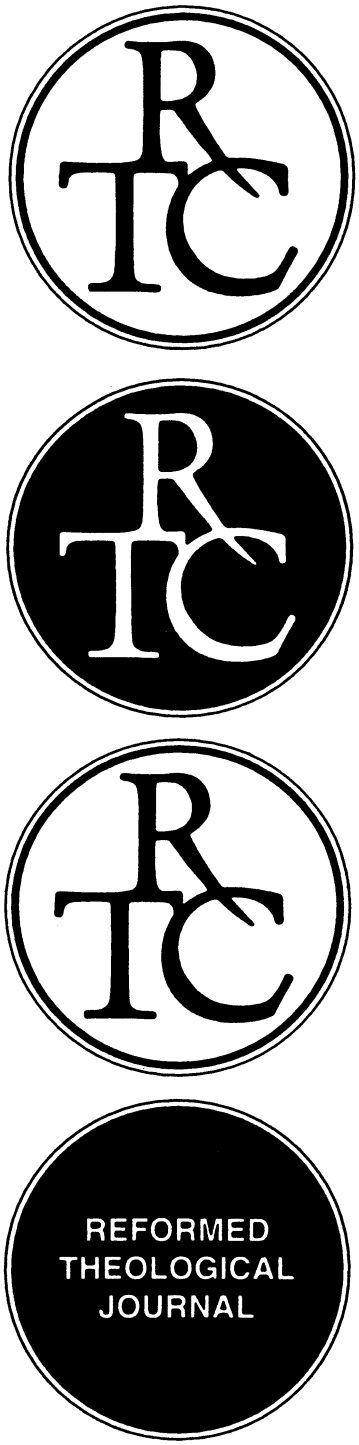

Reformed Theological Journal

Volume 40
NOVEMBER 2024

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

by

DAVID McKAY

Editorial address

Articles, books for review and correspondence should be sent to the

Reformed Theological Journal
36 Glen Ebor Park, Belfast, BT4 2JJ, Northern Ireland.

E-mail address: rtj@rpc.org

The Journal is produced only in digital format which is available free of charge in multiple formats (PDF, Epub, etc) at:

www.rpc.org/theological-college

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

ISSN 0268 – 4772

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE
FOUNDED 1854

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

Vol. 40 **NOVEMBER 2024**

CONTENTS

BOOK NOTICES by David McKay

THE LOVE OF CHRIST CONTROLS US

Warren Peel

Warren Peel is Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at the Reformed Theological College, Belfast, and minister of Galway Reformed Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Ireland.

One of the perennial questions asked of experienced pastors by younger men is, 'What keeps you going in ministry?' How might the apostle Paul have answered that question? Perhaps 2 Corinthians 5:14 might have been at least one of the things he would have said, for in this verse he reveals what drove and energized his ministry: '…the love of Christ controls us.'

The genitive here, *tou Christou*, is almost certainly a subjective genitive. It is Christ's love for Paul that is in view, rather than Paul's love for Christ. This is Paul's normal use of *agapē* with a genitive of the person, but the context clarifies the sense - the second half of the verse speaks of the supreme demonstration of Christ's love for his people in his sacrificial death for them.

Paul says that this love of Christ 'controls' him. The verb *sunechō* has various meanings. It means to 'hold something together' to prevent it from falling apart. This sense of 'hold fast/tight' led to the positive sense of compulsion on the one hand and the negative sense of restraint on the other, such as the banks of a river hemming in water. The ESV does a good job of capturing both senses with the translation 'Christ's love controls us'. Christ's love is a controlling force in the believer's life - a dominating power that both compels the believer to go one way and restrains him from going another.

When Scripture speaks of the love of God, it is usually the love of the *Father* that is in view. This is not to say that the Son and the Holy Spirit *don't* love believers, simply that it is the *Father's* love that is mentioned most often, as the initiator of the plan of salvation. Somewhat unusually, therefore, Paul here focuses on the love of *Christ* as the controlling force in his ministry. The love of Christ for us controls the gospel minister because our ministry is the message of Christ's love. His love for his people controlled *his* ministry first and sets the tone for ours.

In this article we shall look first at the love of Christ and then consider how it controlled Paul in his ministry and how it ought to control gospel ministers today.

Describing the Love of Christ

When the New Testament speaks of the love of Christ, the focus is almost always, as here, on his *redemptive* work - his giving of himself for sinners. Galatians 2.20 is one of the clearest examples of this: '…the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me'. This love comes to its grand climax at cross, but Christ's love is clearly not to be limited to the cross. That is plain, e.g., in John 13:1: '*Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this* world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end'. Notice here the two directions in which Christ's love extends: backwards to eternity and forwards to the cross and eternity future.

1. Christ loved his people from eternity

From eternity, the Son shared the Father's compassion and love for his elect people. It is impossible to conceive of any division within the Godhead, as if the Father loved us but the Son was reluctant or \cold towards us. The Son did not enter into the covenant of redemption and undertake to save his

people out of mere duty to the Father and nothing more. Of John 13:1 ('…having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end'), Charles Ross writes,

> …the sentence is so constructed and compacted as to imply, that the Saviour's whole previous history had been one of love… having always and previously loved them… in undertaking our cause in the councils of peace; in the delight with which he looked forward, from all eternity, to the accomplishment of his work… and in his appearing in the fulness of the times to discharge the great engagement.[1]

John Owen speaks of this eternal love of the divine Son for his people in *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ,* in a chapter which expounds the glory of Christ in his love: 'As then we lay under the eye of Christ in our misery, we were the objects of his pity and compassion…his love worketh in and by delight. It was an inconceivable delight to unto him, to take a prospect of the deliverance of mankind unto the glory of God; which is also an act of love.' What caused this compassion and delight in Christ? '…it was merely from the infinite love and goodness of his own nature, without the least procuring inducement from us or any thing in us.'[2] Paul says that the love of Christ controlled him - but the love of Christ controlled Christ himself first! It was love that motivated Christ to undergo all he did for our sake.

2. Christ loved his people at the incarnation

Owen imagines the Father coming to the Son in the covenant of redemption: 'In this his readiness, willingness and delight springing from love and compassion, the counsel of God concerning the way of our recovery is, as it were, proposed unto him.'[3] He makes the point that this way of salvation would be a way of great difficulties and perplexities for Christ, because he would carry it out in a human nature: 'To the divine nature nothing is grievous, - nothing is difficult; but he was to have another nature, wherein he was to undergo the difficulties of this way and work.'[4]

This helps us understand something of the unique glory of the love of Christ that differentiates it from the love of Father: '…this glorious love of Christ doth not consist alone in the eternal actings of his divine person, or the divine nature in his person…but there is more in the love of Christ. For when he exercised this love he was man also, and not God only.'[5] When the New Testament speaks of the love of Christ, it is referring especially to his love for us as the God-man. He was able to do this, Owen says, because

> …a body was prepared for him. In this body or human nature, made his own, he was to make this love effectual in all its inclinations and actings. It was provided for him unto this end, and filled with all grace in a way unmeasurable, especially with fervent love unto mankind. And hereby it became a meet instrument to actuate his eternal love and all the fruits of it.[6]

Is this partly why Paul particularly says the love of Christ controls us in ministry? Is it because our ministry as men follows the track of his ministry as a man?

---

[1] Charles Ross, *The Inner Sanctuary: An Exposition of John Chapters 13-17,* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), p.17.
[2] John Owen, *The Glory of Christ, Works Vol. 1,* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), p.335.
[3] Owen, *op. cit.,* p.335.
[4] Owen, *op. cit.,* p.335.
[5] Owen, *op. cit.,* p.336.
[6] Owen, *op. cit.,* p.336.

Just think of what this self-giving of the incarnate Son involved - this 'way of great difficulties and perplexities' - what precisely was involved in making his love 'effectual in all its inclinations and actings'. It required Jesus to live out a perfect incarnate life of active obedience to every jot and tittle of God's law. For thirty years Jesus never once said or did anything wrong. More than that, at every moment he positively said and did exactly the *right* thing, in the *right* measure. Even more than that, his obedience was not just in relation to his outward actions and words; his inner life was perfectly without sin: his thoughts, feelings, will, desires, reactions, attitudes, motives, disposition. Not once, for so much as a millisecond, was there ever even an infinitesimal departure from the perfect law of God.

This active obedience of Christ is all the more remarkable when we remember the context in which it was lived out. Jesus was not sheltered away from the corrupting influence of sinful people, being ministered to in secret by angels. Rather he was plunged into the middle of this fallen world, surrounded by sinners and in continual, close contact with them. He experienced all the many and various weaknesses of humanity that give temptation extra power, such as tiredness, poverty and pain.

3. Christ loved his people at the cross

This self-giving love of Christ came to its greatest climax and expression in his offering of himself as a sacrifice for sinners at the cross. Ephesians 5:2,25 'Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God… Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her', Revelation 1:5 'To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood'. This self-giving of Christ at Calvary is in fact the very essence and definition of love, according to 1 John 3:16 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us'.

Speaking of the glory of Christ's love for us at the cross, Owen writes,

> It was required of him that he should pity us until he had none left to pity himself when he stood in need of it - that he should pursue his delight to save us until his own soul was heavy and sorrowful unto death, - that he should relieve us in our sufferings by suffering the same things that we should have done. But he was not in least hereby deterred from undertaking this work of love and mercy for us; yea, his love rose on this proposal like the waters of a mighty stream against opposition.[7]

As John ('Rabbi') Duncan phrased it in answer to his own question, 'Do you know what Calvary was?', 'It was damnation, and he took it lovingly.'

Sin separates the sinner from God - and *imputed* sin separates the sin-*bearer* from God, so that Jesus cried out as he was overwhelmed by the wrath of God, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Christ was left to endure the affliction of the cross alone - he was neither saved him from it nor comforted in it. There was no voice from heaven to assure him that he was the Beloved Son with whom the Father was well pleased. There was no angel to minister to him and strengthen him. There was no help for him in bearing the immense weight of the guilt of the innumerable sins of his people.

This forsakenness was Jesus' deepest pain. It far outweighed all his other tortures. This was what he lamented on the cross. He doesn't mention the beatings, the scourging, the thorns, the spitting or the

[7] Owen, *op. cit.*, p.335.

mocking. He endured all those in silence. The only thing that caused him to cry out in agony of spirit was being forsaken by God. Donald Macleod writes,

> He had known from the beginning that he would die a violent death (Mark 2.20), and in Gethsemane he had looked it in the eye, and shuddered. But now he is tasting it in all its bitterness, and the reality is infinitely worse than the prospect. Never before had anything come between him and his Father, but now the sin of the whole world has come between them, and he is caught in this dreadful vortex of the curse. It is not that 'Abba' is not there, but that he 'is' there, as the Judge of all the earth who could condone nothing and could not spare even his own Son (Romans 8:32). Now, Jesus' mind is near the limits of its endurance. We, sitting in the gallery of history, are sure of the outcome. He, suffering in human nature the fury of hell, is not. He is standing where none has stood before or since, enduring at one tiny point in space and in one tiny moment of time, all that sin deserved: the curse in unmitigated concentration.[8]

No wonder that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35)! If Christ's love led him to do all this for his people, how could anything drive a wedge between Christ and the people for whom he gave himself?

Contemplating the Love of Christ

In Ephesians 3:14-19, Paul prays that God will give believers the strength to 'comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge'. The four dimensions emphasise the sheer immensity of the love of Christ and explain why we need the supernatural strength of God to grasp it! More, Paul says this love 'surpasses knowledge' - we can't ever fully know it. This does not mean that we cannot know it at all, but rather than it far outstrips our ability to fathom it.

This presents a special challenge to us who labour as pastors in the word and doctrine. We spend much time labouring to understand all kinds of things about theology, but how much time do we spend praying for the strength to understand the love of Christ? Perhaps there is a tendency to think of Christ's love as the ABC of theology, but this text makes it clear that we can never plumb the depths of his love or scale its heights.

More than this, Paul also makes clear that comprehending the love of Christ is a collaborative task. Someone who sits in the study alone and contemplates the love of Christ will have a deficient and imbalanced understanding of it, because the full dimensions of Christ's love can only be grasped 'with all the saints'. It is only as God's people share how they have experienced Christ's daily love in countless ways that they are able to build up an ever-clearer picture of the scale of his love. Indeed part of the glory of heaven will be the eternal sharing by all the saints with one another all their experiences of the love of Christ and the never-ending experience of that love in the age to come in a never-ending spiral of understanding!

John Owen gives two timely exhortations to those who would contemplate Christ's love. He introduces these by saying, 'Here, this love passeth knowledge…Yet even here, if we are not slothful and carnal, we may have a refreshing prospect of it.'[9]

---

[8] Donald Macleod, *Your Sorrow Will Turn to Joy: Meditations for Holy Week*, (Minneapolis: Desiring God, 2016), p.80f.
[9] Owen, *op. cit.*, p.336f.

1. Labour that your minds may continually be fitted and prepared for such heavenly contemplations

> If [your minds] are carnal and sensual, or filled with earthly things, a due sense of this love of Christ and its glory will not abide in them. Virtue and vice, in their highest degrees, are not more diametrically opposite and inconsistent in the same mind, than are an habitual course of sensual, worldly thoughts and a due contemplation of the glory of the love of Christ…Few there are whose minds are prepared in a due manner for this duty. The actions and communications of the most evidence what is the inward frame of their souls. They rove up and down in their thoughts, which are continually led by their affections into the corners of the earth. It is vain to call such persons unto contemplations of the glory of Christ in his love. A holy composure of mind, by virtue of spiritual principles, an inclination to seek after refreshment in heavenly things and to bathe the soul in the fountain of them, with constant apprehensions of the excellency of this divine glory, are required hereunto.[10]

If this exhortation was needed in Owen's day, how much more true are his words today in the age of digital overload. A mind that is constantly distracted cannot settle to think deeply and seriously about any weighty subject, let alone one that is so exalted. As Owen points out, the distractions need not be sinful things, but just earthly. How much of the average pastor's time is taken up with administrative tasks? It is challenging to carve out hours of quiet, uninterruptable time to think and pray and meditate on the love of Christ.

Owen himself, one of the most brilliant theologians in the history of the church, is a great example to us in these things of which he writes. For what he longed for more than anything else was a sense of the love of Christ for him.[11]

2. Be not satisfied with general notions about the love of Christ

Owen remarks that everyone who believes that Jesus Christ is God would say they value his love. But they may only have general ideas about it - they don't really know what it is. He recommends that believers need to think in a focused and specific way about it, concentrating for example, on:[12]

a) Whose love it is - the love of the divine person of the Son of God.
b) The ways and means of Christ's love: in his divine nature by eternal acts of wisdom, goodness and grace proper thereunto; in his human nature by temporary acts of pity or compassion, with all the fruits of them in doing and suffering for us.
c) The freedom of Christ's love - how it was completely undeserved by us, for we deserved hatred, not love. Such thoughts humble the soul - which is the best frame of mind in which to contemplate the glory of Christ.
d) The efficacy of Christ's love in its fruits and effects.

Owen closes the chapter with a bold claim to encourage an ever-increasing contemplation of the love of Christ: 'Nothing is in him of a higher spiritual nourishment than his love, which we should always desire.'[13]

---

[10] Owen, *op. cit.*, p.337.
[11] On this see especially Sinclair Ferguson 'John Owen on Christian Piety (Part 2)' *Banner of Truth Magazine* (Nov. 1979) pp.10-15.
[12] Owen, *op. cit.*, p.337f.
[13] Owen, *op. cit.*, p.338.

The Love of Christ in Paul's Ministry and Ours

In 2 Corinthians 5:14, Paul asserts that 'the love of Christ controls us.' The present tense denotes an ongoing, continual reality in Paul's life and ministry. Commenting on the verse, Dane Ortlund describes the love of Christ for Paul as the 'all-determining engine for Christian life and ministry.'[14] P.E. Hughes writes, 'In Christ lay the deep springs of all his conduct'.[15] How then does the love of Christ control Paul? What did that look like in practice? One way to answer this question would be to work through the material in Acts and Paul's letters with this lens in place. A more manageable approach here is to approach the verse through one of Paul's own summary statements of his ministry. Paul conveniently gives us such a summary right in the context of this passage in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10, where he describes his ministry and defends it to the Corinthians in light of their attacks on him. Much of what he says is applicable to all Christians, but we will apply it particularly to ministers of the gospel - 'servants of God' (6:4) who have received the message of reconciliation (5:19).

Christ's love controls us (2 Corinthians 5:14) because he has died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him. Christ's love for Paul so dominated him as to leave him no choice but to live for Christ, not for himself. That is true for all Christians, but it is true in a special way for Paul and his fellow ministers of the gospel. Christ's love prompted him to lay down his life for men. That is the work that Paul and all true ministers of the gospel continue on Christ's behalf - giving themselves up for Christ's people, to make them holy. So what does a life and ministry controlled by the love of Christ look like?

1. Suffering (2 Corinthians 6:4-5)

Paul gives ten marks of the true servant of God, each introduced by *en*: these were not occasional adversities in a life that was normally tranquil - Paul lived in the midst of these gruelling afflictions continually. At the top of the list is 'great endurance,' and no wonder! That phrase is then followed by three triplets which explain why great endurance was needed:

a) *General suffering (4b).* Three words describe a crescendo of trouble: afflictions, hardships, calamities. These things are common to all human beings because we live in a fallen world. Christians are not immune to them, nor are pastors exempt. Paul certainly endured more than most.
b) *Persecution (5a).* The next three words refer to involuntary, external suffering at the hands of others. Paul experienced a great deal of persecution; indeed, Jesus had warned him at the beginning that his ministry would be characterised by persecution: 'I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name' (Acts 9:16). *Beatings:* we are told of eight occasions when Paul was beaten; he tells us that he received the thirty-nine stripes five times; three times he was beaten with Roman rods and once he was stoned.[16] *Imprisonments:* in 2 Corinthians 11:23 he writes that he suffered 'far more imprisonments' than the visitors at Corinth.[17] *Riots:* there are seven recorded in Acts.
c) *Voluntary suffering (5b).* Three words describe suffering willingly undertaken for the sake of the kingdom. *Labours: kopoi* describes toil to the points of utter weariness, as though having been beaten. *Sleepless nights:* when Paul chose to go without sleep in order to travel, or to

[14] Dane Ortlund, *2 Corinthians*, in Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., Jay Sklar (eds.) *The ESV Expository Commentary, Vol. 10: Romans-Galatians*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), p.473.
[15] P.E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), p.193.
[16] 2 Corinthians 11.24f.
[17] Clement of Rome records seven imprisonments.

make tents to support himself, to pray or out of concern for the churches for which he had responsibility. *Hunger:* how often did Paul go without a meal so that he could work or pray or preach or in order to save money so that he didn't need to ask those to whom he preached for support.

2 Corinthians was written in the middle of Paul's career (it is usually dated to c56 AD). In other words, there was much more suffering to come than what is mentioned here. Paul didn't go looking for suffering, but when it came, when it was necessary, he willingly accepted it with great endurance.

He did this not because he was trying to earn salvation or atone for past sins, nor because he was trying to make a name for himself. The reason Paul endured this suffering was because Christ's love controlled him. He was so overwhelmed by Christ's giving of himself for Paul that there was nothing he would not endure for Christ.

He was controlled by the love of Christ in his suffering because he knew that Christ's love led him to suffer all these same things himself. Christ knew far more about suffering than Paul or any other man:

- Christ knew about the *general suffering* of living in a fallen world. Jesus experienced hunger, thirst, exhaustion and grief. He knew the agony of standing by a grave and weeping.
- Christ knew about *persecution* - the relentless attacks of enemies, testing him and scrutinizing every action. He was exposed to the Devil's cunning temptations. He experienced the most brutal physical violence imaginable.
- Christ knew about *voluntary suffering*. He chose to go without sleep in order to pray, even all night at times. He often had no time to eat or rest because of the demands of ministry, so that his family thought he was out of his mind. Above all, of course, there was the unparalleled voluntary suffering of the cross, when he took the cup of God's wrath and drained it, even though he could have summoned more than twelve legions of angels to deliver him (Matthew 26:53).

The challenge to ministers of the gospel today is as stark as it is obvious. How much are we prepared to suffer, controlled by the love of Christ? So many pastors in the West live such pampered lives by comparison. We need to be careful not to embrace asceticism for its own sake, but how often do we experience the exhaustion of toiling for the people of God? When did we last miss a meal, not because of an intermittent fasting regime but so as to pray, or because we were so concerned for someone in the church that we lost our appetite? How often do we go without sleep so we can pray about a pastoral crisis? What about the voluntary labour of sermon preparation? The hours of hard graft in the study, striving to get the meaning of the passage clear and then more hours spent in seeking the best way to explain and illustrate and apply the text to our hearers? What do we know of persecution for the sake of Christ's name?

For those pastors who do know something – much - of these things, here is the motivation that lies behind it: controlled by the love of Christ. It's not for money, nor because of a perfectionist streak; it's not for the appreciation and admiration of people. The true servant of Christ does it because he is overwhelmed by the love the Lord Jesus Christ showed him in giving himself for him.

2. Character (2 Corinthians 6:6)

Paul turns in v6 from suffering to character - from negative difficulties to positive virtues. In some callings character doesn't especially matter, but not in the Christian ministry. A remarkably high standard of holiness is required. It is striking that Paul does not stop at verse 5 - it is not enough to

endure hard things for God, to be tough and brave in the face of affliction and persecution. Christian minister is not *less* than that, but he must be much *more*.

Paul highlights six qualities that commend a man as a true servant of God: purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit and genuine love. Each of these things certainly characterized Paul's ministry. Why? He was controlled by the love of Christ. It was not just that Jesus commanded that these things should be true of Paul - his self-giving love for his people actually *constrained* Paul to develop these qualities. He spells out how this dynamic works in Ephesians 5:25-7: 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.'

Three times in these three verses Paul declares that Christ loved the church and gave himself for her, not just to save her from hell but to sanctify her - to develop in her these very things that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 6:6. This saving, sanctifying love of Christ compelled Paul to strive to be as holy as it was possible for a redeemed sinner to be, in at least two ways.

Firstly, the sacrificial love of Christ made it possible for Paul to be holy. He explains in 2 Corinthians 5:15ff that the death of Christ meant that those who live no longer live for themselves but for him. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation - the old has passed away and the new has come. The indwelling power of the Holy Spirit created new life in our souls: new powers, new desires, new appetites for holiness. The virtues Paul lists - purity, knowledge, patience, genuine love - are no longer impossible goals for the Christian - they are all true of the believer and can be increasingly true because of the love of Christ. He loved the church and gave himself for her to sanctify her.

Secondly, Christ's self-giving doesn't just make it possible to be holy, the love of Christ *motivates* the believer to develop these virtues more and more. The more we understand the love of Christ for us, the more it pushes us to holiness.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, loved us so much that he gave his life to save us and *make us holy*. This love of Christ surely then controls us in the realm of ethics. How can we be indifferent about holiness when it is the very purpose for which Christ gave his life? How can we treat purity as if it were a side-issue? How can we marginalise kindness? How can we think that patience is optional in the Christian life? The temptation is - like the Corinthians - to be enthralled by gifts: to be impressed by eloquent and powerful speakers; by men with high IQs and charisma; by alpha-male leaders who can grow a church from fifty to five thousand within two years; by men who give the appearance of machismo by acting in an aggressive way. But what did Paul say to the gift-obsessed Corinthians? 'I will show you a still more excellent way… Love is patient, love is kind…'

How much time and thought and prayer and effort do pastors give to developing gifts and how much to developing a holy character? As Robert Murray M'Cheyne put it, 'My people's greatest need is my personal holiness…A holy minister is an awesome weapon in the hand of God.' Christ's love controlled Paul, and ought to control us, to develop a holy character.

3. Ministry (2 Corinthians 6:7)

Verse 6 is to be true of all Christians, though outstandingly of Christian ministers. Verse 7 on the other hand seems to relate to the work of ministry in particular. Again Paul mentions three components of faithful ministry:

1. Truthful speech (ESV). This translates the phrase *en logōi alētheias,* a favourite expression of Paul for the gospel (cf. Eph 1:13; Col 1:5; 2 Tim 2:15). Servants of God are preachers of the gospel, entrusted with the 'word of reconciliation' (5:19). They are ambassadors who speak for God, appealing to and imploring their hearers on his behalf (5:20).
2. The power of God. Paul's opponents at Corinth despised his ministry as weak. In fact it was full of power, but not his own power. He depended on the power of God, which energised Paul and made his preaching effective.
3. Weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left. This seems to refer to offensive weapons (like a sword or spear, carried in the right hand) and defensive weapons (like a shield, carried on the right arm) for the spiritual fight, but these weapons are not the typical worldy weapons of sarcasm or mockery, deceit or blackmail, manipulation or bullying but weapons of righteousness. As Dane Ortlund puts it, 'Paul is armed to the teeth - with kindness and love!'[18]

Paul was controlled by the love of Christ to be a faithful servant of God:

- He was controlled by Christ's love as to the *content* of his preaching. His message was the love of Christ - the eternal Son who left heaven and came to earth to give himself to save his people and make them holy because he loved them. He set forth the truth, without distortion or embellishment - he didn't tweak the message to make it more palatable to his culture, or tone down its uncompromising demands.
- He was also controlled by Christ's love as to the *method* of his preaching. Paul preached *about* the love of Christ *with* the love of Christ for sinners. God was making his appeal through Paul, imploring his hearers on behalf of Christ, as if Christ himself was standing in front of the people for whom he died and pleading with them to come and be saved. Just as Christ would not do that coldly or clinically, neither did Paul, as he himself testifies in Acts 20:31: 'for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears'. 2 Corinthians 2:4: 'I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.'
- Christ's love for his people controlled Paul in all aspects of his ministry. He never forgot that the people to whom he ministered were people Christ had loved and for whom he had given himself. They were 'the church of God which he obtained with his own blood' (Acts 20:28). This love of Christ controlled his attitude to the Corinthians who had so maligned and attacked him, so that he wrote in 2 Corinthians 6:11-13: 'We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.'

Again this presents all ministers of Christ with a challenge. What are the things that control our ministries? What forces constrain, shape and motivate us? Is it the fear or favour of man? Or a desire to lord it over the flock, exercising power and influence for its own sake? Is it the longing to make a name for ourselves? Every pastor needs to pray earnestly and continually to be a man, like Paul, whose ministry is controlled by the love of Christ. His self-giving love shapes our ministry and sets the tone for it. Just as he loved us and humbly served us by laying down his life for us, so we are to love his people and humbly serve them by laying down our lives for them.

[18] Ortlund, *op. cit.*, p.482.

4. Paradox (2 Corinthians 6:8-10)

In these verses Paul sets out the paradoxical nature of the Christian life in general, but the Christian ministry in particular. The true servant of God is marked by two things at the same time: apparent insignificance and actual greatness.

(a) Apparent insignificance. This theme lies behind so much of 2 Corinthians. Paul's authority is being undermined and challenged. He had founded the church and was a spiritual father to many, but new teachers had come in of a very different stamp to Paul: they were far more impressive outwardly than Paul - they were handsome and distinguished, superb orators who were up to date with the latest scholarship, winsome, charming and persuasive. Paul was not like that - he didn't look inspiring or seem dynamic. He didn't ooze charisma. Early tradition tells us he was a rather insignificant-looking man: small and bow-legged with a hooked nose.[19] Paul doesn't try to deny any of it: outwardly, humanly speaking, according to the flesh (5:16) it is all perfectly true.

So today, the Christian church is apparently insignificant. In the West especially the church comprises a tiny and shrinking minority in an increasingly secular and hostile culture. Christians are not just marginalised and ignored - they are regarded as a dangerous threat, like a cancer that needs to be removed. Pastors, likewise, are apparently insignificant. Not many local councils consult pastors for their advice and prayers before major decisions. Not many pastors are men of outstanding gifts and influence, with awe-inspiring personalities.

(b) Actual greatness. The insignificance is only *apparent*, as we look at things from a worldly point of view, because unseen, spiritual realities are also present at the same time. Notice the other words Paul lists: 'honour, praise, true, well known, alive, not killed, always rejoicing, making many rich, possessing all things.' In the kingdom of God, these men who seem pathetic are nothing less than princes with God!

How did Paul cope with this tension between apparent insignificance and actual greatness? Christ's love controlled him: it was the love of Christ which enabled him not just to accept this paradox but to rejoice in it. As he puts it in 2 Corinthians 1:.9, '"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' The love of Christ sustained him and spurred him on when he was discouraged by apparent insignificance.

Christ himself was the supreme demonstration of these paradoxes. He embodied each of them because of his great love for his people. For if ever there was someone who was an example of apparent insignificance at the same time as actual greatness, it was Jesus Christ:

- *Honour and dishonour... slander and praise... treated as impostors, yet true… unknown and yet well known.* How true these descriptions were of Christ! Think of the dishonour and slander heaped upon him throughout his life: the illegitimate son of a peasant girl from Nazareth; his own family thought he was mad; he was called a glutton, a drunkard, a blasphemer and demon-possessed. And yet all the time the reality was very different: *My beloved Son with whom I well pleased!*

[19] *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

- *Dying and behold we live... punished and yet not killed.* Christ was scourged, beaten, mocked, crucified and buried, but on the third day he was declared to be the Son of God with power by his resurrection from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God.
- *Sorrowful and yet always rejoicing.* Jesus was a man of sorrows, grieved by human sin and the hardness of heart he witnessed. The Gospel writers draw attention to how he was astonished and indignant when he saw the effects of sin up close in lives broken and damaged by it. And yet at the same time he was filled with a deep, unshakeable joy in God.
- *Poor, yet making many rich... having nothing, yet possessing all things.* Jesus Christ owned nothing but the clothes he walked in, had nowhere to call home and was buried in a borrowed tomb. Yet he created the universe and all the nations are his inheritance. He lifted a countless multitude of human beings up from the direst poverty to the heights of wealth, as Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 8:9: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.'

When the pastor crashes up against these paradoxes of the Christian life and ministry - when he is discouraged by the apparent insignificance of his work and is tempted to think he is throwing away his life and gifts for nothing, he should meditate on the love of Christ: for Christ gave all he was and had because he loved his people and it seemed like the biggest waste in all of history. But in fact what was really happening was that in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself!

For Paul, the love of Christ was the 'all-determining engine for Christian life and ministry.'[20] May it be so for all true servants of God.

[20] Ortlund, *op. cit.*, p.473.

SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND

Professor James Dick's defence of the Imprecatory psalms

Geoffrey Allen

Rev. Geoffrey Allen is Minister of Dromara Reformed Presbyterian Church in Co. Down.

In 1978 the Psalms made it to the top of the U.K.'s popular music charts. The German group, Boney M's song was entitled 'By the Rivers of Babylon' and took the words directly from Psalm 137. In their context it was a statement about the African diaspora. However, Christian people got excited that the Psalms had gained such popular acclaim. But it was not long until the enquirer read the rest of the verses that closed in the imprecatory curse against Babylon and her children.

In promoting the use of Psalms in Christian worship, we are encouraged by many themes and Psalm portions that are being taken and used to God's glory, however, in the midst of the progress there seems a stone of stumbling, the imprecatory Psalms!

There is a reason why even Psalm singers relegate certain Psalms into the corner of the Psalter with the thought 'handle with care' or 'do not sing.' The former thought is the correct one, 'handle with care', but if we believe in the inspiration of the Psalms and the warrant of the command to sing them all, we must, in honouring God, engage with and seek to understand these difficult portions.

Psalms often present a problem which we perhaps unconsciously avoid by selecting portions of a Psalm to sing which are appropriate in the context of worship, the sermon, the situation of the service and who is present, but we then deselect others. Habitually we turn to the proven and popular selections and seem never to have the opportunity to engage with the difficulties. Yet the private reader of the Bible comes across them and we so often hear difficult Psalms preached like the prophets, but never sung, the words never being in the worshippers' mouths.

It is a present encouragement that some within the wider Christian Church are engaging with the Psalms, seeking a more complete ascription of glory to God, that the worshipper realises is absent from the repetitive and ephemeral compositions of recent times. However, when we look back to the older compositions of the 19th and 20th centuries, the use of imprecation is almost completely absent as well. This has compounded the gulf between exclusive Psalm singers and the vast majority of the Christian Church. The very thing that we would accuse others off, selecting certain portions over others, we also do, while consciously deselecting others with the tension that we are in competition for the hearts of the worshippers who feel the draw of 'Gospel Hymns' and the confusion of the Psalms. But are we in fact deselecting something of the character of God? This is a serious matter if we are seeking to sing Psalms exclusively.

If the Psalms are the word of God to be sung completely to him in worship, we must then admit that they contain words that are sung curses, or imprecations, towards the enemies of God. We cannot easily relegate certain 'imprecatory' Psalms with warning signs, when in fact imprecation permeates the whole of the Psalter. The Psalms present to us the contrast of the destiny of the wicked and the destiny of the righteous, but as we engage with imprecation, who are the wicked? Are they those vile enemies of Christ, the active agents of the devil, or are they also our unbelieving friends and family?

Psalm 137 is often held up as a banner against our persistence in exclusive Psalm singing, indeed C.S. Lewis is quoted as saying that a Psalm of imprecation is as 'unabashed a Hymn of hate as was ever written.' This is the first emotion that many Christian people have when they come to such portions of Scripture, but why have modern Christian songs completely set aside this sentiment of worship when the Psalms have been sung in their completeness for over two and a half thousand years?

Across the Presbyterian World Psalm singing has largely disappeared. What was formally clear in uniting Presbyterians and the Reformed Faith, now divides. Sadly, one of the last expressions of Presbyterian ecumenicity brought about in Belfast in 1902 an international conference of Psalm singing, the papers of which were later published. Rev. Professor James Dick, the minister of Trinity Street Reformed Presbyterian Church and professor at the Theological Hall, presented a paper on the imprecatory Psalms.

'The "Imprecatory" Psalms' in *Psalm-Singers' Conference held in The Y.M.C.A. Hall, Wellington Place, Belfast, on 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th August, 1902* (Belfast: Fountain Printing Works, 1903)

Neither this article nor his paper will bring a revelatory solution to this difficulty which has been written about by many others. Nevertheless Professor Dick gives three helpful principles to engage with the entirety of the Psalter:

1. The Psalms are the word of God.

2. The Psalms are consistent with the character of God.

3. The Psalms reveal the person of Christ.

1. The Psalms are the word of God

The Holy Scriptures are the word of God to man. The Bible records by inspiration what he wants us to know of himself and how he interacts with man. The Scriptures by their nature also record the words of men, angels and devils, but we apply ourselves to the whole of the text. The words of David and Paul are just as much the word of God as those of the Lord Jesus, the words of the enemies of God are also part of the word of God. This is important as we seek the origin of the imprecations in the Psalms. Are we to read them as merely the words of men recorded in Scripture or as divinely inspired sentiments for us to engage with? When we read the imprecations of God the Son, God the Father, the prophets and apostles, they are in the second person from us. It is clear they are recorded as the Holy Spirit speaking, however, the imprecations in the Psalms are placed in the first person, in our mouths as we sing. Therefore, there must be a personal engagement with what we sing, in understanding that this is God's word. This asks the question then, whether imprecation records the expression of the human spirit or of the Holy Spirit? Are they the expression of man's anger against his personal enemies, or God's anger against his enemies?

The struggle often arises in the Christian's heart over imprecation which feels unsuitable for the Gospel age, but is it Scripture or the culture of the Church which has informed us of this? Is the Old Testament then not suitable for the Gospel age? In practice the New Testament Church has used them completely for almost two millennia.

As the Church's understanding of Covenant Theology diminishes, the doctrine of the Church becomes Pentecost-centred, and many do not understand that the Old Testament Church comprises our spiritual

forebears. There is then no reason for them to sing a Psalm and the problem for them simply goes away. However, as Christians search deeper into the Scriptures, the relationship of God and the Church becomes clear, along with the imperative of Psalm singing. With the full revelation of Christ we know who they were singing about, therefore the integrity of Scripture demands that we engage with the whole of the Psalms as God has commanded us to, being the inspired word of God. Indeed, many of the Psalms can only be the words of the perfect man, the Lord Jesus who as the final Judge will implement the fulness of justice against the enemies of God.

2. The Psalms are consistent with the character of God

The second point that Professor Dick raises in his paper, is that the Psalms are consistent with the character of God. The Psalms are a different form of literature in Scripture, filled with poetic language and illustration and they appeal to our hearts in a way that narrative does not.

We are to be thoughtful as we select Psalms, not to cause stumbling blocks, but to challenge people to examine the whole character of God. We must be consistent in our practice and on the appropriate occasions exposing our hearts to the examination of imprecation. If we avoid them, are we in practice believing them to be inconsistent with the character of God as revealed in Christ? The conclusion must be then that we do not believe the Lord Jesus to be the perfect representative of the Father. While we are guided to select Psalms appropriate for use, we can impose our spirit upon the Psalms, denying what God would have us know about how he deals with sin. Surely Christians are encouraged that there is divine justice here and in eternity.

Professor Dick advises care in not overemphasising the titles of the Psalms giving various historical contexts. While some context is internally evident, the singer can be distracted by literary techniques applied to secular poetry inappropriate for the word of God. However, we do study them as divine poetry whose author is God the Holy Spirit, so we are not to analyse them alone in the setting of some crisis in the Psalmist's life but apply them to the Christian life and to the contemporary Church.

The imprecatory Psalms cannot be rejected as simply reflecting the spirit of the ancient world as the character and the word of God is consistent throughout redemptive history, even as the Lord Jesus sang these Psalms. Yes, they are ancient, but if we are dismissing something just because it spoke to a former time, or we say it is affected by the spirit of its age, we could apply that principle to last week's sermon as being affected by the spirit of last week, but not of this week! It is a dangerous argument.

Imprecations are common throughout Scripture. Christ came to save and he is coming again to judge. He made that clear as he was reading from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, and as He was speaking to Nicodemus. However, in his gospel preaching he pronounced woes on the fig tree, woes on the Galilean towns that he ministered in and woes upon the generation of unbelievers and those hardened of heart. Paul in 2 Timothy 4 prays that Alexander the coppersmith would receive his rewards for the harm done to the gospel. These we can say are in the power of Christ and the Apostles. But the Lord Jesus also taught us to pray, 'Thy Kingdom come,' which the Shorter Catechism explains that we are praying for the extension of the Kingdom of Grace, that men, women and children would be saved, we are praying for the Kingdom of Glory to come and we cry out 'Come Lord Jesus,' but we are also actively praying in imprecation against the realm of the Devil and all his works and those who conform to them.

The songs people sing in worship shape their theology. Many songs can be theologically accurate yet by omission distort God's character. Christians do have genuine concerns about sung imprecations. One fear is that God would actually answer the imprecatory prayer. It is a solemn matter to invoke God to arise, as several Psalms call us to sing. If God were to rend the Heavens and come down, judgment begins with the Church and what about my heart and my sins as well? There are also fears that our sinful heart will become entangled with what we sing. Will we be thinking of our own enemy, that person who wronged me? Then are we bringing curses and using God's wrath for our own benefit? However, God is not at our command, but nonetheless the sinful heart is a fearful thing. We can also be afraid that we are not praying for man's redemption but for the mere destruction of sinners.

It is a serious matter to engage in imprecation. We know how God deals with wickedness when we sing these Psalms and these are words that are put into the singer's mouth, contrasting wickedness and unrighteousness. God alone has the power to curse, we cannot, we have no power to bring about a curse also the Devil does not have that power. To the sovereign God belongs the blessings for Covenant obedience and curses for Covenant disobedience. God's sovereignty is demonstrated in Psalm 137, in that just as Babylon rejoiced in Jerusalem's destruction, as it had previously in Nineveh's, likewise her sin will be visited upon her own head. Others will be just as delighted as they were and rejoice in their own complete destruction. Be assured, God will complete his purposes.

We think of the sovereign God's glory in the sky and in the stars and the sun rising and setting, the wonderful things that come from the mouth of babes and sucklings, the beautiful pictures of green pastures and good shepherds and there are many things that that we can conclude about the revealed character of God, but these portions of the Psalms do not express man's vindictiveness, but God's righteous judgement. Man's vindictiveness is not recorded in these imprecations, as we would examine the life of David, when he was being victimized by Saul, God presented him with the opportunity to kill Saul, but he did not. David later wept over the death of his rebellious son Absalom. In Psalm 137 the exiles were not vindictive as they sowed in tears of repentance they reaped in joy. These Psalms are the sentiment of spiritual Israel, exiles in a strange land that was so different from Zion. These are also the sentiments of the son of David himself, the Lord Jesus Christ who is the final judge and he is the one who sang these Psalms that declare the reality of God's righteousness.

Contemporary Christian songs barely recognise the reality of external evil. Whilst they may focus upon personal sin, the Psalms address the reality of the world in which the Church finds herself. The Psalms tell us that God will bring evildoers to the dust. He will smash their teeth. He will break their power to destroy the Church. His purposes will continue, no one who is effectually called will be prevented from coming to salvation and the Church will, on the last day, be presented the spotless bride to the Lamb at the wedding feast.

God's word is consistent with his character. Not to engage with the fulness of the Psalms is not to seek after the fulness of God's character. Importantly in Psalm 137:6 there is the matter of self-imprecation:

'If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.'

Our hearts are also plainly examined by singing all of the Psalms, engaging with them completely. This must be part of our sanctification seeking to sing them as Christ sang them and the more Christ-like we become the more we will engage with the Psalms in a manner that is fully intended.

3. The Psalms reveal the person of Christ

We are in that privileged position in singing the Psalms today of knowing who Christ is. These are the Lord's songs, not yet the songs of the New Jerusalem where every tear will be wiped away, for these are the songs of the people of Zion yet exiled here in Babylon, subjects of an eternal Kingdom, traveling through this world of rebellion. The glorious message the Scriptures bring to us is that God is sending his King and Babylon falls! The Psalms fully reflect the victory of God's king, his own son Jesus the Christ, who is portrayed in Psalm 110 as the complete avenger. Psalm 69, sometimes rejected as an imprecatory Psalm, is full of Christ and the cross by which he took that curse of sin for us. Surely for the cross to have meaning Christ also has to be that final judge in that we are by the cross saved from the actual wrath of God against sin. If we rejoice in the year of the Lord's favour, as Isaiah tells us, we must also await the day of the Lord's wrath.

Here then is the work of sanctification that we must pursue in our hearts under the Holy Spirit and Proverbs 24:16-21 warns us:

> For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity. Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; Lest the LORD see it, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him. Do not fret because of evildoers, nor be envious of the wicked; For there will be no prospect for the evil man. The lamp of the wicked will be put out. My son, fear the LORD and the king.

In engaging with God's holiness, we must not engage the sinful heart. Sanctification is to be applied to all of life as we grow in grace towards our enemies, heaping coals of kindness upon them, praying for them, witnessing to them, going the extra mile, turning the other cheek. However, we are realistic about the fate of the wicked. Sanctification means that we grow in hatred towards sin and towards the enemies of Christ. We are indignant with politicians, we are indignant with the police if they stop us for speeding, we are indignant with referees on the sports field, but are we indignant with national sins or personal sins? National sinners and personal sinfulness?

In Psalm 139:21 we sing,

> LORD, don't I hate those hating you,
> and loathe those who oppose you, too?
> With utmost hatred I hate them;
> my enemies they have become.

We are hardly at that point of sanctification if we still sin from the love of sin. However, as Christ sang this Psalm, he did so with sinless hatred that comes from perfect righteousness. Ultimately the challenge of the imprecation in the Psalms is to sing them as Christ sang them, to see sin as he does, and yet he gave his atoning blood for the repentant believer. The rejection of the same blood will condemn the unrepentant unbeliever.

The imprecations of the Psalms remind us of that curse that has been removed, therefore as we would sing these portions, we do so with humble thanksgiving for the cross and with tears of mourning for the lost. As we pray for those who are enemies of Christ, we grieve over our own sinfulness and we also grieve over sin and the workers of iniquity in this world.

Singing Psalms as Christians we tremble and are humbled when we realize from what we have been saved, but thinking of these difficulties in the Psalms, we engage with them in the same manner as Christ does. They must provoke us to even greater works of evangelism knowing that what we sing of remains upon unbelievers for eternity who, if they sing them, compound the wrath of God upon them.

Professor Dick in his address does not attempt to resolve the difficulties nor to provide a key to understanding the imprecations sung in the Psalms, but we can conclude from his exhortations that we must sing the Psalms less selectively and more fearfully, longing for the day when in the Lord's land we sing the songs of the New Zion by the rivers of life where we will know all things complete in the risen and glorified Christ.

DANIEL DEWAR (1788-1867) AND THE MORAL IMPROVEMENT OF IRELAND IN THE EARLY 19th CENTURY

Raymond Blair

Raymond Blair is minister of Dervock Reformed Presbyterian Church, Co. Antrim, and Lecturer in Church History at the Reformed Theological College, Belfast.

> Is there then a man who professes to be a Christian, and yet refuses to enlighten the poor, to aid in educating the sons of misery and want, to disseminate the knowledge of salvation in every direction? If there is, that man acts in opposition to the first precepts of revelation, to the spirit and design of the gospel, to the profession of religion which he makes. (Daniel Dewar, 1812).[1]

In 1812 there was published in London a substantial tome bearing the title, *Observations on the Character, Customs, and Superstitions of the Native Irish.* The subtitle is perhaps a more accurate indicator of its content, *And on some of the causes which have retarded the moral and political improvement of Ireland.* The author was a young man from Scotland named Daniel Dewar who later on in his life would become quite a prominent theologian within the Church of Scotland. However, this particular composition of his is not that widely known, not familiar at all to most people outside the ranks of historians of 19th century Ireland. Yet, it is worthy of study for insights into the spiritual and moral (as well as the social and political) condition of Ireland at the outset of the 19th century. In this article, therefore, attention will be given to three major issues. These consist of an overview of the author's life, a detailed outline of his proposals for the moral improvement of Ireland, and an assessment of how effective his proposals might have been, had they ever been fully implemented.

THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF DANIEL DEWAR

Early life and ministry

Although Daniel Dewar had a high profile during his lifetime as an influential figure within the Church of Scotland and a prolific writer of substantial theological works, he is now, like so many others, a largely forgotten figure. Nevertheless, surviving sources provide us with a fairly comprehensive picture of the man in question. Dewar was born in Glen Dochart in Perthshire.[2] That was of significance for his later career and for his interest in Ireland as it meant that he was a native Gaelic speaker, and maintained a keen sympathy for his native language throughout his life . For instance, in the 1830s he assisted Norman MacLeod with the compilation of a Gaelic dictionary.[3] Furthermore some of his sermons in his native tongue have survived, and in 1829 he edited a periodical called *The Gaelic Preacher*, containing a selection of sermons by a variety of preachers in the native tongue.[4]

As a young man, Dewar came under the evangelical influence of the Haldane movement and went to study at Robert Haldane's seminary. Subsequently, he served as an itinerant evangelist with the Independents, preaching the gospel extensively within the Aberfeldy district. Although he received

---

[1] *Observations on the Character, Customs, and Superstitions of the Native Irish* by Daniel Dewar (1812), pp.107-8. The page numbering in Dewar's *Observations* is somewhat confusing due to a printer's error.
[2] *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* edited by Nigel M. de S. Cameron, p.240.
[3] *A Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* by Norman Macleod and Daniel Dewar (1839).
[4] *The Gaelic Preacher; and Scripture interpreter* edited by Daniel Dewar, (1829).

further theological instruction at Homerton Independent College, he eventually moved away from Independency as he was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Mull of the Church of Scotland in 1812.[5] However, his visit to Ireland and the subsequent book which he published about the country took place prior to his licensure by the Church of Scotland.

Scholarly credentials and ministry within the Church of Scotland

In line with his commitment to itinerant ministry, Dewar served for a short period as a missionary at Strontian in Ardnamurchan, which was also an expression of his desire to see the gospel being disseminated within the Gaelic-speaking Highlands of Scotland. Subsequently, however, from 1814 to 1819, he served as the minister of the College Church of Greyfriars, Aberdeen. During this time, and as a testimony to his academic ability, Dewar obtained an M.A. from Edinburgh University as well as an LL.D. from Glasgow University. (The latter university duly honoured him with a D.D. in 1833.)

Dewar's scholarly proficiency was further acknowledged in 1815 when he was appointed to the prestigious post of Professor of Moral Philosophy at King's College, Aberdeen. Four years later he became the minister of the Tron Church in Glasgow and served as the pastor of that evangelical congregation until 1833, as successor to none other than the renowned Thomas Chalmers. Given Dewar's academic ability, however, it was no surprise when he then returned to Aberdeen and served for many years as Principal of Marischal College and as its Professor of Ecclesiastical History.[6]

Despite having raised expectations that he would have been ready to join the Free Church at the time of the Disruption in 1843, he ended up staying within the Established Church and serving for the rest of this life within its ranks. This gained him a great measure of opprobrium: there were those who accused him of siding with the Established Church out of the most unworthy of motives. One embittered critic summed him up in this way:

> But in all of his changes of place and circumstances, and in his dealings with mankind, his principles and character preserved the same aspect. He sat in a vehicle drawn by two horses, Ambition being the name of the one, and Avarice that of the other.[7]

Given the lapse of time, it is almost impossible to know if this was an accurate assessment of Dewar's motives but it should be pointed out that others have been much more positive in their verdict upon Dewar's behaviour. One authority commends him in the following manner:

> ...a man of considerable ability and independence of thought, evangelical, knowledgeable in philosophy, biblical hermeneutics and church history, who at least until middle age could preach strongly.[8]

Theological Works

The positive assessment of Dewar has some creditability in the light of his impressive corpus of theological writings. Some of these were dedicated to devotional matters, such as *The nature and obligation of Personal and Family Religion* (1821) and *A Manual of Family and Private Devotions*

[5] *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, p.240.
[6] *McClintock & Strong Biblical Cyclopedia* (1887), p.273.
[7] *Memorabilia Domestica; Or, Parish Life in the North of Scotland* by Donald Sage (1899), p.228.
[8] Cited in *James Clerk Maxwell: Perspectives on his Life and Work*, edited Flood, McCartney and Whitaker (2014), p.36.

(1849). Other works had to do with philosophical and ethical matters, most notably his *Elements of Moral Philosophy and Christian Ethics,* which appeared in two volumes in 1826. It is chiefly because of this work that he has been deemed worthy of inclusion in the prestigious *Continuum Encyclopedia of British Philosophy.*

In the realm of ecclesiastical history, in 1836 Dewar oversaw the production of a new edition of the classic work by Thomas Stackhouse, *A History of the Holy Bible,* which had originally appeared in 1733. Then, in the general field of theology, Dewar penned quite a number of worthwhile compositions. In 1847 he published *The Holy Spirit: his personality, divinity, office and agency, in the regeneration and sanctification of man.* In 1860 there appeared, *The Atonement: its nature, reality and efficacy* and in 1867, running to three volumes, Dewar published his *Elements of Systematic Divinity.*[9] Two decades earlier he had produced a more popular work along somewhat similar lines entitled, *A Body of Divinity treated according to the Order of the Dispensations.* This work was highly recommended by a reviewer as being:

> ...an able exposition of Christian doctrine, a succinct history of the Bible, a short biography, and an excellent general commentary on the books of Scripture, and promising to be eminently useful for the purposes of practical piety.[10]

This is far from being a complete list of Dewar's writings, but it is enough to establish that he was prolific as a writer and prominent as a theologian in 19th century Scotland. However, when it comes to his interaction with Ireland, it is, as we shall see, his keen interest in the Gaelic language, his concern for moral improvement, and his evangelical commitment to the spread of the gospel that are of most relevance.

DEWAR'S PROPOSALS FOR THE MORAL IMPROVEMENT OF IRELAND

Before summarising Dewar's proposals for the moral improvement of Ireland, four preliminary remarks should prove helpful. First of all, it is important for the understanding of his book to know something about the economic and political situation of Ireland at the beginning of the 19th century. Increased attention was being given to the troubled state of the country because of the 1798 rebellion and the subsequent passing of the Act of Union, which had done away with the Parliament in Dublin. There was also concern about the levels of economic impoverishment and social deprivation.

Furthermore, these early decades of the 19th century were marked by a continuing campaign to do away with the Penal Laws. These laws had imposed substantial civil and political disabilities upon the Roman Catholic population. Some of them had been repealed in the closing decades of the 18th century, but the campaign to have the remainder abrogated was being actively pursued at the time when Dewar was writing down his thoughts about how Ireland might be improved, and it is no surprise that he devotes quite a proportion of his book to discussing them.[11]

Then, secondly, it must be appreciated in regard to Dewar's *Observations* that they were based on first-hand experience of Ireland. One scholar aptly refers to Dewar as having been 'a friendly Scottish visitor' to the land.[12] In 1808, four years before publishing his book, the author had conducted an

---

[9] *Catalogue of Books in the Library of the British Museum* (1882), p.233.
[10] *The Presbyterian Review and Religious Journal* Volume 15 (1842), pp.261-2.
[11] For the general background see *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation: the Catholic Question* by Thomas Bartlett (1992).
[12] Irish Historical Studies (1949), p.112.

extensive tour throughout much of the country. In the Introduction to the book, Dewar makes reference to this tour:

> A tour through that country enabled me to prosecute inquiries which otherwise could not be conducted with the same facility and advantage. An acquaintance with the Irish language has put it in my power to enter more fully into the views and prejudices of the Irish nation, than the mere English traveller could possibly have done.[13]

Therefore, by undertaking that tour, and by being able to converse with people in their native tongue, the author did obtain valuable insights into the condition of the ordinary people. It helped also that his disposition towards the people was favourable as can even be sensed from the poetic quotation on the title page of his book. It was taken from a poem by the Scottish poet, Thomas Campbell, in which the land is commended in this way: 'Green be thy fields – sweetest isle of the ocean.'[14] Dewar's sympathy for the land is also evident from the closing lines of the introductory section in which he expresses this fond hope:

> My book, such as it is, I present to the public, with the sincerest desire to promote the interests of a nation, which may, at some future period, be the glory of the British Empire.[15]

While his fond hope that Ireland might become the glory of the British Empire was to be unfulfilled, Dewar's desire to see its people prosper cannot be faulted.

The third preliminary remark relates to the fact that Dewar's proposals for the moral improvement of Ireland were very much shaped by his own experience of the Scottish Highlands. Not only was his initial ministry conducted in the Highlands but, as a Highlander himself, he maintained an ongoing interest in their well-being throughout his life. Thus, we find one of his contemporaries referring to him in these terms: '... a genuine Highlander, proud of his Gaelic, speaking and preaching in Gaelic to the last with zest and living power.'[16]

In fact, just prior to writing his book about Ireland, Dewar had undertaken a tour of localities in the Highlands on behalf of the *Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools;* in his subsequent report on behalf of that Society, he pointed to the urgent need for improved educational facilities, a theme which is extremely prominent in his *Observations* about Ireland.[17] Therefore, it is crucially important for the understanding of his proposals about Ireland to recognise that they were substantially inspired by his own experience of the Scottish Highlands.

The fourth preliminary remark has to do with the somewhat misleading title that Dewar gave to his book. The title page gives the impression that it was going to devote considerable attention 'to the customs and superstitions of the Irish.' However, there is not very much at all about either subject and Dewar himself even acknowledges this in the preface to his *Observations*:

---

[13] *Observations*, p.20.
[14] *The Exile of Erin* by Thomas Campbell (1812).
[15] *Observations*, p.20.
[16] *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* Volumes 19-20 (1895), p.297.
[17] *Society for the Support of Gaelic Schools* Annual Report for 1812, p.2.

> It was once intended to have entered more fully into the consideration of the poetry, customs, and superstitions of the native Irish; but these topics will probably be made the subject of a future publication.[18]

As far as can be ascertained, the author never got around to producing that additional publication, but there is at least one key statement in his *Observations* in regard to the sensitive issue of native superstition. This is worth quoting *in extenso*:

> When, however, it {superstition} interferes with the prerogative of the magistrate; when it presumes to dictate to the sovereign and senate of the people; when its leading maxim is that ignorance and incapacity form the security of the multitude; and when it proscribes as heretics, and punishes as infidels, all who do not adhere to its dogmas, then indeed it produces the most baneful effects of the most baneful superstition. And it is difficult to say, what greater curse heaven in its wrath can inflict on mortals; it takes away the power as well as the inclination of noble and liberal exertion; it destroys some of the most important sources of human happiness; and unlike the tempest which lowers and darkens only to produce a more brilliant sunshine, it spreads a cloud of night over the land, which the brightest rays of genius may long attempt in vain to penetrate, and the clearest light of revelation be scarcely able to remove. How unlike the rational, and mild, and beneficial, and ennobling religion which nature approves, and which God prescribes.[19]

These highly critical comments about the baneful effects of native superstition will obviously face grave objections from 'liberally' minded commentators in this modern era. They were perfectly consistent, however, with Dewar's convictions as an evangelical Protestant and with his training in moral philosophy.

Having completed those preliminary remarks, a detailed summary of Dewar's book can now be presented. His *Observations* are divided into twelve chapters.

Chapter 1: The Introduction

The first chapter is introductory and in it the author identifies what he regards as the three main factors which can retard national improvement. These are said to arise from political institutions, from national religion, and from the habits of the people. In regard to political factors inhibiting progress, Dewar claims that a chief cause of the misery and backwardness of the island was the want of harmony among the several divisions of its people; that is between the native Irish, the descendants of the English settlers, and the descendants of the Scots who were established in the province of Ulster. The author adds while no part of Ireland was more improved than the principal counties of Ulster that nowhere was:

> the influence of religious antipathies and prejudice more apparent...A religious designation is here the name of a political party, as well as of a religious body; and it is no unusual thing to meet with a ruffian, who would fight for that sect whose name he bears, whilst he is totally ignorant of the tenets of every sect.[20]

These are perceptive comments of enduring relevance to modern Ireland!

---

[18] *Observations*, Preface page vii.
[19] *Observations* pp.11-12.
[20] *Observations*, p.25.

Chapters 2 and 3: The Character of the Irish

Two chapters are devoted to describing the character of the native Irish, and the description is generally positive in its tone. Dewar thought that they were especially characterised by inquisitiveness:

> He will walk miles with you to discover where you come from, where you are going, and what is your business; he will appear merry to make you frank, and perfectly untutored and simple with a design constantly in view.[21]

Another mark of the native Irish identified by Dewar was their love for their own cottage and locality. Even when they travelled far away in search of work and a better life, the native Irishman, according to Dewar, could 'never forget the cottage of his early years.'[22]

A third characteristic had to do with the hospitable spirit of the people:

> The hospitality of the Irish, like that of the Scottish Highlanders is proverbial, and never surely has a stranger visited the neighbouring isle without having had satisfactory proofs of it. The poor labourer, who has only potatoes for himself and his children, will give the best in his pot to the guest, from whatever quarter he may come; he bestows his simple fare with a kindness that has often delighted me.[23]

Dewar was by no means the only visitor to be impressed by the hospitality of the Irish people; even around the time of the Great Famine, three decades later, that generous spirit of hospitality was prevalent.[24]

Another characteristic of the Irish, according to Dewar, was their inclination toward extremes of gratitude and resentment:

> They are prone to extremes in their prepossessions, or their antipathies, their love or their hatred...they are ardent and high-spirited.[25]

Next, Dewar deals with the Irish reputation for shrewdness or deceitfulness. At this point his sympathy for the people becomes very evident once again. He claims that their degree of shrewdness has been exaggerated by hostile observers and furthermore that this and other faults:

> ...should I think be ascribed to the moral and political circumstances in which the Irish have been placed. The constituent parts of this character are certainly good; and if under proper direction, would undoubtedly produce the happiest results...If to these circumstances we add the hatred and contempt which are entertained for the native Irish by the English who had obtained possession of their lands, we need not be surprised at the instances of infidelity of which the latter so much complain.[26]

---

[21] *Observations*, p.26.
[22] *Observations*, p.32.
[23] *Observations*, pp.38-9.
[24] *Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger* by Asenath Nicholson (1847).
[25] *Observations*, p.41.
[26] *Observations*, pp.41-2.

In summary therefore, it is evident that Dewar - in contrast to many of his English and Scottish contemporaries - had an extremely positive view of Irish character, and that also made him optimistic about the prospect for progress and improvement in the land.

Chapter 4: The Irish Language

Given what has already been noted about Dewar's love of the Gaelic language in his native Scotland, it is not at all surprising to find him devoting a whole chapter to the Irish language. Not only does he devote a whole chapter to the subject, but he refers to it at several points later on in his book. His main emphasis in regard to the Irish language has to do with the extent to which it was still being spoken in those early decades of the 19th century:

> In this country we have generally underrated the proportion of the inhabitants of Ireland who continue to speak the language of their ancestors...the fact is that while Irish is prevalent very generally throughout Leinster and Munster and part of Ulster, it forms, in a manner, the exclusive language of the lower orders in Connaught; so we shall find a million and a half, or probably two millions of people incapable of understanding any more of English than a few familiar words.[27]

And then arising from his observation about the widespread prevalence of the Irish language, Dewar goes on to make one of his key proposals for the improvement of Ireland: 'Hence we may judge of the importance of communicating to them religious instruction in their own language.'[28]

In this regard as well, Dewar alludes to the work being done by Dr Stokes to publish the Scriptures in the Irish language. He bemoans the failure of the Established Church (the Church of Ireland) to make any provision for the Irish-speaking population:

> …there is not one of its ministers that preaches in this language. In a parish containing twelve hundred inhabitants, in some instances not above fifty persons can derive any advantage from a sermon, or any other continued discourse in English, and yet the clergyman who is entrusted with the care of their souls understands no other. It is true most of these people are Roman Catholics. Are they not forced, however, to remain in the bosom of the Roman church? Their priests give them that instruction in the venerable tongue of their fathers, which the Protestant teachers have always denied them. And, yet, these teachers complain of the increase of the papists, and of the gross ignorance of the people. How inconsistent is man![29]

Chapters 5, 6 and 7: The History of Ireland and why the Reformation failed to make progress in the land.

Dewar discusses the earlier history of Ireland in considerable detail, culminating in his evaluation of why the Reformation had made so little progress in the country. Modern-day historians have put forward many differing explanations for this failure and the five reasons identified by Dewar can be added to the debate. Firstly, the extent to which paganism still had a hold on the native Irish on the eve of the Reformation is seen as significant. Secondly, the adoption of the new religion by the English, whom they regarded as their oppressors was 'therefore in their eyes a weighty objection to

[27] *Observations*, p.88.
[28] *Observations*, p.149.
[29] *Observations*, p.95.

it.' Thirdly, the fact that none of its advocates were acquainted with the Irish language was a major obstacle to the advance of the Reformation. Fourthly, even the 'idea of introducing the new religion into Ireland does not seem to have been entertained at all for some time.'[30] And lastly, the education of Roman Catholic priests abroad confirmed the native Irish in their attachment to Rome: '...the exertions of foreign priests were added to their own turbulence in resisting the innovation.'[31]

Chapters 8, 9 and 10: The Penal Laws and Catholic Emancipation

Following on from the initial failure of the Reformation, the later imposition of the Penal Laws upon the Roman Catholic population is regarded by Dewar as exacerbating the problem. He denounces these laws in no uncertain terms:

> These laws, however, were pregnant with the seeds of national mischief; their severe discouragement of the Catholics acting as a general check to industry, and as a perpetuating cause of poverty. Hence, in great measure, the ignorance, the insubordination, and the propensity to vice, which form so disadvantageous a contrast between the native Irish and their better governed fellow subjects in Great Britain.[32]

Given his intense hostility to the Penal Laws, it is unsurprising that Dewar stands up for the cause of Catholic emancipation:

> The true way of lessening the zeal of Catholics, contradictory as it may seem, is by the repeal of the penal laws, a repeal which will lessen the union of those who have been long held together by the bond of suffering.[33]

In further support of his position, Dewar responds to those who talk of the political danger that could result from emancipation by claiming that the Irish Catholics had renounced 'the deposing power of the pope' and 'the doctrine of keeping no faith with heretics.'[34] And he confidently concludes by asserting that: 'A full repeal of the penal code will greatly conduce to the happiness, the strength, and glory of the British Empire...'[35]

Chapter 11: National Education and Preaching in the Irish Language

In his penultimate chapter, Dewar puts forward his two main proposals for the moral improvement of Ireland. The first of these, the provision of a national system of education, including instruction in the Irish language, is greatly emphasised. Ignorance, indolence and vice are said to be as closely allied on one side as intelligence, industry and purity of manners are on the other. The ability to read he regards as one of the chief securities against moral, political and religious error. He believes that having a basic level of education would render the common people more capable of seeing through the selfish view of demagogues and be less blindly led into disobedience. He goes still further when he confidently affirms:

---

[30] *Observations*, pp.128-135.
[31] *Observations*, p.134.
[32] Review of *Observations* in the *Monthly Review* (1813), p.463.
[33] *Observations*, pp.53-54.
[34] *Observations*, p.57.
[35] *Observations*, p.59.

> Discontent is generally the effect of ignorance; knowledge enabling us both to ascertain our duties and appreciate our blessings in this life, and referring the mind to that future state in which the inequalities of this transient scene will be adjusted.[36]

It is at this point in the development of his argument that the author becomes so critical of those who profess Christianity while opposing the instruction of the masses (see quotation at the beginning of this essay). While favouring the reading of the Scriptures within such schools, Dewar is adamant that:

> ...no liturgy or church catechism belonging to any Protestant church can be employed in any system of national education which may be introduced, since in that case the Catholics will consider themselves excluded. The Bible, however, may be introduced without offending their prejudices.[37]

Alongside a state-supported system of national education, Dewar goes on to put forward his other main proposal for the moral improvement of Ireland. He sums this up with the heading, 'On the Utility of Preaching in the Irish Language'. In relation to this, he again bemoans the fact that so little had been done about this in previous generations:

> ...the churches were supplied with ministers who were not only ignorant of the tongue which the great majority of the people understood, but affected to despise it as what they called the language of Catholicism, and of the wild Irish.[38]

To remedy the situation, Dewar recommends two measures. The first one would involve obliging every clergyman presented to a living where Irish was spoken to acquire that language so as to be able to preach through its medium. The second remedy, which he deems more realistic, would involve employing Presbyterians from Scotland acquainted with the Gaelic.

Dewar summed up the dual importance of national education and preaching in the Irish language in the following way:

> It is surely very evident, that though the people should be educated, they suffer great disadvantages while there is no information afforded them from the pulpit, while there is no familiar exposition given them of the doctrines and morality of that sacred book which the exercises of the school have enabled them to read.[39]

As a final argument in favour of the utility of preaching in the Irish language, Dewar confronts his readers with this thought-provoking comparison:

> But surely I may say that while Christian missionaries are sent forth to the islands of the South Sea, to India and Africa, the moral and religious instruction of a people so closely linked to us in civil and political interest as the Irish should not be overlooked.[40]

---

[36] *Observations*, p.86.
[37] *Observations*, p.134.
[38] *Observations*, p.142.
[39] *Observations*, p.144.
[40] *Observations*, pp.146-7.

Chapter 12: On the Poverty of the Irish Peasantry

Rather than drawing his book to a conclusion with his two main proposals, Dewar chooses to reinforce his argument for their implementation by highlighting the impoverishment of the Irish peasantry. He contends that Roman Catholicism is one of the chief causes of this impoverishment, particularly because of 'the many days of idleness and dissipation' that it prescribed. His view is that far too many religious feast days are being observed especially as such feasts are marked by the habit of 'drinking spirituous liquids to excess.'[41]

In Dewar's mind, the indolence thereby promoted has another cause:

> The immediate cause of the indolence of the Irish is the facility with which they procure the means of subsistence.[42]

Arising from this was the practice of early marriage of which Dewar strongly disapproved. Influenced undoubtedly by the writings of Thomas Malthus, Dewar sees such early marriages as inimical to the prosperity and well-being of the people. However, he then ends his book by reverting to his favourite remedy for the moral and economic improvement of the Irish people:

> ...Regard should uniformly be had to the moral and religious instruction of the lower orders. It is this...which will render the humblest cottage the abode not only of comfort, but of virtuous and generous exertion.[43]

AN ASSESSMENT OF DEWAR'S PROPOSALS

Having given some insight into Dewar's career and having provided a detailed overview of his suggestions for the moral improvement of Ireland, an attempt will now be made to evaluate his proposals. One recent scholar has given Dewar's work high commendation:

> His book is an extensive and quite brilliant application of the ideas of Hume, Smith, Stewart and Malthus to the Irish case.[44]

Such a comment is insightful as regards the intellectual influences upon the writing of Daniel Dewar, identifying as it does several of the key figures of the Scottish Enlightenment as being foundational to his outlook. Such thinkers pointed to the education of the masses as being almost a panacea for all human ills, and Dewar seems to be largely in agreement with that viewpoint. At one point, he does state in passing that 'education cannot eradicate any passion or appetite in human nature' but this is more than counterbalanced by all the optimistic remarks that he makes about the morally transforming power of education.[45] It is somewhat surprising that one who later became such an accomplished theologian should have failed to highlight the deeper spiritual causes of immorality, even allowing for the fact that his book was intended more as a social and political tract rather than as a theological treatise.

---

[41] *Observations*, p.153.
[42] *Observations*, p.156.
[43] *Observations*, p.158.
[44] *National Character and Public Spirit in England and France, 1750-1914* by Robert Romani (2001), p.218.
[45] *Observations*, p.84.

In our modern era, the misplaced optimism of the Enlightenment regarding the transformative power of education has become all too apparent. One can heartily agree that the populace should be educated and that such education can be beneficial in many ways, but its power to bring about moral improvement is far more limited than Dewar envisaged. Furthermore, it is rather disconcerting to find Dewar quoting so unreservedly from John Locke's treatise on education:

> I think I may say, that of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are good or evil, useful or not, by their education.[46]

It is more difficult to evaluate Dewar's other main proposal for the moral improvement of Ireland, namely the utility of preaching to the people in the Irish language. Dewar is certainly right to bemoan the slowness of the Protestant churches in Ireland to adopt that approach. However, in the decades following the publication of his book a concerted effort was made by evangelicals within the Established Church and by Presbyterian churches, and by others, to proclaim the gospel in the Irish language. This was particularly the case in the Western and South-Western regions of Ireland. Despite some initial success, these Irish-speaking missions did not have a lasting impact.[47] And in fairness to Dewar, it should be mentioned that he did try to assist those efforts; on one occasion, over a decade after the publication of his book, he attempted to enlist the help of John MacDonald, the famous 'Apostle of the North', to proclaim the gospel in Irish.[48]

Perhaps, it was a case of too little too late; if Dewar's approach had been adopted at a much earlier juncture, it might have yielded much greater fruit. From a Scriptural viewpoint, however, we must never lose sight of the sovereign grace of God and the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit as being the true source of moral and spiritual transformation in any land.

In conclusion, it can be said that Dewar's book, based as it was on immediate contact with the ordinary people, is of considerable value to an understanding of the social, economic, political and religious condition of Ireland at the outset of the 19th century. There is no doubting his good intentions toward the people of Ireland, especially in his longing to relieve their impoverishment. However, from a theological standpoint, his book must be regarded as being shaped far too much by the prevailing ideologies of his own day (of which his adherence to Malthusian views of population growth is the most notable) while failing to advocate a more Scriptural approach to the moral improvement of Ireland. (By way of balance it should be pointed out that Dewar did openly criticise some aspects of the Scottish Enlightenment.)[49] Nevertheless, the overall tone of his *Observations* should alert Christian nowadays to the continuing danger of allowing theological truths to be swamped by the powerful ideologies of our own day and generation. The most apposite response therefore to Dewar's remedies for the moral improvement of Ireland is that based on the inspired words of the apostle Paul:

> We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.[50]

---

[46] *Observations*, p.115, quoting from Locke's *Thoughts concerning Education*.
[47] For an overview of the evangelistic campaign in the Irish language see *The Bible War in Ireland* by Irene Whelan (2005). See also *The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland* by Crawford Gribben (2021), pp.146-152.
[48] *Life of John Macdonald D.D., the Apostle of the North* by Robert Macgregor (1881), pp.65-66.
[49] See for example, *Early Responses to Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy* by James Fiesar, 2nd edition (2005), p.323.
[50] 2 Corinthians 10:5, *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (1987).

As a concluding reflection upon that opening quotation from Dewar's book, those who profess Christianity should not refuse 'to enlighten the poor', they should 'aid in educating the sons of want and misery', but especially they should, via the preaching of the gospel, 'disseminate the knowledge of salvation' in every direction.

CONSCIENCE, PERFECTION AND THE PRIESTLY WORK OF THE ETERNAL SON OF GOD IN HEBREWS

Robert Strivens

Robert Strivens is pastor of Bradford on Avon Baptist Church.

[*This article is a revised version of a lecture delivered as part of a series of four papers on the letter to the Hebrews at a conference of the ministers of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland in September 2024.*]

The conscience is a neglected subject today. It seems to have fallen somewhat out of view in evangelical and reformed preaching and teaching about the Christian faith and life. The idea that our preaching must reach the consciences of our hearers, so prominent in the thinking of the Reformers and the Puritans, is perhaps less often heard today. Preachers know that they must reach their hearers' understanding - that their manner of speech and the content of what they say must be comprehensible to those whom they address. This is, of course, quite right and needs to be emphasised. But the impression can be given that that is all that is required: that, if the preacher makes what he has to say from God's Word clear to his hearers, ensuring that what he says truly reflects and expounds what that Word is actually saying, then he has done all that he needs to do. Could it be that the relative lack of fruitfulness that we see from such preaching is a reflection, not of any failure to expound the Word clearly and comprehensively, but of a failure to take seriously the need for preachers to address the consciences of their hearers?[1]

Along similar lines, it would be interesting to know how much the members of evangelical congregations think about their consciences. Do they have an understanding of the place of their conscience in their overall make-up as a human being created by God with such a faculty? Do they know that they have a conscience at all? And do they have some understanding, from Scripture, of how it functions, what help it gives us, how it can go wrong, and how to satisfy it? If the answer to those questions is in the negative, to what extent does the responsibility for this lie with the fact that congregations have not been sufficiently instructed in these matters? The apostle Paul has twenty references to the conscience (*suneidēsis*) in his letters, besides the five in the Epistle to the Hebrews; Peter has three and there are two in the Acts of the Apostles.[2] The conscience is not a neglected theme in Scripture.

The subject is important not only because it is prominent in Scripture. Whether or not believers think about their consciences, they do feel guilt. And of course unbelievers and those outside the church also often feel guilt, sometimes to a tremendous degree. Until he or she hears the gospel, the unbeliever does not know how to deal with these feelings of guilt. And so the unbeliever – and maybe the believer too - seeks all kinds of means to try to assuage the feelings that guilt produces, whether medication, psychiatric counsel, abuse of various substances or indulgence in an illicit lifestyle, or by means of attempts to suppress the feelings of guilt through devotion to work, family, sport or other activity. The conscience is not properly addressed and is thus in danger of becoming hardened and ultimately seared.

---

[1] A contemporary and accessible introduction to the subject of the conscience is provided by Gary Brady, *Candle in the Wind: Understanding Conscience in the Light of God's Word* (EP Books, 2014).

[2] Rom. 2:15; 9:1; 13;5; 1 Cor. 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25, 27, 28, 29 (x2); 2 Cor. 1:12; 4:2; 5:11; 1 Tim. 1:5, 19; 3:9; 4:2; 2 Tim. 1:3; Tit. 1:15; Heb. 9:9, 14; 10:2, 22; 13:18; 1 Pet. 2:19; 3:16, 21; Acts 23:1; 24:16.

The letter to the Hebrews is of great help in dealing with the conscience. The term appears twice in chapter nine, twice in chapter ten and once in a much more general sense in chapter thirteen. This article focuses on the occurrences in chapters nine and ten.[3] Hebrews begins by introducing to us the eternal Son of God who is appointed heir of all things, has made purification for sins and has sat down at the right hand of the most high, far above all angels (1:1-4).[4] The author of the letter presents this Son as the one who has come to share in our humanity, our very flesh and blood, in order to suffer and die and so deliver us from the bondage that comes from the fear of death (2:9-18). And in 2:17 he briefly introduces this Son as 'a merciful and faithful high priest in the things concerning God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people'. It is this great theme – the eternal Son as the high priest who has atoned for sins – which later in the letter enables the writer effectively to address the topic of the conscience. In order to grasp the full significance of what he says on that topic, it is necessary first to examine in more detail his teaching on the priestly work of the eternal Son.

Christ and Moses

The substantive exposition of the subject of Christ as high priest in Hebrews begins at the end of 4:14 and continues all the way through to chapter 10. This article will not attempt an exposition of all that is taught on that subject in those chapters, but will focus on those that expressly relate the priestly work of Christ to his status as eternal Son.

In order to set that in context, it will be helpful to begin with the discussion in 3:6, where the author is comparing Moses the servant with Christ the Son, thereby demonstrating Christ's superiority as Son over the servant Moses. The writer points out items both of similarity and of dissimilarity between these two key figures in Scripture. Firstly, and importantly, both Moses and Christ were 'faithful' (*pistos*). This picks up on the statement in 2:17 that the Son is a 'faithful' high priest (*pistos archiereus*). This is very significant for the argument that is to follow, as the author needs to demonstrate that the Son has fully accomplished the priestly work of atonement that was committed to him, in order to conclude that no more sacrifice is necessary to deal with sin. So Christ was faithful, just as Moses was. But Moses was faithful, 3:5, 'in the whole house of God as an attendant [or servant]', while Christ as a son over God's house, 3:6. The contrasts come out a little more clearly in the original, where the prepositions *en* and *epi* emphasise the different status that the protagonists hold in relation to God's house, 'in' and 'over' God's house, while the repetition of *ōs,* in the expressions *ōs therapōn,* as a servant, and *ōs huios,* as a son, underlines the different roles that they play. Christ comes, then, as the faithful one who is the heir to God's house, not a servant in it, and who is over God's house, not merely a part of it. Significantly, we see the same expression, 'over the house of God', *epi ton oikon tou theou,* reappearing in 10:21, in the great summing-up of our confident access to God through the work of our faithful high priest. The author thus with the greatest skill and with most effective literary artistry connects the theme of Christ as 'faithful over God's house as a son', expounded in chapter three, with that of his work as high priest in what follows.

It is this faithful Son, then, over God's house who, as we have seen, is described at the end of chapter four as our 'great high priest' who is able to sympathise with us and help us. As we move into chapter five of the letter, we are told that it is by God's appointment that this Son has become such a high priest. No one takes this honour himself, but has to be appointed by God, and this was true even of Christ (5:5). Here is the next instance of a reference to the Son in connection with his high priestly

[3] 9:9, 14; 10:2, 22; 13:18.

[4] For a contemporary defence of Hebrews 1 as teaching the eternal and divine nature of the Son, see Richard Bauckham, 'The Divinity of Jesus Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews', in Bauckham et al., eds, *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 18-21.

work. The author quotes both Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 at this point, to substantiate his argument that the Son was indeed appointed to this position – he quoted the same verse from the second Psalm back in 1:5, and quoted from Psalm 110, though a different verse, at the end of that first chapter. The verse from that latter psalm which is quoted in 5:6 will also form the basis for the argument about Melchizedek in chapter seven.

So here, in chapter five, he is making absolutely clear the identity of the eternal Son of chapter one with the high priest of whom he is now speaking. Moreover, in the verses that follow these two quotations in chapter five, he makes clear that it is the Son in his incarnate state who is appointed our high priest – as the one who offered prayers and supplications and loud cries and tears in the days of his flesh and so learned obedience through his sufferings. It was only having undergone all this, in our humanity, that he could be perfected (v.9), so as to become the cause of eternal salvation for all who obey him. His true humanity, no less than his eternal Sonship, were necessary for this purpose because it equipped him to sympathise with us in our weaknesses, as he has shown in the preceding verses. So he is qualified to be 'named by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek' (5:10).

Christ and Melchizedek

This last thought – the priestly order of Melchizedek – is picked up in connection with the final set of references in the letter to the Son in the context of his priestly work, in chapter seven – at verses three and twenty-eight. This theme is introduced at the end of chapter six, following the warning passage in that chapter. Melchizedek himself appears in the opening verses of chapter seven, where he is spoken of in verse three as one 'resembling the Son of God' (*aphōmoiōmenos tō huiō tou theou*). That language does not seem to be capable of teaching that Melchizedek was in fact the Son of God, appearing in a pre-incarnate form on earth; Calvin's view on this is difficult to gainsay: 'It does not seem worthwhile to refute the follies of those who dream that Christ had then appeared'.[5] Melchizedek is not the Son of God, but he resembles and prefigures him in the respects that the author highlights in these verses.

These opening verses of chapter seven specify two respects in particular in which Melchizedek and the Son are similar. The first is in kingship. Melchizedek, we are told, is king of righteousness, because that is what his name means in Hebrew, as well as king of peace, because he was the king of the community which carried the name 'Salem', meaning peace (v.2). These can be thought of as the essential characteristics associated with a priest, who is a mediator between man and God: righteousness, because God is righteous and the great problem that we have is that we are not righteous, but are sinners; and peace, because our great need is to be brought into a state of peace with God, from our fallen state in which God is hostile to us (and we to him), again because of our sin. While these aspects of the figure of Melchizedek are essential, the writer in the rest of chapter seven focuses on the other respect in which the ancient king is similar to the Son of God: that he is eternal. The focus now will therefore be on what chapter seven has to say about the Son's eternal nature in relation to his priesthood, as this is fundamental to the argument of the writer about Christ's priestly work in the remainder of the letter.

We are told that Melchizedek is 'without father, without mother, without genealogy, with neither a beginning of days nor an end of life' (v.3). This is not intended to be taken literally – Melchizedek is

[5] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews,* ad loc.; see also John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews,* vol. 5 (repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), p. 338: 'He [Melchizedek] was not the Son of God, but he had the honour in so many things to be made like unto him.'

not actually from eternity. Calvin again: 'It is indeed certain that he was begotten by parents. But the apostle is not discussing him here as if he were a private individual; rather, he presents him as a type of Christ'. The writer is pointing out that Melchizedek is introduced in Genesis 14 without any indication of his parentage or familial descent, a highly unusual phenomenon in that early part of Scripture. We are meant to take notice of this detail – learning from the silences of Scripture as well as from its affirmations – and ponder it.

Melchizedek looks forward to another, who is literally and actually eternal, who in his eternal state has no parent, no genealogy, no earthly or created origin whatsoever. Immediately, as we are reading Hebrews, we know that the writer is referring to the eternal Son, for we have seen him introduced as such in the first chapter of the letter: the one through whom God made the worlds, whose throne is for ever and ever, who in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth and who will roll up the heavens when they wear out, whose years have no end (1:10-12). That is why the writer can say, at the end of 7:3, that the Son 'remains priest for ever' (*eis to diēnekes*). Whereas this was true of Melchizedek only in terms of how he is presented in the narrative of Genesis 14, it is actually and literally true of the Son of God: he is the priest who is indeed 'for ever'.[6]

This great truth forms the basis for much of the remainder of the argument of chapter seven. Abraham's payment of tithes to Melchizedek indicates that the priest-king is superior to Abraham and also to his descendants – specifically, in verse 9, the Levites, who of course include the priestly line of Aaron. So this is part of the argument to demonstrate the change of priesthood, mentioned by implication in chapter five (vv. 4-6), here spelled out in verses eleven onwards. No other priesthood would have been needed had Aaron's priestly line brought perfection, but, so runs the implied argument, it did not and so a change was necessary. This required a change in the law, for Christ was of the line of Judah, not Levi. The need for such a change is raised – and the fact that that change will come is demonstrated - by the figure of Melchizedek, whose priestly status depends not on laws about descent, as did the Aaronic line, but on the 'power of an indestructible life' (v.16). In other words, the right of Melchizedek, figuratively, and of Christ, in actuality, to this new priesthood depends upon his eternal nature.

This is a vitally important hinge in the argument of the letter at this point. We are being told that a new priesthood has been established, the priesthood of the Son of God, which supersedes that of Aaron - and that it does so on the basis of the Son's eternal nature. In other words, what is vital for the truly effective priestly work that we need as sinners is not law but life (see 7:16). Without downplaying the importance and essential nature of the law, we know from Scripture that it can never save sinners. As 7:18-19 go on to tell us, the law is both weak and brings no benefit, for it can perfect nothing. If we depend upon the law or on anything that is based upon the law, we can never be saved, for we have broken the law. No law-based scheme can therefore do us any good. We need something that offers a 'better hope' (v.19) 'through which we approach God'. We need a priest who has the power to save us from our sin and all its consequences: and so we must turn to this one who comes 'with the power of an indestructible life'. He differs radically in this respect from the Aaronic priests whose priestly ministry always ended in death (v.23). The eternal Son of God, by contrast, has a permanent priesthood, 'because he continues for ever' (v.24). And so, because of his eternal nature, his priesthood enables him to save sinners 'to the uttermost' – 'since he always lives to make intercession for them' (v.25). Melchizedek thus foreshadowed the priesthood of Christ because the eternality of his being ensures that his priesthood continues for ever.

[6] For a discussion as to the meaning of εἰς τὸ διηνεκές, arguing that it means 'continually' rather than 'for ever', see Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 250 and references given there.

His priestly work

At this point, the argument moves away from Melchizedek to explain how Christ has discharged his priesthood. At the end of chapter seven, the author emphasises the sinlessness of this priest, who, unlike the Aaronic priests, did not need to offer continued sacrifices for his own sins, for he is 'holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners' (v.26). Rather, for he has offered up himself once for all (*ephapax*, v.27), on the basis of the oath which appointed him a priest for ever (v.28). The author then goes on to show that this offering of the Son of God has been made on the basis of a new and better covenant than that of Moses, in chapters eight and nine. His discussion here is premised on the fact that a priest brings sacrifices and offerings (8:3). The priests under the Mosaic covenant brought the gifts demanded by the law of Moses (8:4). This involved various rituals of washing, etc. (9:6, 10) and the various items of furniture in the temple for the worship of God (9:1-5). It required the offering of the blood of animals (10:12, 13), supremely for the annual entry of the high priest into the Holy of Holies (9:7).

It was clear, however, that none of this truly dealt with the problem of the worshippers' sins or addressed the needs of their conscience (9:9-10). They continued to sin and rebel and evidenced no true change of heart – hence the quotation from Jeremiah chapter 31 (8:8-12). The reason is that the Mosaic institutions for worship were only ever intended to be temporary – a pattern or symbol (*hupodeigma*) and a shadow of the heavenly things (8:5), a figure or parable (*parabolē*) for the present age (9:9). It is Christ who comes as the high priest on the basis of a new covenant (9:11, 15) to offer a once-for-all offering of his own blood. He does this in the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not part of this creation (9:11), so securing an eternal redemption (9:12) and the purification of our consciences from dead works to serve the living God (9:14).

The remainder of chapter nine and the first half of chapter ten confirm these points, underlining the importance of the fact that Christ shed his own blood – in order to validate the new covenant (9:15-22) and to enter the heavenly holy places, again with his own blood, to deal with our sins (9:23-29). The first half of chapter ten underlines the importance of the eternal nature of Christ's priestly work, which therefore does not need to be repeated in the way that the work of the earthly priests under the Mosaic covenant had to be. Hence, while they served in a standing position (10:11), Christ having offered himself sat down at God's right hand (10:12), his work complete. Consequently, the way into the true holy of holies is now open to us and we may go in with confidence and assurance, by Christ's blood which cleanses our conscience, having him as our great priest (10:19-25).

We seem to have come some way in the argument of the epistle from the last mention of Christ as the Son, which was at the end of chapter seven. The author, however, returns to the title of 'Son' for Christ in the warning passage in chapter ten which immediately follows his exhortation to draw near. He warns in verse twenty-nine against 'trampling upon the Son of God'. This is the final reference in the letter to the eternal Son under that title. It is a very stark warning against seeking some other way to God or some other path of salvation than the one that the author has so clearly set out. That way lies utter ruin, as among other things it involves the complete disparagement and rejection of the very eternal Son of God of whom he has written, and whom we have been considering. It means effectively a denial of all that the writer has said about the Son – that he is eternal, divine, the creator of all things, that he became man for our sakes and suffered and died to deliver us from death, that he is our great high priest who has offered his own blood in the very courts of heaven in order to cleanse us from our sins and enable us too to enter heaven, to approach the throne of grace and to know the assurance of sins forgiven and eternal life. To reject all these things is to reject the person and the work of the eternal, incarnate Son of God and can have no other consequence than that of everlasting perdition.

The perfection of the conscience

Let us then, as we come to some application of what has been considered, draw together the various truths that the writer has expounded in these chapters about the effects of Christ's priestly work for us and in us. Consider the different ways in which he expresses in chapters nine and ten the fruits of Christ's work of salvation. He, our great priest, has secured an 'eternal redemption' (9:12); he has 'purified our conscience' (9:14) and provided us with an 'eternal inheritance' (9:15); he has once for all put away sin (9:26) and borne our sins (9:28); and he has sanctified us for ever (10:10) and perfected us for all time (10:14). The language used picks up on themes related to the Son that we have seen already in the letter: that of 'purification', reminding us of the reference to the Son's making 'purification of sins' in 1:3; 'sanctification', reminding us of how we saw in 2:11 that the one who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all 'of one', that is, share in a common human nature, or maybe a common origin in God; his dealing with sin, reminding us of what we have read of the propitiation that the Son has made for sins, in 2:17; and his being 'perfected', reminding us of how the founder of our salvation was 'perfected' in 2:10, in 5:9 and in 7:28.

The Epistle to the Hebrews, therefore, presents the priestly work of Christ in a variety of different lights, all of which contribute to and coalesce in the eternal redemption for sinners that the incarnate Son has thereby secured. This is very helpful to preachers. One of the challenges of a sustained ministry is variety. It is too easy, after several years preaching to the same congregation, to fall into a standardised pattern of expounding the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is likely, for the evangelical and reformed, to involve a strong emphasis upon the substitutionary and penal nature of Christ's death. Preachers will tell their congregations again and again that Christ died for sinners, in their place; that he thereby bore the punishment for sin and endured the wrath of God so that sinners through faith in him are justified and not condemned before him. There is no suggestion of doubt as to either the biblical veracity of these great truths or their supreme and central importance in the preaching of the gospel. They are clearly taught in the letter to the Hebrews. The letter, however, also has other, complementary ways of presenting what is essentially the same truth, as it discusses the priestly work of Christ. It is worthwhile for preachers to ponder these thoroughly then and make use of them in their pulpit ministries – though certainly not to the disadvantage of a central focus on the penal substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement. One way in which this can usefully and fruitfully be done is in relation to the matter raised at the start of this article, that of the conscience.

- the conscience

Our consciences need to be perfected, according to verse nine of chapter nine, which tells us that the gifts and sacrifices offered under the Mosaic covenant could not (on a literal translation), 'according to conscience perfect the one who was worshipping'. Further elucidation of this matter is provided by the first two verses of chapter ten, which tell us that such sacrifices could never perfect those who offered them, because otherwise they would not have needed to continue to offer them, because they would have been cleansed and so have had 'no more consciousness of sins' (v.2). The word translated 'consciousness' there is the same word, *suneidēsis*, translated 'conscience' in the other verses that we are considering. In other words, the problem is that our consciences remind us of our sins and of our guilt because of those sins. Under the Mosaic system, this was compounded by the sacrifices which reminded the worshippers that their sins were not dealt with. Hence the feelings of guilt – and those same feelings will therefore trouble even the believer, if either they have unresolved sin in their lives or they do not clearly see that their sins have been dealt with. In either case, their conscience will trouble them.

What is needed, then, is for the conscience truly to be cleansed and for us to understand clearly that that has occurred. This is something that only the blood of Christ, our faithful high priest, can accomplish. Of course, the wonderful good news of the gospel is that he has done precisely this. This is a major point in these chapters of Hebrews and I suggest that it is a theme that we need to sound regularly in the ears of our congregations, for the comfort and help of the believer. The blood of Christ, the eternal Son of God, has been shed and Christ has offered himself to God through the eternal Spirit, according to 10:14. The writer has gone to great lengths to demonstrate the truth of this to his readers. He has used that uncompromising word *ephapax* no fewer than three times in the letter to underline that the Son's sacrifice was single, effective, never needing to be repeated. It is for this reason that Christ has sat down at God's right hand, while the Mosaic priests continually stood to perform their duties, for their work was never finished, whilst his is perfectly complete. So it is this blood, the blood of the eternal, incarnate Son of God, our faithful high priest, which deals with our conscience.

The writer uses three different verbs to express what the blood of Christ does to our conscience: it 'perfects' it (*teleiōsai*, 9:9), it 'cleanses' or 'purifies' it (*kathariei*, *kekatharismenous*, 9:14; 10:2) and it 'sprinkles' it (*rherantismenoi*, 10:22) - strictly speaking, in that last reference, it is our hearts that are sprinkled, from an evil conscience.

With this threefold terminology, drawn to a large extent from the Old Testament worship language of the Mosaic institution, the writer seeks to impress upon his readers – and on us – the absolutely and finally effective nature of the death of the Son on our consciences. Christ's blood truly does cleanse the conscience. This effect is not merely therapeutic, as are most of the secular and worldly attempts to deal with the conscience. It really deals with the root of the matter, which of course is actual guilt – not merely feelings of guilt – for sin. Because the eternal Son, as the letter states in 9:26, 28, has as our high priest put away sin and borne sins, because he has made propitiation for them, as is said back in 2:17, our guilt has truly been taken away, for ever, and so our consciences are truly cleansed, sprinkled and perfected. A genuine understanding of these truths and an application of them to ourselves, by faith in Christ, supplies all that our conscience needs and, as he says in 9:14, prepares us to serve the living God. Let us teach and preach more about the conscience.

- perfection

In this connection it is noteworthy how the writer of Hebrews makes use in his argument of the concept of perfection in relation to Christ. This, as has been seen, is another major theme in the letter, which uses the word *teleioō*, to 'perfect' or 'complete', nine times, from chapter two verse ten through to chapter twelve verse twenty-three. In relation to Christ, the teaching of the letter is that the Son was perfected, or completed, through his sufferings in his incarnate state, in order that he might be our faithful high priest. These truths are summarised for us in 5:8-9 and 7:26-28. This focus on perfection can be coupled with the concept of the uniqueness of the eternal Son as our great high priest, which this letter teaches. We have seen how the author emphasises how the Son has shared in our humanity and so has that in common with us. But as the priest after the order of Melchizedek, the writer has been underlining how the Son is different from all others – he is not a priest after the order of Aaron, so he is different from all other priests and, indeed, originates from a different tribe altogether; unlike them, he does not have to bring offerings continually, but has rather offered himself once for all and then sat down, whereas they continue to carry out their duties in a standing position; and finally, and crucially, as we have seen, our great high priest Jesus Christ, unlike these other priests, lives for ever. In all these ways, the eternal Son's uniqueness as high priest is brought forcibly before us.

The Son's being perfected and his uniqueness together address another great need among our congregations, which is closely connected with that of the conscience, already considered. There seem

to be many believers who lack a real assurance of their forgiven, justified state in Christ. They feel their sins intensely. They know that they do not, in themselves, come up to the standard of God's Word. They realise keenly their own weakness, fallibility and frequent failure as a believer. This is a source of constant discouragement to them; it saps their joy and threatens to undermine their sense of assurance. This in turn tends to render them less effective in their Christian life, their personal testimony to Christ and in their service in the church.

The teaching of Hebrews on the Son's being perfected as our unique high priest is of great help to believers such as this. Their great need is to have their focus shifted from themselves and their sins and weaknesses to Christ. The chief way to do this is to demonstrate from Scripture how Christ provides all that we need, in our sinfulness and failure. That is precisely what Hebrews does through these concepts of perfection and uniqueness. We see a transition in the letter from the incarnate Son being perfected through his sufferings, in 2:10, 5:7-9 and 7:28, to the perfection that thereby comes to the believer – in 9:9, as we have seen already in relation to his conscience, and in 10:1, both of which make negative statements to the effect that the ceremonies under the Mosaic covenant can never bring perfection; but then in 10:14, finally, in a wonderfully positive statement about the effects of Christ's work: 'for by one sacrifice he has perfected (*teteleiōken*, perfect tense) for ever those who are being made holy/sanctified'. This brings out in an extraordinary fashion the glorious truth about the Christian believer: that he or she stands before God in a state of true justification, through the finished work of Jesus Christ. By that work, a final sacrifice for sins has been offered. Just one, unique such sacrifice was required to make an end of all sins for ever. This is precisely because of the uniqueness of the Son's priesthood: as we have seen, unlike other priests whose sacrifices were never complete and never finally dealt with sins, his has and does, so that no further sacrifice is needed. His one-time sacrifice of himself on the cross deals with sin for all time and so perfects each one whose faith is in him.

This is where fainting believers need to fix their gaze, as they are urged to do in chapter twelve, verse two – to persevere in faith, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter (*archēgon kai teleiōtēn*) of our faith. Rather than constantly looking at ourselves in all our weakness and failure, we are to look to Jesus, who himself was made perfect through his sufferings and so was enabled, as our unique high priest, to do what no other priest has ever been able to do – to offer a one-time final sacrifice for sins, to 'put away sin' (9:26} and to 'bear the sins of many' (9:28). We continue to sin; we are weak, we fail. We need the constant cleansing and forgiveness that comes to all who seek God for this on the basis of the death of Christ and his shed blood.

And what tremendous assurance these truths provide to us! When once we begin to grasp the scale and significance of Christ's work on the cross, as expounded in this letter, it brings us into a place of great joy and thankfulness to God, as we see the completeness and perfection of the eternal Son's unique, priestly work on our behalf. It is a work that has been done and is completed, so that its effects can be stated in regard to the believer as final and perfect, even though we continue as sinners in this life. And there is promise of even better to come – as the writer nears the close of his letter and takes us up into the heavenly places themselves, at the end of chapter twelve, he describes in verse twenty-three how we, even in this life on earth, have come to 'the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, to God the judge of all and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, (*teteleiōmenōn*)', emphasising by his use of the perfect passsive participle the absolute finality of Christ's work in the believer, to render us perfect for ever. Calvin, commenting on 10:14, puts it in this way: 'If therefore our faith looks for Christ sitting on the right hand of God, and rests quietly in that truth, we shall at the end enjoy the fruits of this victory along with Him who is our Head, and, when our foes are vanquished

along with Satan and sin and death and the whole world and when we have put off the corruption of our flesh, we shall triumph.'[7]

The Son of God incarnate, our eternal priest, has offered himself once for all for the sins of all his people, thereby cleansing their consciences and perfecting them for ever.

[7] Torrance & Torrance, *Calvin's Commentaries: Hebrews,* p. 138.

BOOK REVIEWS

No Shadow of Turning. Divine Immutability and the Economy of Redemption, Ronni Kurtz, Mentor, 2022, pbk., 248 pages, £14.99.

The 'classical' approach to the doctrine of God, exemplifies by such theologians as Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine, concentrated first and foremost on the *being* of God, regarding that as the essential foundation for formulating a right understanding of the *works* of God. As Ronni Kurtz, Assistant Professor of Theology at Cedarville University, Ohio, points out, much contemporary theology, even within the professedly 'evangelical' camp, has put the focus on the work of God, often with the thought that discussions of ontology are abstruse and even misleading.

In the first chapter of *No Shadow of Turning* (entitled 'Theology and Economy') Kurtz sketches the main lines of that classical theism to which, he believes, we need to return. Without the foundation of a sound doctrine of the being of God, our soteriology will inevitably turn away from Scripture. His focus will be on the doctrine of divine *immutability*: his goal is to produce 'A Dogmatic Account of the Soteric Significance of Divine Immutability' (p.35). In particular he aims 'to demonstrate how a classical articulation of divine immutability both protects and promotes God's work in the economy of redemption' (p.35). Kurtz indicates that the book has both a general thesis and a specific thesis. The general thesis is that all soteriology should be rooted in the principle and source of Christian theology, namely the doctrine of God. The specific thesis is a demonstration of how a classical articulation of divine immutability both protects and promotes God's work in the economy of redemption.

In chapter 2 ('Definitions, Deviations, and Denials of Divine Immutability'), which concludes Part One of the book, Kurtz first offers a definition of divine immutability in terms of God's changelessness in respect of process, processions, potentiality, parts, passions, perfections and plans. In addressing the 'deviations and denials' of divine immutability, Kurtz identifies five problems raised by those who disputev the traditional understanding of this doctrine: the problem of relations and soteriology, the problem of the incarnation, the problem of creation and divine action, the problem of volition and knowledge, and the problem of divine freedom and contingency. A wide range of theologians and theologies is considered.

Part Two sets out what Kurtz terms 'A Threefold Witness for Divine Immutability'. The first witness, discussed in chapter 3 'Historical Witness: Divine Immutability in the Halls of History') surveys a number of theologians who have defended the traditional doctrine. Kurtz takes in the early church (e.g. the Augustine and Athanasius), medieval theology (Anselm and Aquinas), the confessions and confessors of the Reformation and Post-Reformation period (including Turretin and Owen), and finally the modern period (Bavinck and contemporary writers such as Weinandy, Dolezal and Muller).

Chapter 4 considers the second witness, namely 'Biblical Witness: Divine Immutability in the Pages of Scripture'. Drawing on a range of passages from both Old and New Testaments, Kurtz aims to establish three principles regarding the biblical witness to divine immutability: God's covenant faithfulness through the ages *demonstrates* divine immutability, particular pericopes and passages *teach* divine immutability, and theological reasoning given what else is true of God *demands* divine immutability. 1 John 1 and the Book of Hebrews play particularly significant roles in his argument.

Chapter 5 deals with 'Theological Witness: Divine Immutability in Christian Reason'. In this chapter Kurtz examines a number of the perfections/attributes of God revealed in Scripture and demonstrates how each is related to divine immutability. He chooses simplicity, impassibility, aseity, atemporality, infinitude and what he terms the 'omnis' – omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence. Each is not only compatible with divine immutability, but, as Kurtz shows, also requires a God who is unchanging. All the perfections of God are inextricably bound up with one another in a multitude of ways. If one is compromised, all are affected.

Part Three puts the spotlight on 'Divine Immutability and the Economy of Redemption'. In this single chapter Kurtz draws out the implications of his study of God's immutability for soteriology. He considers first the implications of divine immutability for the assurance of salvation that believers can and should have. He then examines the life of Jesus to demonstrate how the changelessness of his divine nature impacts what he terms 'functional Christology', always seeking to hold together the *person* and the *work* of the Saviour. Thirdly Kurtz returns to the metaphysical relations of the divine perfections in order to understand some of the doctrine of divine immutability binds together soteriology and divine perfections such as simplicity and aseity. He also deals here with the traditional understanding of God as *actus purus*, pure actuality with no potentiality. At the end of the chapter implications of divine immutability for union with Christ are helpfully drawn out, whilst recognising the diversity of views that exist among the Reformed regarding the nature of that union.

As Kurtz's conclusion indicates, the heart of the study is 'An unchanging Redemption in an Unchanging Redeemer'.

No Shadow of Turning is rooted in doctoral research and inevitably demands effort on the part of readers. Biblical exegesis and systematic theology are combined with philosophical discussion, and the resulting study is intellectually stretching, albeit in productive ways. For those with the capacity and willingness to tackle Kurtz's work, the rewards will be a deeper understanding of the nature of God, the Unchanging One, and a richer grasp of the salvation that he has provided in Christ. Divine immutability is no peripheral issue: it lies at the very heart of redemption.

David McKay

J. Gresham Machen, A Biographical Memoir, Ned B. Stonehouse, Banner of Truth Trust, 2019, 606 pages, £17.50.

Christian biographies are of immense value to the Christian Church, not only because of the facts revealed concerning the persons under review, but also because of the insights gleaned from the times in which they lived. Ned Stonehouse, the author of this biographical memoir of, John Gresham Machen does this in a most interesting and informative way.

This reviewer was first introduced to Machen 50 years ago when beginning his training for the gospel ministry at the Reformed Theological College. Among the books set as prescribed reading by Prof. F. S. Leahy, the Professor of Systematic Theology, was *Christianity and Liberalism* by Machen. As Machen's book reveals, he was in the vanguard of those who were defending the Christian faith against the insidious attacks being made by the Liberals. It says something for the popularity and usefulness of this book that it is still in print, having been first published over 100 years ago.

The author of this biography, Ned B. Stonehouse, was well qualified to compile it. Not only was he a graduate of 'Old Princeston' in 1927, but he served alongside Machen from 1929 in the New Testament Department of the newly established Westminster Theological Seminary.

John Gresham Machen was born in Baltimore on 28th July, 1881, to Webster Machen and Mary Jones Gresham. Machen grew up in a home in which the culture and values of the 'Old South' were deeply cherished. Of much greater importance was the devout Christian faith which young Machen observed from both sides of his parentage, the Machens and the Greshams, values which were exemplified in the lives of his parents.

It could be said of Machen, as was said of Moses, that 'he was no ordinary child'. For example, we read that at 12 years of age he was familiar with the contents of the Bible, including the names and character of all the kings of Israel and Judah. In his childhood he had committed to memory the questions and answers of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Later in life he would attribute his love for and attachment to the Reformed Faith to this nurturing in the doctrines of grace so succinctly stated in the Catechism. Next to the Bible the Pilgrim's Progress was a favourite in the Machen home and as a young boy Gresham became familiar with its contents. After a distinguished career at school and university he graduated with a BA degree in 1902.

After much thought and prayer Machen decided to enrol as a student in Princeton Theological Seminary. Princeston, having been established in 1812, had gained the reputation of 'standing for the rugged, undiluted Calvinism of the Westminster Standards'. Our biographer gives us a fascinating insight into the members of the faculty, men like BB Warfield, Caspar Wistar Hodge, Geerhardus Vos and William Brenton Green, whose teaching had a profound impact upon young Machen.

After excelling as a student at Princeton, Machen continued to pursue theological study in Germany in places like Marburg and Göttingen. This of course necessitated the mastery of the German language, which proved no difficulty to young Machen. In Marburg the Professor of Theology was Wilhelm Herrmann. He was intellectually brilliant but theologically liberal. As our biographer informs us, he was very capable of making a profound impact upon his students. He informs us that 'Herrmann made liberalism wonderfully attractive and heart gripping'.

For a time Machen was spellbound by this brilliant erudite theologian. Thankfully, as our biographer informs us Machen was eventually to see 'that the Christ to whom Herrmann was fervently devoted never really existed and that religious experience is not as such, self-validating'. Machen's experience in Germany, while extremely unsettling, providentially prepared him for the major battles he was to wage in defence of the Reformed Faith in the U.S.A.

On Machen's return from Germany, he was appointed 'Instructor in the New Testament Department at Princeton'. Although the appointment was only for one year, this was the beginning of 23 years at the foremost Reformed Seminary in the U.S.

What this reviewer found intriguing was the way in which Liberalism slowly and imperceptibly gained control of Princeton. This reached the point in 1929 when Machen, and those who stood with him, resigned their positions at Princeston, at great personal cost, and banded together to found Westminster Theological Seminary.

Machen's difficulties were not over because the Presbyterian Church USA, in which Machen was a minister, suspended him from office. This led Machen to secede and, along with others, establish in

1936 the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. This occurred only a few months before Machen suddenly died, in January 1937 at the age of 55.

Other aspects of Machen's life which give us fascinating insights into this remarkable man are: his very close relationship with his parents, especially his mother, who only predeceased him by a few years; his ability as a lecturer, preacher, and author, which made him a much loved and highly respected servant of Christ in Bible believing circles; his service in France, during the 2nd World War with the YMCA, where he ministered to the troops both physically and spiritually.

John Gresham Machen may not have lived a long life, but he lived a full life to the honour and glory of his Saviour. In doing so he has left behind a legacy which is of immense value to the church in the 21st century. We are still facing the subtle attacks of Liberalism, but with the help of Machen and the Lord whom he trusted and served, we will triumph over this insidious enemy that has corrupted many churches.

Robert L W McCollum

The Lord of Psalm 23, David Gibson, Crossway, 2023, hbk., 184 pages, $19.99-

This gem of a book grew out of a series of three sermons preached in the regular course of ministry by David Gibson in Trinity Church, Aberdeen. This is the best-known psalm, if not passage, in the whole Bible, challenging any commentator to say something new without being edgy or extreme. Gibson ably meets this challenge. Before diving into the psalm proper, he provides a note on the singing of the psalm, telling us that what we know as Psalm 23B, sung to the tune 'Crimond', was a favourite of Queen Elizabeth II, chosen both for her wedding and her funeral. Gibson's aim throughout is to arouse a greater and deeper love for Jesus, the Lord of Psalm 23.

The meaning of the psalm is so clear that a child can grasp it (Gibson provides a well-known, poignant story of such a child on pages 22 and 140). However, as the apparatus of the *ESV* informs us, and as Gibson illustrates, the psalm is not always easy to translate. It was Alec Motyer, Gibson tells us, who pointed out the three first person statements from David punctuating the psalm – 'I shall not want' (v.1); 'I will fear no evil' (v.4); and 'I shall dwell in the house of the LORD' (v.6). These are at the heart of the three sections into which Gibson believes the psalm falls – the sheep and the shepherd (vvs.1-3); the traveller and the companion (v.4); and the guest and the host (vvs.5-6). While shepherding language is also found in the second and third sections (which indicates that the first verse sums up the whole), Gibson is surely right to detect these other emphases as well.

According to the main verbs in the passage, God is everywhere active – making, leading, restoring, accompanying, preparing, anointing. All of these aspects flow out of exactly who the Lord is. Gibson quotes John Calvin, who says, 'rich store of every kind of good abounds in him' (p.6). Therefore, we receive all these goods through union with him. The particulars of the three sections all reflect the closeness of that union. However, Gibson remains a while with the opening person of the psalm, for it is himself he shares with the sheep. Yet, mysteriously, he is underived, original, unchangeable, inexhaustible and undecaying – it would profit our thinking and our praying to dwell on these special qualities of God. As Gibson states, and proceeds to show us, if we can say the Lord is *my* shepherd, then we have everything we will ever need (p.23) – namely his presence, his

provision, his protection and then his paradise. While the psalm is intensely personal, Gibson shows its connections with the communal life of Israel – David's experience (and possibly ours) recapitulates that of the exodus generation. He shows us how this plays into 'the exodus-shaped life of the Lord Jesus' as the One who leads us out of slavery to sin into new life in him (p.37). So the psalm is personal, but only because it portrays the experience of the whole people of God.

Gibson helpfully reveals that the clause 'for you are with me' (v.4) forms the middle words of the psalm. With this personal address the psalmist seeks to highlight Jesus's accompaniment of his own. As he says, 'there is a beauty and a balm in almost every word' (p.56) in verse 4. He explains where the traditional rendering 'valley of the shadow of death' comes from and asserts God's sovereignty over experiences of deep darkness. He shows the faith in 'walk', the hope in 'through' and the kindness and discipline in the rod and staff. The never-aloneness of this verse takes us to the isolation of Calvary on behalf of believers, and to Jesus's love for his followers expressed in John chapters 13-17. Never minding when another has the most pithy quote, Gibson refers to Thomas Goodwin who has Jesus say to his disciples, 'I cannot live without you' (p.85). That certainly provides another dimension to 'You are with me'. So, even in its darkest part, the psalm is one of life and not of death.

With the last section Gibson sees the Lord as host inviting special guests to a feast. He pauses to counter a C.S. Lewis claim by referring to a delightful scene from Lewis's own work (pp.102-104). The host's attention to detail (from the verb 'to prepare') and comprehensive care (himself!) shows how generous he is. By comparison, Gibson has to say that some Christians 'are not like God in how he gives' (p.113). He points us to Jesus in humility calling his enemies to table, not to justice. For 'follow' in verse 6 Gibson prefers the stronger 'pursue' and sees God's goodness and his covenant love as arms of his determined pursuit of his people. He means to do us good, this covenant LORD, whose name here book-ends the psalm. With the *ESV* footnote, Gibson prefers 'only' to 'surely', stressing that God is only good to his own, even though that good may involve pain. Gibson pointedly asks under-shepherds if that is how our sheep feel about us. The two Hebrew words that close the psalm are, literally, 'for length of days', but Gibson argues they're best rendered 'for evermore'. Surely the length of the stay in the last verse fits the character of the host in the first. It is a glorious place, the house of the Lord, Eden restored, with sheep restored from straying through the sacrifice of the Shepherd. Yet the place must give way to the person. As Gibson simply but sweetly sums up, 'We were created for fellowship with God; the whole point of our existence is to dwell with Him' (p.137).

This reviewer cannot praise this book too highly. It deals seriously with the text, digging into translation choices rather than skirting around them. The division of the passage into three is compelling. There is much application, for those who may be considering leaving God's paths, and for all as we listen to Jesus speak words of righteousness, following in his tracks. If, as the author has it, 'you are with me' (verse 4) 'is the heart of the whole Bible in a nutshell' (p.135), then the closing words of the psalm provide the climax to the Bible's story described more fully but no more exquisitely in Revelation 21-22. There is much to refresh weary hearts here; much to encourage; and much to refix our gaze on the author of our salvation. Could we look to this same writer, or even to some among our own number, for similar volumes on other precious psalms?

Stephen Neilly

Thoughts on Public Prayer, Samuel Miller, (first published in 1849 by the Presbyterian Board of Publications, Philadelphia) Banner of Truth Trust, 2022, hbk., 201 pages, £11.00.

In 1813, Samuel Miller (1769-1850), after twenty-one years as the minister of First Presbyterian Church, New York, was appointed the second Professor in Princeton Seminary, where he taught until 1849. He wrote this book, at the end of his career, for young ministers and candidates for the ministry. It is useful, however, for all leading in prayer in any corporate setting.

Miller agreed that he and his fellow-ministers should 'devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word' (Acts 6:4), but noted that more attention was given to the latter aspect of pulpit work (preaching), while the former (public prayer) is neglected. This imbalance in pulpit work is considered in Chapter 1, 'Introductory Remarks'.

In Chapter 2, 'The History of Public Prayer', Miller considers the Old Testament, the Jewish synagogue and the early Christian churches up to the fifth century after Christ and finds no evidence of prescribed prayers or liturgies. All public prayer was extempore, delivered according to the judgement and ability of those praying. This reviewer, although appreciating Miller's argument that 'The Lord's Prayer' is not a justification for prescribed prayer (providing the topics, not the words for prayer,), was a little uneasy when Miller diminishes the significance of 'The Lord's Prayer', particularly as it featured prominently in the Catechisms and *Directory for the Public Worship of God* produced by the Westminster Assembly. This reviewer disagreed with Miller's dismissal of the views of any who 'insist that we are bound still to adhere to the Psalmody of the old economy.' Miller, however, usefully identifies the origins and erroneous nature of some practices associated with public prayer – praying towards the East, prayers for the dead, to the 'Saints' and the 'Virgin Mary', in a language unknown to those present and prayers which call for responses. Finally, he considers the various postures adopted in public prayer that are documented in Scripture (prostration, kneeling, bowing the head and standing) and concludes that standing (not sitting) for public prayer in Sabbath worship services is the norm for those enjoying full communion in Reformed churches.

In Chapter 3, 'The Claims of Liturgies' are thoroughly refuted, and their negative consequences demonstrated. In Chapter 4, 'Frequent Faults of Public Prayer' are identified: overuse of favourite phrases, hesitation, stammering, ungrammatical expressions, lack of order, excessive detail and length, irreverence, party political references, using the prayer to teach doctrine, rapidity and vehemence of delivery, wit and sarcasm, excessive humility and flattery of individuals present. In both chapters Miller provides anecdotes to illustrate his points.

In Chapter 5, 'Characteristics of a good public prayer' are identified: use of biblical language, orderliness, comprehensive in scope but restrained in detail, appropriate to the occasion, variety in the titles used of God and of closing doxologies, concern for the spread of the gospel, delivered in a spirit of hope and confidence. In Chapter 6, 'The best means of attaining excellence in public prayer' are suggested: spending much time in private prayer, study books on public prayer, draw heavily from Scripture, using not only its language but making reference to its narratives, allude to current events, practise writing public prayers to develop skills (but never commit them to memory for later use).

Some may find Miller verbose, but allowance must be made for mid nineteenth century language; others may consider him repetitive, but teaching students for thirty-six years, where repetition is a part of pedagogy, Miller may have seen value in repeating his argument to reinforce his message. His message is an important one when we consider Paul's priority for corporate worship: 'First of all,

then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people.' (1 Tim. 2:1). This book is a rare and vital resource for those who wish to address the diminishing place, and quality, of prayer in public worship or lead others in prayer in any corporate setting.

Trevor McCavery

Psalms: Volumes 1 and 2, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary, James M. Hamilton Jr., Lexham Academic, 2021, hbk., $84.99.

James Hamilton Jr, Professor of Biblical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has provided the church with a two-volume commentary on the Book of Psalms that deserves to be purchased, read, and digested by every minister who cares about excellence in Psalm exposition. Hamilton explicitly follows the methodological approach of Gregory of Nyssa - first grasping the aim of the Psalter as a whole, and then attending to the arrangement of the individual psalms as they relate to the Psalter's aim. Thus Hamilton 'interpret[s] the book of Psalms *as a book*, that is, as a purposefully ordered collection of poems that build on and interpret one another' (vol.1, p.3). Consequently, this is not a commentary to be dipped into - it is designed to be read from cover to cover, beginning with the introductory material. It is with the introductory material that this review is concerned.

Hamilton's approach is refreshing. Contra the majority of post-Enlightenment academia, which is sceptical of what the Bible claims for itself and generous to scholarly theories, Hamilton is happy to privilege the witness of the primary biblical sources and remains unconvinced by modernist scholarship. Thus he takes the superscriptions of the Psalms at face value—if a Psalm says that it is 'of David', then it should be taken as such, unless there are very good reasons not to. Hamilton observes that the internal evidence of the Old Testament Scriptures indicates a developing 'canonical consciousness,' that the Psalter was received as canonical at an early stage, and that the Psalter shares the worldview of the Hebrew canon. In other words, David and the other psalmists understood the trajectory of the story of redemption, the Torah of the Lord, and the worship of Israel - and this understanding informed and directed their work on individual psalms, and on the Psalter as a corpus. 'David not only wrote the individual psalms attributed to him, but also began the process of setting them in order…The trajectory set by David would have been understood by those who followed him not only in time but in perspective' (vol.1, p.51). Moreover, Hamilton recognizes that faithful interpretation demands that this biblical worldview becomes the worldview of the commentator - his stated 'intent is to interpret the Psalms from that perspective' (vol.1, p.21).

Hamilton is convinced that structure - especially ring structure (chiasmus) - pervades the Psalter, in individual psalms, and in groups of psalms, and as a whole. Pages 56 - 64 of the Introduction comprise an outline of the structure of the Psalter. Hamilton does not claim that this is the last word in explicating the structure of the Book of Psalms - indeed, he says the opposite, and admits that even in the body of the commentary proper he suggests alternatives structures. Each individual psalm commentary includes Hamilton's own translation. These translations are of programmatic significance because Hamilton wants to preserve as much as possible of the Hebrew word-links among the psalms. To that end, the commentary on each psalm begins with notes on verbal and thematic links with surrounding psalms, while it closes with bridges out to themes in the wider biblical canon. In his comments on the text of each psalm, Hamilton pays attention to the psalm's structure, observing that '[w]hen an interpreter rightly understands how an author has structured his

material, he knows where things start, where things end, and how things are balanced in between' (vol.1, p.53).

This commentary is highly recommended. Hamilton's theology is catholic and Reformed (even to the point of noting the explanatory power of the doctrine of divine simplicity for understanding the Psalms) - and his eyes are on the King whose suffering and glory are sung in the church's book of praise. It seems fitting to allow Hamilton himself to conclude this review: 'The Psalms are true history, fulfilled prophecy, and enduring praise. The book of Psalms is a school of prayer, a fountain of truth, and a revelation of God himself. We will not master this book, but oh that it might master us, becoming the pulse to which our hearts beat, the soil in which our souls take root' (vol.1, p.2).

John Watterson

The Minor Prophets: A Theological Introduction, Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas, IVP Academic, 2023, pbk., 400 pages, $45.99.

The subject of *The Minor Prophets: A Theological Introduction* is of great importance. The contribution by the authors, Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas, could be helpful, but the endorsement of this review is qualified. Let me explain.

The biblical corpus we know as 'the Minor Prophets' is often either overlooked or misunderstood. The dislocation of the Latter Prophets as a whole from their canonical home at the centre of the Hebrew canon to the end of the Old Testament Scriptures in our English Bibles does not help their interpretation; and the renaming of what the Hebrew Scriptures call 'the Book of the Twelve' the *Minor* Prophets may be misconstrued as suggesting that they are of less importance than, say, Isaiah or Jeremiah. Bartholomew and Thomas make it clear from the outset that they disagree - 'The Minor Prophets are rich beyond measure' (p.1). Moreover, although the authors' primary focus is on the individual messages of each of the prophets, they also aim, at least to a degree, at a canonical reading of the Book of the Twelve, 'explor[ing] what happens when these books are read corporately rather than only individually' (pp.23-4). This is a welcome contribution to the literature on the Minor Prophets.

Most of the volume (chapters 3 to 19) comprises introductions to each of the Minor Prophets. The material in these chapters is standard fare - historical context, literary structure, interpretation, theology, and New Testament appropriation. The approach of the authors is conservative (although they are agnostic about the historicity of Jonah). One does not have to agree with everything in these chapters to acknowledge that anyone planning to preach or teach on the Minor Prophets would benefit from the material in these chapters. Seven specialist chapters that zoom in on the key theme of the 'Day of the LORD,' and key texts such as Jonah 2 or Micah 6:6-8, are particularly helpful. It is a pity that the short discussion of 'divine violence' in the chapter on Nahum and Zephaniah was not expanded into a specialist chapter.

In the closing three chapters of the book the authors begin to deliver on the sub-title of their work - they provide a *theological* interpretation of the Minor Prophets. The first of these chapters, on 'The Theology of the Minor Prophets,' touches briefly on key themes: the God who speaks; the covenant God; Zion, the city of the Great King; the Creator; Yahweh and Israel amid the empires; God the

judge, the LORD of hosts; gracious and compassionate; sin and repentance; ethics; spirituality; eschatology. Readers will benefit greatly from the (all too brief) exposition of these themes. The following chapter on 'The Minor Prophets and Jesus' is likewise of great help in understanding the influence of the Book of the Twelve on the Evangelists - the authors help us to see that '*without the prophets the story of Jesus could not be told*, at least not in the form we have it' (p.350). The hermeneutical principle that the authors have brought to their work is commendable - 'We take the discrete witness of the Minor Prophets seriously and move from them to Jesus. The Gospels push us back to the Minor Prophets to explore the New Testament references in their contexts, and this in turn pushes us back to Jesus. It is a *dialectical hermeneutic*, with the Minor Prophets illuminating Jesus, Jesus casting his light back on the Minor Prophets, and so on' (p.353).

It is, however, in the closing chapter of the book - 'The Theology of the Minor Prophets for Today' - that the influence of modernistic theology on the authors becomes explicit. Already in chapter 1 they have said that a theological interpretation 'is read *from faith* - thus rejecting the epistemic foundations of the Enlightenment.' So far so good. But it is also read '*to faith* - thus leveraging all our academic resources toward attending to God's address' (p.24). And therein lies the rub, because in chapter 22 major theological leverage appears to come from the works of Thomas Merton (a mystic Roman Catholic monk), Gustavo Gutiérrez (a liberation theologian), Adrio König (a twentieth-century Dutch Reformed theologian), and the World Council of Churches. Jürgen Moltmann is never named, but his tired old trope about 'the God of Greek philosophy' is trotted out in a denial of the classical Christian doctrines of divine aseity, immutability, and impassibility - God's essence is said to be 'really involved' in history (pp.366-9). This is not the *theology* of the Minor Prophets - it is the theology of modernism. Unsurprisingly, the *application* of the Minor Prophets in this chapter is immanentized and politicised. To be sure, the Minor Prophets call us to love justice, to do kindness, and to walk humbly with God, but it is hard to evade their proclamation that the problem of the injustice, cruelty, and pride that has marred God's good creation can *only* be addressed by an eschatological act of God himself. The one good thing about this chapter is that it alerts us to the theological currents that flow beneath the surface of the other chapters of the book.

There is much here that could be of use to the busy pastor who wants to understand, and help his congregation to understand, the message of the Minor Prophets. But because of the theological perspective that the authors bring to their work, this review must conclude with the classic caution - 'buyer beware.'

John Watterson

BOOK NOTICES

A Guide to the Puritans, Robert P. Martin, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2023, hbk., 532 pages, £19.00.

Engaging with the great Puritan writers can seem an overwhelming prospect. It is one thing to know that they contain much material of value for personal use and also for ministry: it is another thing altogether to know where to find the precise exposition or piece of theology that one needs. Appreciating this difficulty and concerned that the Lord's people should not be discouraged from mining the riches of the Puritans, Dr Robert Martin, pastor and theological teacher, compiled this volume which has now been reprinted to help new generations of readers and preachers. In his Preface Martin makes two important points. First, his definition of 'Puritan' is broad, including some who were deeply influenced by the Puritans, such as J C Ryle, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield and John Murray. Second, he has limited himself to works that have recently been republished, a wise decision which means that the material he indexes is accessible to a wide range of readers. Martin provides first a Topical Index that runs from Abortion to Zeal. Next comes a substantial Scripture Index, which will be of great use to preachers and Bible teachers in particular. Short indices of biographies and biographical sketches, of reviews and introductions, of sermons for funerals, Communion seasons, ordinations, special occasions and farewells, of unindexed letters and of 'miscellaneous items' round out the volume, along with a comprehensive and essential bibliography. Martin's painstaking work has provided a rich resource for those who seek convenient access to the writings of the Puritans and their successors, and it's reprinting is very welcome.

Futureproof, Stephen McAlpine, The Good Book Company, 2024 pbk., 158 pages, £8.99.

In his previous book *Being the Bad Guys* Stephen McAlpine, Belfast born and Australia based, examined how in our contemporary world Christian views are often regarded as not merely false or foolish – now they are increasingly considered to be dangerous. As a result the Christian voice is marginalised or even silenced. In *Futureproof* McAlpine sets out how the church may address this situation and above all equip Christians to live for the Lord in such a challenging environment. In a constantly and rapidly changing culture, the church is called to remain faithful and fruitful amid the change. McAlpine's fundamental claim – a thoroughly biblical one - is that God has provided his church with everything we need, not only to survive, but to build flourishing communities that engage the culture with faith and confidence. As he puts it, 'Jesus has made the church futureproof'. The book is in two parts. Part One: A Lasting Future exhorts Christians to out-purpose the culture, out-relate the culture and outlast the culture. As we look forward to God's planned future, we are called to remember, to patience and to holiness. Part Two: A Flourishing Future deals with many of the big issues with which Christians have to wrestle – polarisation, technology, culture wars and ecology. McAlpine explains the challenges clearly and also provides biblically-grounded responses. By God's grace we have a sure hope that cannot fail. This is a stimulating and encouraging response to the cultural challenges we face. It is not necessary to agree with every idea stated, but thoughtful readers cannot fail to be better equipped to live flourishing, godly lives in our present, often difficult, circumstances.

Reasoning in the Public Square, Graham Nicholls, Christian Focus Publications, 2024, pbk., 181 pages, £9.99.

Engaging in faithful gospel witness to a culture that increasingly rejects the most basic Christian principles is fraught with challenges. That is especially so when our witness may now be met with a degree of hostility, rather than indifference. We must not, however, give up on our calling – it is after all God's calling to us. Beyond personal witness to individuals, we are sent to witness in the 'public square', in a range of public settings. Whatever our particular mission field, we need expert help to avoid pitfalls and to present gospel truth in the best way. *Reasoning in the Public Square* by Graham Nicholls, Director of Affinity, provides a wealth of stimulus and guidance for the range of possibilities for witness open to us today. Drawing on Paul's ministry in Athens (Acts 17), Nicholls shows how we may engage people who would never enter a church with the Good News where they are. He sets out a variety of ways in which the initially indifferent or hostile may be brought into dialogue which offers opportunities for gospel presentation. The range of options for 'public square' witness is wide. In 'Market Streets' Nicholls has some challenging observations about street preaching, about which he was initially sceptical, but is now much more willing to consider. He deals also with opportunities in the media, in which he has himself developed considerable skill and enjoyed a degree of success, in online interaction and in the political realm. We need discernment as to our gifts and the ways in which God is calling us to serve, but this is a book full of advice and encouragement to engage with the culture around us for the glory of God and the advance of the gospel. Highly recommended.

Martin Luther's Bible. Perspectives on a Rich Legacy, edited by W. Gordon Campbell, James Clark and Co., 2024, pbk., 191 pages, £25.00.

At the Leipzig autumn fair in 1522 the September Testament went on sale. It was a translation of the New Testament by German Reformer Martin Luther and its publication was a major event in the production of vernacular Bible translations. *Martin Luther's Bible* brings together six essays dealing with different aspects of the translation and its influence on the provision of Bible translations in Europe in subsequent years. The research lying behind the volume originated in a conference held in September 2022 at Union Theological College in Belfast to mark the 500th anniversary of the September Testament. In the first essay, 'Erasmus as the Initiator of East-Central German Vernacular Bible Translations of the Sixteenth Century' by Christine Ganslmayer (Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen/Nürnberg)) explains the contemporary background in which the work of Erasmus on the Greek New Testament encouraged various German translations of the New Testament which provided a springboard for Luther's work. In the first of two essays editor of the volume, Gordon Campbell of Union Theological College examines the September Testament in detail and traces the sequence of translations by Luther leading up to his 1534 German Bible. Two essays then consider the influence of Luther's work on vernacular translations in other European languages. Fearghus Ó Fearghail of Dublin City University examines the influence of the September Testament on the work of William Tyndale in English and perhaps on the Irish translation of 1602. Éric Kayayan of Foi et Vie Réformées then deals with the steps that led to the 1599 French translation known as the Geneva Bible. Gordon Campbell's second essay considers how the translation work of William Tyndale influenced the Geneva Bible in English, with a particular focus on the Book of Revelation. The final essay is by Shawn Langley of the Kirby Lang Centre in Cambridge. His subject is the impact of the translation work of Luther and Tyndale on the doctrine of the anointing of the Holy Spirit drawn from 1 John 2:20 and 27. These essays are the fruit of profound scholarship and also provide fascinating insights into the work of early Bible translators, in particular of course Martin Luther. They offer a fitting tribute to one vital aspect of the Reformer's ministry and legacy.

The Shorter Writings of George Gillespie, Volume 1, edited by Chris Coldwell, Naphtali Press and Reformation Heritage Books, 2021, hbk., 384 pages, $50.00.

George Gillespie (1613-1648) was one of the Scottish Commissioners sent to take part in the debates of the Westminster Assembly, which resulted in some of the great documents of Presbyterianism in relation to theology and church government. Despite his relative youth, Gillespie took a leading apart in the debates, especially in defence of presbyterian church government, and demonstrated a great grasp of Scripture and of the writings of other theologians, both ancient and contemporary. He is probably best known for his major works *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies* and *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, but there is much of value in his shorter writings. Naphtali Press and Reformation Heritage Books have joined forces to produce a three-volume edition of these writings. The introductory material in Volume I includes the important 'Memoir' of Gillespie by William Hetherington along with other relevant items. The bulk of the volume is made up of Gillespie's 1641 treatise *An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland* which offers in relatively concise (in terms of seventeenth century debates) form the main elements of the Scots' defence of Presbyterianism as being 'by divine right', not merely a pragmatic system. Also included are four anonymous tracts relating to issues of ecclesiology. These too are valuable sources shedding light on the Assembly debates. The authorship of these tracts is a matter of debate. The attribution of the final one, entitled *Wholesome Severity Reconciled with Christian Liberty*, to Gillespie has been rejected by some, including the present reviewer, and the portrayal of Gillespie as a supporter of theonomy that emerges from *Wholesome Severity* does not seem to be consistent with statements he makes elsewhere. Nevertheless this is a valuable volume which, together with the succeeding two volumes, will contribute significantly to our understanding of the seventeenth century debates on church government.

David McKay