80-83.
[11] Samuel Rutherford, *Lex Rex* (Edinburgh: R. Ogle and Oliver & Boyd, 1843), p.xxii.

Robert Baillie, another Scottish commissioner to the Assembly, writes in his *Historical Vindication of the Government of the Church of Scotland*:

> What you [the critic] speak of the deacons, it is a mistake; for albeit they be present in the Eldership, to receive their directions for the poor, yet they do not voice [deliberate and vote] in any well governed Eldership, nor do they claim any power in jurisdiction.[12]

If deacons had no jurisdictional authority other than to administer the eldership's instructions, the question of women in the deacon's office might well be something to consider given that there is no essential incapacity in the female as regards administration or business (cf. Proverbs 31:1-30).

Women as deacons?

An obvious passage was the reference in 1 Timothy 3:11 to wives who are required to have similar qualifications to the elders and deacons. Calvin, the restorer of the presbyterian model of church government, writes:

> He refers here to the wives of bishops and deacons, for they must help their husbands in their office and they can do that only if their behaviour is better than other people's.[13]

But aiding or helping does not imply distinct office nor the ordination to office of the wives of office-bearers, although the way Paul writes about Phoebe in Romans 16:1 suggests something more than the widow-servants in 1 Timothy 5:9-10 since she is obviously a woman of means and prominence and probably the one who delivered Paul's letter to Rome. Calvin commends Phoebe 'our sister who is a servant [*diakonon*] of the church that is at Cenchrea' because, he says, 'she exercised a very honourable and holy ministry in the church.' Calvin links her ministry with that of the widows referred to in 1 Timothy 5. These windows were free of domestic duties and 'desired to dedicate themselves wholly to God for religious service. They were therefore received into this office…' [14]

From 1 Timothy 5:9-10 Calvin had deduced 'an honourable order of widows' and referred to his *Institutes* for further information. Certainly, there was a list of needy widows supported by the church because they had no families to support them. They had to have spiritual qualifications like the elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 so that they too were 'beyond reproach' (3:2; 5:7), although they did not preach but helped in a ministry of mercy as their health allowed. Paul's comments about these widow-servants do not of course mean other people did not receive support from the church in appropriate circumstances.

Interestingly, in his *Institutes* IV.iii.9, Calvin used Romans 12:8 to distinguish two sorts of deacons – those who distributed the funds and those who took care of the poor; the former were male deacons but not members of the consistory, while the latter could include women whose work extended to a significant nursing component. Calvin adds, 'Women could fill no other public office than to devote themselves to the care of the poor.' Other churches 'only rarely adopted' Calvin's two kinds of deacons[15] and even in Geneva this position does not seem to have endured for many years after Calvin's death in 1564. In the French Confession of 1559, Article XXXI, there seems greater emphasis on the inter-relatedness of the offices and so deacons were generally members of the consistory along

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[12] Robert Baillie, *Historical Vindication of the Government of the Church of Scotland* (London: Samuel Gellibrand, 1646), p.17.
[13] *Calvin's Commentaries* (ed. Oliver & Boyd 1964) at 1 Timothy 3:11.
[14] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [1540] (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1961) at 16:1.
[15] H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* Vol. IV, p.388.

with the ministers and elders.[16] Calvin distinguished the office of elder and deacon quite sharply and so deacons did not have a governing role in Geneva and churches influenced by Geneva. However, all churches valued and recognised the service of women without appointing them to office as deacon.

The notable George Gillespie, a commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, envisaged women deaconesses in his writing in 1641.

> That though it be ordinarily most convenient, that the office of attending the sick be committed to women, yet it is not essentially necessary to the office: As Aretius notes on this place [Rom 12:8], we may under *ho eleon* [showing mercy] comprehend not only widows appointed to attend the sick, but old men appointed to receive and entertain strangers: which is also judiciously observed by [Peter] Martyr [Heidelberg: *Loci Communes*, 1603] Ch. 4, p.746. Besides, when the Apostle, 1 Tim 5 teaches what is required in widows, who should be made Deaconesses; this he requires among other things, that they be not such as live in pleasures and idleness, and take not care to provide for their own houses, verse 6,8, *ei dé tis* [if now anyone]; which though Erasmus and Beza turn it in the feminine, *quod si qua*, [that if there be any] yet our English Translators, and many good Interpreters, turn it to the masculine. And surely it shall have more weight if it agree to men as well as women, says Calvin upon that place.[17]

Gillespie does not comment elsewhere on women occupying a church office[18] other than at the Westminster Assembly as discussed below, but there was a definite opinion supporting woman deacons down the years although evidence of formal ordination is lacking.[19]

The Westminster Assembly 1643

Of the Westminster Assembly convened in 1643, Campbell says, 'the office of Deacon was accepted with little or no debate'.[20] In fact there was wide-ranging debate beginning 15 December 1643 [Session 117] and concluding with Session 124 on 1 January 1644.[21] It covered various topics including whether the office was perpetual, what its duties were and whether women were eligible. On 20 December [Session 119] Herbert Palmer was not convinced the deacon was a necessary and perpetual office and he considered that if Caesar had provided for the poor in NT times there would be no need for deacons. Selden, the Erastian, thought that there were special reasons for deacons in the first century and imitation now was not appropriate. Dr Lightfoot somewhat echoed this as he

[16] *Office of Deacon in the Churches* (Study Committee Report Recommended to the churches by Synod St. Catherines of the United Reformed Churches in North America 1997), p.12.
[17] George Gillespie, *An Assertion of the Government of the Church of* Scotland (Edinburgh: James Byrson, 1641) Part 1, Class 5, p.39. Benedictus Aretius (1505-74) was a Swiss Reformed theologian. The well-known Reformed theologian Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562) taught at Oxford and at Zurich. Both men were prolific authors.
[18] W. D. J .McKay, *An Ecclesiastical Republic: Church Government in the Writings of George Gillespie* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster for Rutherford House, 1997), p.208.
[19] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* IV, p.388 lists important theologians Franciscus Junius (1545-1602), Antonius Walaeus (1573-1639) and Gijsbert Voetius (1589-1676) as among those who restored the office of deaconess.
[20] William. M. Campbell, *The Triumph of Presbyterianism* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1958), p.127. The A.F.Mitchell/J.Struthers 1874 edition of the *Minutes* begin at Session 324 (18 November 1644) which may account for Campbell's assumption.
[21] For the fullest record see Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes and Papers of the Westminster 1643-1652: Vol II, Sessions 45-119, 155-198* (Oxford: OUP, 2012). Sessions 120-154 are lost. Gaps in the debate on Deacons can be filled from John Lightfoot, *The Complete Works of John Lightfoot: Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines* (London, 1824), p.82-98.

believed that the deacons mentioned in the epistles were for the collection of funds for the poor believers in Jerusalem.[22] To move the debate forward, on 21 December Palmer proposed:

1. It is the command of God in nature, that there be in every commonwealth some officers to take care of the poor.
2. There were such in the apostles' time, by divine institution called deacons.
3. In like times of persecution both nature and Scripture command that the church have such officers.
4. It is most consonant to Scripture and Christ's institution, that the case of his poor members should be committed rather to officers of their own than others, yea though the magistrate be Christian.

And so the debate of the perpetuity of the office proceeded. On 22 December the proposal that the deacon's duties included 'assisting the pastor in preaching and administrating the sacraments' was voted down. After the Christmas break, on 28 December the perpetuity of the office was voted affirmatively on the basis of 1 Timothy 3:8-9, etc., but further support from Romans 12:8 was thought doubtful and passed over, while the support of Acts 6:1 for the office of deacon was affirmed, but four or five (including Lightfoot) were opposed.[23]

There was influential support for women deacons across party lines when on 29 December the Assembly debated the proposition: *'That widows we read of in 1 Tim 5:2, and elsewhere, are comprehended under the name of deacon.'* [24] Some, such as Dr Cornelius Burgess, one of the two assessors or vice-presidents of the Assembly, held that the widows supported by the church had no public office but were servants of the church taking care of others as the church directed,[25] so it was a function without official office, but others went further. John Gibbon (c.1587-1646) of Waltham considered the widows to be church officers such as are referred to in 1 Timothy 3, and that the term 'deacon' in Philippians 1:1 and Romans 12:8 includes widows. Charles Herle responded arguing that Paul had treated office-bearers in 1 Timothy 3: 1 Timothy 5 was on another subject, and church financial support does not imply office. Against Stephen Marshall, the influential London preacher, George Gillespie asserted some widows were supported by the church and were not church officers, but some were both.[26] William Bridge argued the widow in 1 Timothy 5 is a church officer as evidenced by the attention given to the matter and the various qualifications having parallels with other officers. Sidrach Simpson, another Independent minister, had a similar opinion. Origin and Theodoret (among early writers), Cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534) and Gulielmus Estius (1542-1613), the noted New Testament commentator (among the Roman Catholics), and Calvin, Osiander, Gwalther, Bucan and Cameron (among Protestant writers), were cited in support of Phoebe (Romans 16:1) as a female deacon. Dr Thomas Temple believed that Phoebe had no need of financial support but on the contrary was a woman of quality who had business in Rome and was entrusted with Paul's letter to the church there.

Samuel Rutherford, a member of the Assembly, is not recorded by Lightfoot as speaking in the debate. However, in 1644 he issued his *The due right of presbyteries, or, A peaceable plea for the government of the Church of Scotland* in which he states:

[22] Lightfoot, p.88.
[23] Lightfoot, p.93.
[24] Lightfoot, p.94
[25] Lightfoot, p.96.
[26] Lightfoot, p.91.

> I conceive, the place 1 Tim. 5. saith, that Widows were in the Apostolic Church, both poor aged Women, who were to be maintained by the Church, and also auxiliary helps, for mere service to help the Deacons in these hot Countries. Both is apparent from the Text…Again, that this Widow had some charge or service in the Church, (I mean not any Ministerial office, for she was not ordained as the Deacon, Acts 6. with imposition of hands) I prove from the Text…It is not unprobable to me that Phoebe called a Deacon, or servant of the Church of Cenchrea, was such a Widow, seeing she is Rom. 16:1 expressly so called: how she came to Rome, if she was a poor Widow and now 60 years old, I dispute not, seeing God's Spirit calleth her so.

Despite influential support the debate in the Assembly about women as deacons did not find sufficient unanimity and it was passed from without a recorded vote. Accordingly, the *Form of Presbyterial Church Government* of the Westminster Assembly (1645) states:

> The Scripture doth hold out deacons as distinct officers in the church. Whose office is perpetual. To whose office it belongeth not to preach the word, or administer the sacraments, but to take special care in distributing to the necessities of the poor.

Around this time, James Guthrie (c.1612-61) wrote *A Treatise of Ruling Elders and Deacons*[27] published in 1652, republished in 1699, and frequently quoted by Walter Steuart, the Laird of Pardovan, in his influential *Collections and Observations: Concerning the Worship, Discipline and Church Government of the Church of Scotland* (1709). Guthrie emphasised the distinct and permanent office of deacon, while recognising elders could act as such (employing the language of the higher office including the lower), and that the number ought to be proportioned to the number of poor in the parish. He cites Romans 12:8 *(he that gives)* and 1 Corinthians 12:28 *(helps)* as referring to deacons. He does not mention Phoebe or refer to women as deacons as advocated by his fellow strict Covenanters, Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie. The deacons were to collect and distribute the funds and assist the minister and elders to the extent of giving information and advice about needs. They were to alert the Session to any who were sick so that the elders could visit them.

Government-funded poor relief

Scottish government provision of church and manse buildings and ministerial stipends as well as poor relief, with poor relief administered ultimately by the Session (as the meeting of the congregational eldership came to be called), the diaconate seems to have fallen into practical disuse in most places. Thomas Chalmers is a notable exception. He sought to develop the diaconate in his ministry of distributing poor relief in Glasgow in the 1820s, given the inadequacy of the parish system in the burgeoning population of the industrial cities.[28] Deacons in the Scottish church constitution prior to the Disruption of 1843 strictly had no right to sit with the Session unless called to meet with it to deliberate as to the financial affairs of the congregation. Thus, as reported to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1888 (Session II), the historic position was correctly summarised:

> Their proper functions are the collecting (and finding, when necessary, assistant collectors) of funds for Church or charitable purposes, and the distribution of these; and though sitting and deliberating with the Kirk Session as to all such matters, when called as aforesaid, and

[27] *A treatise of ruling elders and deacons in which, these things which belong to the understanding of their office and duty, are clearly and shortly set down.* By a Minister of the Church of Scotland (Edinburgh, 1652).
[28] S. J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford: OUP, 1982) 132. John Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers: Enthusiast for* Mission (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press for Rutherford House, 1999) esp. p.105ff.

> giving their advice and assistance in the distribution of such funds, they have no vote even as to these, in that court but are to be guided by its judgment.[29]

This was a correct statement of the constitutional position in the Established Church of Scotland in 1840 when the 'Synod of Australia in connection with the Established Church of Scotland' was formed.

Free Church of Scotland

The Disruption of 1843 brought about the restoration of the Deacons' Court in the Free Church of Scotland. Many congregations could not supply a sufficient number of deacons to operate separately from the Session, and an Act of the Free Church of Scotland in 1846 allowed it was competent for elders to act as deacons. This was clearly correct given that the Christian church at its beginning did not have a specific office of elder until devolved by the action of the apostles as described in Acts 6.[30] The chief points of the decision are as follows:

> **Act anent the Duties of Elders and Deacons. Edinburgh, 30th May 1846. Sess. 22.**
>
> WHEREAS it has become necessary, in consequence of the restoration of the scriptural order of Deacons, and in consequence of the late change in the outward condition of the Church, to point out and regulate the duties of Elders and Deacons respectively, and to define and describe the powers of the meeting of congregational office - bearers for secular business, the General Assembly, with consent of a majority of the Presbyteries of this Church, enact and ordain :
>
> **I. Respecting the peculiar duties of ELDERS:**
>
> 1. That they sit in session along with the Minister, and assist in the administration of discipline, and in the spiritual government of the Church.
> 2. That they take a careful oversight of the people's morals and religious principles, of the attendance upon public ordinances, and of the state of personal and family religion.
> 3. That they visit the sick from time to time in their several districts.
> 4. That they superintend the religious instruction of the young, and assist the Minister in ascertaining the qualifications of applicants for admission to sealing ordinances.
> 5. That they superintend and promote the formation of meetings within their districts for prayer, reading of the Scriptures, and Christian fellowship among the members of the Church.
>
> **II. Respecting the peculiar duties of DEACONS:**
>
> 1. That they give special regard to the whole secular affairs of the congregation.
> 2. That they attend to the gathering of the people's contributions to the general fund for the sustentation of the ministry; and that they receive the donations which may be made for other ecclesiastical purposes.

[29] William Mair, *A Digest of Laws and Decisions…* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1923), p.148. Changes to the law of the Church of Scotland were made in 1888 to create an order of deaconesses.

[30] If the view in held that the seven men set aside 'to serve tables' were the first deacons the point still stands but, as discussed earlier, I think they were elders who relieved the apostles of much of their burden and in turn could devolve part of their task to those later called deacons.

3. That they attend to the congregational poor.
4. That they watch over the education of the children of the poor.

III. Respecting the duties which are common to ELDERS AND DEACONS:

1. That both Elders and Deacons may receive the Sabbath collections of the people, according to such arrangements as shall be made by the Deacons' Court.
2. That, for the better discharge of their peculiar duties respectively, as well as with a view to increased opportunities of doing good, both Elders and Deacons visit periodically the districts assigned to them, and cultivate an acquaintance with the members of the Church residing therein.
3. That it is competent for Elders to be employed as Deacons, when a sufficient number of Deacons cannot be had.
4. That Deacons may assist the Elders with their advice, whether in Session or otherwise, when requested so to do.

IV. Respecting the meeting of Minister, Elders, and Deacons, for secular affairs, — which meeting may be called the DEACONS' COURT: ….

There is no shift of substance in this legislation.

United States of America

Before turning to the Australian experience some attention to what happened in Presbyterianism in the USA is worth noting. For some years prior to 1888 there was discussion about women's work as in the *Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System*. In July of that year the subject had significant attention at the meeting in London. The *Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America* – the conservative psalm-singing denomination – was first to pass a proposal overwhelmingly at its 1888 Synod that women were eligible to the office of deacon. This had arisen from the election of a woman to an RP congregation. Although the Barrier Act rules were not followed until 1945, the decision was acted upon and continues the case today although I understand there are not many female deacons.[31] The role of deacons is held to be wholly administrative and not governmental.

In an Editorial Note in *The Presbyterian Review* for April 1889,[32] Professor B. B. Warfield expressed concern that there was a *laissez-faire* policy in regard to organised women's work which had many dangers if it was not constrained within a proper church setting. In line with the finding of the Alliance he therefore thought it appropriate to make formal provisions for women's ministry within the established structure although mindful of the need for great wisdom and careful consideration. He found Romans 16:1 the only passage to provide a basis for the office of deaconess, but he admitted that it was a 'slender' even 'precarious' one. The May 1889 Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA (the Northern church) appointed a Committee to look into the establishing of an Order of Deaconesses with B. B. Warfield as Chairman. The following year the Committee reported noting that some thought a deaconess was really a congregational deacon and others a sisterhood of trained

[31] At the *International Conference of Reformed Churches* in Seoul in October 1997 I was the Reporter for the two-man Committee appointed to assess the application of the RPCNA. I specifically mentioned that the RPCNA had some women deacons but that thy were not regarded as exercising authority but were under the oversight of the Session. The application was unanimously approved.

[32] *The Presbyterian Review*, Vol. 10 No. 38 (April 1889), p.283-295; accessible at commons.ptsem.edu <commons.ptsem.edu/id/presbyterianrevi1038unse-dmd009>

workers. Both were needed, the Committee believed, but they recommended initially the opening of the congregational diaconate to women, and the investigation of the sisterhood model in due course. The following proposal for sending to presbyteries was accepted:

> Shall the following sections be added to the Form of Government, viz., (1) in Chap, vi, a section to be numbered Section 2, as follows:
> 'II. Women also served the Apostolical Church as deaconesses, whose office and duties were similar to those of deacons.'
> And (2) in Chap, xiii, a section to be numbered Section 9, as follows:
> 'IX. Deaconesses may be elected to office in a manner similar to that appointed for deacons, and set apart by prayer.'

The report to the Assembly of 1890 showed presbyteries had in some cases voted on the proposal as a whole and others as two separate proposals, and the results were not consistent or clear. A total of 53 of 216 presbyteries (203 of whom reported) had approved both changes, but 84 voted against; 59 rejected the first item but approved the second, and 2 approved the first but rejected the second. However one cut it, there was lack of clarity or unanimity and the proposal therefore fell.

The Dutch tradition

While it takes beyond the aim of this essay, it is worth noting that the Dutch churches had (and often have still) an enlarged view of the diaconal office compared to those in the Scottish tradition. In the same period of the late 19th century Herman Bavinck proposed an eleven-point approach to the working of the diaconal office, reflecting his conviction that just as Christ teaches his own as prophet, and governs them as king, so as priest he demonstrates to them the riches of his love and mercy in diaconal work.[33] Christ's provision of elders to rule (some of whom preach) and deacons who attend to financial matters including the ministry of mercy comes out strongly in the best writers on church organisation. So not a church organising itself and its basic framework as it sees fit but Christ providing for his church, soul and body, as its King and Head.

Australia

The first Presbyterian Deacons' Court in Australia was formed in Pitt Street PCEA (Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia), Sydney, in 1849.[34] But it was perhaps more common in early Australian Presbyterianism for financial affairs to be in the hands of a body called the Committee of Management as is also the current situation in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.[35] This was aided by settlers from the largely town-based United Presbyterian Church of Scotland commonly using this system, while Highland parishes often had few communicant members but a large number of adherents who were not eligible for office as deacons. Settlers of Church of Scotland background were not used to deacons and so a Committee was a natural and pragmatic choice for financial management. Indeed, I would expect a tendency in this pragmatic direction in the social circumstances in 19th century colonial Australia. The Presbyterian Church of Victoria enacted rules for Boards of Management in 1868 and that terminology continues today in that church. 'Committee of Management' was usual in New South Wales, but Peter Barnes considers such language to encourage neglect of the church's role in social welfare.[36] I'm not so sure this was a significant factor, but it didn't help understanding the work of the deacon as inclusive of Christ's provision for the temporal needs of his people.

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[33] H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* IV, p.427-429.
[34] R. S. Ward, *The Bush Still Burns* (PCEA, 1989), p.91.
[35] 'The Congregational Committee' in *The Code* (Belfast: Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 2020), p.20.
[36] Personal communication, 15 December 2020.

Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia

In the ten or so parishes of the PCEA the Committee of Management approach was quite usual in the 19th century, the parishes being largely formed by Gaelic-speaking farmers, and indeed this persisted well into the 20th century in some cases. As late as 1933 Hunter PCEA Session resolved to meet as a Deacons' Court until they had deacons available. Deacons, and indeed other substantial aspects of Presbyterian polity, are not referred to in the 1918 legislation which incorporated the PCEA in New South Wales for property holding purposes.[37]

In the small Free Presbyterian Church of Victoria the Act of Reconstruction of 1878, drafted by Rev. Arthur Paul of St Kilda, provided a somewhat idiosyncratic statement of the historic constitutional position. While the Deacons' Court is specifically mentioned, authority over real property and any rents or profits from such was excluded; in practice these were dealt with by the trustees. There were periods in Geelong PCEA with only a Committee of Management. In St Kilda in the 1930s the trustees (who were elders) met as if they were the Deacons' Court, initially in their capacity as trustees. In 1953, at the time of absorption into the PCEA, what is now termed the *Presbyterian Church Eastern Australia Property Act* of the Victorian Parliament, 1953, 2012, secured a proper specification of Presbyterian polity in Victorian law. Even so, there were no deacons at St Kilda until the 1960s, but the elders also met as the Deacons' Court. This is currently (2020) the case in the four PCEA congregations in Melbourne.

The All Nations PCEA in Mulgrave (Victoria) is a Southern Sudanese congregation, most members from the Nuer tribal group, and includes many widows. On 17 June 2018 the Session minuted as followes:

> The Session formerly confirmed its agreement to set apart a number of Pastoral Care Visitors which in South Sudan would be called deaconesses. They do not have administrative or disciplinary roles and are not office-bearers, but their particular task is to help the single ladies and mothers, to teach, visit and encourage them, in line with the words of the Apostle Paul in Titus 2:3-5.

They were set apart with prayer on the same day and obviously fall into a category fully in line with Scripture and the Presbyterian constitution.

Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia [RPCA]

The Victoria-based Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia (3 congregations), which is linked with the RPCNA, in its 2012 Constitution restricts the eldership to men, but states:

> *3.4 Other Appointed Workers*
> Christ has given gifts of ministry to the church for service other than the oversight of a congregation. Appointments to these official ministries, also known as the role of deacons, are open to men and women…the period of appointment shall not exceed three years. Reappointment may be made.

The Constitution indicates that 'financial management, home help, works of mercy, teaching of children and other areas relevant to the overall ministry of a particular congregation' are in view. All

[37] The earliest printed PCEA Model Trust Deed known does refer to Deacons, but when incorporated for property holding purposes by the Synod of Eastern Australia Property Act, 1918 (NSW Parliament), only the Synod is mentioned.

such ministries are organised in committees are under the oversight of the elders who are able to join them. It seems to put the office of deacon on the level of persons exercising other service functions. In this way it neatly avoids some exegetical challenges but at some cost, I would think. This somewhat novel provision has the effect of avoiding the notion of ordination,[38] a word not mentioned in 1 Timothy 3 but surely implied by the parallel with elders who were formally set apart by the body of elders (1Timothy 4:14; 5:22; cf. Acts 6:6; 14:23). I understand a role for women deacons was a matter rather evenly dividing the RPCA presbytery, but the provision was not removed.

Presbyterian Church of Australia [PCA]

The PCA is a federation of state churches formed in 1901 and by far the major Presbyterian grouping with an active following of around 30,000. In recent years its General Assembly has provided some guidelines in regard to deacons, but as each state church retains control in most areas of church government related to elders and deacons, so variations exist.[39] Generally, 1 Timothy 3:8-13 read in the light of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 is the approach. Women are taken as eligible for the office of deacon, the tasks are to be regarded as distinct from that of the Session Board or the Management Board/Committee (except in New South Wales) and meetings at least four times a year are required. There is also provision for an order of Deaconesses and for an approved course of training. Except in Western Australia, where she is *ordained*, a deaconess is *commissioned* and signs the formula of subscription, but the language of ordination is not used.[40]

In the *Presbyterian Church of Australia in the State of New South Wales,* the largest section of the PCA, and the only section that has actively retained woman as eligible as elders, the Committee of Management may operate as a Deacons' Court. In that case it does not have managers elected annually by the members and adherents, but deacons elected by the communicant members and ordained without a time limitation. Women are eligible as managers or deacons equally with men. In reference to the Order of Deaconess, the PCNSW Code 7.17 states:

> A deaconess is a woman who has undertaken the relevant course of training determined by authority of the General Assembly of Australia, been commissioned by a presbytery, and become eligible to be engaged in an appropriate sphere of service. The functions assigned to deaconesses vary widely according to local circumstances, but the overall purpose of the role is to exercise an evangelistic, pastoral or educational ministry in one or more of the following spheres:
>
> a) a department or committee of the Church,
> b) a congregation, chaplaincy or school,
> c) a situation which, while outside the immediate work of the Church, is approved by the Ministry and Mission Committee with the concurrence of the relevant presbytery.

[38] This raises the question of what ordination is. I think that the formal, public setting apart of rulers/elders/preachers and of deacons has the special authority of Christ and ordination should be reserved to this situation. There is the office of every believer, and the eldership should encourage and utilise the varied gifts in an appropriate way for the building up of the body in love. In my experience, godly women do visit other ladies in a helpful way, and it is notorious that the womenfolk of the church tend to 'serve tables' literally at church functions. Doubtless some ladies can be gossips and busybodies and some men can be over-bearing and critical, but there is every reason to sometimes specially recognise some godly women as pastoral visitors, in a ministry of mercy even though that is the calling of them all anyway (Titus 2:3-5).

[39] Peter Barnes' 54 page booklet *Serving as Deacons* (Box Hill North: PTC Media, 2005) has been influential in PCA circles.

[40] It does not appear to me that commissioning can be easily distinguished from traditional definitions of ordination. The PCWA has not ordained or commissioned any to the Deaconess Order since Church Union in 1977.

In the *Presbyterian Church of Western Australia*, the temporal affairs of each of the nine congregations of the PCWA are administered by an elected Committee of Finance and Property, whose members shall be called Managers. On the basis of 1 Timothy 3 male and female members of 21 years and over are eligible for election as deacons if so decided by the eldership. After completion of a training course they are, unlike Managers, ordained in manner similar to elders. Elders are ex-officio members of the Deacons' Committee, which is funded by the Finance and Property Committee and tasked with the expression of Christ's love in the ministry of mercy (e.g. food parcels). There is provision for an Order of Deaconesses who, in effect, fulfil a ministry of mercy (not defined in detail) and such are ordained.

In the *Presbyterian Church of Queensland* there is provision for an annually elected Committee of Management from members and adherents but no provision for a Deacons' Court. There is provision for an Order of Deaconesses who must undergo training and a candidate is commissioned as a deaconess after satisfactory completion of examination. The Code [6.2] indicates her role in training and encouraging women in the context of the local congregation under the oversight of the Session including the practical application of doctrine. The deaconess is not a member of Session.

In the *Presbyterian Church of Victoria,* Board of Management is the descriptor as it is in Tasmania and South Australia. Managers are elected, with half retiring each year but eligible for re-election. Deacons in the PCV are optional and are elected for three years and are eligible for re-election. They are not ordained but inducted by prayer in a worship service. Deacons are subject to the direction and supervision of the Session and, if more than one, form a Pastoral or Diaconal Aid team chaired by the minister or his designate meeting at least quarterly. The diaconate is to promote, according to biblical guidelines and as resources permit, the material well-being first of the poor and needy within the local body of believers, secondly of other believers, and finally of all humanity, and is funded by the Board. The provision in the *Presbyterian Church of Tasmania* is similar (Code 2.31), as is the situation in the now very small *Presbyterian Church of South Australia,* where providing meals and helping with emergency transport are among examples given of diaconal ministry.

History is such that circumstances vary and the PCA provisions just noted evidence a desire to give proper attention to the Word of God. Mind you, one would have thought that Deacons are responsible for the temporal goods and ministry of mercy so that to separate the two is a needless complication, while it is better to keep to a practice that encourages recognition of the high spiritual qualification required of those managing the temporal affairs of the congregation.

As regard an Order of Deaconesses as a ministry role, it is hard to condemn this outright as some do, for there is plenty of orthodox argument in the past for such as we have seen. Still, in the Scottish tradition it was not accepted until the 1880s, and in some cases, it seems, the deaconess role with special concern for the women and ministry to the poor moved on to the assistant minister model which might well be controversial. In recent years full leadership authority by female deacons has been assumed in Anglican and other professedly Protestant churches where modern egalitarianism has joined with a disparaging of the Word of God in Christ's provision of the basic pattern of church government. Still, in principle a church that legislates for deaconesses who have no governing role and are not ordained has not done wrong. After all, the church may rightly appoint paid employees such as secretaries, youth workers and camp organisers as well as recognise unpaid Sunday school teachers, paid catechists (usually elders) and the like.

Conclusions

1. The Deacons' Court has no governing role in the church and hence the name Deacons' *Court* may be a bit misleading to some (note *PCEA Handbook* 3.4)[41] and another name (such as the *Diaconate*) may be more suitable. It is the Session that has the governing and disciplinary function not the Deacons' Court.

2. The office of deacon as a distinct office is not absolutely essential, except in so far as the task cannot be conducted satisfactorily by the elders. In this sense we should understand the claim of the *Second Book of Discipline* (1578) that the office of Deacon 'is an ordinary and perpetual ecclesiastical function in the Church of Christ' (VIII.2) and of the Westminster *Form of Presbyterial Church Government* (1645) that 'the office of deacon is a distinct and perpetual office'. We will always have those in need, and the function of the deacon office will always be needed. In larger congregations the Diaconate will be essential not only in general financial management, but in specific care for the poor. Social welfare provision by the State is good as far as it goes, but there is a quality of care that can only be provided by the Church to distressed members of Christ who cares for his people, even if civil authorities do not or cannot.

3. Terminology can be fluid even in the New Testament period (e.g. elders [*presbuteroi*] or overseeers [*episopoi*]) for the same office, but it is likely to aid appreciation of the biblical calling of office-bearers to use the terms elders and deacons. While ordination does not imprint spiritual character, it does declare the appointment by Christ through his people to the key functions of spiritual oversight and provision for material needs.

4. It is patently obvious that we have servant/diaconal ministry by women in the New Testament, and the only question is whether a woman could be set apart as a deacon in the same way as men. I would argue that the wisest course is not to do so, since it is not clearly warranted from 1 Timothy 3. But to encourage the servant ministry of all church members, including designating to particular tasks, all being under the oversight of the eldership, is fundamental to Biblical Presbyterianism.

5. It is distressing to see situations where Ladies Bible Studies are looked on askance;[42] where women are not permitted to pray in a mixed prayer meeting,[43] or be recognised as pastoral visitors, Bible women and in various missionary roles, and even where they cannot vote in church meetings.[44] Happily there are few if any who are fully consistent in their opposition, but professedly theologically-conservative bodies would profit much by a more open and generous acknowledgement of the vital and positive role of Christian women in the churches as we see so clearly in the New Testament.

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[41] The PCW dropped the term Deacons' Court in 2019 in favour of Deacons' Committee because of confusion of this kind – Rev. Stuart Bonnington, PCW Assembly Clerk.

[42] Compare Titus 2:3-5.

[43] 1 Corinthians14:34-35 in the context of evaluating prophecy, is addressing roles in marriage not the question of women in office and likely women (typically seated separately from the men) talking among themselves about what they were hearing when they should ask their husbands at home and not disturb the meeting. 1 Timothy 2:8 on men praying is not a prohibition on women doing so but highlights the typical sins of men (contentiousness) and women (immodest display) in the church. Of course, the liberty of women to pray, implied also in 1 Corinthians 11:5, is not a liberty to undermine the authority of her husband.

[44] Still an issue in some churches of Dutch background. The Rev James Forbes (1813-51) specifically granted the vote to female church members on the formation of the Free Presbyterian Church of Victoria in 1846.

6. As conservative churches seek to recover a more principled and biblical pattern of organisation, any criticism needs to be offered in a constructive way. The Scripture provides a basic pattern, but good sense needs to prevail and, indeed, a recognition of the principle than in extraordinary situations extraordinary things may be done with a view to the upbuilding of the body of Christ in love.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Fulfilment of the Promises of God. An Explanation of Covenant Theology, Richard P. Belcher, Jr, Mentor, 2020, pbk, 324 pages, £15.99.

One of the great themes which runs all the way through the Scriptures and which unites their diverse elements is 'covenant'. Indeed the theme of covenant has become central to the Reformed approach to theology. This volume by Richard P. Belcher, Jr., who teaches Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary Charlotte, examines the covenants revealed in Scripture and the various formulations of covenant theology that have developed over the centuries.

In Chapter 1 'Introduction to Covenant Theology' Belcher writes, 'Covenant theology is a vast and complex topic. It is easy to get lost in the various approaches and the different emphases of covenant theologians' (p.15). It would be difficult to disagree. The author aims to explain covenant theology according to the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and so to help seminary students, elders and lay people to understand covenant theology. He examines several introductory matters in the rest of the chapter: The Importance of Covenant Theology, The Definition of Covenant, The Covenant of Redemption (not explicit in WCF, but affirmed by many in the Assembly) and Covenant in Historical Perspective.

In chapters 2 to 8 Belcher provides a survey of the biblical covenants, from the Covenant of Works in Eden to the New Covenant. Chapter 2 'The Covenant of Works' is foundational, dealing as it does with the covenant in Eden which man has broken and which necessitates the covenant work of Christ. Belcher considers the evidence for the Covenant of Works in Genesis 1-3 since some eminent Reformed theologians such as John Murray have denied that there is such a covenant), noting that the elements of a covenant are present in Genesis 1-3. He does not come down on one view of Hosea 6:7, which some see as a reference to a covenant with Adam. Belcher then deals with some major issues related to the Covenant of Works – the name of the covenant and the role of grace in the Covenant of Works.

Chapter 3 considers 'The Initiation of the Covenant of Grace', setting the scene for the following five biblical chapters. With the breaking of the Covenant of Works, God provides salvation through the Covenant of Grace. Belcher considers the 'protoevangelium' (Genesis 3:15) and compares the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace, noting that the principle of works is present in both and that Christ fulfilled that requirement in the Covenant of Grace. Belcher also considers general issues related to the Covenant of Grace – the condition of faith, parties to the covenant and the historical administration of the Covenant of Grace, involving not just the elect, but believers and their seed.

The Noahic Covenant is considered in Chapter 4, with Belcher noting the variety of views within Reformed camp regarding the nature of the Noahic Covenant. He sees elements of common grace and of redemption in this covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant is the subject of Chapter 5, considering Genesis 12 'The Promises of God', Genesis 15 'The Establishment of the Covenant' and Genesis 17 'The Confirmation of the Covenant'. Belcher explains the meaning of circumcision and the covenant's emphasis on offspring. The Mosaic Covenant, the subject of Chapter 6, is, according to Belcher, 'the most difficult covenant to understand' (p.75), not least given the role of the land and the law, and the diverse views of the covenant that theologians have held. Belcher rightly sees the Mosaic Covenant as a development of the Covenant of Grace. He writes, 'It shows great continuity with the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant and is necessary for those promises to be fulfilled'

(p.93). In Chapter 7 Belcher considers the Davidic Covenant as revealed in 2 Samuel 7, supplemented by 1 Chronicles 17. He notes the development of the idea of kingship in the covenant and shows that the king fills the role of mediator of God's people, pointing clearly to Christ. Chapter 8 considers the New Covenant spoken of by Jeremiah, demonstrating how Christ comprehensively fulfils the covenant promises, especially those made to David.

The remaining six chapters examine various form of Covenant Theology that are influential on the contemporary theological scene. In Chapter 9 Belcher considers the covenant perspectives of Palmer Robertson, John Murray, W J Dumbrell, Paul R Williamson and also Federal Vision. Chapters 10 and 11 consider the complex and controversial views of covenant theology propounded by Meredith Kline, Chapter 10 setting out Kline's views and Chapter 11 subjecting them to a thorough and penetrating critique.

In Chapter 12 Belcher examines in some detail the views of various varieties of Baptists on Covenant Theology. He divides them into two basic types – Confessional Reformed Baptists and Confessional Historic Baptists – and explains the diversity of views that they hold on the covenants. Issues such as the nature of the Covenant of Works and the physical and spiritual significance of the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants loom large. Belcher is a helpful guide to complex terrain. The contribution of Progressive Covenantalism is considered in Chapter 13. This is the view set out, for example, in Gentry and Wellum's weighty tome *Kingdom through Covenant* (2018), which sees itself as a middle way between Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. Belcher's treatment is an illuminating survey of a view that is influential in some Baptist circles. The final chapter is something of a summary of Belcher's view of Covenant Theology as set out in the *Westminster Confession* and usefully draws out the legal, personal and corporate dimensions of the covenants. Two appendices consider 'Covenants in the Context of the Ancient Near East' and 'The Question of "Testament" in Hebrews 9:16-17'.

Belcher surveys a wide range of exegetical and theological material in a clear and accessible style. His approach is thorough and fair, and the result is a valuable introduction to Covenant Theology as set out in Scripture and embodied in the Westminster Confession. It provides significant help for anyone seeking to understand the basic framework of God's revelation and redeeming work.

David McKay

The Best Catholics in the World, Derek Scally, Penguin Books, 2021, pbk, 336 pages, £16.99.

Subtitled, 'The Irish, the Church and the end of a Special Relationship', this book is not academic in its tone, but it is an insightful reflection by a perceptive journalist upon the rise and decline of Roman Catholicism in Ireland over the centuries. It starts out by drawing a stark contrast between the triumphant visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979 and the much less enthusiastic response to the visit by Pope Francis in 2018. He notes that the Papal Mass in Dublin drew an attendance that was 85 per cent less than that which marked a similar Mass some 30 years earlier. The book is not, as one might expect, an angry diatribe, although the author acknowledges the depth of the anger that pervades the wider society.

He captures the change in outlook with some acute observations, which include the following: 'When Irish people celebrate the breaking of bread, it is more likely to be sourdough produced by

tattooed hipsters in faux artisanal bakeries than silent nuns in convents. Passion is the word used to sell Ireland's new holy water – coffee – rather than to remind people that Jesus died on the cross for the salvation of their souls.'

The book is divided into three sections entitled respectively, 'The Leaning Tower of Piety', 'Implosion', and 'Among the ruins'. As those titles imply, the author first of all presents us with an analysis of why Roman Catholicism became so dominant in Ireland, of why its adherents were once classified as 'the most devoted of all the children of the Holy See'. He then examines the habits of mind that sustained its long-term dominance, devoting particular attention to what he regards as the unhealthy Irish tendency to show undue deference towards those in authority. He deals with the unsavoury scandals and secrets which undermined the authority of the institution. In the final section, he reflects upon the mood in present-day Ireland, trying to understand how his 'Catholic past went from rigid reality to vanishing act.'

Scally makes two interesting observations in his short epilogue. First, he detects 'a new Ireland open as never before to new ideas and practices.' While that may provide us with hope as regards a new openness to the gospel, it also alerts us to the challenges posed by the pluralism that is now so pervasive in modern Ireland. Second, the author has a note of warning for those in modern Ireland who are rejoicing in the downfall of Roman Catholicism: he points out that whereas in the past the majority looked to Rome with a blind faith, nowadays many may be looking with a blinkered devotion in the direction of Silicon Valley.

While the reader may not derive any profound theological insights from Scally's book, it is well worth reading by all those who want to understand the angry, disillusioned mood of modern, secular Ireland. It might not be going too far to say that it should be required reading for any church planter who wants to understand the soil in which the seed of the gospel has to be sown in 21st century Ireland.

Raymond Blair

Bavinck: A Critical Biography, James Eglinton, Baker Academic, 2020, hbk, 480 pages, $44.99.

Herman Bavinck is a name familiar to practically every student of the Reformed Faith. This is due, for the most part, to his classic four volume publication *Reformed Dogmatics*, the first volume (531 pages) appearing in print in 1904. But who was Bavinck? This well researched and carefully constructed biography by James Eglinton, to a large degree, answers that question.

The book traces the life of Bavinck from his roots in the German town of Bentheim, close to the Dutch border, to his student days at Kampen, then to his time in the pastoral minister at Franeker, through to his teaching career as a professor in Kampen and also in Amsterdam.

Herman Bavinck was born in 1854 and was brought up in a devout Christian home. His parents' spiritual roots can be traced to the Mennonites on one side and to a mix of Lutheran and Reformed on the other. The Bavincks belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church which had been appropriated by King William I in the early part of the 19th century. The king attempted to exert his influence on the life of the church and its worship. This led to a secession in 1834 by ministers and congregations, a denomination known as the Dutch Seceders.

Herman's grandfather led his family into the Secession Church, later known as the Christian Reformed Church, and it was within its bounds that Herman grew and developed his love for the Reformed Faith. The State dealt harshly with the Dutch Seceders making life exceedingly difficult for these advocates of a consistent Reformed Church. Nevertheless, the denomination grew rapidly and soon became accepted as a tolerated minority in late 19th century Dutch society.

Herman Bavinck, often described as a son of the Secession, was the son of Jan and Geziena Bavinck. Jan had left the family trade of carpentry to train for the ministry, being ordained in 1848. Growing up in the manse young Herman was influenced from an early age to accept Christ and embrace the doctrines of the Reformed Faith. His academic potential quickly became apparent at school and his ability secured a place at Leiden – the Netherlands' oldest and most prestigious university.

After graduating from Leiden Herman prepared for the ministry at Kampen where the Seceder Theological School was located. It was at Kampen that Hermon met Abraham Kuyper when he came to deliver lectures at the School in 1874. This was a significant meeting as the two men were later to become firm friends, each making a significant contribution to the spiritual health and wellbeing of both Church and State in the Netherlands.

After graduation Bavinck became the pastor of the Christian Reformed congregation in Franeker. After only 18 months in that pastoral charge, during which the congregation doubled in size, he was appointed by the Synod as a teacher in the Theological School in Kampen.

Bavinck quickly became a favourite among the students, not only for his gifts as lecturer, but also for his theological acumen. At Kampen he was constantly at his desk producing theological articles or writing a chapter for one of his many books. During his time in Kampen he met Geerhardus Vos. Their families, Eglinton informs us, had an unusual degree of shared history. The two men became firm friends and appreciated each other's gifts even though they served Christ on either side of the Atlantic.

These facts and a host of others, bought to light by Eglinton from previously unpublished documents, provide the reader with fascinating insights into this Dutch Calvinist theologian. Highly recommended.

Robert McCollum

All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone, Brian J. Tabb, NSBT 48, Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove: IVP, 2019, pbk, xviii + 270 pages, £14.99.

It is surely no coincidence that the Spirit has placed Revelation as the last book of Scripture. Not only does it look to the future, it gathers together all the threads that run through Scripture's unfolding revelation as they find their fulfilment and climax in its pages. It is, to use Richard Bauckham's phrase, 'the climax of prophecy'.

In this recent addition to the excellent New Studies in Biblical Theology series, Brian J. Tabb (Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis, USA) takes several of Revelation's central themes and traces out their biblical-theological arc through the rest of the canon. He seeks to show how Revelation brings Scripture's

narrative about God, his people and his world to its grand conclusion in the already-not-yet reign of Christ and the glorious new creation.

In his introduction, Tabb briefly makes the case for his eclectic hermeneutical approach to Revelation (or 'redemptive-historical idealism,' as he calls it). He views the genre of Revelation as a mixture of letter, prophecy and apocalypse, whose purpose is to challenge readers to resist compromise, complacency and false teaching, at the same time as encouraging the faithful to persevere. The symbols of Revelation are intended to unveil true spiritual realities compellingly to those with ears to hear. These symbols are drawn primarily from the Old Testament and conditioned by the Graeco-Roman context of the first readers of Revelation.

The main body of the book explores four of Revelation's major themes in their biblical-theological context: the Triune God (chapters 2-4), the worship and witness of Christ's followers and foes (chapters 5-6), God's plan for judgment, salvation and restoration (chapters 7-9) and the Word of God (chapter 10). These topics are certainly at the heart of Revelation and reflect the scope of the whole. It is hard to think of any significant theme in Revelation that does not relate in some way to these four areas. Tabb is widely read in the secondary sources and provides an excellent summary of the canonical backstory to these glorious subjects. This book is an ideal starting point for the student or the preacher planning to write or preach on Revelation. He packs a great deal of information into a small space.

It is an ambitious undertaking - precisely because Revelation *is* the canonical capstone of Scripture and the culmination of so many trajectories it is hard to do justice to them all. For example, the favourite picture of Jesus Christ in Revelation is the Lamb, and yet Tabb only gives two and a half pages to this subject. It is hard to see how it could be otherwise, without the book doubling or tripling in length. For the student or pastor looking for an overview of the main biblical-theological themes in Revelation, this book is the obvious starting point. For those who want to explore in more depth, the bibliography and footnotes provide invaluable signposts to all the most recent books and articles on any of the topics treated.

Warren Peel

Linguistics and New Testament Greek: Key Issues in the Current Debate, David Alan Black and Benjamin L. Merkle (eds), Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020, pbk, 276 pages, $29.99.

Anyone who thinks that there hasn't been much to add to New Testament Greek studies since A.T. Robertson wrote his magisterial grammar in 1914 needs to read this book. This collection of eleven essays comprise the papers read at a conference by the same name at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in April 2019 on the intersection of linguistics and New Testament Greek. David Alan Black writes in the preface that the purpose of the conference was to help the Greek students at the seminary 'to become more familiar with the significant contributions that linguistics can make to their study of New Testament Greek' (p.2). He argues that one of the most notable features of New Testament Greek scholarship during the two decades has been 'the recovery of our temporarily mislaid interest in the science of linguistics.' It is a plea to teachers and students of Greek to recognise that God has given manifold insights in the science of linguistics that should inform traditional approaches to exegesis. The essays deal with some of the current areas of debate in the field and are written by the renowned and trustworthy experts.

Stanley Porter reviews and evaluates the various linguistic schools of thought and their approaches to the subject; Constantine Campbell surveys the current scholarship on aspect and tense and then discusses their relevance to exegesis; Michael Aubrey helps students to a clearer understanding of the Greek perfect tense-form; Jonathan Pennington discusses the Greek middle voice and shows its significance for exegesis - recurring emphasis in these papers that I especially appreciate: the authors are conscious they are speaking to seminary students and that their subjects are never purely academic but always earthed in the practical purpose of exegeting Scripture to the glory of God for the good of his people.

Stephen Levinsohn gives an overview of some key features of discourse analysis and illustrates them using Galatians as a case study; Steven Runge shows how understanding constituent order gives a more nuanced reading of Koine Greek. Michael Halcomb discusses the teaching of Greek as a living language, surveying the history of this method of language teaching and making some interesting suggestions as to how it might be implemented today, especially as a way of stemming the decline in the numbers of students taking up Greek. Randall Buth deals with the not-unrelated topic of the role of pronunciation in New Testament Greek studies - what should spoken Koine sound like? Thomas Hudgins helpfully orientates students among the vast array of electronic tools and online resources available for New Testament Greek. Robert Plummer, well known to many through his 'Daily Dose of Greek' videos, has just completed an introductory Greek grammar (in conjunction with Benjamin Merkle, one of the editors of this book) and so is well placed to write on what an ideal beginning Greek grammar should include. Finally Nicholas Ellis gives us a 'prodigal history' of biblical exegesis and linguistics, again emphasizing the importance of linguistics to our main work as students of the Word of God.

Benjamin Merkle concludes the collection of essays with a very useful postscript which doesn't simply summarise the content of the chapters but seeks to synthesize them, highlighting areas of consensus as well as areas of ongoing debate. This is an extremely useful book that will stimulate further reading and thinking.

Warren Peel

God's Ambassadors: The Westminster Assembly and the Reformation of the English Pulpit, 1643-1653, Chad Van Dixhoorn, Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2017, hbk, 215 pages, $40.00.

The 2012 publication of Chad Van Dixhoorn's monumental *Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, 1643-1653* (*MPWA*) has initiated much fresh research into Puritan history and theology, both in academic circles and confessional churches. This volume is without question one of the best studies to date to draw gold from this new mine of source material, and appropriately it comes from the pen of Dr Van Dixhoorn himself. Whilst the Westminster divines are best known for their production of the confessional, catechetical and directorial documents that bear their name, this volume presents a much-overlooked element of their regular work: the examination of candidates for the ministry of the Church of England.

Part 1 sets the ecclesio-political context, revealing that this aspect of the divines' work was not intended primarily to address any perceived inadequacy in the *theology* of preaching (which was a point of strong consensus among the divines), but a crisis with England's preaching *personnel*,

precipitated by the ceremonialist policies of the Laudian regime, and an alarming growth of sectarian preachers. These threats would be checked not only by the Assembly's better-known efforts to restructure church government and discipline, but also by applying new filters to the nation's pulpits.

Part 2 explores how the English pulpit was reformed by a policy of 'purge and replace'. An Assembly committee examined problematic ministerial incumbents as well as new candidates for godliness and orthodoxy – a role it was assumed would soon be taken up by presbyteries – admitting a remarkable five thousand new ministers during its decade-long tenure. Though its success was short-lived in England (many of these being ejected in 1662), its general approach has stood the test of time within Scottish, Irish and American Presbyterianism.

Part 3 draws from the *MPWA* a remarkably thorough – if somewhat predictable – study of the Puritans' high view of preaching, addressing such important issues as homiletical Christocentrism, typology and methodology. Many of the divines' insights will be particularly helpful for churches engaging the new and complex casuistry of preaching in a post-Covid world, addressing such less-explored topics as preaching to small groups, exhortations by the non-ordained in home contexts, the relative value of in-person public preaching over recorded (written) sermons, and listening primarily to one's own local pastor over the homiletical celebrities of the day (ch.10).

Van Dixhoorn provides a sterling example of how the *MPWA* can be mined to good effect for the benefit of today's churches, as we eavesdrop on the divines' deliberations on a host of practical ecclesiology questions such as, 'How young is too young to be a pastor?', 'How should a ministry student's personal godliness be assessed?', 'What exceptions to confessional boundaries are deemed acceptable in a ministry candidate?', 'Who may read the Scriptures in public?', 'How long should the sermon be?', 'Is a three-point sermon structure preferable?', 'Is textual or topical preaching best?', 'Should we preach the text directly, or the preacher's derived 'homiletical point'?' Ministry candidates and those responsible for examining them will find particular benefit in perusing the committee's twenty-one 'Rules for the Examination of Ministers' (ch.4), 'Directory for Ordination' (ch.6, appx. 2) and the Sub-directory for Preaching (ch.7, appx. 3).

This detailed and wide-ranging study in historical theology will be of more than merely academic interest. It is especially recommended for ministers and those who aspire to this office, but also for all who pray for a godly, educated and Spirit-filled ministry in our nation's pulpits today.

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BOOK NOTICES

A Radical, Comprehensive Call to Holiness, Joel R. Beeke and Michael P. V. Barrett, Mentor, 2021, hbk, 472 pages, £29.99.

The combined gifts of Joel Beeke and Michael Barrett have produced in this substantial volume a most valuable resource on a vital topic – God's call to his people to be holy. As the writers state in the Introduction, grace always transforms the sinner into a saint, a holy man. They aim to answer the question, 'How can we achieve victory over sin and live the Christian life successfully? Is such victory even possible?' (p.9). They note the danger of substituting virtuous character for genuine holiness. They sum up the New Testament evidence regarding godliness in six propositions: it is focused on Jesus, it is linked to doctrine, it is motivated by the light of eternity, it matures through effort, it is marked by attendant circumstances (i.e. it always has effects) and it begins at home. The remainder of the book is divided into seven sections: Holiness Defined, Holiness Exegeted, Holiness Practiced [sic], Holiness Promoted, Holiness Tested, Holiness Distorted and Holiness Consummated. This is a rich study of a multitude of relevant Scriptures, full of theological insight and practical application, both of which we have come to expect from these authors. *A Radical, Comprehensive Call to Holiness* is not light reading – it demands effort and thought – but attentive readers will be richly rewarded with biblical instruction that will reshape them more in the likeness of their holy Lord.

With A Mighty Triumph! Christ's Resurrection and Ours, Rhett P. Dodson, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2021, pbk, 142 pages, £6.00.

Without the resurrection of Christ, there is no Christian faith, no salvation, no hope. A dead Saviour is no Saviour. Christ, however, has risen and on account of his triumph, all believers will also rise to share his glory. One passage of Scripture in which Paul expounds these great truths about the resurrection is 1 Corinthians 15. *With A Mighty Triumph!* brings together a written version of six addresses preached in his congregation by Rhett Dodson, pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Hudson, Ohio, and author of Banner titles on Joshua and Psalms. The entirety of 1 Corinthians 15 is covered under the headings 'Remember the Resurrection', 'Imagine There's No Easter', 'Christ the Firstfruits', 'A Resurrection-shaped Life', 'Sown and Raised: The Resurrection Body' and 'The Great Transformation'. The facts of Christ's resurrection are clearly explained and the significance of his once-for-all resurrection for those who are united to him is spelled out. As a preacher and pastor Dodson writes in an attractive and accessible style, close to the preached word, and his applications are warm and helpful. The grave consequences of not belonging to Christ are also set forth without compromise. This is material to instruct the mind and warm the heart, dealing as it does with the very heart of the gospel and the Christian's hope.

Sharing the Gospel with a Muslim Neighbour, Robert Scott, 10 Publishing, 2021, pbk, 146 pages, £4.99.

Robert Scott is well qualified to write about gospel witness to Muslims. Based in London, he helps to oversee international outreach at St. Helen's Bishopsgate and lectures in Islamic Studies at Oak Hill Theological College. He begins by stressing that all Muslims are made in God's image but are, like every human being, fallen sinners and are to be loved and told about the Lord Jesus. He

notes some of the problems that hinder witness to Muslims, such as the failings of colonialism, and reminds readers that Muslims may well carry stereotypes about Christians, just as Christians have stereotypes of Muslims. The book, Scott says, is loosely structured according to how conversations with Muslims often begin and develop. After a short chapter on 'Introducing Jesus as Messiah, he next considers the 5 pillars of Islam, 6 basic Muslim beliefs and 4 frequent objections to Christian beliefs raised by Muslim people. The following chapters consider in turn the various sects of Islam, the Qur'an and the person of Muhammad. Chapter 7 examines a wide range of questions that may well arise in gospel witness to Muslims, and the final two chapters consider how to engage in Bible study with Muslims. A glossary and suggestions for further reading complete the book. This is a clearly written handbook full of sound advice on witness to Muslims, thoroughly grounded in Scripture and growing out of extensive first-hand work in the field. It will prove to be very valuable to anyone who has the opportunity to share the gospel – sensitively and faithfully - with Muslim friends.

The God Who Acts in History, Craig G. Bartholomew, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020, pbk., 265 pages, $29.99.

The denial of the historicity of the Old Testament – in part or in its entirety – has become commonplace in academic biblical studies. In more recent times this issue has become entwined with philosophical questions about the nature of divine action. The results for many have been catastrophic, with a collapse of commitment to the authority of Scripture as a word from God. These complex issues are tackled with great scholarly ability and a firm commitment to the inspired nature of Scripture in this study of 'The Significance of Sinai' (to quote the book's subtitle) by Craig Bartholomew, now director of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics at Tyndale House, Cambridge. Recognising the fundamental importance of the events at Sinai for both Jews and Christians, Bartholomew seeks to explain why so many have been reluctant to affirm the historicity of Sinai and then to propose an alternative approach. Bartholomew recognises the vital importance of theological and philosophical commitments in shaping the views of Sinai that scholars have adopted and much of the book is given over to theological and philosophical argumentation. The first two chapters, 'The Puzzle' and 'The Problem Explored' set out the key issues to be considered in relation to the historicity of the Sinai events. Chapters 3 to 7 examine in detail the contributions of scholars such as Maimonides, Aquinas, Spinoza, Kant and Gunton to the debate. The final chapters consider 'Models of Divine Action' (chapter 8) and answer the crucial question 'Special Divine Action at Sinai? An Exploration of Exodus 19 – 24'. Bartholomew argues strongly and, we believe, convincingly for the historicity of these chapters of Exodus. Bartholomew is a very capable scholar and this is a book that demands thought and concentration, but it is a valuable study which strengthens commitment to the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

Commentary on Ephesians, Robert Rollock, translated by Casey Carmichael, Reformation Heritage Books, 2021, hbk, 253 pages, $40.00.

Robert Rollock (1555-59), the first principal of Edinburgh University, was one of the most significant figures of the early Scottish Reformation. In particular he made a crucial contribution to the development of Covenant Theology in *A Treatise of God's Effectual Calling* (1597). Much less well known, in large part because of a lack of modern English translations, are Rollock's biblical commentaries. This fine translation by Casey Carmichael of Rollock's *Commentary on Ephesians* begins to remedy that lack. With the careful analytical method associated with

Reformed Scholasticism Rollock proceeds through the epistle, attending above all to the text and only then drawing out the theological implications of the apostle's words. False views are rebutted, but the focus is on the positive teaching of Paul, and above all on Christ who is central to all Scripture. This work is not simply a historical curiosity, but a warm pastoral exposition of a wonderful portion of the Word of God. As a supplement to more recent commentaries and as food for the reader's soul, this is a valuable work. Carmichael's translation reads well and succeeds in removing linguistic barriers to engaging with Rollock and, through him, with Ephesians. This is an important addition to RHB's 'Classic Reformed Theology' series.

David McKay