

Foundations

An international journal of evangelical theology

EDITION 86 | July 2024

affinity
gospel churches in partnership

Foundations Theological Journal

Foundations is an international journal of evangelical theology published in the United Kingdom. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics, and to indicate their relevance to pastoral ministry. Its particular focus is the theology of evangelical churches which are committed to biblical truth and evangelical ecumenism. It has been

published by Affinity (formerly The British Evangelical Council) from its inception as a print journal. It became a digital journal in April 2011. The views expressed in the articles published in *Foundations* do not necessarily represent the views of Affinity or its partners although all content must be within the bounds of the Affinity Doctrinal Basis.

Editor

Dr Donald John MacLean
foundations@affinity.org.uk

Associate Editors

Bob Fyall
Cornhill Training Course (Scotland)

Jamie A. Grant
Vice-Principal (Academic), Highland Theological College

David McKay
Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland

Dan Strange
Director, Crosslands Forum

Ted Turnau
Anglo-American University, Prague & Union School of Theology

Keith Walker
International Strategic Development Director, SIM International

Paul Wells
Emeritus Professor, Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence, France

Garry Williams
The John Owen Centre, London Seminary

Peter Williams
Tyndale House, Cambridge

Alistair Wilson
Edinburgh Theological Seminary

Foundations is published by Affinity

Resources like this are made possible by the generous support of members and affiliates. To find out more about how you can support the work of Affinity visit www.affinity.org.uk

Published in 2024. ISBN 978-1-916769-04-5. ISSN (Print) 0144-378X. ISSN (Online) 2046-9071

Foundations is copyrighted by Affinity. Readers are free to use it and circulate it in digital form without further permission (any print use requires further written permission), but they must acknowledge the source and, of course, not change the content.

Contents

3

EDITORIAL

6

NEO-CALVINISM: A THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

Review Article
by Jonathan Bayes

15

ABRAHAM KUYPER: INSPIRATION, REVELATION, AND SCRIPTURE

by Dr Steve Bishop

39

JOHN OWEN AND RELATING TO GOD AS FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

by Dr Lee Gatiss

61

JOHN WESLEY AND ALDERSGATE

by Roger Fay

71

SLAVERY, THE SLAVE TRADE AND CHRISTIANS' THEOLOGY – PART 1

by Ian Shaw

98

MISSIONARY – WHAT'S IN A WORD?

A Critical Discussion of a Disputed Term
by Dr Thorsten Prill

123

BOOK REVIEWS

Christianity and Science

Herman Bavinck

The Holy Spirit

Robert Letham

Providing for Pastors: How to Give Time, Energy, and Money to Support the Work of Pastors

Jeremy Walker

This Earthly Life Matters: The Promise of Arnold A. van Ruler for Ecotheology

Arnold A. Van Ruler

EDITORIAL

Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush – “This one was born there,” they say. (Ps. 87:4, ESV)

One of the glorious things spoken about the church in Psalm 87 is the future diversity of God’s people. From vastly differing nations, God’s people will be united in one worshiping people. This edition of Foundations sees something of that theme. From articles on neo-Calvinism, Puritanism, and Methodism, to the sad attitude of the 18th and 19th century American church to slavery the diversity of God’s people (and the occasional failure of the church to honour that diversity) is on display. An article on the value and meaning of the word “missionary” today also reflects on the diversity of God’s people.

Jonathan Bayes provides a review article on an important book from Cory Brock and N. Gray Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2022). In an appreciative interaction with the book, Bayes focuses on the doctrine of common grace. Whilst highlighting special salvific grace, the Reformed tradition has always held to a clear doctrine of common grace. In some ways, neo-Calvinism accented that earlier emphasis, and therefore the emphasis in Bayes’ review is appropriate and needed.

Continuing the theme of neo-Calvinism, Steve Bishop considers Abraham Kuyper’s doctrine of Scripture. It is vital to hold together the truths of “the infallible truth and divine authority” of Scripture as “immediately inspired by God” (Westminster

Confession of Faith 1:5,8) and the differing styles, language and modes of thought of the various books of Scripture. Bishop helpfully unfolds Kuyper's approach to this. Not all will agree, nor prefer Kuyper to Warfield (to the extent they differ), but Kuyper is an important figure, whose works are worthy of careful engagement.

Lee Gatiss takes us to the era of Puritanism, and to the great theologian and pastor John Owen. In particular, the article focuses on the pastoral value of Owen's trinitarian theology and Owen's key contribution that "we have distinct communion with him as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit." Gatiss helpfully contextualises Owen and the theological landscape of his time. He then treats us to a warm and thoughtful unfolding of Owen's teaching.

This is followed by a short article from Roger Fay on John Wesley, a figure who in key respects differed sharply from the theology of Owen, and from neo-Calvinism. Fay considers Wesley's "conversion" experience of May 1738 and, contrary to much scholarship, argues for its importance to Wesley's ongoing life and thought.

Ian Shaw's article is the first instalment of two on the attitude of some (principally American) theologians on the topic of slavery and race. It is important that we consider honestly the failure of leading reformed theologians on these topics. Some of the quotes from Shaw make hard reading, and further reflection will follow in the second instalment in the next edition of Foundations.

Thorsten Prill rounds out this edition with a consideration of the word "missionary". This article considers how the word has been understood historically and how it is used

today. Prill argues for the usefulness of the word and that the preaching of the gospel, the planting of churches and the training of church leaders lie at the heart of “missionary” work.

I trust these articles, and the four insightful book reviews in this issue, are all of help for the church.

Dr Donald John MacLean

Editor of Foundations

Elder, Cambridge Presbyterian Church and Assistant Professor of Historical Theology at Westminster Seminary (UK).

July 2024

REVIEW ARTICLE: NEO-CALVINISM: A THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

Brock, Cory C., and N. Gray Sutanto. Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction. Lexham Press, 2023.

The authors of this book are concerned that the theological contribution of the two founders of Dutch Neo-Calvinism, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, has been sidelined by a preoccupation with their political emphases, resulting in a distortion of their main concerns. The aim of the book is to redress the balance. Where necessary, it also corrects theological misreadings of their position.

I. What is Neo-Calvinism?

The Introduction is followed by a chapter which analyses the term “Neo-Calvinism”. Each of its two parts is significant. The reference to “Calvinism” is important because Kuyper and Bavinck saw a retrieval of the teaching of Calvin as necessary, for two main reasons: first, they feared that the Reformed movement since Calvin had veered towards an unhelpful, rationalistic approach; second, they applauded Calvin’s emphasis on a God-centred concern for every area of life, seeing this as Biblically superior to a retreat into a Christian ghetto mentality. The significance of “Neo-” is the recognition that the Calvinist emphasis on an all-encompassing world-view needs to be reconfigured to speak into the issues raised by the modern philosophical outlook.

What particularly struck me in reading the book was the centrality in Neo-Calvinism of the doctrine of common grace. The bibliography includes two articles by each writer

on this subject, plus a major three-volume study by Kuyper. Common grace is mentioned in every chapter: this has the effect of portraying it as an underlying thread which runs through Neo-Calvinist theology in its entirety, the glue which holds together all the separate theological loci. It is on this motif that I want to major in this review because I personally found this the most exciting and inspiring aspect of the book. As a result of reading it, I have gleaned many fresh insights on this subject, and for that I am very grateful to Drs. Brock and Sutanto.

The introduction paves the way by noting how Kuyper thought that common grace had been a neglected topic since the time of Calvin, and that it ought to be treated as a specific doctrine within dogmatics. He summarises the meaning of common grace in terms of God's loving and patient preservation of this cursed creation, such that progress and development are possible even in a world wrecked by human sin and rebellion.

References to common grace crop up at regular intervals in the chapter which expounds the term "Neo-Calvinism". The doctrine is seen as going hand-in-hand with a radical doctrine of sin: even where sin abounds, God's common grace undergirds natural life, and in that context, Christianity has a leavening power (in a good sense) in the present world. By his common grace, God is said to maintain the life of the world, relax the impact of the curse, and arrest the process of corruption, with the result that the unhindered development of human life is allowed to take place, and so he, as Creator, is glorified, even in this fallen world.

II. Common Grace and the Gospel

Each of the next seven chapters addresses a different theological theme, one of them focussing particularly on common grace, under the heading “Common Grace and the Gospel”. I shall first summarise this chapter before noting the references to common grace in the other six chapters.

The chapter opens by defining common grace both negatively and positively: negatively, it is how God curbs the operation of Satan, death and sin; while positively, it refers to the provision of an intermediate state — an era between the Fall and the Second Coming of Christ — for Creation and the human race, so that, although humanity is deeply and radically sinful, sin cannot work out its end.

The reference to total depravity is fundamental to this book’s presentation of the doctrine of common grace, and I personally found the explanation of this relationship to be the most far-reaching aspect of it. Total depravity has often been explained in a way which qualifies it somewhat, applying it to man’s inability of his own resources to achieve any saving good but acknowledging that fallen human nature is still capable of much natural good. Neo-Calvinism, by contrast, interprets total depravity in an unqualified way. It really is total; all possibility of good was eradicated by the fall. The Neo-Calvinists also acknowledged that, in this fallen world, people do still do good, and admitted that this observation does not seem to tally with such a radical version of total depravity. However, they were at pains to insist that this is not at all because of some spark of goodness remaining in human nature, that human achievements may not

be attributed to vestiges of human ingenuity. Rather, it is against the background of human helplessness and inability that God's common grace enables good to be done and allows beneficial and joyful experiences to occur. The truth is that there is absolutely nothing praiseworthy in this fallen world except that which comes from God. It is he who enables good to be done, and every expression of goodness is a conferred grace. But for God's common grace the world would have been annihilated, and there would be no possibility of knowledge, or progress, or peace.

Neo-Calvinism acknowledges its debt to Calvin at this point. He spoke of God's "general grace" as an aspect of his all-encompassing providence, which maintains human life and culture, and gives birth to the things which we admire, including civic order, philosophy, the art of rational disputation, medicine, and mathematics. Kuyper and Bavinck identified God's common graces as moral, intellectual, and natural goods, and summarised them under the two headings of internal and external graces. The former are seen in expressions of truth, goodness, and beauty, and include the family, natural love, human virtue, the public conscience, integrity, fidelity and piety. The external graces embrace human power over the natural world, life-enriching inventions, the arts and sciences, music, the seasons, crops, food, clothing, and all of life's beneficial and enjoyable experiences. In short, we have received the gift of life, every breath that we breathe being a gift of God's grace, and not something to which we have a right. Moreover, we are in a stable world where, although there is no universal moral consensus because of sin, nonetheless, neither is there total confusion.

It is worth enlarging on the reference to piety in the list of common graces. For Kuyper and Bavinck, even false religions are tokens of God's common grace, in so far as they recognise the reality of the divine and ensure the human search for the true God. Even pagan religion is a fruit of God's self-revelation in Creation and the conscience, albeit that fallen man is inevitably prone to misread the evidence.

The point about the intermediate state of the present world in which common grace abounds also needs elaboration. Although common grace came into effect immediately upon the Fall and the Curse, its covenantal basis is traced back to Noah, who stood as the representative of the whole creation. Common grace prepared the way for Christ's first coming, both in the sustaining of a religious disposition, and in the spread of the Greek language. In this time between his two comings, common grace continues its work as preparatory for the Eschaton. It provides the arena, the stage, the field for the work of salvation with a view to the ultimate redemption. When that day comes, the work of common grace will terminate, as grace and nature come together in glory. The Neo-Calvinists said that while the "germ" of the internal graces will continue its external accomplishments will not.

This is not to say that common grace is inevitably universal throughout this interim period. Kuyper and Bavinck recognised, on the basis of Romans 1, that there are times when God withholds common grace, gives up to their own desires those who idolise created realities, and nullifies the possibility of participation in his revealed law.

Kuyper and Bavinck understood common grace to be an outworking of God's absolute and overall sovereignty, and brought out its trinitarian reality: the Father wills the preservation of the creaturely realm; Jesus Christ the Son is the mediator of common grace, the light of the world shining in the darkness; and it is the Spirit who distributes God's gifts of love to the world, giving and maintaining life and being at every level — human, animal and inanimate. In such a world, the leavening task of the Church and of individual believers is to witness to God's special grace in Christ, to live in a godly way, and to be involved in society to the glory of God.

III. Common Grace in Broader Neo-Calvinism

The first of the other six chapters is headed "Catholic and Modern", its point being that the churches are both rooted in the universal, historic Christian faith, but also adaptable, though not uncritically so, to all cultural and generational differences, so that within its unity there is space for vast diversity. The beneficial aspects of each of the multiple cultures throughout time and across the nations are the good gifts of God in his common grace.

The next chapter addresses the subject of "Revelation and Reason". The primary concern is God's general revelation of himself in the works of Creation and the human consciousness of absolute dependence. This is distinguished from natural theology, which is rational reflection on that inbuilt revelation. In the estimation of Kuyper and Bavinck, Medieval Thomism and subsequent Roman Catholic teaching claimed that natural truths could be known without supernatural grace; by contrast, they insisted that

it was only through God's common grace that the sinful human mind could attain to correct beliefs.

The title of the following chapter is "Scripture and Organism", by which is meant both that Scripture, in all the diversity of its component parts, is a unified whole, and that the entirety of human knowledge arising from observation and discovery is a single entity, with Scriptural truth as its unifying foundation. One of Kuyper's articles was entitled "Common Grace in Science"; it is referenced five times in the earlier part of this chapter. He saw the learning of philosophers and scientists, not excluding Charles Darwin, as a fruit of common grace. He notes that the effects of sin do not impede the observation of data but lead to a misconstrued system when the attempt is made to organise the data coherently: it is Scripture which provides that foundation.

Next, we come to a chapter on "Creation and Re-creation". Common grace is seen in the general gifts of creation, and in human development. The practical skills of the farmer and the intellectual ability of the scholar are alike the fruits of God's common grace. In connection with the cessation of common grace at the Eschaton, Kuyper and Bavinck rejected the idea of a gradual transition from the present age into the New Heaven and Earth, which they believed would be ushered in cataclysmically.

The chapter on "Image and Fall" depicts the human race as the image of the Triune God in its diversity within unity, and in the unity of man's constitution as a being both physical and spiritual. It is God's common grace which prevents the total loss of the image as a result of the Fall: but for the restraint of common grace, sin would have

destroyed the image completely. The human race would have lost its unity, breaking up into disconnected and egocentric individualism but this tendency is curbed by common grace. It is the moral conscience, a primary element in common grace, which judges human sin and so preserves the spiritual aspect of human being. Moreover, the human vocation of dominion under the rule of Christ continues to be evident in every age as human beings exercise stewardship in the life of the world; this too is an expression of common grace.

The last of these six chapters is headed “Church and World”. It recognises that God preserves and governs the world through his common grace, which brings into being the three main spheres of family, state and culture, the last being a wide term embracing multiple aspects of social life, including farming and the arts. In the midst of this world, the church, brought into being by special grace, becomes a fourth sphere which, as the presence of special grace, can penetrate any of the other spheres and enhance the domain of common grace as a witness to renewal in the future Kingdom. The earthly homelands of believers and churches continue as a result of common grace, and this prevents Creation from collapsing into chaos under satanic dominion. Through his common grace, it is God in Christ who continues to govern life in the world, and, in a world sustained by common grace, artwork, for example, when done from a Christian perspective, displays the glory of God.

IV. Conclusion

The book closes with a brief summary chapter containing 16 theses listing the main points made in the preceding chapters. These are introduced by a synopsis which includes the observation that our contemporary situation still enjoys the gifts of common grace. Thesis nine then affirms that by the Spirit's work in common grace God restrains sin, and grants to fallen humanity moral, intellectual, and life-giving gifts to enjoy, with a view to the ultimate redemption in Christ.

The inclusion of enjoyment in that final reference to common grace is surely significant. It emphasises the amazing kindness of God even towards a fallen and rebellious world. His purpose is not merely to preserve the world for a better future; the implication is that he himself finds pleasure, and is the more greatly glorified, when his sinful creatures are still able to enjoy life even in a fallen creation.

The theme of common grace especially captivated my imagination as I read this work. However, there are also many other stimulating themes, and I heartily recommend this book as an important introduction to a branch of theology which is probably largely new to many of us.

Jonathan Bayes (Pastor at Stanton Lees Chapel, UK Executive Director and Lecturer in Systematic Theology, Carey Outreach Ministries)

ABRAHAM KUYPER: INSPIRATION, REVELATION, AND SCRIPTURE

Steve Bishop

Abstract

This paper examines Kuyper's view of the Scriptures. It stresses Kuyper's organic and pneumocentric view of the Scriptures. These emphases serve to show that Scripture is both of divine and human origin.

I. Introduction

It is sometimes forgotten that Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was a theologian. He was the first professor of theology at the Free University in Amsterdam and lectured in theology for over 20 years (from 1880-1901). He also wrote and published several volumes that dealt with theological topics, not least his *Principles of Sacred Theology*,¹ *The Work of the Holy Spirit*,² and *God's Angels*. In recent years, with the publication of *The Collected Works in Public Theology* (2015-2022), the emphasis has been on

¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1894); it was originally translated as *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries (New York: Scribner, 1898); it was later republished as *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954, 1968), translating only parts of volume 1, and all of volume 2 of the *Encyclopaedie*. Volume 3 remains untranslated. Baker republished it in 1980 and an abridged version by Jay P. Green Sr was published in 2001 by Sovereign Grace Publishers. The version used here is the 1968 edition – hereafter *PST*.

² The version used here is the paperback edition of 2001 published by AMG Publishers – henceforth *WotHS*. The original translation by Henri De Vries was published in 1900 by Funk & Wagnalls. It was reprinted in 1941 by Eerdmans. It was a translation of the three volume *Het werk van den Heiligen Geest*, Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1888 and 1889.

application rather than on Kuyper's theology. In this article I want to look at Kuyper's view of inspiration, revelation, and Scripture – with an emphasis on his view of Scripture – in part because Scripture shaped his politics, education, journalism, art, sciences and so forth.³

Most of the examinations of Kuyper's view of the Scriptures have been comparisons with others – Harris with fundamentalism and with Warfield,⁴ and Gaffin Jr⁵ with Rogers and McKim.

This article will focus primarily on Kuyper's own view of the Scriptures. Kuyper continually refers to Scripture when discussing topics, so an examination of his approach is important. He continually uses phrases such as these (selected from *Honey from the Rock*⁶):

*Doesn't all of Scripture show ... (1.6)*⁷

According to the (Holy) Scriptures ... (1.30, 1.48)

Scripture teaches ... (1.25)

³ For an overview of Kuyper see, for example, Steve Bishop, "Abraham Kuyper: Cultural Transformer," *Foundations*, 79 (November 2020), 60-76.

⁴ Harris, Harriett A., *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and "A Diamond in the Dark," in L. Lugo (ed.), *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁵ Gaffin Jr., Richard B., *God's Word in Servant-Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on Scripture* (Jackson: Reformed Academic Press, 2008).

⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Honey from the Rock* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018) – henceforth *Honey*.

⁷ The numbers indicate volume then section.

Holy Scriptures show ... (1.29)

Holy Scripture tells us ... (1.29; 2.55; 2.59)

That's why Scripture says... (1.32)

Holy Scripture speaks ... (1.55)

Scripture itself says ... (1.71)

Scripture requires ... (1.98)

... what Scripture wants ... (2.17)

Scripture reminds us ... (2. 24)

...says Scripture ... (2. 34)

Scripture itself teaches ... (2.36)

...says the Holy Spirit in Scripture ... (2.57)

... on the basis of Scripture ... (2. 84)

Holy Scripture says ... (2.88)

Scripture itself answers ... (2.93)

In the following we shall briefly examine the role of the Holy Spirit, Kuyper's organic view of the inspiration of the Scriptures, and the analogies Kuyper uses for Scripture, but first the notion of the self-authentication of the Scriptures.

II. The Internal Testimony of the Scriptures

In his *Work of the Holy Spirit*, Kuyper begins by examining what the Scriptures have to say about themselves and looking for any indications of inspiration. The Scriptures are self-attesting. Jesus appears to have credited the Old Testament with inspiration; he considered it to be the Word of God, agreed with Jewish beliefs of the time, and saw it as "one organic whole". As seen by his repeated use of the phrase "It is written", Jesus insisted that the Bible cannot be broken and accepted the authority of the Old Testament. This is also apparent in Matt 5:17-18 – every jot and tittle. As Kuyper asserts:

The way Jesus thought about Holy Scripture is the way you should.

What Jesus confessed concerning Scripture, you should.

What Jesus accepted as the sacred charter of truth, you should as well. ... You have to stand rock solid in the conviction that "What Jesus says is completely true."⁸

Similarly, in his *Principles of Sacred Theology (PST)* he stresses the importance of Jesus' view of the Scriptures. We either agree with his view or see his view as being an error – to take the latter option is to reject Jesus as "the absolute guide along the way of faith" (*PST*, 459).

⁸ Kuyper, *Honey*, 386-388.

III. The Work of the Holy Spirit and Scripture

McGowan observes: “Although evangelicals have spoken about the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to Scripture, there has been insufficient emphasis upon this theme”.⁹ This is not the case for Kuyper. He continually stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Scriptures. For example, “That the Bible is the product of the Chief Artist, the Holy Spirit; that He gave it to the Church and that in the Church He uses it as His instrument, can not be over-emphasized” (*WotHS*, 65). Kuyper poses the question: “How did the Scripture originate?” His answer, “By the Holy Spirit” (*WotHS*, 171).

The Holy Spirit, is for Kuyper, the “perpetual author”:

... the Holy Spirit, who gave the Scriptures, is Himself the perpetual author (auctor perpetuus) of all appropriation of their contents by and of all application to the individual. It is the Holy Spirit who, by illumination, enables the human consciousness to take up into itself the substance of the Scripture; in the course of ages leads our human consciousness to ever richer insights into its content; and who, while this process continues, imparts to the elect of God, as they reach the years of discretion, that personal application of the Word, which, after the Divine counsel, is both intended and indispensable for them. (PST, 281)

⁹ A.T.B. Gowan, “The Divine Spiration of Scripture,” *SBET*, 21(1)(2007), 199-217.

The role of the Holy Spirit is all-embracing, as well as the author of Scripture, he brings illumination and rich insights to the reader. He also is responsible for the Scripture as it is “presented to the church”. The content, selection, and arrangement of the Scriptures are a result of the work of the Holy Spirit (*WotHS*, 84). The Holy Spirit is the source of inspiration both in the writing of and in the reading of, Scripture.

Hence inspiration is the name of that all-comprehensive operation of the Holy Spirit whereby He has bestowed on the Church a complete and infallible Scripture. We call this operation all-comprehensive, for it was organic, not mechanical. (WotHS, 82-83)

For Kuyper, the Scripture is an instrument of the Holy Spirit in his work upon the human heart and to equip a person for every good work (*WotHS*, 64). In several places, he describes the Scriptures as an instrument of the Holy Spirit.

That the Bible is the product of the Chief Artist, the Holy Spirit; that He gave it to the Church and that in the Church He uses it as His instrument, can not be over-emphasized. (WotHS, 60)

Without the revelation, the Scriptures cannot fulfil their purpose. Once Christ through the Holy Spirit opens up the Scriptures to us then they cease to be a dead letter but become life giving water:

Consequently the working of Scripture embraces not only the quickening of faith, but also the exercise of faith. Therefore instead of being a dead-letter, unspiritual,

mechanically opposing the spiritual life, it is the very fountain of living water, which, being opened, springs up to eternal life. (WotHS, 59)

The Holy Spirit has a threefold operation, according to Kuypers:

First, a divine working giving a revelation to the apostles.

Second, a working called inspiration.

Third, a working, active to-day, creating faith in the Scripture in the heart at first unwilling to believe. (WotHS, 177)

The order is important: revelation comes to, for example, one of the apostles, who records it and writes it down. However, inspiration by the Holy Spirit is required to ensure it is recorded without error. He sees it as a verbal rather than mechanical inspiration. It was not a dictation; rather it is organic, in that it is about “calling forth the words from man’s consciousness”.¹⁰

The Holy Spirit is the one who brings insight to believers as they read the Scripture. Linked to the work of the Holy Spirit in Scripture are the themes of the authority, necessity, and purpose of the Scripture.

¹⁰ Abraham Kuypers, “The Biblical criticism of the present day,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, LXI (1904), 409-442; 666-668. This was a rectoral address given in 1881 at the VU Amsterdam. It was later translated by Rev. J.H. De Vries for publication in *Bibliotheca Sacra*.

1. *The authority of Scripture*

The authority of the Scripture comes from the fact that it is the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures. They are not merely a human product. The authority of Scripture has no say in the literary ability of the writers or on the importance of the writers; what is foremost is that they were all equally inspired by the Holy Spirit and that is why their writings are authoritative for then and for today.

Believing in the authority of the New Testament, we must acknowledge the authority of the four evangelists to be perfectly equal. As to the contents, Matthew's gospel may surpass that of Luke, and John's may excel the gospel of Mark; but their authority is equally unquestionable. The Epistle to the Romans has higher value than that to Philemon; but their authority is the same. As to their persons, John stood above Mark, and Paul above Jude; but since we depend not upon the authority of their persons, but only upon that of the Holy Spirit, these personal differences are of no account. (WotHS, 172)

The authority of the Scripture means that they are accurate and true; they are reliable. And this is only because of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

2. *The necessity of written Scripture*

A written Scripture was necessary to preserve truth and prevent “degeneration and falsification” (WotHS, 169). The apostles were under the impression of the imminent return of Christ and so had no idea that their writings would become Scriptures. They

did not know what they were doing; the Holy Spirit prepared them for their work. The Scriptures were necessary, as they were God's provision for future generations. As Kuyper puts it:

Hence two things had to be done for the Church of the future: First, the image of Christ must be received from the lips of the apostles and be committed to writing. Secondly, the things of which Jesus had said, "Ye can not bear them now, but the Holy Spirit will declare them unto you," must be recorded. (WotHS, 169)

3. *The purpose of the Scripture*

The role of the Scriptures is not to lead us to Christ, but Christ leads us to the Scriptures. He does not see the purpose of the Scriptures as an apologetic tool. The primary emphasis is on Christ not on the Scriptures.

The Scriptures are for all of life. They serve a dual purpose: "First, as an instrument of the Holy Spirit in His work upon a man's heart. Secondly, to qualify man perfectly and to equip him for every good work" (*WotHS*, 64). They are not a "mere paper book":

a lifeless object, but not if we hear God speaking therein directly to the soul.

Severed from the divine life, the Scripture is unprofitable, a letter that killeth. But when we realize that it radiates God's love and mercy in such form as to transform our life and address our consciousness, we see that the supernatural revelation of the life of God must precede the radiation. The revelation of God's tender mercies must precede their scintillation in the human consciousness. First, the revelation

of the mystery of Godliness; then, its radiation in the Sacred Scripture, and thence into the heart of God's Church, is the natural and ordained way. (WotHS, 65)

4. *A predestined Bible*

In *PST* Kuyper draws upon the notion of a predestined Bible. There is no chance or accident in the completion of the Scriptures (*PST*, 475):

It was not mistakenly, therefore, that a predestined Bible was spoken of in Reformed circles, by which was understood that the preconceived form of the Holy Scripture had been given already from eternity in the counsel of God in which at the same time all events, means and persons, by which that preconceived form would be realized in our actual life, were predestined. (PST, 474)

He recognises the human and divine authorship of the Scripture. He describes this mode of origin as "*Inspiration, theopneusty, by the Holy Spirit.*"¹¹ He rejects any rationalistic splitting of the word of God and Scripture. He affirms; "The Scripture is God's word both as a whole and in its parts."¹² This means *synthetically*, in its whole, and *analytically*, "in each of its parts."¹³ The inspiration is organic rather than mechanical, by "calling forth the words from man's own consciousness."

¹¹ Kuyper, "Biblical criticism," 425.

¹² *Ibid.*, 430.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 430-431.

IV. An Organic View of Inspiration

Kuyper uses the term organic, although he does not clearly define it. The term organic has a wide range of meanings. Nowadays, it is used in labels related to food production to denote the absence of pesticides or other artificial chemicals. It is a scientific term used to designate living plants and animals, or as a term to indicate the chemistry of carbon compounds. It can also mean change that happens naturally and gradually without being forced, planned or mechanical. It can also mean a structure or community that fits together well with other parts. It is usually these last two meanings that Kuyper has in mind. Most often he uses it as the opposite of mechanical and to show diversity within unity – “in its whole and in its parts, it is God’s word”.

Kuyper argues that the apostles regarded the Old Testament not as a set of literary documents but as a “codex”, a complete volume. It has an organic unity; it is not an anthology of writings but a whole, “organically constructed and clothed with Divine authority” (*PST*, 444).

As Kuyper puts it in his rectoral address: “The Scripture is God's word both as a whole and in its parts”.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 430.

The inspiration of the Scriptures is more organic than mechanical inspiration is not mechanical as a stenographer, but organic, impressionistic, and artistic. The Scriptures are works of art and not photographs. As he makes us aware in his *Dogmatik Dictaten*:¹⁵

*What Jesus said is very important. If one wished to have Jesus' words with human infallibility, they would all have to be reproduced with the exactness of a stenographer. God has, however, set aside four evangelists for the purpose of reproducing Jesus' words. God, now, works artistically; the evangelists therefore reproduce infallibly the essence of Jesus' words, but not always in the same form in which they were spoken".*¹⁶

The role of the Holy Spirit in inspiration is organic, not mechanical (*WotHS*, 83). Thus, Kuyper's main view of the inspiration of the Scriptures is organic and pneumocentric. He also uses several analogies that are linked to these two foci. These analogies include the incarnation; a portrait, not a photograph; and a diamond or jewel. These analogies will be examined below.

¹⁵ These were student notes from the dogmatic lectures that Kuyper gave at the Free University, Amsterdam.

¹⁶ A. Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek van Dr. A. Kuyper. II. Locus de Sacra Scriptura*, 92.

V. Analogies for Scripture

For Kuyper, the Scripture is a “divine jewel”, “the Word and the Scripture of ... God.”¹⁷ When reading it, it is not Moses or John that addresses him but “the Lord my God.” He waxes lyrical about the Scriptures:

In the midst of that sacred history I hear the Holy Spirit singing to my spiritual ear in the Psalms, which discloses the depths of my own soul; in the prophets I hear him repeat what he whispered in the soul of Israel's seers; and in which my own soul is refreshed by a perspective which is most inspiring and beautiful. Till at length, in the pages of the New Testament, God himself brings out to me the Expected One, the Desire of the fathers; shows me the place where the manger stood; points out to me the tracks of his footsteps; and on Golgotha lets me see, how the Son of his unique love, for me poor doomed one died the death of the cross. And, finally, it is the same God, the Holy Spirit, who, as it were, reads off to me what he caused to be preached by Jesus' disciples concerning the riches of that cross, and closes the record of this drama in the Apocalypse with the enchanting Hosanna from the heaven of heavens. Call this, if you will, an almost childish faith, outgrown by your larger wisdom, but I cannot better it.¹⁸

¹⁷ Kuyper, “Biblical criticism,” 422.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 423.

1. *Incarnation*

Kuyper sees a parallel between the incarnation and the inscripturation of the Word.

Holy Scripture clothes itself in the garment of our form of thought, and holds itself to our human reality. (PST, 478)

The human authors are seen as secondary to the Holy Spirit who is seen as the primary author. The human author is the “amanuensis of the Holy Spirit” (PST, 480). This implies an organic unity of Scripture – the Holy Spirit unifies the Scripture, through a diversity of authors.

The incarnation analogy carries with it two important aspects of the Scriptures for Kuyper. It is both human and divine, and comes in a servant form.

i. Human and divine authorship

As Jesus in his incarnation was human and divine, so too are the Scriptures. They are divine in origin and human:

Although the Holy Spirit spoke directly to men, human speech and language being no human inventions, yet in writing He employed human agencies. But whether He dictates directly, as in the Revelation of St. John, or governs the writing indirectly, as with historians and evangelists, the result is the same: the product is such in form and content as the Holy Spirit designed, an infallible document for the Church of God. (WotHS, 83-84).

This role of the Holy Spirit in using human authors ensures the organic unity and authority of the Scripture. This organic view of the Scripture and inspiration also rejects the idea that the Holy Spirit dictates the words of Scripture (other than occasionally in the book of Revelation), it also means that human individuality is not stifled in the process of inspiration:

the men employed in this work were consciously or unconsciously so controlled and directed by the Spirit, in all their thinking, selecting, sifting, choice of words, and writing, that their final product, delivered to posterity, possessed a perfect warrant of divine and absolute authority. (WotHS, 84).

ii. Servant form

The Scripture also assumes the role of a servant, just as Jesus did when He came to earth. Kuyper explains how the Scripture displays this trait of a servant:

As the Logos has not appeared in the form of glory, but in the form of a servant, joining himself to the reality of our nature...so also, for the revelation of His Logos, God the Lord accepts our consciousness, our human life as it is...The spoken limitation of our language, disturbed as it is by anomalies. As a product of writing, the Holy Scripture also bears on its forehead the mark of the form of a servant. (PST, 419)

2. *A diamond and gold*

The Holy Scripture is like a diamond: in the dark it is like a piece of glass, but as soon as the light strikes it the water begins to sparkle, and the scintillation of life greets us. So the Word of God apart from the divine life is valueless, unworthy even of the name of Sacred Scripture. It exists only in connection with this divine life, from which it imparts life-giving thoughts to our minds. It is like the fragrance of a flower-bed that refreshes us only when the flowers and our organs of smell correspond. (WotHS, 63 Ch XII)

Here Kuyper in using the analogy of a diamond shows the necessity of revelation in relation to the Scriptures. Without revelation the Scripture is dull and lifeless – as a diamond in the dark – but with the revelation of the Holy Spirit, it brings life and understanding. Likewise, the Scriptures are like gold and like gold there is a need for work to dig out the gold from the ground.

i. Biblical Scholarship

Kuyper observes:

...God's will lies hidden in the Scriptures, like gold in a mine, and only sustained and comprehensive study, by which we compare Scripture with Scripture, as well

*as a thorough working out of its meaning in our lives can lead to particular results.*¹⁹

In this Kuyper endorses the importance of, and need for, biblical scholarship. There is a need to dig deep in the mine of Scripture.

At the time when Kuyper was writing on Scripture, Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918)²⁰ and Kuyper's fellow Dutchman, Abraham Kuenen (1828-1891), were developing their higher criticism of the Bible. The historical-critical methods were in the ascendancy. At one time, while a student at Leiden, Kuyper had become enamoured by L.W.E. Rauwenhoff's (1828-1889) Enlightenment approach to the Scriptures. Later, particularly after his experience with the "malcontents" at Beesd, he became orthodox in his views and critical of biblical criticism. This is most apparent in his 1881 rectoral address on "The Biblical Criticism of the Present Day."

There he shows awareness of the dangers but also the place of biblical criticism. He warns:

... the biblical criticism of the present day is destructive of the best interests of the church of the living God, for the reason that it revokes her theology, robs her of

¹⁹ A. Kuyper, *Common Grace (Volume 3): God's Gifts for a Fallen World* (Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology) (Bellingham, MA: Lexham Press, 2020), Ch27 §3.

²⁰ Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis of the Old Testament split the source of the Old Testament into four different sources labelled J, E, D, and P. His main works developing this were published in 1878 onwards.

*the Bible, and destroys her liberty in Christ. ... biblical criticism must end in the destruction of theology.*²¹

He compares biblical criticism to vivisection.²² For Kuyper the heart of theology is dogmatics, with exegesis, church history, and pastoral theology clustered around dogmatics – critical-literary studies lie the furthest away. For this reason, biblical criticism, which at Kuyper’s time dealt primarily with these critical-literary studies, focuses on peripherals rather than what is central: “*It tears the parts of theology out of their relation, violates its character, and substitutes for it something which is no theology.*”²³

The work of biblical criticism is likened to a regal banquet where “all the threads of the table linens have been numbered, and every spot and scratch on the golden goblets have most carefully been recorded; while, to the mortification of the guests, the sparkling wine is wanting.”²⁴

The danger of biblical criticism is then that it tears theology out of its relation, and it falsifies its character.²⁵ It also, Kuyper argues, robs congregations of their Bible.²⁶ It

²¹ Kuyper, “Biblical Criticism,” 410.

²² *Ibid.*, 413.

²³ *Ibid.*, 410.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 412.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 415.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 422.

should be stressed, however, that, as mentioned above, Kuyper was not opposed to biblical critical studies. On the contrary, he thought it could be done to the glory of God:

Not as though critical and historical examination were prohibited. Such endeavor for the glory of God is highly commendable. (WotHS, 69)

ii. Errors in the Bible?

One important question Kuyper addresses is the nature of possible errors in the Bible. Does inspiration mean that the Scriptures are error-free? The ethicalists, a theological school dominant in Kuyper's time, suggested that there were errors which show that "the Scripture does not pretend to be infallible."²⁷ Kuyper refuted this opinion in his "Biblical Criticism" address. He does so for two "decisive reasons". One, we do not have the original autographs – and so errors may have crept in on what was without original error; two, the witness of the Holy Spirit carries more authority than human judgement:²⁸

it is the same primary author (auctor primarius) who, by the apostles, quotes himself, and is therefore entirely justified in repeating his original meaning in application to the case for which the quotation is made, in a somewhat modified form, agreeably to the current translation. (PST, 450)

²⁷ Ibid., 471.

²⁸ Ibid., 471.

When the Holy Spirit *freely* quotes something from an earlier Old Testament verse, he will never make a mistake, even though the exact words may differ, as the original author he is well within his right to express the same meaning in a different form (Scripture is a work of art and not a photograph – see below).

In addition, in *WotHS* he wrote: “God must condescend to our limitations. ... in order to make Himself intelligible to man, God must clothe His thoughts in human language and thus convey them to the human consciousness” (*WotHS*, 77). This is in line with Calvin’s view of the Scriptures. As Dirk Jellema points out such apparent “errors” “are God’s *accommodation* to the truth to the limited [human] understanding.”²⁹

3. *Art, not a photograph*

In His *Dictaten Dogmatik* Kuyper observes the difference between a photograph (a mechanical reproduction) and an artist’s portrait, which provides an impressionistic likeness of the original, it captures hidden meanings. The artist can be seen in and through the piece of art. A photograph may capture a likeness and every hair on a sitter’s head – but the artist works in a different way and the final reproduction is substantially more accurate to reality than the photograph, while not being quite as exact. As he puts it:

²⁹ Dirk W. Jellema, “God’s ‘Baby-Talk’: Calvin and the ‘Errors’ in the Bible,” *The Reformed Journal* 30(4)(1980), 25.

Divinely infallible reproduces the essence infallibly, without retaining precisely the same forms (like a painting). Humanly infallible reproduces the form exactly (notariëel), but cannot guarantee the essence (like a photograph).³⁰

In the New Testament words have been quoted from the Old Testament. Human infallibility would require a literal reproduction, including even the commas and periods; it would require the kind of copying done by a court reporter or stenographer. Divine infallibility means that the Holy Spirit took over the thought of the Old Testament quotation with freedom and reproduced it in a somewhat different form. These changed quotations do not plead against but for inspiration, since God is an artist and not a photographer.³¹

VI. Evaluation and Conclusion

Kuyper's view of the Scriptures and inspiration provides a useful alternative to the static, mechanical view of inspiration that is often associated, for example, with the Princeton School of Theology as epitomised by B. B. Warfield and some forms of fundamentalism.³² Kuyper had an organic view of revelation. By this, he meant that

³⁰ Kuyper, *Locus de Sacra Scriptura*, II, 91.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

³² Although, some have overemphasised the differences between Kuyper and Warfield. They both held to a high view of inspiration. They differed on the mode and foundation of inspiration. Harris provides a good description of one of the main differences between Kuyper and Warfield: "In their respective theological battles it is safe to say that Warfield's polemic was fundamentally against subjectivism while Kuyper's was against a belief in human autonomy – although this is to impose terminology upon them". Harriett A. Harris, "A Diamond in the Dark," in L. Lugo (ed.) 2000. *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 127.

God's revelation of himself is as one whole. The Bible is not a disconnected set of anthologies³³ – it is a whole. It is one. An important point that is often ignored in fundamentalist proof texting.

Kuyper takes seriously the subjective without resorting to subjectivism, cultural relativism, or historicism. He takes seriously the human role in Scripture both in reading and in the writing of Scripture. Though neither nullifies that it has divine authority.

To the person thus addressed it must seem therefore as though he had been spoken to in the ordinary way. He received the impression that he heard words of human language conveying to him divine thoughts. Hence the divine speaking is always adapted to the capacities of the person addressed. Because in condescension the Lord adapts Himself to every man's consciousness, His speaking assumes the form peculiar to every man's condition. What a difference, for instance, between God's word to Cain and that to Ezekiel! (WotHS, 77)

A crucial point for Kuyper was that we can only know God in so far as he reveals himself to us. He distinguished between *archetypa* and *ectypa* forms of knowledge of God.³⁴ *Theologica archetypa* is the knowledge of God as he has it in all its infinite fullness; *theologica ectypa* is the knowledge that is communicated to humanity, which

³³ Geerhardus Van Der Leeuw, *The Bible as a Book* (St Catherines, Ont: Paideia Press, 1978).

³⁴ This distinction can be found in the Reformed Scholastics Franciscus Junius (1545-1602) and Francois Turretin (1623-1687) among others. See, for example, Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* Topic 1, Second question, VI. Scotus also made a distinction between our knowledge of God (*theologia nostra*) and God's self-knowledge (*theologia in se*).

is always mediated knowledge. It is knowledge that is revealed and, as humans are not infinite, has to be accommodated to us – we see through a glass, darkly.

As he argues: “The Scripture reveals ectypal theology mostly in facts, which must be understood; in symbols and types, which must be interpreted” (*PST*, 568). This archetypha/ectypa distinction can be taken as revealing the influence of the Greek form/matter ground-motive³⁵ or it can be seen as stressing the importance of the Creator/creature distinction. Unfortunately, at times for Kuyper, it seems to be the former approach and thus shows a scholastic influence upon Kuyper.³⁶

As we have seen Kuyper had a high view of Scripture. What marked out his uniqueness at the time was his understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the formation and writing of the Scriptures. His was a pneumocentric view of the Scriptures. Too little attention has been made of this certainly prior to Kuyper.³⁷

His was also an organic view of inspiration and thus of the Scriptures. Scriptures are an organic whole and should be read and studied as such. He, unlike fundamentalists,

³⁵ “The form-matter motive is the fundamental motive of Greek thought and culture. It originates, according to [Herman] Dooyeweerd, from a meeting of two conflicting views the pre-Homeric natural religion – corresponding to the pole of matter – and the Olympian gods’ cultural religion – corresponding to the pole of form”. Steve Bishop, “Herman Dooyeweerd’s Christian Philosophy,” *Foundations*, 82 (Spring, 2022), 66.

³⁶ The term scholastic has often been used as a pejorative term. Unfortunately, it has a range of connotations: “Scholasticism is so much a many-sided phenomenon that, in spite of intensive research, scholars still differ considerably in their definition of the term and in the emphases that they place on individual aspects of the phenomenon” (*Britannica* art. “Scholasticism”). In one sense it is an approach or method that is based on Aristotle’s logical writings – hence the Greek influences.

³⁷ Kuyper’s *Work of the Holy Spirit (WotHS)* was the first major work on the Holy Spirit possibly since John Owen’s. In his preface to this work Kuyper remarks: “This meager bibliography shows what scant systematic treatment is accorded to the Person of the Holy Spirit. Studies of the Work of the Spirit are still more scanty”, xiv.

understood the importance of biblical scholarship: biblical criticism was not necessarily bad and it certainly, for Kuyper, did not undermine the authority of Scripture. Scripture's authority was self-attesting and could not be undermined by naturalistic methods.

Kuyper holds to an organic, pneumocentric view of Scripture. For him Scripture is both truly human and truly divine.³⁸

*Dr Steve Bishop is an independent researcher based in Wales, UK. He is a trustee of ThinkingFaith Network, maintains the website allofliferedeemed.co.uk and is an Associate Fellow of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology. He is co-editor of *On Kuyper* (Sioux Center, IO: Dordt Press, 2013).*

³⁸ My thanks to Renato Coletto for helpful comments on a previous draft.

JOHN OWEN AND RELATING TO GOD AS FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT¹

Lee Gatiss

Abstract

This article presents the foundational importance of the Trinity for the Christian life. Considering the teaching of John Owen, and his context in the seventeenth century, helps us see that the great blessing of the Christian life is that we have fellowship with the one true and living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And, in particular, that we have distinct communion with him as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit.

I. Is Your Faith Trinitarian?

Does the fact that the Christian God is a Trinity make any difference to you as a Christian? Is there a discernible Trinitarian shape to the Christian life? Or is it the case that the ordinary piety and devotion and lifestyle of a Christian is no different in theory and practice to the spirituality of a Muslim or a Jew or a follower of any other monotheistic religion? We may all claim to follow and believe in one God. We may have historical and cultural practices that differ somewhat depending on times and

¹ This article began life as a talk given at the John Owen Barn in Owen's old parish of Fordham in Essex (UK), at the launch of Lee Gatiss (ed.), *John Owen Daily Readings* (Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2022).

places. But does it matter that our God is supposedly one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Let's begin with Scripture, and in particular the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Chapter 1 begins like this:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that

we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Eph 1:1-14 ESV)

I think we can see here that Paul has a Trinitarian emphasis in his understanding of the Christian life. He begins by blessing his readers with grace and peace “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The first two persons of the Trinity are distinguishable, but equally the source of grace and peace to us. He then speaks of blessing God, or ascribing praise to God, as “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”. The God to whom we owe everything is the God of Jesus, the Father of Christ the Son. He is not simply a generic, undistinguished, undifferentiated “God”, but the Father whose Son is Jesus. This is where it all starts, with the Father who is the fountain of everything.

In eternity, this Father chose us, in Christ, to be his holy people. In love, he predestined us for adoption as his children. This was accomplished despite our sinful rebellion in thought and word and deed, through the blood of Jesus on the cross, which redeems those who are united to him. In the Son we have forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of his grace — his lavish kindness and mercy towards undeserving sinners. This God, Father and Son, work out everything in conformity with their plan. And when we hear the good news of what the loving Father has done for us

in Christ our Saviour, and believe in it, we are sealed with “the promised Holy Spirit.” He is the downpayment within us of the glory to come in future, marking us out as belonging to God. Those who are chosen by God the Father are redeemed by God the Son and sealed by God the Spirit.

So, Paul presents the salvation of Christian believers and our status in God’s universe in an explicitly and gloriously Trinitarian way, centred on Christ in whom we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. And in the rest of this letter, Paul shows us how the Trinity is at the root of our distinctive doctrine as Christians, but also of our distinctively Christian lives. So, we are not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30), and hence we are to let go of bitterness, anger, slander, and malice. Our lives are meant to be patterned after Christ’s, as we “walk in love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5:2). And we “give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5:20). Christian lives are Trinitarian lives, which take up “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit” (Eph 6:18-19). And so, we will enjoy peace and love “from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 6:23).

The Christian life, like Ephesians itself, begins and ends on a Trinitarian note. But is that just a footnote in your Christian life and understanding? Is it the way you think about God, meditate on his truth, and live for him every day? Would it make a

difference if we embraced the splendidly particular and peculiar and distinctive Trinitarian-ness of Christian faith more boldly?

II. John Owen and Anti-Trinitarians

These are questions which greatly exercised the great John Owen, the celebrated seventeenth-century pastor and theologian. In his days, the church was troubled by various sects and radical religious groups, such as the Quakers, the Ranters, and the Fifth Monarchists. Many of these groups were heretical when it came to key doctrines of the Christian faith. A number of these extremist groups were anti-Trinitarian. These were often labelled “Socinian”, after Socinus, a famous Italian-born heretic. He had a particular following in Poland known as the Polish Brethren, with their own seminary at Rakow and a widely circulated manifesto known as the Racovian Catechism.

In 1655, Dr Owen was asked by the Council of State, effectively the cabinet of the day, to write a book against the anti-Trinitarians. The government were sufficiently worried by these unorthodox developments that they wanted John Owen, at this point Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, to counter their dangerous doctrine, which was becoming increasingly popular, and was creeping into the church in subtle and insidious ways, often unawares. Someone anonymously translated and published a Socinian commentary on the book of Hebrews in 1646, for example, and very few noticed that it was unorthodox on the Trinity. Even the Puritan censor had to later apologise for not having read it properly and seen that, but it was too late, and the commentary was

already in the hands of many who had no idea what kind of book it was. Unitarian views of God and Unitarian interpretations of Scripture were slowly gaining ground.²

For many theologians at this time, Socinianism was “an intellectual abomination”,³ and theologians all over Europe, both Catholic and Protestant, wrote against it. As one historian has said, “Socinianism, with its denial of the Trinity and the atonement as well as its grace-denying moralism, was a more complete challenge to Calvinist orthodoxy than Arminianism had been.”⁴ That’s why, I think, Socinianism replaced Roman Catholicism as the biggest bogeyman to be refuted, as the seventeenth century wore on. Owen’s work is an example of “the eclipse of Romanism by Socinianism as the chief bugbear of the Reformed Protestant world by the third quarter of the seventeenth century.”⁵

Owen’s 1655 book was called *Vindiciae Evangelicae; or The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined*. His main point is that the Socinians and their Racovian Catechism twisted the text of the Bible because, when you examine it honestly, it is clearly Trinitarian. Or, as he said, in one of his not-untypically obscure insults: “This naked and unprejudiced view of the text is sufficient to obviate all the

² For more on this see Lee Gatiss, “Socinianism and John Owen,” in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20.4 (2016).

³ S. Hampton, *Anti-Arminians: The Anglican Reformed Tradition from Charles II to George I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 73.

⁴ D. Wallace, *Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660–1714: Variety, Persistence, and Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 235.

⁵ Lee Gatiss, “Adoring the Fullness of the Scriptures in John Owen’s Commentary on Hebrews” (PhD, University of Cambridge, 2013), 251.

operose and sophistical exceptions of our catechists.”⁶ (As Jim Packer said, Owen often “reads like the roughly dashed-off translation of a piece of thinking done in Ciceronian Latin”).⁷ This misreading of Scripture by the Socinians is one reason why he also spent a huge amount of time countering their exegesis of Hebrews, in his own massive commentary on Hebrews. There he claimed that a Socinian interpretation of the Bible “sinks under its own weakness and absurdity... Who not overpowered with prejudice could once imagine any such sense in these words, especially considering that it is as contrary to the design of the apostle as it is to the importance of the words themselves? This is that which Peter calls men’s ‘wresting the Scripture’ to their own perdition.”⁸

Later in the century, Socinian ways of interpreting the Bible became very popular in the Church of England and amongst the Establishment. They were encouraged by the leading Bible commentaries of people such as Hugo Grotius and Henry Hammond, even if the authors of those commentaries claimed that they were themselves Trinitarian.⁹ After Owen’s death, Unitarianism became an even more virulent force, and many pulpits and churches turned Unitarian in teaching and practice, if not in name. This happened mostly amongst nonconformists, rather than Anglicans. As one scholar

⁶ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 12:233.

⁷ J. Packer, *Among God's Giants: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991), 192.

⁸ Owen, *Works*, 20:73 on Heb 1:1-2.

⁹ See Gatiss, “Adoring the Fullness of the Scriptures,” 84ff on the crypto-Socinianism of Hugo Grotius and Henry Hammond.

has rightly affirmed, “the liturgy far more than theology kept alive in Christian consciousness the trinitarian structure of Christian faith”;¹⁰ while another is surely correct to say that “[t]he sheer rhythm of the Liturgy familiarized churchgoers with belief in the Trinity.”¹¹ But in nonconformist churches, where there was little in the way of liturgy and the ministers had in some cases rejected the idea of subscribing to confessions of faith and even the Creed, anti-Trinitarianism was rife. And it eventually emptied churches left, right, and centre, because its rationalism and unorthodoxy chimed in so well with the spirit of the age that those churches became indistinguishable from the world and lost the cutting edge of the gospel.

III. Trinitarian Piety

But it wasn't just in the academic and theological arena that Unitarianism was a problem. My main purpose is not to outline the scholastic debates about the Trinity which rocked the mid-seventeenth century church. Rather, I want to look not at Owen's academic output on this subject but at his more sermonic contribution in this area. Because, as well as being the *de facto* head of Oxford University and Dean of Christ Church College and cathedral there, he was a preacher and a pastor to students, just as he had been a pastor in Fordham and Coggeshall. It is in that role that he preached a

¹⁰ Catherine LaCugna, *God For Us* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 210.

¹¹ Philip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 215-216. See also H. J. MacLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), 334.

series of sermons in Oxford (or possibly first in Coggeshall) on fellowship with God the Holy Trinity. A few years later, after some pressure from various people who had found these sermons to be especially edifying, he wrote them up and published them as a book in 1657. That book was called *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation; or The Saint's Fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost Unfolded*. As you can tell from that magnificent long title, it is a book about living as a distinctly Trinitarian Christian, relating to God explicitly as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit. It is a work of Trinitarian piety for ordinary believers to enjoy their relationship with our unique and wonderful God-in-three-Persons.

He begins with a verse from 1 John 1, where the apostle writes, “Indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). He says that John wrote in a time when the outward appearance and condition of God’s people was “very mean and contemptible”. Christian leaders, he writes, were “being accounted as the filth of this world and as the offscouring of all things.” The faith was looked down on and its leaders were considered wicked. So, it seemed odd at that time to be inviting people to join the church and be in fellowship with Christians. “What benefit is there in communion with them?”, people might have asked, “Is it anything else but to be sharers in troubles, reproaches, scorns, and all manner of evils?” Being part of the church would just make us open to persecution and to being considered morally wrong by our society, so why would we want to do that? And John wrote to say that despite all these

disadvantages, and the way Christians were seen by the carnal people of his day, it was in fact “very honourable, glorious, and desirable” because our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.¹²

To have fellowship with God, or as he sometimes says, “communion with God”, is a stunning and amazing blessing. He’s not talking about communion as in holy communion, the Lord’s Supper, the bread and wine. He’s talking about a relationship, an association, a union, a bond, or a connection with God. And yet, how could any human being have such a close and intimate relationship with God? To quote from Ephesians, the New Testament letter with which we began, human beings are spiritually dead, without hope, without God in the world, alienated from the life of God, because of our sins of body, mind, and spirit (Eph 2:1-3, 2:12, 4:18). So as Owen says, “While there is this distance between God and man, there is no walking together for them in any fellowship or communion.”¹³ We can’t be friends with God like this.

For Owen, and the Bible, the only way we can be friends with God is if God does something about the barrier between us. We are unable, because of our sinfulness, to knock it down ourselves and reach out to him. He alone can reach across the divide. And this is what he has done, in Jesus Christ, who at the first Christmas became man, joining in himself the human and the divine, so that he might die in our place to take

¹² John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God* (edited by Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 89-90.

¹³ *Ibid*, 91.

the punishment which our sins deserve and reconcile us to God. The end goal of this gracious initiative is *not* that we start behaving ourselves as if it had all just been about persuading us to be more moral and obedient. The end goal of redemption is that we might have communion, and fellowship, with God.

The tremendous thing is that as redemption is accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God himself is revealed to be a Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There may be hints of this in the Old Testament, but the obscurity of the Old Testament is wonderfully clarified in the accomplishment of our salvation in Christ, and the sending of the Spirit.¹⁴ So, the gospel in the New Testament reveals so much more. It is there that we discover the eternal Trinity. Of course, God has always been a Trinity, but the clear revelation of this aspect of his nature and work was kept until the coming of Jesus and the Spirit. What a privilege it is to live this side of the incarnation and of Pentecost.¹⁵

¹⁴ As Owen says, “although the substance of the will and mind of God concerning salvation by the Messiah was made known unto them all, yet it was done so obscurely to Moses and the prophets that ensued, that they came all short in the light of that mystery to John the Baptist, who did not rise up in a clear and distinct apprehension of it unto the least of the true disciples of Christ”. *Works*, 20:32-33 on Heb 1:1-12. Other passages might be added where he contrasts the Old and New Testament by means of this obscure-clarity dichotomy, e.g. “Although the work of *regeneration* by the Holy Spirit was wrought under the Old Testament, even from the foundation of the world, and the doctrine of it was recorded in the Scriptures, yet the revelation of it was but obscure in comparison, of that *light* and evidence which it is brought forth into by the gospel.” *Works*, 3:210.

¹⁵ “It is true that both these and other prophets had revelations concerning his sufferings also. For “the Spirit of Christ that was in them testified beforehand of his sufferings, and the glory that should follow,” 1 Peter 1:11 — an illustrious testimony whereunto we have given us, Ps 22, and Isa 53. Nevertheless, their conceptions concerning them were dark and obscure.” *Works*, 1:102.

The really revolutionary thing which Owen does in this book is to go on in chapter two to say this: “the saints [that is, all believers] have a distinct communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (that is, distinctly as the Father, and distinctly with the Son, and distinctly with the Holy Spirit).”¹⁶ As Brian Kay says in his book on *Trinitarian Spirituality*, this “breaks new ground” because it’s not just about showing how important the Trinity is as a foundational doctrine, but it shows “how the Christian’s devotional response to God takes on a distinctively trinitarian shape.”¹⁷ Since, as Kelly Kapic says, Owen has a “persistent unwillingness to speak in abstractions devoid of experiential content”, he is so often thinking of the application to life when he is talking about doctrine.¹⁸ Owen broke new ground here, because as Ryan McGraw rightly points out, few scholars have ever “dealt with the Trinity in terms of personal piety in their devotional literature”, and so, “Owen stands out in his self-consciously Trinitarian approach to Christian experience.”¹⁹

Owen sees in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, a testimony to this working of the Trinity towards believers. Paul wrote: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.” Traditionally, this has been read

¹⁶ Owen, *Communion*, 95.

¹⁷ Brian Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 115-116.

¹⁸ Owen, *Communion*, 152.

¹⁹ Ryan McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory: Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship and a Reassessment of John Owen’s Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014), 58-59.

as referring to the Spirit, the Son, and the Father, and their distinct actions. He also examines Ephesians 2:18, which says: “For through [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” Our access to God, he points out, is *through* Christ, *in* the Spirit, *to* the Father. The persons of the Trinity are engaged in distinct ways in our salvation. We are baptised into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit at the start of our Christian lives. And, of course, Owen doesn’t fail to notice the verse which ends every service of Evening Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer*: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14). The liturgy quietly but emphatically emphasises the Trinity and reinforces this idea of the grace, love, and fellowship of the Son, Father, and Spirit.

So, Owen concludes that all acts of worship or obedience to God which we give are distinctly directed to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. We believe and trust in each of them. We love each of them. We worship each of them. And all the benefits we receive from them are ascribed jointly yet distinctly to each person in the Deity. We are taught by God (John 6:45). We are taught by our Master, Christ (Matt 17:5). We are taught by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 1 John 2:27). All these distinctions are found in Scripture. There is a distinct communication of grace from each of the persons, which proves that we have distinct communion or fellowship with each.

At the same time, there is a peculiar, particular way in which we have communion with each person distinctly. Now, we do need to be careful here: the persons of the Trinity never act alone; when one is at work, they are all there and involved. The

persons of the Trinity are not lone rangers. As Augustine had already pointed out, *opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*, the outward, external acts of the Trinity are indivisible, undivided.²⁰ But at the same time, the works of each can be distinguished. For example, creation is particularly the work of the Father, and redemption is peculiarly the work of the Son. Some works of the Trinity are eminently and specially the work of one of the persons.

Owen summarises the distinct and particular fellowship that we have with each person in this way: Communion with the Father consists in *love*. Communion with the Son consists in *grace*. Communion with the Spirit consists in *consolation*, or comfort. The love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the comfort of the Spirit.

IV. New Ideas

Let me pause to say that it's not very common in the history of theology that someone truly comes up with a new idea and "breaks new ground". There's nothing new under the sun, as they say (Eccl 1:9). And often, if a theologian does come up with something distinctive and new, it can be wildly unorthodox, and that's why no one has ever thought of it before or written it down. It's so wrong, no one ever thought it worth seriously considering. Or it was considered, and refuted thoroughly, and so hasn't come up again.

²⁰ As Owen says elsewhere, "It is a saying generally admitted, that *Opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*. There is no such division in the external operations of God that any one of them should be the act of one person, without the concurrence of the others; and the reason of it is, because the nature of God, which is the principle of all divine operations, is one and the same, undivided in them all." *Works* 3:162.

For example, there was something recently called “the new perspective on Paul”, which made all sorts of observations about the apostle Paul and his theology. On closer examination, I found that earlier theologians such as Augustine and Calvin had actually come across these supposedly new ideas before, in the writings of various heretics, and had thought of the responses to them as well. So, it wasn’t really very new. And it was, said Calvin “utterly silly... Even schoolboys would hoot at such impudence.”²¹ As G.K. Chesterton says somewhere: “You can find all the new ideas in the old books; only there you will find them balanced, kept in their place, and sometimes contradicted and overcome by other and better ideas. The great writers did not neglect a fad because they had not thought of it, but because they had thought of it and all of the answers to it as well.”²²

Owen’s thought here, which he develops at length, that we have a distinct fellowship with the Father, and with the Son, and with the Spirit, is that rare breed: a new thought that is orthodox and good. It may be there in seed form in earlier works. The theologian Gregory of Nazianzus says, “No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One.”²³ Owen cites this saying of Gregory from the fourth century, as his

²¹ Quotations from Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.19-20. See Lee Gatiss, “Justified Hesitation? J. D. G. Dunn and the Protestant Doctrine of Justification,” in *Cornerstones of Salvation: Foundations and Debates in the Reformed Tradition* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 2015), 69-92.

²² See “On Reading,” in G.K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 23.

²³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 40: The Oration on Holy Baptism*, in NPNF² 7:375 PG 36 col. 417B. See Owen, *Communion*, 95.

inspiration. But he himself is the one who takes the idea of the distinct communion we have with the Three and runs with it.

Why did he suddenly come up with this? I think it must be, in part at least, because of the anti-Trinitarian Socinian threat. In a context where the doctrine of the Trinity was being hotly disputed, orthodox theologians were forced to go back to the Bible and think again, to counter a new species or new variant of heresy. Paul perhaps hints at this sort of thing in 1 Corinthians 11 when he says, “There must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 Cor 11:19). St Augustine certainly found it to be true. He confessed that,

while the hot restlessness of heretics stirs questions about many articles of the catholic faith, the necessity of defending them forces us both to investigate them more accurately, to understand them more clearly, and to proclaim them more earnestly; and the question mooted by an adversary becomes the occasion of instruction.”²⁴

Many centuries later, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther found something similar to be true. I am, he said, “deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil’s raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so much. That is to say, they

²⁴ P. Schaff (ed.), *St. Augustine’s City of God and Christian Doctrine* (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Volume 2. Translated by M. Dods; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1999), 309-310 (Book 16, chapter 2).

have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise.”²⁵ In the same way, Owen benefited from the heresies of the Socinians, and took advantage of the opportunity afforded by their false teaching to dwell on the truths of the doctrine of the Trinity more deeply. His gain is also ours. In some ways, however, it is not so much that Owen came up with a brand new idea from scratch; more that he gave this idea which had been lying somewhat dormant the most careful and extended treatment it had ever had, and so brought out facets of the truth which had not been so appreciated and understood in this way before.

In the quotation above from Augustine, the North African bishop was speaking particularly about those who claimed to be Christian but lived “abandoned lives”, as well as those who openly separated themselves from the church by their false teaching. Perhaps in our day, if we also find ourselves assailed by “the hot restlessness of heretics” and those who have abandoned traditional Christian teaching and living, it might also enable and encourage us to drink more deeply from the old wells and perhaps dig out new things, which we will then appreciate more fully than before. To do that, without falling into heresy and apostasy ourselves, is not, however, easy.

²⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, eds. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 287.

V. Distinct Communion

Returning to John Owen and the Trinity, we find that Owen summarises the distinct and particular fellowship that we have with each person in this way: Communion with the Father consists in love. Communion with the Son consists in grace. Communion with the Spirit consists in consolation. The love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the comfort of the Spirit. He spends a great deal of time examining the biblical witness to see how these things are presented in Scripture itself.

The communion we have with the Father, he says, is especially in love — “free, undeserved, and eternal love”.²⁶ “This the Father peculiarly fixes upon the saints.” The Father as the fountain of Deity is known as a God of justice, full of wrath and indignation against sin; but in the gospel, we now also discover that he is full of love towards us. As Paul says in Titus 3, the arrival of Jesus is the time “when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared” (Titus 3:4). God is love (1 John 4:8), and the next verse clarifies for us that this is particularly the Father: “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.” He himself sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins — to take the wrath of God upon himself — out of love for us.

It’s very important to note here, as Sinclair Ferguson does, that “for Owen, the death of Christ did not purchase the Father’s love but is the way in which that love is

²⁶ Owen, *Communion*, 107.

communicated. The death of Christ is not the cause of the Father's love but is its effect."²⁷ So we may have "dark and disturbing thoughts" about God while we are "in the troublesome region of hopes and fears, storms and clouds". But weary souls should rest in the knowledge that God loves his people. As he says, "The love of the Father is the only rest of the soul".²⁸ And we ought to return love to him. The love of God is a love of bounty, and our love for him is a love of duty and delight.²⁹ We can love him because he first loved us. As Kelly Kopic puts it, "Divine action is first, union with Christ is the result, and human response is the desired consequence."³⁰ Once we have union, then we can have communion. God acts first, but we are called to return his love in joyful, loving obedience, since as Owen says, "Communion consists in giving and receiving"; and, "God loves, that he may be beloved."³¹ We are not to have anxious and doubtful thoughts, and think of him as an angry Father — because children always hide from angry parents — but as full of love toward us. This should cause us to run to him, even when we sin.

Our communion with the Son is eminently a communion in grace. The love of the Father, the grace of the Son. As John's Gospel says, Christ is "full of grace and truth... For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace...grace and truth came

²⁷ Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 77.

²⁸ Owen, *Communion*, 112.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁰ Kelly Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 157.

³¹ Owen, *Communion*, 111, 113.

through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:14-17). And the grace of Christ is presented to us in Scripture, particularly as a marriage, between Christ and the soul of the believer. His kindness and condescension towards poor, wretched sinners, who by nature hate and reject him, is alluring and seductive. Owen goes to town here with illustrations of this gracious love from the Old Testament book, Song of Songs. He’s not unusual in this, but we may find it strange because many of us are not used to thinking of Jesus this way.³²

Finally, our communion, our relationship with the Holy Spirit is particularly one of comfort and consolation. Not that he exists to make us comfortable and happy. Not that at all. But that God the Holy Spirit is given to us, as Jesus said, to be our Comforter — reminding us of his teaching and his promises, that we rely on; pointing us back to our gracious Saviour and loving Father; confirming and assuring us of their connection to us; giving us a foretaste of the glory to come; enabling us to live for Christ and long for that day. In return, we maintain our communion with the Holy Spirit by praying in the Spirit and keeping in step with him along the way of holiness. As it says in Acts 9:31, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it

³² See, however, E. Clarke, *Politics, Religion and the Song of Songs in Seventeenth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

multiplied.” Whatever happens in this life, we have the comfort of the Spirit in the midst of troubles, which outweighs the evil, trouble, or perplexity we may have to face.³³

VI. Conclusion

Obviously, there is more I could say about this. Owen’s book on communion with God as Trinity is hundreds of pages long! But the burden of it is simple: the great blessing of being a Christian is that we now have fellowship with the one true God, which in our natural, unbelieving state we could never enjoy or have access to. Since God is actually a Trinity, we have distinct communion with him as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit. Each of these persons of the Trinity is fully God, and they always act together. But certain things are eminently ascribed to particular persons, with regard to their relationship to us. As the Savoy Declaration, a confession of faith which Owen helped to write, puts it, “the doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him.”³⁴

This is not meant to be academic. It is deeply personal and pastoral. It is how we enjoy our unique God and live in a way that is pleasing to him. We must fill our minds with thoughts of God’s love. We should ponder the graciousness of our divine Saviour. We should rely on the comfort of the Holy Spirit as we walk in his way, use the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, and make every effort not to grieve, resist, or

³³ Owen, *Communion*, 392.

³⁴ See Savoy Declaration 2.3 in A. Matthews (ed.), *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order 1658* (London: Independent Press, 1959), 79.

quench the Spirit (Eph 4:30, Acts 7:51, 1 Thess 5:19), or show contempt for his ministry towards us. He is love, grace, and comfort for us, and as we respond to him, the relationship he established with us by grace alone, is strengthened.

So, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore, Amen.

Dr Lee Gatiss is the Director of Church Society, a lecturer in Church History at Union School of Theology, and with Shawn D. Wright is series editor of The Complete Works of John Owen to be published by Crossway in 40 volumes from 2023.

JOHN WESLEY AND ALDERSGATE

Roger W. Fay, ThM, MA

Abstract

This article considers the significance of John Wesley's experience on 24 May 1738 when his heart was "strangely warmed". It argues against attempts to dilute the evangelical significance of this experience.

I. Introduction

John Wesley (1703–91), destined to become one of the most prominent figures in the eighteenth-century evangelical awakening in Britain, as well as leader of the Arminian Methodists, recorded in his journal some highly significant words concerning the evening of 24 May 1738:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹

¹ John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley* (4 vols.; London: J.M. Dent, 1906), 102 (24 May 1738).

He had at last found a personal assurance of salvation, through faith in Jesus Christ. Given the importance of what happened to John Wesley at Aldersgate, it is regrettable, although not surprising, that some modern academics, arguing from a variety of perspectives, have tried to dilute the evangelical significance of Aldersgate to Wesley. This article briefly explores and answers this revisionism.

II. Commemorating Aldersgate

It is certainly surprising that the centennial and sesquicentennial anniversaries of Aldersgate passed without formal commemoration within Methodism. It was not until 1924 that the observance of ‘Wesley Day’ on 24 May was inaugurated. By its bicentennial anniversary in 1938 though, the commemoration of the day was widespread within Methodism.²

Historians have also mused on the relative lack of comment about Aldersgate in Wesley’s published works. Theodore Jennings wrote provocatively: “In the many histories of the Methodist movement published by Wesley there is never any mention made of Aldersgate... From Wesley’s own point of view, then, Aldersgate had no importance in the history of Methodism”. Jennings decried the popular conversionist view of Aldersgate and even claimed that “Aldersgatism” is “a pious fraud”.³ But this

² Randy L. Maddox, “Aldersgate: A Tradition History,” in *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 133–46.

³ Theodore W. Jennings, “John Wesley *Against* Aldersgate,” *Quarterly Review* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 3. [cited 23/12/20]. Online: <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/13209892/fall-1988-quarterly-review>.

extreme view, which denies the importance of Aldersgate to Methodism even “from Wesley’s own point of view”, is not sustained by the evidence.⁴ Although Wesley’s references to Aldersgate may be fewer than expected, he certainly considered Aldersgate important. This point can be defended from more than one angle.⁵

III. Wesley’s references to Aldersgate

Wesley’s review of his life in his journal was explicitly designed to make 24 May 1738 “the better understood” by his readers. The review, amounting to thirteen substantial paragraphs of nearly 3,000 words and climaxing with the account of Aldersgate cited above, underlines that Wesley regarded what took place there as a pivotal event.⁶

Contrary to Jennings’ assertion, Wesley also alluded to Aldersgate and the period immediately before and after it as a turning-point on a considerable number of occasions, even if not as often as might be expected.⁷

⁴ Other critics of the conversionist view of Aldersgate are surveyed in Maddox, *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, 12–15.

⁵ A taxonomy of scholarly views concerning the significance of Aldersgate for Wesley is included in Frederick E. Maser, “Second Thoughts on John Wesley,” *The Drew Gateway* 49, no. 2 (Winter 1978), 28–53.

⁶ Wesley, *Journal*, 96–102 (24 May 1738).

⁷ J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys A Critical Study* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), 20–24; Kenneth J. Collins, ‘Twentieth-Century Interpretations of John Wesley’s Aldersgate Experience: Coherence or Confusion’, *Wesleyan Theological Journal* Vol. 24 (1989): 23–4. [Cited 21/7/22]. Online: <http://wesley.nnu.edu>.

To give just two examples of Wesley citing 1738 as a turning point in his ministry: first, in correspondence with one Thomas Church, he compared his preaching before and after this year:

(1) From the year 1725 to 1729 I preached much, but saw no fruit of my labour. Indeed, it could not be that I should: for I neither laid the foundation of repentance nor of believing the gospel; taking it for granted that all to whom I preached were believers and that many ‘needed no repentance’. (2) From the year 1729 to 1734, laying a deeper foundation of repentance, I saw a little fruit. But it was only a little, and no wonder: for I did not preach faith in the blood of the covenant. (3) From 1734 to 1738, speaking more of faith in Christ, I saw more fruit of my preaching and visiting from house to house than ever I had done before; though I know not if any of those who were outwardly reformed were inwardly and thoroughly converted to God. (4) From 1738 to this time — speaking continually of Jesus Christ; laying Him only for the foundation of the whole building, making Him all in all, the first and the last; preaching only on this plan, ‘The kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel’ — ‘the word of God ran’ as fire among the stubble; it ‘was glorified’ more and more; multitudes crying out, ‘By grace are ye saved through faith’.⁸

⁸ Letter to Thomas Church, 17 June 1746, Wesleyan Heritage Publishing, Wesley Center for Applied Theology (WCAT).; John Wesley, *The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained*, n.p. [Cited 1 November 2021]. Online: http://www.godrules.net/library/wesley/274wesley_h18.htm.

Second, he spoke of 24 May 1738 as a turning-point in correspondence with “John Smith”:⁹

It is true that, from May 24, 1738, ‘wherever I was desired to preach, salvation by faith was my only theme’, that is, such a love of God and man as produces all inward and outward holiness, and springs from a conviction, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost, of the pardoning love of God; and that, when I was told, ‘You must preach no more in this church’, it was commonly added, ‘because you preach such doctrine!’ And it is equally true that ‘it was for preaching the love of God and man that several of the clergy forbade me their pulpits’, before that time, before May 24, before I either preached or knew salvation by faith.¹⁰

IV. Wesley’s doctrine of grace

Was there a theological reason behind Wesley’s relative reticence about Aldersgate? Almost certainly, yes; and one that was located in his understanding of how grace works.

Wesley developed a complex, non-predestinarian view of God’s grace, based around the idea of “prevenient grace”. His mature view of this found expression in a sermon preached in old age (1785), entitled “On Working Out Our Own Salvation”:

⁹ Many identify “John Smith” with Thomas Secker, Archbishop of Canterbury (1758–68).

¹⁰ William Arnett, “What happened to Wesley at Aldersgate,” *The Asbury Seminarian* 18, no. 1 (1964): 16. [cited 20 July 2021]. Online: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2041&context=asburyjournal>.

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing¹¹ grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God.

Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed repentance; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone.

Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby, 'through grace', we 'are saved by faith'; consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God.¹²

¹¹ "Preventing" is synonymous for "prevenient". Wesley may have been alluding here to the Church of England's Article X that states: "Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will".

¹² Sermon 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," *The Sermons of John Wesley* (ed. Thomas Jackson, 1872). Re-edited by John Wesley Sermon Project (JWSP), General Editors: Ryan N. Danker and George Lyons, Wesley Center at Northwest Nazarene University, Nampa, Idaho 83686, USA. [Cited 1 November 2023] Online: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-chronologically-ordered>.

Prevenient grace, according to Wesley, is something every person experiences. It is “the first dawn of light concerning [God’s] will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him”. People can reject this dawning light and so hinder God from giving further, “convincing” grace that would lead to repentance. Or they can respond positively, and this will lead, through “convincing grace”, to “the proper Christian salvation”.

The Spirit works prevenient grace in every soul. Even these workings “imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation”. But the Spirit withdraws this grace if a person resists. As Wesley put it in his own case, “I believe, till I was about ten years old I had not sinned away that ‘washing of the Holy Ghost’ which was given me in baptism”.¹³

There is something synergistic, even if not fully semi-Pelagian (a synergistic understanding of salvation that acknowledges the necessity of divine grace, but with a greater priority given to human initiative)¹⁴ in Wesley’s view of grace.¹⁵ While, to him,

¹³ Wesley, *Journal*, 96 (24 May 1738).

¹⁴ Christopher T. Bounds, “How are people saved? The major views of salvation with a focus on Wesleyan perspectives and their implications,” *Wesley and Methodist Studies* 3 (2011): 37.

¹⁵ Leo G. Cox, “Prevenient grace — a Wesleyan view,” *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 12, no. 3 (1969): 147–8.

grace is resistible,¹⁶ it is still, somewhat illogically, due to grace that a person cooperates with prevenient grace.¹⁷

In short, Wesley believed that what happened to him at the society meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, on 24 May 1738 was “the final Christian salvation”, but there had been before Aldersgate — and there would be after it — other workings of God’s grace, taking him along the path of holiness, if he responded positively to the Spirit. This grace continues towards “perfect love” or Christian perfection.¹⁸ As he put it in his sermon “On Faith”:

*And, indeed, unless the servants of God halt by the way, they will receive the adoption of sons. They will receive the faith of the children of God by his revealing his only-begotten Son in their hearts ... And whosoever hath this, the Spirit of God witnesseth with his spirit that he is a child of God.*¹⁹

¹⁶ Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers eds., *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 200.

¹⁷ Compare *The Westminster Confession of Faith*: “All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted time effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace” (10.1).

¹⁸ “Perfect love” was Wesley’s preferred term for “entire sanctification” or “Christian perfection”.

¹⁹ Sermon 106, “On Faith,” Hebrews 11:6, 9 April 1788, JWSP.

Wesley affirmed that, until 24 May 1738 he did not preach or know “salvation by faith”; Aldersgate had been vital.²⁰ But he did not want to so focus on Aldersgate as to detract from other workings of God’s grace in his life.

Over time, he modified his view of Aldersgate’s importance within his own more continuous theology of grace, but still maintained Aldersgate was the moment of “proper Christian salvation”. No doubt, because the main body of Wesleyan Methodists accepted John Wesley’s writings, including his sermons, as well as his brother Charles’ (1707–88) hymns, as normative for Methodist doctrine and experience,²¹ they also were relatively reticent about Aldersgate, at least until the early twentieth century.

Some scholars have averred that Wesley’s view of the operations of grace was one of ‘once-born’ continuity, but, for all its eccentricities, his post-Aldersgate understanding of grace remained ‘twice-born’. For example, his “Explanatory Note” on the word “elect” in 1 Peter 1:2, while erroneously minimising the foreordaining purpose of God in election, asserts the need to believe and be saved in order to “receive the precious gift of faith”:

The true predestination, or fore-appointment of God is, 1. He that believeth shall be saved from the guilt and power of sin. 2. He that endureth to the end shall be

²⁰ William Arnett, “What happened to Wesley at Aldersgate,” *The Asbury Seminarian*, 18, no. 1 (1964): 16. [cited 20 July 2021]. Online: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2041&context=asburyjournal>

²¹ Philip Turner, “What Methodists believe: an exploration of normative and lived theologies,” *The Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies*, n.p. [cited 8 October 2021]. Online: <https://oimts.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/2018-09-turner.pdf>

*saved eternally. 3. They who receive the precious gift of faith, thereby become the sons of God; and, being sons, they shall receive the Spirit of holiness to walk as Christ also walked.*²²

A twice-born view of salvation informed Wesley's advice to Joseph Cownley (1723–92), one of his preachers: 'Let the law always prepare for the gospel. I scarce ever spoke more earnestly here of the love of God in Christ than last night; but it was after I had been tearing the unawakened in pieces'.²³

Justification or salvation by faith continued as an integral part of Wesley's twice-born convictions. Those convictions were centred on what happened to him at Aldersgate Street in May 1738. Moreover, the changes that took place in his ministry after Aldersgate were too great to be discounted. From that date his life was, more than most Christian leaders of his era, filled with itinerating, preaching, praying, writing, editing and corresponding, as he established and cared for the burgeoning Methodist societies.

Roger Fay is retired pastor and former editor of Evangelical Times. Roger Fay's ThM thesis on 'The Faith of John Wesley' (158 pages) for Westminster Seminary, UK (via Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, USA) can be accessed on Theological Research Exchange Network (<https://www.tren.com>).

²² John Wesley, "1st Peter," in *John Wesley's Notes on the Bible* (1755), WCAT. [cited 8 October 2021]. Online: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible/notes-on-the-first-epistle-general-of-st-peter>

²³ Letter, 12 April 1750, WCAT; quoted in Bruce D. Hindmarsh, "'My Chains Fell off, My Heart Was Free': Early Methodist Conversion Narrative in England", *Church History* 68, no. 4 (December 1999): 925.

SLAVERY, THE SLAVE TRADE AND CHRISTIANS' THEOLOGY – PART 1

Ian F Shaw

Abstract

In this article I explore the different positions taken by Christians in America and Britain, through the 17th to 19th Centuries, regarding slavery and the slave trade. In a second article I will reflect on the theological themes that framed how they thought, spoke and acted.

I. Introduction

For those who spoke or acted regarding slavery and the slave trade we can make a rough distinction between Christians who were opposed to the slave trade but sought in different ways to work for a *gradual* ending of slavery; those who worked for an *immediate* abolition of slavery; and those who endeavoured to ‘Christianize’ slavery. There were variations within these positions, as well as those who seem to have stayed silent, and others who may have regarded slavery as a matter indifferent.

I am not writing about the history of the slave trade (abolished in the UK in 1807) or slavery (abolished by the British parliament in 1833), or about a Christian response in general. Neither will I consider how to understand and apply the Bible apart from how we see the question through the eyes of those at the time. Christians did not, of course, think of slavery and the slave trade only in biblical or theological terms. They

were aware of its political, economic and social dimensions. Finally, I have little to say on important questions of how Christians should act and think about our pressing contemporary heritage of these issues.¹

When encountering the stances taken by some whose lives and work we may have found very helpful, we are likely to concur with Andrew Fuller, writing on the subject of the slave trade to John Newton in 1802: 'It is amazing to think how much we are influenced, even in our judgement of right and wrong, by general opinion, especially by the opinion and example of religious men' (Bull, 2007: 49). Spurgeon observed of George Whitefield, 'even in the saints there remains the old nature; even they are not altogether free from the darkening power of sin, for I do not hesitate to say, that we all unwittingly allow ourselves in practices, which clearer light would shew to be sins. Even the best of men have done this in the past.'²

There were, of course, those who shifted positions. John Newton, for example, moved from being indifferent to being a 'gradualist' regarding slavery but an

¹ On the history of slavery and the trade John Coffey, "Evangelicals, Slavery and the slave trade: from Whitefield to Wilberforce," *Anvil* 24:2 (2007): 97-119; William Hague, *William Wilberforce: the Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: Harper, 2008); and David Richardson, *Principles and Agents: The British Slave Trade and its Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022) are helpful. Michael Haykin's contributions have been useful, especially in regard to the central role of the Particular Baptists. I have written about it in Ian Shaw, "Evangelicals, Slavery and Colonialism in the 18th and 19th Centuries," in *Wrestling with Our Past: Papers Read at the 2022 Westminster Conference* (Stoke on Trent: Tentmaker Publications, 2023). A satisfying Christian response to contemporary issues is awaited. I have tried to distinguish the questions at issue in an online lecture for the Westminster Seminary, UK. Ian Shaw, "Evangelicals, Slavery and Colonialism," n.p. [cited 28 June 2024]. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FEwjhqSGj4>.

² Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Sermons Volume 19: 1873* (Woodstock, Ontario: Devoted Publishing, 2017), 51.

‘immediatist’ about the slave trade. Wilberforce was a politically self-aware gradualist about slavery until the final years of his life, but an immediatist about the trade.³

In the opening part of this article, I trace briefly the positions taken by the Puritans, especially in America; the position of Jonathan Edwards; the writings of the Southern theologians, Dabney, Palmer, Thornwell and Girardeau; and the position taken by Charles Hodge and Princeton. This leads to the core of the article, where I draw from the writings and preaching of the various protagonists, to understand how they:

- Grasped the implications of a Christian view of human nature.
- Drew varying consequences for a Christian doctrine of God’s providence.
- Believed, in some cases, that slavery was a national sin and hence raised the likelihood, if not repented, of national judgement.
- In some cases, regarded slavery as a deep hindrance to the gospel, and its abolition as promising gospel prosperity.

II. “The Negro Christianized” – Puritans and Slavery

The general view of society taken by the Puritans was represented by John Winthrop in “The Model of Christian Charity” when he wrote, “God almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some

³ Wilberforce’s position was a politically careful one. Hague has a helpful discussion in Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 481.

must be rich some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others meane and in submission.”⁴

However, “man-stealing” (cf. Ex 21:16; 1 Tim 1:10) was denounced as a sin by the Puritans in the Westminster Larger Catechism. Q. 142 asks, “What are the sins forbidden in the eighth commandment? A. The sins forbidden in the eighth commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are, theft, robbery, man-stealing...”. Writing in 1644, a year after the Westminster Assembly convened, Samuel Rutherford expressed what was perhaps the strongest statement from a Puritan in his *Lex Rex*.⁵ He asks (Q XIII) “...how that is true, ‘every man is born free,’ and how servitude is contrary to nature?”⁶ He answers, “Slavery of servants to lords or masters, such as were of old amongst the Jews, is not natural, but against nature.”⁷ While he seemed to accept that slavery will exist in certain circumstances, he was clear that:

Slavery should not have been in the world, if man had never sinned, no more than there could have been buying and selling of men, which is a miserable consequent of sin and a sort of death, when men are put to the toiling pains of the hireling...

⁴ A sermon preached by Winthrop in Southampton before embarking with the colonists. John Winthrop, “The Model of Christian Charity,” n.p. [cited 28 June 2024]. Online: <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>.

⁵ Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, rex, Or, The law and the prince* (London: Printed for John Field, 1644).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

*A man being created according to God's image, he is res sacra, a sacred thing, and can no more, by nature's law, be sold and bought, than a religious and sacred thing dedicated to God.*⁸

However, many Puritans in America owned slaves, the first African slaves probably arriving in New England in 1638. The general view is that most of the Puritans “did not oppose slavery as an institution but sought to educate and evangelize the African slaves, such as Cotton Mather and John Eliot”.⁹ But it is important to emphasise that there were various views among the English and New England Puritans. Nuenke has helpfully shown that William Perkins, William Gouge, Richard Baxter, Samuel Sewall and Cotton Mather in Massachusetts all took positions that “had many seeds of an anti-slavery movement” although not bearing as much fruit as many today would wish to have seen.¹⁰ Baxter and Mather gave perhaps the fullest expression to the position characteristically taken by Puritan pastors. Baxter was writing in the 1670s with a focus primarily on the West Indies. He urged:

UNDERSTAND well how far your power over your slaves extendeth, and what limits God hath set thereto... that they are of as good a kind as you, that is, they are reasonable creatures as well as you, and born to as much natural liberty; that

⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁹ H. Jeon, “Jonathan Edwards and the Anti-Slavery Movement,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 63:4 (2020): 773-788.

¹⁰ J. Nuenke, “Puritan involvement with slavery,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 15:1 (2023): 224.

*they have immortal souls, and are equally capable of salvation with yourselves; Remember that God is their absolute owner, and that you have none but a derived and limited property in them.*¹¹

He openly infers that “Those therefore, that keep their Negroes and slaves from hearing God’s word, and from becoming Christians, do openly profess contempt of Christ the Redeemer, and contempt of the souls of men, and indeed they declare that, their worldly profit is their treasure, and their God.”¹²

He turns his fire on plantation owners the other side of the Atlantic:

*How cursed a crime it is to equal men to beasts? Is not this your practice? Do you not buy them and use them merely to the same end as you do your horses; to labour for your commodity, as if they were baser than you and made to serve you? Do you not see how you reproach and condemn yourselves, while you vilify them as savages and barbarous wretches?*¹³

His application is uncompromising:

[To] catch up poor Negroes, or people of another land, that never forfeited life or liberty, and to make them slaves and sell them, is one of the worst kinds of thefts in the world, and such persons are to be taken for the common enemies of mankind;

¹¹ Richard Baxter, *Baxter's directions to slave-holders, revived; first printed in London, in the year 1673* (Philadelphia: Printed by Francis Bailey, at Yorick’s Head, in Market-Street, 1785), 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

*and they that buy them, and use them as beasts for their mere commodity, and betray, or destroy, or neglect their souls, are fitter to be called incarnate Devils, than Christians.*¹⁴

Cotton Mather wrote *The Negro Christianized*.¹⁵ He was not speaking against either the trade or the institution of slavery, but to set the demands on slave owners in a New Testament context of the demands on a Christian household. But in doing so, the principles he sets out open the possibility of the later argument that it is not possible to have a humane slavery. He proceeds by way of careful exposition of a series of verses: Eph 5.9, Col 4.1, Gal 6.1, 1 Tim 5.8 and Gen 18.19.

He observes,

*What is he, who is willing that those of his own House remain Strangers to the Faith, and Wretched Infidels? Householder, Call thy self anything but a Christian. As for that Worthy Name...Do not pretend unto it; Thou art not Worthy of it. If thou wilt Name the Name of CHRIST, in denominating thy self a Christian, then Depart from this Iniquity, of leaving thy Servants, to continue the Servants of Iniquity.*¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁵ Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized. An essay to excite and assist the good work, the instruction of Negro-servants in Christianity* (Boston: Printed by B. Green, 1706). See also Mather's earlier work, *A good master well served. A brief discourse on the necessary properties & practices of a good servant in every-kind of servitude: and of the methods that should be taken by the heads of a family, to obtain such a servant* (Boston: Printed by B. Green, and J. Allen. 1696).

¹⁶ Ibid., 7-8.

*The Christians who have no concern upon their Minds to have Christianity Propagated, never can justify themselves. They say they are Christians, but they are not.*¹⁷

Of those who fail to do so he is unsparing: “Don’t mince the matter; say of it, as it is; It is a Prodigy of Wickedness; It is a prodigious Inconsistency, with true Christianity!”¹⁸ He has much to say on acting consistently with their prayers: “What! *Pray for this*; and yet never *do* any thing for it! It is impossible, or, such *Praying*, is but *Mocking of God*.”¹⁹

*Most certainly, Sirs; The Blood of the Souls of your poor Negroes, lies upon you, and the guilt of their Barbarous Impieties, and superstitions, and their neglect of God and their Souls: If you are willing to have nothing done towards the Salvation of their souls.*²⁰

He deals with objections that we return to below and which have echoes today: “It has been cavilled, by some, that it is questionable Whether the Negroes have Rational Souls, or no. But let that British insinuation be never Whispered any more.”²¹ He then

¹⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁰ Ibid., 16.

²¹ Ibid., 23.

writes of how, “Their Complexion sometimes is made an Argument, why nothing should be done for them.”²² He calls this:

*A Gay²³ sort of argument! As if the great God went by the Complexion of Men, in His Favours to them! As if none but Whites might hope to be Favoured and Accepted with God! Whereas it is well known, that the Whites, are the least part of Mankind ... Say rather, with the Apostle; Acts 10.34, 35, Of a truth I perceive, that God is no respecter of persons; but in every Nation, he that feareth Him and worketh Righteousness, is accepted with Him.*²⁴

A final text that should be observed was published the same year as Mather’s work: “The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial”, by Samuel Sewall (1652-1730).²⁵ Sewall was a Judge, known for his involvement in the Salem Witch Trials – for which he later apologised. His argument is quite far-reaching. He opens saying, “The Numerousness of Slaves at this day in the Province,²⁶ and the Uneasiness of them under their Slavery, hath put many upon thinking whether the Foundation of it be firmly and well laid.”²⁷ I restrict reference to this text to a point which became central to the way the Bible

²² Ibid., 24.

²³ ‘Gay’ here has the sense of not reasonable or suitable.

²⁴ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 24-25.

²⁵ Samuel Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial* (Boston: Printed by Bartholomew Green and John Allen, 1700).

²⁶ i.e., Massachusetts.

²⁷ Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph*, 1.

subsequently was interpreted in relation to slavery, *viz.* the relevance of the curse on Ham following the Flood:

Obj. 1. These Blackamores are of the Posterity of Cham, and therefore are under the Curse of Slavery. Gen. 9.25, 26, 27.

Answ. Of all Offices, one would not begg this; viz. Uncall'd for, to be an Executioner of the Vindictive Wrath of God; the extent and duration of which is to us uncertain. If this ever was a Commission; How do we know but that it is long since out of date? Many have found it to their Cost, that a Prophetical Denunciation of Judgment against a Person or People, would not warrant them to inflict that evil.²⁸

John Eliot's contribution is also important.²⁹ In a letter in 1675 "To the Honorable the Governor and Council" sitting at Boston, "Protesting against Selling Indians as Slaves", he protests "the terror of selling away such Indians unto the islands for perpetual slaves", saying:

It seemeth to me that to sell them away for slaves is to hinder the enlargement of his kingdom. How can a Christian soul yield to act in casting away their souls for which Christ hath, with an eminent hand, provided an offer of the Gospel? To sell

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁹ For an introduction to the life of this too-little known New England Puritan see the essay by Cryer in *Five Pioneer Missionaries* (Banner of Truth Trust), a second edition of which is pending at the time of writing. For an important collection of his writing on related matters, see Clark (2003).

souls for money seemeth to me a dangerous merchandize. If they deserve to die, it is far better to be put to death under godly Governors, who will take religious care that means may be used that they may die penitently. To sell them away from all means of grace, which Christ hath provided means of grace for them, is the way for us to be active in the destroying their souls, when we are highly obliged to seek their conversion and salvation and have opportunity in our hands so to do.³⁰

III. Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards' views and practice regarding slavery are complex. I will touch on them because Edwards has been the target of serious criticism. David Baker expresses one of the gentler versions, saying:

Whatever the nuances of Edwards' views, the fact that he owned slaves at all is profoundly disturbing for us as Christians today. It was not even as if everyone who shared his theology at the time also supported slavery – some didn't. Even before Edwards, English theologian Richard Baxter had condemned it. So what

³⁰ John Eliot, "Letter from John Eliot Protesting against Selling Indians as Slaves," n.p. [cited 28 June 2024]. Online: <https://nativenewenglandportal.com/node/18119>.

*should we make of it all?... Apart from anything else, it reminds us that all theological heroes have feet of clay.*³¹

Edwards had baptised black children, rejoiced in the conversion of members of the black community in times of revival, and admitted them to full membership of his congregation. He had envisaged a day when “many of the Negroes and Indians will be divines.”³² But for all that, he still seated slaves in a segregated area of the church. As a young minister, he travelled to the slave port of Newport, Rhode Island, to purchase a fourteen-year-old African girl as a household slave. Her name was Venus, and she cost him eighty pounds. During his lifetime, Edwards bought and sold several other slaves, including a “Negro boy named Titus”, who was valued at thirty pounds in the inventory of his estate.³³ Matthew Everhard observes that “Though there are thousands

³¹ David Baker, “Jonathan Edwards' disturbing support for slavery: some reflections,” *Christian Today* (24 June 2020), n.p. [cited 28 June 2024]. Online: <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/jonathan.edwards.disturbing.support.for.slavery.some.reflection.s/>. Baker is incorrect when he says that Baxter condemned all slavery. On Edwards, others have argued that his doctrine of election or predestination can be thought to lead to his status as slave owner. But as far as we know, Edwards never argued such a view. He cherished the doctrine of election because it undergirded the free grace and love God shows toward undeserving sinners who could never merit his grace. There is no causal relationship – or even descriptive correlation – between theology proper and 18th century slaveholding. Nuenke rejects a similar argument brought against the Puritans who moved from England to America (Nuenke, “Puritan involvement with slavery,” *passim*).

³² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Volume 9: A History of the Work of Redemption* (ed. John F. Wilson; Yale: Yale University Press, 1989), 480.

³³ John Coffey, “Difficult histories: Christian memory and historic injustice,” *Cambridge Papers* 29:4 (Cambridge: Jubilee Centre, 2000), 98.

of extant sermon manuscripts, it seems that Edwards never once preached against slavery as a form of social evil”.³⁴

However, he took particular exception to a narrow definition of “Neighbour” as identifying only fellow believers. If neighbours were limited to Christians, then any sort of immoral behaviour toward others was permissible. “This”, Edwards commented, “makes the SS. [i.e. Scripture] Contradict itself”.³⁵ Alluding to Acts 17:30, Edwards wrote that God had overlooked the prejudicial practices of people hitherto. “God’s winking at some things that were early, he argued, had no more relevance for the present than God’s winking at polygamy during the days of the Old Testament. In the dispensation of the gospel, God ‘don’t wink at such things now.’”³⁶

As he surveyed world events, he concluded – unlike some Christians – that slavery could never be a converting ordinance that would bring captured Africans into the Christian faith voluntarily. In fact, an ongoing trade in African slaves would promote just the opposite. At the level of daily church life, Edwards and his congregation at Northampton were on the leading edge of thinking through these issues in at least one specific way. His congregation received black Christians into full membership of the

³⁴ Matthew Everhard, “Jonathan Edwards’ Complex Views on Race,” *Modern Reformation* (1st July 2020), n.p. [cited 28 June 2024]. Online: <http://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/the-mod-jonathan-edwards-complex-views-on-race>.

³⁵ K. P. Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*. 54:4 (1997): 828.

³⁶ K. P. Minkema, and H. S. Stout, “The Edwardsean Tradition and the Antislavery Debate, 1740–1865,” *Journal of American History* 92:1 (2005): 50).

church, giving them all the privileges of membership, including access to Baptism and the Lord's Supper:

Edwards held a more negative view of slavery than did the Puritans, accepted slaves as church members, enlarged the Puritan's understanding of neighbor, and strongly opposed the slave trade. His attitude toward the slave trade changed as a result of the Great Awakening, and that shift can be attributed to an increase in the number of conversions among Africans, and a strengthened millennial vision.³⁷

A significant development was the discovery in 1997 of a draft letter written by Edwards to a minister who appears to have been facing criticism for his stance on slavery.³⁸ "It is the only known instance of Edwards's writing, however abstrusely, about slavery."³⁹ Minkema says of this letter:

Though he himself owned slaves, he did not wholeheartedly defend slavery; rather, his letter acknowledged its inequities and disturbing implications. At the same

³⁷ Jeon, "Jonathan Edwards and the Anti-Slavery Movement," 780.

³⁸ For a facsimile see <https://slavery.princeton.edu/uploads/Edwards-Letter-on-Slavery-compressed.pdf> Edwards Papers, folder ND2.I3, Franklin Trask Library, Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, Massachusetts. We do not know for whom it was intended, and the letter may never have been sent.

³⁹ Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," 823.

*time, however, Edwards felt that slavery was a necessary evil that served some positive good in the natural order that God had decreed.*⁴⁰

Through his later writings on the Christian's obligation to show a disinterested beneficence, Edwards significantly shaped the position of his successors, including his son, Jonathan Edwards, Jun. and Samuel Hopkins, who, in a 1776 sermon, declared, "where liberty is not universal it has no existence." He exhorted his hearers to act, not only against British tyranny, but against their own sins:

Rouse up then my brethren and assert the Right of universal liberty; you assert your own Right to be free in opposition to the Tyrant of Britain; come be honest men and assert the Right of the Africans to be free in opposition to the Tyrants of America. We cry up Liberty, but know it, the Negros have as good a right to be free as we can pretend to. We say that we have a right to defend our Liberty, but know assuredly that this is not the priviledge of one man more than another. The Africans have as good a right to defend their liberty as we have. Be exhorted

⁴⁰ Ibid., 825. It would be of interest to understand the views of David Brainerd in this connection. In a report of 1746, Brainerd gave as a significant reason for the resistance of some American Indian tribes to the gospel, the fear of being enslaved by White settlers. See, David Brainerd, *Mirabilia Dei inter Indicos, or The rise and progress of a remarkable work of grace amongst a number of the Indians in the provinces of New-Jersey and Pennsylvania, justly represented in a journal kept by order of the Honourable Society (in Scotland) for Propagating Christian Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Printed and sold by William Bradford in Second-Street, 1746).

*therefore to exert yourselves for universal Liberty as that without which we can never be a happy people.*⁴¹

IV. The Southern Theologians

The writings of Robert Dabney, James Henry Thornwell, Benjamin Palmer and to some extent John L Girardeau have been kept available through reprints in the latter part of the last century. Yet on slavery, we read statements in their writing that we would wish had never been uttered.

They were united in accepting that the African American population were people created in the image of God. “Depend upon it”, James Thornwell said, “it is no light matter to deny the common brotherhood of humanity... If the African is not of the same blood with ourselves, he has no lot nor part in the Gospel”.⁴² But he proceeded to insist that:

Providence has given us in Slavery. Like every human arrangement, it is liable to abuse; but in its idea, and in its ultimate influence upon the social system, it is

⁴¹ Minkema, and Stout, ‘The Edwardsean Tradition and the Antislavery Debate, 1740–1865,’ 56. I have not dealt with Whitefield’s position. It is widely known that he supported the ownership of slaves, and that his beliefs on this matter hardened during his ministry (Shaw, ‘Evangelicals, Slavery and Colonialism in the 18th and 19th Centuries, *passim*.), but I have not been able to trace any theological or biblical defence offered by Whitefield. I wrote about Whitefield’s Bethesda orphanage project in Ian Shaw, ‘George Whitefield and his “Family”’, *Reformation Today* 32 (July/August 1976): 3-12.

⁴² J. H. Thornwell, *Collected Writings, Volume 4: Ecclesiastical*. (New York: Robert Carter and Bros., 1873), 542.

*wise and beneficent. We see in it a security for the rights of property and a safeguard against pauperism and idleness.*⁴³

Slavery, he believed,

*is one of the conditions in which God is conducting the moral probation of man – a condition not incompatible with the highest moral freedom, the true glory of the race, and, therefore, not unfit for the moral and spiritual discipline which Christianity has instituted. It is one of the schools in which immortal spirits are trained for their final destiny.*⁴⁴

He made a distinction between a “like” and a “common” nature, saying that white and black people have a common but not a like nature:

*Have we, as a people and a State, discharged our duty to our slaves? Is there not reason to apprehend that in some cases we have given occasion to the calumnies of our adversaries, by putting the defence of Slavery upon grounds which make the slave a different kind of being from his master? ... The ground of His right to redeem is the participation, not of a like, but of a common, nature.*⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 541.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 430.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 542.

The key text for understanding how Benjamin Palmer, the New Orleans Presbyterian pastor, argued the case for slavery, is his “Thanksgiving Sermon”,⁴⁶ delivered just days after the election of Abraham Lincoln as U.S. president in 1861:

A nation often has a character as well defined and intense as that of the individual... The particular trust assigned to such a people becomes the pledge of the divine protection; and their fidelity to it determines the fate by which it is finally overtaken... If, then, the South is such a people, what at this juncture is their providential trust? I answer, that it is to conserve and to perpetuate the institution of domestic slavery as now existing.⁴⁷

A whole generation has been educated to look upon the system with abhorrence as a national blot. They hope, and look, and pray for its extinction within a reasonable time... We, on the contrary, as its constituted guardians, can demand nothing less than that it should be left open to expansion, subject to no limitations save those imposed by God and nature.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ The text of this sermon can be found in Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer* (Repr.; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 206-219.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer*, 209. (Emphasis in original.)

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

Robert Dabney's fullest statement on the slavery question can be found in his *Defence of Virginia* (1867).⁴⁹ He was perhaps the most uncompromisingly negative of this group regarding the enslaved population. He said of "the curse on Canaan":

*It gives us the origin of domestic slavery. And we find that it was appointed by God as the punishment of, and remedy for (nearly all God's providential chastisements are also remedial) the peculiar moral degradation of a part of the race.*⁵⁰

He went on to say, "The words of Noah are not a mere prophecy; they are a verdict, a moral sentence pronounced upon conduct, by competent authority; that verdict sanctioned by God".⁵¹ His overall argument was of a piece with this:

*...in considering the actual influences of slavery on the morals of the Africans, let the reader remember what they actually were before they were placed under this tutelage... they were what God's word declares human depravity to be under the degrading effects of paganism. Let the reader see the actual and true picture, in the first chapter of Romans, and in authentic descriptions of the negro in his own jungles.*⁵²

Dabney appeared to see his conclusion as the only one possible:

⁴⁹ Robert L. Dabney, *A Defence of Virginia, (and through her, of the South) in recent and pending contests against the sectional party* (New York: E.J. Hale, 1867).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 279.

It is enough for us to say (what is capable of overwhelming demonstration) that for the African race, such as Providence has made it, and where He has placed it in America, slavery was the righteous, the best, yea, the only tolerable relation.⁵³

Now cannot common sense see the moral advantage to such a people, of subjection to the will of a race elevated above them, in morals and intelligence, to an almost measureless degree?...was it nothing, that this race, morally inferior, should be brought into close relations to a nobler race.⁵⁴

As a consequence, he believed that “the teachings of Abolitionism are clearly of rationalistic origin, of infidel tendency, and only sustained by reckless and licentious perversions of the meaning of the Sacred text”, such that “the anti-scriptural, infidel, and radical grounds upon which our assailants have placed themselves, make our cause practically the cause of truth and order.”⁵⁵

While the least well-known of the four, Girardeau is, for me, the most interesting and intriguing.⁵⁶ In general, we have a man whose ministry to enslaved, freed and

⁵³ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 280-1. By contrast, we may notice an exchange Newton had with a House of Commons Committee. He was asked: “From what you saw of Africa, did the intercourse with the Europeans appear to civilise them, or to render them more corrupt or depraved?” He answered, “The intercourse of the Europeans has assimilated them more to our manners, but I am afraid has rather had a bad than a good influence upon their morals. I mean, they learn our customs, wear our apparel, they get our furniture; but they are generally worse in their conduct in proportion to their acquaintance with us.”

⁵⁵ Ibid., 21-22.

⁵⁶ For a helpful, if almost wholly positive, short piece, see Sally Davey, “John L. Girardeau, Minister to the Slaves of South Carolina,” *Banner of Truth* (8th April 2015), n.p. [cited 28 June 2024]. Online: <https://banneroftruth.org/uk/resources/articles/2015/john-l-girardeau-minister-to-the-slaves-of-south-carolina/>.

others of the black community was committed and blessed, while he maintained a defence of the superiority of the white community. Though Girardeau could not legally teach enslaved members to read, he led them in the memorization of Scripture, catechism, and hymns. Most notably, enslaved persons had both their first and surname listed on written membership rolls, which differed from the common practice of only a first name with the last name of the individual or family which owned them as slaves. He faced strong local opposition, including multiple death threats by those who feared he would incite a slave insurrection. In 1869 Girardeau was among the first (in the newly formed PCUS) to ordain freed African Americans as elders and support measures for integrated worship⁵⁷

Yet we need to recognise that his treatment of Africans and African-Americans prior to and after the Civil War was in large part an expression of paternalism. He shared the belief that divine providence had given enslaved Africans into their possession as a means to civilize and evangelize them while reducing slaveholder abuses. His biographer summarises Girardeau's position as follows:

He believed that association with the white man was essential to the uplift of the negro. He realized that both races were descended from the first Adam, and that for both the second Adam had died, but he also believed that God in His Providence had made the negro to be the inferior; that as to climb upward, the

⁵⁷ But he maintained and defended separate seating (the 'Separate System') for black and white members of his congregations.

vine needs the trellis and the ivy the wall, so the negro needs the white man.

Hence, he always desired the negro churches to be connected with and under the supervision of the white churches. Hence, he doubted the propriety of sending American negroes, though well-educated and even with an admixture of white blood, as missionaries to Africa, for he believed that when left to themselves they could not resist the temptation to dishonesty and adultery.⁵⁸

V. Princeton and Albert Barnes

For Princeton at this period, “The great issue of the day...was slavery. For the first fifty years of its existence, Princeton Seminary – students and professors – wrestled with the problem. Almost all agreed that it was a great evil and ought to be abolished. A Society of Inquiry report charged that because of slavery, ‘the glory of this far famed republic is sullied, religion is dishonoured, and humanity mocked’”.⁵⁹

But the gradualists held sway. The General Assembly of 1818 passed a unanimous “Declaration of Slavery” (written by Ashbel Green) stating that slavery was “a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of nature ... utterly inconsistent with the law of God ... totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the Gospel of Christ.”⁶⁰ The Assembly urged that it was the duty of all Christians “as speedily as

⁵⁸ George Blackburn, *The life work of John L. Girardeau, D.D., LLd.: late professor in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Columbia, S.C.* (Columbia: The State Co., 1916), 70.

⁵⁹ David B. Calhoun *Princeton Seminary: Faith and Learning 1812-1868* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 324.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 325.

possible the efface this blot on our holy religion, and to obtain the complete abolition of slavery throughout Christendom, and if possible throughout the world.”⁶¹ However, this strong statement was a compromise, believing “hasty emancipation to be a greater curse” than slavery.⁶²

The Princeton theologian, Samuel Miller, is an example of someone who moved from seeming to be an immediatist regarding slavery to being a gradualist. He appeared to be an outright abolitionist in his youth in the late eighteenth century, when he said of slavery that one “must heave an involuntary sigh, at the recollection that ... this offspring of infernal malice, and parent of human debasement, is yet suffered to reside”.⁶³ In 1797 Miller described the “humiliating tale ... that in this free country ... in this country, from which has been proclaimed to distant lands, as the basis of our political existence, that ALL MEN ARE BORN FREE AND EQUAL, - in this country there are found slaves!”⁶⁴ But by 1836 he was chairing a General Assembly committee that concluded that slavery was not denounced in the New Testament but that Christ through the apostles:

Chose rather to enjoin upon masters and slaves those duties which are required of them respectively by their Master in heaven; and to inculcate those benevolent and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 482.

⁶³ Ibid., 325.

⁶⁴ Samuel Miller (1816-1883), *The life of Samuel Miller, D. D., LL. D., second professor in the Theological seminary of the Presbyterian church, at Princeton, New Jersey* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen and Haffelfinger, 1869), 92.

*holy principles, which have a direct tendency to mitigate the evils of slavery, while it lasts, and to bring it to a termination in the most speedy, safe and happy manner for both parties.*⁶⁵

A brief development of Charles Hodge's position may serve to place Princeton.⁶⁶ Hodge and the Princetonians "abhorred the evils of slavery, deplored the agitation of the abolitionists, avoided condemnation of slaveowners, and aimed at peaceful emancipation", and were against abrupt and radical measures.⁶⁷ J. W. Alexander wrote, "I am more and more convinced that our endeavours to do at a blow, what Providence does by degrees, is disastrous to those whom we would benefit".⁶⁸

It seemed clear to Hodge that Scripture did not prohibit slavery in all cases, and therefore the efforts to declare slaveholding a sin were unbiblical. Preservation of the integrity of Scripture was paramount. "It will do no good", he asserted, "under a paroxysm of benevolence, to attempt to tear the Bible to pieces." He remarked, "Let the North remember that they are bound to follow the example of Christ in their manner of treating *slavery*, and the South, that they are bound to follow the precepts of Christ in

⁶⁵ Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: Faith and Learning 1812-1868*, 325.

⁶⁶ A very helpful site that discusses Hodge's position is Richard Reifsnyder, "Charles Hodge: A Conservative Theologian Finds His Way to Emancipation," *Presbyterian* (17th April 2018), n.p. [cited 28 June 2024]. Online: <https://www.history.pcusa.org/blog/2018/04/charles-hodge-conservative-theologian-finds-his-way-emancipation>. I am indebted to him in the following paragraphs, and the unattributed quotations are from this site.

⁶⁷ Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: Faith and Learning 1812-1868*, 326.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 327.

their manner of treating *slaves*.”⁶⁹ He dismissed the arguments that slavery was “man-stealing” and a violation of the Ten Commandments, believing that “slavery was not a sin ‘in itself.’ It all depended on circumstances.”⁷⁰

Hodge saw himself as following Scripture where it led. He defended what he saw as the simple reading of the Bible, yet, as Mark Noll puts it, “the obvious crisis that bore directly on the fate of the nation was [that] the ‘simple’ reading of the Bible yielded violently incommensurate understandings of Scripture, with no means, short of warfare, to adjudicate the differences.”⁷¹

His position gradually softened. He became more insistent that slaveholders take seriously their responsibility to provide for the “religious education of their slaves, to respect their parental and marital rights ... to recognize their right of property” in regard to what he called “the gospel method of emancipation.” He felt he was seeking “middle ground, the ground of the Bible.”

⁶⁹ Charles Hodge, “Slavery,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* (April 1836): 305.

⁷⁰ *Reifsnnyder*, “Charles Hodge: A Conservative Theologian Finds His Way to Emancipation,” n.p. It seems as though Hodge himself may have owned a slave for a time.

⁷¹ Mark Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” in R. Miller, H. Stout, and C. Wilson, eds., *Religion and the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Noll’s essay (1998) gives a summary of four major ways in which the Bible was interpreted on this issue. He has given a valuable lecture on ways in which Scripture has been interpreted on matters of race and slavery. See Mark Noll, “Race and Slavery in America’s Bible Civilization,” *Wheaton College* (31st Marh 2016), n.p. [cited 28 June 2024]. Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unvPKqxJyc4>.

But his optimism proved to be unfounded as Southerners increasingly defended slavery, not only as a permissible necessity but as a positive good in God's plan.⁷² Despite his assertion to the very end that he did not change his views, Hodge became a more ardent supporter of the end of slavery and less sanguine about its ability to wither away under the natural processes of societal Christianization. He could not bring himself to say that slavery was wrong in itself from a biblical point of view, or that the spiritual arc of the Bible bent toward acknowledging slavery as sinful – the view held by many New School colleagues and numerous other evangelicals.⁷³ Hodge thought that a position other than his own could lead nowhere but to an undermining of the authority of Scripture. However, "It could be argued that his maturing views of providence enabled him to see the hand of God at work in the extermination of slavery."

Calhoun judges that "Princeton Seminary was a challenge and inspiration to thousands of people. In the matter of slavery, however, its message was timid, conventional and unremarkable."⁷⁴ By contrast, Albert Barnes, the prominent participant in New School 'progressive' Presbyterianism, regarded slavery as "evil in

⁷² We noted above Benjamin Palmer's view of the institution of domestic slavery, that it "should be left open to expansion, subject to no limitations save those imposed by God and nature." "Nature" often appears in arguments from various sides, either to support change or as a reason to accept the status quo. For an outstanding discussion of how "nature" and "Nature" were important in Christian and scientific thinking, see P. Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). This volume was reviewed in *Foundations* in 2017. See, Ian Shaw, "Review of *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*," *Foundations* 72 (Spring 2017) n.p. [cited 28 June 2024]. Online: <http://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations-issues/issue-72-book-reviews#book4>.

⁷³ The divisions between Old School and New School Presbyterianism are complex, but for the purposes of this paper, New School Presbyterians in the North opposed slavery.

⁷⁴ Calhoun *Princeton Seminary: Faith and Learning 1812-1868*, 328.

its origin, evil in its bearing on the morals of men, evil in its relations to religion, evil in its influence on the master and the slave — on the body and the soul — on the North and the South, evil in its relations to time and in its relations to eternity.⁷⁵

In the next issue I will reflect on the theological themes that framed how they thought, spoke and acted.

Ian Shaw is Professor Emeritus at the University of York, and a member of York Evangelical Church.

⁷⁵ A. Barnes, *The Church and Slavery* (Philadelphia: Parry and McMillan, 1857), 6.

MISSIONARY – WHAT’S IN A WORD? A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF A DISPUTED TERM

Dr Thorsten Prill

Abstract

This article discusses the meaning of the word “missionary” and its use in today’s church. It looks at the biblical, historical and contemporary understandings of a phrase which triggers a variety of responses even among Christians. Some insist that “missionary” has become a discredited term and others hold that it no longer reflects their broader understanding of mission. However, those who still use it find support both in the Scriptures and mission history. Given the similarity of the phrase “missionary” and the biblical term “apostle” one can argue that missionaries are followers of Christ who are sent to continue with the apostolic task without claiming the same authority as the Twelve or the Apostle Paul. Therefore, the preaching of the gospel, the planting of churches and the training of church leaders lie at the heart of their mission. This work might be accompanied by other activities, such as social, educational or medical programmes, but, as demonstrated by the early representatives of the Protestant mission movement, it should always be carried out with sensitivity, respect and humility.

I. Introduction

When one mentions the word *missionary* in an African country like Namibia one usually gets a mixed response. While some people are quick to talk about an unholy collaboration between missionaries and colonisers in the past, others spontaneously express their gratefulness for the men and women who first brought the gospel to their ancestors almost 200 years ago. Whatever their response, most Namibians have a view on the nature and work of missionaries, past and present. Further north on the African continent, in countries like Ghana, Nigeria or Zimbabwe, the word is increasingly used for African believers in Christ who see Europe and North America as their mission fields. In the Bible Belt of the Southern United States, the word *missionary* conjures up in the minds of many Christians the positive image of cross-cultural workers serving in Africa, Latin America or elsewhere overseas. Others argue that the church in North America and Europe should support indigenous missionaries who work in their own countries rather than sending Western Christians. In Scotland, one of the fastest secularising countries in Europe, however, the picture is a very different one. In the country that was once called the land of the Book and from whose shores large numbers of missionaries went out into all the world, most people today would struggle to make sense of the term *missionary*. The most common response is neither criticism nor praise but a shrug of the shoulders. This prompts the question: What shall we make of a phrase that triggers such diverse reactions?

II. *A Biblical Understanding*

If we turn to our English Bibles to find the word *missionary* our efforts will be in vain, and this should not really surprise us. The English word *missionary* is neither of Greek nor Hebrew origin but derives from a Latin word, i.e., the verb *mittere*, which means *to send*. However, what we find in the New Testament is the term *apostle* (or *apostolos* in Greek). The noun *apostolos* is related to the Greek verb *apostellein*, which basically conveys the same idea of sending or dispatching.¹ The general meaning and use of *apostolos* varied greatly in the Greek-speaking world. Thus, it was used to describe ambassadors, delegates or messengers but it could also refer to a naval expedition or even a passport.² In the Septuagint, the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word *apostolos* occurs only once in 1 Kings 14:6. That being said, the Septuagint makes frequent use of the verb *apostellein* to translate the Hebrew word *salah*.³ “Only this latter usage”, as Christopher Bryan writes, “prepares us at all for the weight that the word comes to bear in the New Testament generally, and Paul in particular.”⁴ Thus, the Hebrew *salah* does not simply express the act of sending but also carries the idea of commissioning with a particular task and authorisation. Having said that, the emphasis is on the authority of the sender who is represented by the one sent.

¹ C. Bryan, *A Preface to Romans: Notes on the Epistle in Its Literary and Cultural Setting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 64.

² *Ibid.*

³ R.D. Rightmire, “Apostle,” in W.A. Elwell (ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 33.

⁴ Bryan, *A Preface to Romans*, 64.

Accordingly, Everett Harrison defines apostles as those who “are sent on a definite mission in which they act with full authority on behalf of the sender and are accountable to the sender.”⁵

Altogether, the noun *apostolos* appears 79 times in the New Testament and applies to a variety of persons. In Hebrews 3:1 it is used to refer to Jesus as the one sent by God, while in John 13:16 *apostolos* (here translated *messenger*) seems to apply to every individual Christian. Most often, it refers to Paul and to the Twelve, i.e., the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples, whose formal qualifications were twofold: They had been chosen by Jesus himself (Acts 1:8) and been witnesses to his resurrection (Acts 1:22). Included in this group, whose members seem to claim the title *apostles of Jesus Christ* for themselves,⁶ is Matthias who replaced Judas. In addition, there are those church leaders and workers, who are distinct from Paul and the Twelve but are also called apostles. In 2 Corinthians 8:23, Paul speaks of this group as the *apostles of the churches*. Among them are James, the brother of Jesus and one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church (Gal 1:19), and Barnabas, one of Paul’s co-workers (Acts 14:14), who together with Paul was commissioned for their work and sent out by the church in Antioch (Acts 13:2-3), as well as Silas (1 Thess 2:6), Timothy (1 Thess 2:6) and Apollos (1 Cor 4:6, 9). The

⁵ E.F. Harrison, “Apostle, Apostleship,” in W.A. Elwell (ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 85.

⁶ For example, 1Tim 1:1 and 1 Pet 1:1.

meaning of the term *apostle*, as it appears in the New Testament, is helpfully summarised by William Taylor when he writes:

The core New Testament meaning clusters around ideas related to sending and or crossing lines, to those being sent, the sent ones – whether messengers or the Twelve, or the others who serve with some kind of apostolic authority or function. The New Testament affirms that the apostolic messenger (the missionary) becomes the person authoritatively sent out by God and the church on a special mission with a special message, with particular focus on the Gentiles/nations.⁷

The message that the Twelve and the Apostle Paul as well as their co-workers had been given to spread was the gospel of Jesus Christ. From the moment of his conversion Paul, for example, understood the proclamation of the life-changing good news to be at the heart of his mission. Luke tells us in Acts 9:20 that at once Paul “began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the son of God.” To his spiritual son Timothy, Paul later wrote:

So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the

⁷ W.D. Taylor, “Missionary,” in A.S. Moreau (ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 644.

beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher (2 Tim 1:8–11).

But for all that, Paul and his co-workers were more than a group of evangelists who travelled from one city to another. They did not work to gain large numbers of converts but to present each person mature in Christ. In his letter to the Christians in Colossae, Paul put it this way: “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Col 1:28–29). Such a maturity, the apostle believed, could only be attained within a church where believers exercised their various gifts to the edification of the whole.⁸ In other words, he aimed to see Christians grow in their faith and to help them to establish self-governing local churches of mature followers of Christ. Paul, his fellow apostles and co-workers were both disciple-makers and church-planters, or as Roger Greenway puts it: “The apostolic strategy throughout the Book of Acts involved evangelizing and winning converts and forming believers into organized communities under spiritual leadership.”⁹ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert helpfully summarise the mission of the apostle as follows:

⁸ See, for example, Eph 4:11–16 and 1 Cor 12:4–11.

⁹ R.S. Greenway, “Success in the City: Paul’s Urban Mission Strategy,” in R.L. Gallagher and P. Hertig (eds), *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 192.

*A careful study of his life and teaching shows that Paul’s mission was threefold: (1) initial evangelism, (2) the nurture of existing churches by guarding them against error and grounding them in faith, and (3) their firm establishment as healthy congregations through the full exposition of the gospel and the appointing of local leadership.*¹⁰

Given the similarity of the two phrases *missionary* and *apostle* one can surely argue that missionaries are sent to continue somehow with the apostolic task described above.¹¹ That said, we must not confuse today’s missionaries with the Twelve and the Apostle Paul. While the two terms have similar etymological roots (“sent one”), the meaning of a word, as Peter Cottrell points us, “must be determined by its usage and not by its etymology.”¹² Thus, the New Testament *apostles of Christ* had a unique calling and a unique place in the history of the church. The church, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians, is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph 2:20). Like the Old Testament prophets, they could speak and write words of God. In that sense, missionaries, past and present, are not apostles. At the same time, they are

¹⁰ K. DeYoung and G. Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 62.

¹¹ Cf. D. Herm, “Die Person des Missionars: biblische Theologie der Berufung und praktische Konsequenzen,” in K.W. Müller (ed), *Die Person des Missionars: Berufung - Sendung – Dienst* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1997), 12.

¹² P. Cottrell, *The Eleventh Commandment: Church and Mission Today* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), 72.

different from local pastors or teachers.¹³ This raises the question, how should we define missionaries?

III. Contemporary Understandings

To find a definition, many scholars and practitioners, especially those of theologically conservative or evangelical persuasions, have traditionally turned to the ministries of the apostles and their co-workers who sought to fulfil the instructions given to them by Jesus towards the end of his time on earth. The Apostle Paul, in particular, is seen as a role model for any missionary today. Bryan Estelle calls Paul “our supreme example”, who “embodies the primary mission of the church in his own ministry to the Gentiles”.¹⁴ Similarly, DeYoung and Gilbert write: “We believe his mission models for us what we ought to be doing in the world insofar as Paul’s ambition ought to be our ambition (1 Corinthians 10:33-11:1), and we should be partners in the same work he undertook (see Philippians 1:15, 14, 27, 30; 2:16).”¹⁵ Bearing in mind the uniqueness of Paul and the Twelve, George Peters defines a missionary as “a messenger with a message from God sent forth by divine authority for the definite purpose of evangelism, church-founding and church edification.”¹⁶ Similarly, Eric

¹³ Cf. C.G. Olson, *What in the World Is God Doing? The Essentials of Global Missions: An Introductory Guide* (Cedar Knolls: Global Gospel Publishers), 9–10.

¹⁴ B.D. Estelle, *The Primary Mission of the Church: Engaging or Transforming the World?* (Fearn: Mentor, 2022), 396.

¹⁵ DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 62.

¹⁶ G.W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 248.

Wright maintains that missionaries are “unique individuals sent out by the Spirit with both the vision and gifts to plant churches among unreached peoples.”¹⁷ Another author who considers the apostles in general and Paul in particular as missionary role models par excellence is Eckhard Schnabel. Schnabel describes the task of missionaries as follows:

Thus, missionaries establish contact with non-Christians, they proclaim the news of Jesus the Messiah and Savior (proclamation, preaching, teaching, instruction), they lead people to faith in Jesus Christ (conversion, baptism), and they integrate the new believers into the local community of the followers of Jesus (Lord’s Supper, transformation of social and moral behavior, charity).¹⁸

Kenneth Fleming, who agrees with this understanding of missionary work, points out that missionaries might still be involved in other activities that in one way or another express “the Christian response to a needy world, either to show the compassion of Christ or to assist the missionary to become more efficient in his presentation of the gospel.”¹⁹ According to Fleming, such activities, which have been described as a “handmaid to the gospel”, include medical work, education, child care or agricultural

¹⁷ E. Wright, *A Practical Theology of Missions: Dispelling the Mystery; Recovering the Passion* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2010), 168.

¹⁸ E. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 29.

¹⁹ K.C. Fleming, *Essentials of Missionary Service* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 2000), 13.

help.²⁰ He stresses that the early missionaries who were involved in these kinds of ministry seldom lost their focus.²¹ Fleming notes: “They used them as tools to promote their clearly established goal which was a strong indigenous church in every area. They were careful never to wander from the centrality of the gospel.”²²

In a similar vein, the Zambian Baptist theologian Conrad Mbewe encourages Christians “to consider coming alongside gospel-preaching missionaries as teachers, doctors, builders, printers, etc., in the mission field.”²³ Missionaries, he continues, work best in teams in which individuals complement each other. However, like Fleming, Mbewe expects missionaries to keep the proclamation of the gospel at the heart of their work:

*Let us keep first things first. Yes, there is always going to be a lot of auxiliary work in the mission field. We may need to establish hospitals and schools. We may need to supply food, clothing and shelter. There is nothing wrong with that as long as we do not begin to see these as an end in themselves. Our primary work in missions is evangelism and the planting of churches after the New Testament pattern – churches that will continue this same work long after we are gone.*²⁴

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 14.

²² Ibid.

²³ C. Mbewe, *Foundations of the Flock: Truths About the Church for All the Saints* (Hannibal: Granted Ministries Press, 2011), 290.

²⁴ Ibid., 299.

For Mbewe, the ultimate goal of any missionary activity is the salvation of people who do not know the triune God. Whatever missionaries do, they must not lose sight of their task of helping people find their way back to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Mbewe states:

*Gospel work must aim at winning individuals to personal faith in Christ or it is not gospel work at all (...) In missions, we must refuse to comfort ourselves with anything less than souls turning from sin and putting their trust in the Lord Jesus, because that is what the work is all about.*²⁵

Michael Raiter, an Anglican theologian and mission practitioner, who supports the traditional view of the missionary task, reminds us that the ministries of those Christians who seek to alleviate human suffering in needy and poorly developed contexts should never be frowned upon.²⁶ While works of compassion on their own do not constitute mission in the New Testament sense, they are nonetheless important.²⁷ Raiter's self-critical explanation is worth quoting in full:

One criticism that can be levelled at we who define mission narrowly is that, in our zeal to see the gospel spread, we can appear disparaging of those who minister to people's physical needs. This criticism is often warranted. Too often we

²⁵ Ibid., 297.

²⁶ M. Raiter, "Sent for his Purpose: 'Mission' and 'Missiology' and their Search for Meaning," in R.J. Gibson (ed), *Ripe for Harvest: Christian Mission in the New Testament and in Our World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 131–32.

²⁷ Ibid., 132.

*are heard to be saying that the only work of real value or eternal value is the work of gospeling. Other works, while laudable, are expendable; indeed, given our limited resources we ought to be concentrating on the work of proclamation. I believe that such a sentiment is uncharitable and unbiblical. Works of compassion done in the name of Christ are intrinsically good. We are to do good to all people, although the household of faith has the priority. The parable of the Good Samaritan stands as a perpetual reminder to us of the approval God gives to those who see a neighbour in physical need and reach out to meet that need.*²⁸

Stephen Gaukroger, a British Baptist theologian, draws attention to another aspect of missionary work. He emphasises that cross-cultural missionaries are not self-appointed, independent workers, but boundary crossers who are always commissioned and sent out by their local church.²⁹ As part of their ministry, they intentionally seek “to introduce those who come to Christ to join with others in the fellowship of a church.”³⁰ Writing from a confessional Lutheran perspective, Klaus Detlev Schulz goes a step further. Schulz speaks of the missionary office which, as a *rite vocatus*, is in principle not different from the office of the pastor.³¹ It is therefore the church’s responsibility to appoint missionaries through whom God will work. The church is

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ S. Gaukroger, *Why Bother with Mission* (Leicester: IVP, 1996), 51.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ K.D. Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 273.

obliged to get involved in mission through an ordered, structured missionary ministry, i.e., an ordained ministry, “that cannot be replaced but only complemented by the services of the laity.”³²

In contrast to Schulz, some authors, like James Garret, have argued that every Christian is a missionary.³³ The so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, Garret holds, calls every believer to be involved in the work of making disciples of all nations. He bases this view on the nature of the priesthood of all believers.³⁴ Referring to the Great Commission, as we find it recorded in Acts 1:8, Thomas Hale notes: “Jesus told us to “go” ... This means that *all* Christians are to go and be witnesses - to their families, to their neighbourhoods, to their cities. In other words, all Christians are called to be “missionaries” in the broad sense of the word.”³⁵ Cottrell, who seems to share this broader understanding, also refers to the New Testament command of being Christ’s witnesses. He writes:

As to the requirement that the missionary is one who is sent on a specific task, the New Testament makes it clear that there is one task, to be Christ’s witnesses.

Mission is biblically still mission whether it involves being Christ’s witnesses in my home or being Christ’s witness five thousand miles away from my home. There

³² Ibid.

³³ Cf. P.L. Tie, *Restore Unity, Recover Identity, and Refine Orthopraxy: The Believer’s Priesthood in the Ecclesiology of James Leo Garrett Jr.* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 22.

³⁴ Tie, *Restore Unity, Recover Identity, and Refine Orthopraxy*, 22.

³⁵ T. Hale, *On Being a Missionary* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1995), 6.

*is no geographical category which turns a martyrs (witness) into an apostolos (missionary) (...) A martyrs is a missionary. A kēryx is a missionary.*³⁶

Others have responded to this position by pointing out “that if everybody is a missionary, nobody is a missionary”.³⁷ Put differently, if every Christian can be called a missionary, the word *missionary* becomes just another term to describe Christians, albeit with a focus on their calling or task. David Hesselgrave argues that such a general call for missionary volunteers cannot be found in the New Testament.³⁸ He goes on to say that “although all followers of Christ are called to be witnesses, it is not true that all are called to be missionaries, any more than all are called to be pastors.”³⁹ Stephen Davis speaks of an overuse of the term which has led to the point of dilution.⁴⁰ Like the word “mission” it has become a catchall word.⁴¹ “As a result”, he argues, “there are “missionaries” who bear little resemblance to their New Testament counterparts.”⁴² Davis suggests that there needs to be a better understanding of the function of missionaries in our day.⁴³

³⁶ Cottrell, *The Eleventh Commandment*, 72–73.

³⁷ Taylor, “Missionary,” 644.

³⁸ D.J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 215.

³⁹ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 215.

⁴⁰ S.M. Davis, *Crossing Cultures: Preparing Strangers for Ministry in Strange Places* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

Contrary to Davis, who wants to keep the term *missionary*, though its usage in mission circles is problematic,⁴⁴ there are those who have decided to drop it completely. For various reasons, they would rather speak of *mission partners*, *mission companions*, *international workers*, *global workers*, *message bearers*, *apostolic messengers* or simply *apostles*. While some of them want to stress the partnership aspect in mission or mission's cross-cultural dimension,⁴⁵ others use a term like *apostle* to emphasise the special gifting, experience and spiritual authority of those involved in missionary work.⁴⁶ Having said that, there are also churches, mission organisations and authors that have stopped using the phrase *missionary* because it has become a term with negative connotations.⁴⁷ If, in some parts of the world, missionaries past and present are increasingly portrayed as intolerant zealots who impose their views on other people, it is better to replace that designation, so their thinking goes.⁴⁸ Ryan Shaw explains:

The traditional term missionary carries a number of unhelpful negative stereotypes. During a ministry tour among several African and Asian nations, about a decade ago, I used missionary regularly as I spoke to campus ministry

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁵ See for example, J. Price, *World-Shaped Mission: Exploring New Frameworks for the Church of England in World Mission* (London: Church Publishing House, 2012), 61–62.

⁴⁶ See for example, B. Robinson, *Leaving All to Follow God's Call: What Happens When We say Yes to God* (Tampa: Robin House Publishing, 2010), 55–56.

⁴⁷ See for example, R. Love, "Identity with Integrity: Apostolic Ministry in the 21st Century," in R.D. Winter and S.C. Hawthorne (eds), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), 477.

⁴⁸ Davis, *Crossing Cultures*, 9.

fellowships, churches and Bible schools. But I quickly realized it was not communicating what I was intending. I met with several small groups and asked them what they thought a missionary was. None was able to capture the biblical essence. And several responses were reactions to the negative influences of colonialism. It became clear that a more effective term was needed. I asked for suggestions, and the term “message bearer” emerged.⁴⁹

Finally, many evangelical Christians today understand mission in much broader terms than their 19th-century predecessors, “whose primary objective was”, as Keith Ferdinando notes, “the making of disciples but who responded to the needs and suffering which existed among those to whom they carried the gospel.”⁵⁰ In some of these circles evangelism, church planting and leadership training are no longer seen as the central activities of mission but rather as some of many missional dimensions which are all equally important. Over a decade ago, Christopher Little spoke about “a trend in the horizontalization in mission” which could be noticed among evangelicals.⁵¹ He described it as follows:

First, evangelical theologians of mission are currently advocating that the missionary task involves securing justice for the poor, overcoming violence and

⁴⁹ R. Shaw, *Spiritual Equipping for Mission: Thriving as God’s Message Bearers* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 18–19.

⁵⁰ K. Ferdinando, “Mission: A Problem of Definition,” *Themelios* 33, 1 (2008), 55.

⁵¹ C. Little, “Christian Mission Today? Are We on A Slippery Slope? What Makes Mission Christian?,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 25, 2 (2008), 67.

*building peace, caring for the environment, and sharing in partnership (Kirk 1999). Second, evangelicals are now being told that mission entails launching businesses which bring in the kingdom of God.*⁵²

Today, some younger evangelicals have become so “passionate about living in community, demonstrating justice, serving others, and caring for creation”, as Dean Flemming observes, that they neglect evangelism and verbal proclamation of the gospel.⁵³ Since the traditional understanding of the term *missionary* does not reflect that paradigm shift it is felt by some evangelicals that the term cannot be used anymore or needs to be redefined.⁵⁴

However, not every missiological paradigm shift has such far-reaching consequences for the use of the term *missionary*. Thus, today mission is no longer understood as an exclusively Western enterprise, but as the global task of a global church. This new understanding of mission means, as Israel Oluwole Olofinjana writes, “that anyone, including Africans, can be involved in God’s mission and can be called by the missionary God to serve as a missionary in the West.”⁵⁵ A phrase that Olofinjana and others use to describe such missionaries from Africa, Asia and Latin America is

⁵² Little, “Christian Mission Today?,” 66.

⁵³ D. Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being Doing and Telling* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 13.

⁵⁴ Cf. A.S. Moreau, G.R. Corwin and G.B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 17.

⁵⁵ I.O. Olofinjana, “*Missio Dei* and African Mission: Towards Reverse Missiology,” in I.O. Olofinjana (ed), *African Voices: Towards African British Theologies* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2017), 34.

reverse missionaries. Although reverse missionaries tend to focus on their own diaspora communities, there is also a desire to reach out beyond the diaspora. Olofinjana explains the concepts of reverse mission and reverse missionaries as follows:

Reverse Mission is one aspect of mission and mission studies. It stems from a sense of humility and gratitude, acknowledging that those of us from former mission fields are directly or indirectly the spiritual fruit of European mission. It recognizes that mission is no longer the privilege of the Western church, but is now carried out from anywhere to everywhere; and that is why those of us from the Majority World have something to contribute to mission theology and practice, and are therefore intentionally sent, or through migratory factors (economic, educational and social) come, to reach out through holistic mission (evangelism and social action) to the different people (indigenes as well as other nationalities) in the Western world.⁵⁶

Anderson Moyo, who also uses the term, points to the universality of Christ as a key missiological concept.⁵⁷ He argues that reverse missionaries have an obligation to share the Christian message beyond the boundaries of their diasporic communities. To focus exclusively on their on their own people group is not an option. Moyo writes:

⁵⁶ Olofinjana, “*Missio Dei* and African Mission,” 34.

⁵⁷ A. Moyo, “Church-Planting Considerations for African Reverse Missionaries in Britain in the Postmodern Era,” in I.O. Olofinjana (ed), *African Voices: Towards African British Theologies* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2017), 67.

*Every believer has a mandate to share the good news to whoever willingly listens, regardless of gender, colour, background, caste, status or ethnicity. African reverse missionaries have a biblical responsibility to preach the good news to the community in which God has planted them in any part of the world. The Bible does not set any limitations to this universal mandate to share the good news.*⁵⁸

Similarly, Samuel Escobar speaks of less affluent missionaries from the two-thirds world as “missionaries from below”.⁵⁹ These missionaries from below have access to mission fields that are often closed to full-time Western missionaries. Escobar gives the example of Christian women from the Philippines who serve as domestic workers in rich oil-producing Arab countries.⁶⁰ These women seize the opportunities they have to share their faith in difficult circumstances. Escobar writes: “[...] in the midst of daily chores, they sing Christian songs and tell Bible stories to the children they babysit. As in biblical times, these women see themselves as witnesses for Christ in a foreign land.”⁶¹

Finally, like Olofinjana and Escobar, Tim Chester points out that anyone can become a missionary.⁶² Just as the first missionaries came from a variety of backgrounds, including fishermen, tax collectors and political activists, missionary service today is

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ S. Escobar, *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 16.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 15–16.

⁶¹ Ibid., 16.

⁶² T. Chester, *Mission Matters: Love Says Go* (Nottingham: IVP, 2015), 77–78.

not limited to those with a university degree. Chester describes the basic missionary qualifications as follows:

*You don't need to be some kind of super-Christian. You should already be serving God in your current situation. But you don't need to enjoy an hour-long quiet time every day, have perfect children and be leading five young people to Christ every week. Mission is for ordinary people. Here's what you need though – you need to know Jesus ... You need to have a passion for Jesus.*⁶³

IV. A Historical Understanding

When the first Protestant mission societies were established in England in the last decade of the 18th century, many of them, like the Baptist Missionary Society or the London Missionary Society, had the word *missionary* in their names. The Society for Missions to Africa and the East, founded in 1799, even changed its name to Church Missionary Society in 1812.⁶⁴ The word *missionary* certainly did not carry any negative undertone at that time. The Anglo-Saxon fathers of the Protestant mission movement, men like William Carey or Robert Morrison, had adopted it from German and Moravian pietists.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁴ J. Baker, "The Church Mission Society Story," in *Community Welcome: Community Handbook 2017* (Oxford: Church Mission Society, 2017), 6.

⁶⁵ Taylor, "Missionary," 644.

In 1705, the first two German missionaries left the city of Halle, the centre of Lutheran Pietism, at the request of the Danish King, Frederick IV.⁶⁶ After their ordination in Copenhagen, Heinrich Plütschau and Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg went to the Danish colony of Tranquebar in India.⁶⁷ They arrived there a year later, eighty-seven years before William Carey would set foot on Indian soil.⁶⁸ In the following years, Ziegenbalg learned Tamil and started preaching in that language.⁶⁹ In addition, he founded not only schools and orphanages but also a theological seminary for the training of Tamil Christians, translated the New Testament and wrote a Tamil grammar.⁷⁰

Daniel Jeyarja notes that at the beginning of the 18th century the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 did not play any role as a motivating factor for overseas missionary work.⁷¹ However, with Ziegenbalg and Plütschau this changed. Just before they left for India, Plütschau declared: “We will go in the name of the Lord. If God would save a single person, our journey would be rewarded adequately.”⁷² Plütschau and Ziegenbalg clearly saw it as their central task as missionaries to help people to come

⁶⁶ R.E. Olson and C.T.C. Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 56.

⁶⁷ R. Hille, “Ziegenbalg, Bartholomäus,” in A.S. Moreau (ed), *Evangelical Dictionary of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 1043.

⁶⁸ Olson and Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 56.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.; Hille, “Ziegenbalg, Bartholomäus,” 1043.

⁷¹ D. Jeyarja, *Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg: The Father of Modern Protestant Mission: An Indian Assessment* (New Delhi: The Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2006), 59.

⁷² Quoted by Jeyarja, *Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg*, 59.

to faith in Christ. Yet, their approach, Ziegenbalg was convinced, had to be respectful and culturally sensitive. This is how the German missionary once addressed his Tamil listeners:

*If you wish to become Christian, we will not require you to imitate us Europeans in wearing clothes, eating, drinking, and other external things. You will have the freedom to do the things that your country requires. We don't want to change the external appearance of your body, but to look for the transformation of your heart and mind which alone means real conversion.*⁷³

Ziegenbalg and his fellow missionary did not see it as their charge to westernise Indian culture or support any Danish colonial aspirations.⁷⁴ Instead, they wanted to demonstrate, as Jeyarja notes, “God’s love in action to positively benefit their fellow human beings.”⁷⁵ Ziegenbalg served in Tranquebar until his death in 1719.⁷⁶ With his understanding of what it means to be a missionary, Ziegenbalg became the role model for generations of Protestant missionaries who came after him. Like Ziegenbalg, these missionaries saw themselves first and foremost as ambassadors of Christ who worked for the benefit of people who needed to hear and accept the Christian gospel. They demonstrated what we can call a *holistic* approach to mission, however, without

⁷³ Olson and Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 57.

⁷⁴ Jeyarja, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, 59.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Hille, “Ziegenbalg, Bartholomaeus,” 1044.

embracing the missiological holism that is promoted and practiced by so many today.⁷⁷

J. Mark Terry writes:

*The early missionaries preached the gospel, but they also started schools, hospitals, leprosariums, orphanages, and agricultural stations – all with the intent of winning the lost to Christ and ministering to their social and physical needs. Some of the institutions were established as means of converting local people, while the missionaries established other institutions because of the Christian compassion they felt for the suffering they encountered.*⁷⁸

We find this view of mission, for example, expressed in a letter dated 18th February 1842 which was addressed to the Scottish missionary David Livingstone by two leaders of the London Missionary Society, Arthur Tidman and J.J. Freeman. They wrote:

We rejoice to think you are now amongst the people to whose welfare your life is devoted, and have begun to put forth those efforts which, by the blessing of the Most High, will promote at once their social and spiritual interest. We indulge a grateful persuasion that your labors will in various ways produce a large amount of good amongst the Native tribes, and at no distant day become, through Divine grace, instrumental to the salvation of many. We entreat you to give your close and

⁷⁷ Cf. J.M. Terry, “In Response to Ralph Winter’s ‘The Future of Evangelicals in Mission,’” in D.J. Hesselgrave and E. Stetzer, *Missionshift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010), 234.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

*constant attention to the Native language until you acquire that knowledge of it, both for literary and colloquial purposes, which is so essential to your efficiency and success as a Missionary of the Cross.*⁷⁹

Similarly, in his famous book *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, first published in 1792, William Carey argued that missionaries had to be highly motivated and willing to make sacrifices. Missionaries, he declared, “must enter with all their hearts into the spirit of their mission” and “must be willing to leave all the comforts of life behind them, and to encounter all the hardships of a torrid, or frigid climate”.⁸⁰ Furthermore, Carey expected missionaries to learn indigenous languages and make friends with the people they sought to introduce to the Christian faith.⁸¹ He stressed the importance of sensitivity and explicitly warned missionaries against any form of superiority as this would be counterproductive to their mission. Carey wrote:

They must endeavour to convince them that it was their good alone, which induced them to forsake their friends, and all the comforts of their native country. They must be very careful not to resent injuries which may be offered to them, nor to think highly of themselves, so as to despise the poor heathens, and by those means

⁷⁹ Quoted in I. Schapera (ed), *Livingstone's Missionary Correspondence 1841-1856* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 13.

⁸⁰ W. Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (Frankfurt: Outlook Verlag, 2018), 39.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

*lay a foundation for their resentment, or rejection of the gospel. They must take every opportunity of doing them good...*⁸²

The motivation, sensitivity and humility that Carey and Ziegenbalg demonstrated and promoted indicate that they possessed a substantial degree of cross-cultural competence, which was and still is an absolute must for all who regard themselves as missionaries.

V. Conclusion

Today the phrase *missionary* triggers a variety of responses and even in Christian circles its use is disputed. While some people hold that it has become a discredited term others argue that it no longer reflects their broader understanding of mission. Those who use it find support both in the Scriptures and mission history. Given the similarity of the phrase *missionary* and the biblical term *apostle* one can surely argue that missionaries are sent to continue with the apostolic task without claiming the same authority as the Twelve or the Apostle Paul. Put another way, at the heart of the missionary task lies the preaching of the gospel, the planting of churches and the training of church leaders. This work might be accompanied by other activities, such as institutional social or medical programmes, but it is always carried out with sensitivity, respect and humility.

Dr Thorsten Prill is a minister of the Rhenish Church in Namibia and a BCMS Crosslinks mission partner.

⁸² Ibid., 39–40.

BOOK REVIEWS

Christianity and Science

Herman Bavinck, Translators & Editors: N. Gray Sutanto, James Eglinton, Cory C. Brock, Crossway, 2023, 236 pp, h/b, (£19.75 hive.co.uk)

Is there such a thing as *Christian Science*? Dutch neo-Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) contends that there is. In this newly translated work, Bavinck observes a growing dissatisfaction with the trajectory of the sciences [*wetenschap*]. Many, including Bavinck, desire science to be based on a robust Christian foundation. To this end, Bavinck sought to formulate an understanding of the positivist and Christian views of science.

It is important to stress that Bavinck's use of the term "*wetenschap*" encompasses more than the natural or physical sciences. It should be understood as denoting scholarship or academic disciplines.

In Chapter 2, Bavinck explores the nature of truth and Christianity as a religion of truth. God is truth implies that all that comes from him is truth. This stands in marked contrast to the wisdom of the world, which is considered foolishness. The early Christians stood antithetical to the world. Philosophy is incapable of making known the truth; this is primarily because humanity is so corrupted by sin. As Bavinck observes, "Science [*wetenschap*] can thus teach only a little, and that little only to a few. It does not know the way to truth, for it does not know Christ, and thus leads to dead ends." (57). However, Bavinck does not denigrate reason; rather, he sees it as a gift from God.

Chapter 3 examines some defects that clung to Christian Science, these include the tearing apart of faith and reason, science became a “servant of theology”, and the neglect of empiricism. The result of these defects led to science considering “independence as its ideal”

Chapters 4-6 delve into the issue of positivism. Comtean positivism was prevalent when Bavinck was writing. It later morphed into logical positivism, which, although in decline, remains influential today. Bavinck does a masterly job of showing the incoherence of positivism. He demonstrates that it is self-refuting. Positivism maintained that knowledge can only arise from what is empirically verifiable. It is a form of naturalism and denies any form of revelation. It is reductionistic, reducing reality to the observable and measurable, and it denies the richness and depth of human experience and reality. Positivism claims to be a presuppositionless science. Yet, as Bavinck demonstrates, it is a philosophical system that presupposes the reliability of the senses, the objectivity of what is observed, and a unity and order — all of which presuppose metaphysical assumptions, which positivism denies.

Although Bavinck is highly critical of empiricism in the form of positivism, he does not deny the need for and importance of “normal empirical thinking” (107). The significance of everyday knowledge is underscored in Chapter 7. This is a hinge chapter. Having demolished the pretension of positivism, he establishes the need for empirical knowledge as a basis not only for the sciences but also everyday life. He highlights that normal empirical thinking precedes scientific knowledge. As he

observes, farming preceded scientific agriculture. He stresses that scientists are human and have human failings.

He then moves on to discuss the natural sciences (Chapter 8), the humanities (Chapter 9) and the theological sciences (Chapter 10). He reiterates that the natural sciences proceed from philosophical convictions. In true neo-Calvinist fashion, he emphasises the organic nature of the sciences and the unity within diversity of creation: the “world is one whole yet endlessly differentiated”. By “organic” he emphasises the interconnected and dynamic nature of science. The unity within diversity means that it avoids pantheistic fusion and deistic disintegration. Each of the sciences have their own character and each their own law. There is no one single scientific method.

He perceived the humanities as being tied to perceptible phenomena, such as manuscripts, monuments, art, institutions, and so forth. He dismisses the suggestion of the humanities as a historical study, as the natural sciences have historical elements, geology is a case in point.

In Chapter 10, the role of theology is examined. In particular he addresses the question: is theology a science? He concludes it is. At the time of Bavinck's writing the Dutch academy under the 1876 Higher Education Act subsumed theology under religious science. Hence the need for Bavinck to defend theology against its poor reputation.

Positivism denied any form of revelation outside of the measurable and observable. This is obviously in direct opposition to Christianity, where revelation is key. Hence,

in Chapter 11 he deals with revelation, focusing on its source. For Bavinck all of Creation is revelation. As an organic whole, Creation displays aspects of God. He rejects the notion that different religions are manifestations of God. All religions have different and opposed ideas of God, sin, and redemption and he rightly stresses the uniqueness of Christ. The key question of the age is, “What do you think of Christ?”

Chapter 12, “The blessings of Christianity for science”, discusses the role of religious belief in the scientific enterprise: “we cannot possibly be neutral, unprejudiced researchers” (183). Bavinck is in no doubt: although science did not arise through Christianity, “Christianity saved science” (186). This is because science rests on the assumption that there is an eternal, knowable, unchangeable truth. Science is also rooted in a search, and a love, for truth.

All this is foundational for his final chapter: “A Christian university”. Given all that he has discussed before, he sees as imperative the need for a Christian university. As Bavinck has it: “Ultimately, these principles regarding the relationship between Christianity and science call for embodiment in a Christian university” (205).

Most notably this work lacks any explicit discussion of common grace. The focus appears to be on the antithesis; in particular, the antithesis between Christianity and positivist views of science. Thus, disjunction between different approaches to science is crucial for the necessity of a distinctly Christian university.

Bavinck argues that “theologians must themselves take the lead in philosophy”. In this book, Bavinck provides an excellent example of how this can be done. He engages

with the key philosophical arguments prevalent in his time and shows how they are left wanting in their approach to the sciences compared with the Christian perspective.

In many ways, his approach presages Dooyeweerd. Bavinck's emphasis on everyday knowledge preceding science, that religious convictions drive scientific research, the rejection of presuppositional-less science, and theology as a science are all ideas developed by Dooyeweerd. Although, Dooyeweerd would take issue with Bavinck's view of theology as the queen of the sciences.

The title, *Christelijke wetenschap* in Dutch, is literally translated as "Christian Science". The "and" is added in this translation presumably to distance it from Mary Baker Eddy's sect. However, the *and* gives the impression that Christianity *and* science are separate, which runs counter to Bavinck's integrated organic view.

The translators have exhibited commendable proficiency in making this important text by Bavinck accessible to a broader audience, not least in their introduction and the explanatory footnotes. This seminal work by Bavinck merits considerable scholarly attention for its foundational contributions to a Christian approach to the sciences and the importance of Christian universities.

Steve Bishop is a Kirby Laing Centre Associate Fellow, a Trustee of ThinkingFaith Network, and the maintainer of www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk website.

The Holy Spirit

Robert Letham, *Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2023.*

Robert Letham will not need any introduction to most readers of *Foundations*. He is an erudite scholar and prolific writer, and he is also well known to regular attendees of the Affinity Theological Studies Conference, where he has spoken several times in the past and is due to be one of our speakers at the 2025 Conference, entitled *Great God of Wonders* – make sure you have booked your place!

This book on the Holy Spirit is the first volume of a planned “Trinitarian Trilogy” to place alongside Letham’s masterly work, *The Holy Trinity*, published in 2005.¹ The most obvious question from the outset is this: why has Letham chosen to deal with the Spirit first, rather than the Father, as we might expect? No specific answer is supplied in this work, and it would be hazardous for any reviewer to attempt any kind of speculation. We await clues from subsequent volumes!

Another surprising and indeed provocative feature of this book, possibly related to his decision to deal with the Holy Spirit first, is the way in which Letham tackles his subject from an historical-theological angle in Part 1 prior to surveying the biblical data in Part 2. This methodology seems to reflect Letham’s distinctive understanding of

¹ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2005).

revelation and inscripturation, as set out in his *Systematic Theology*.² This should not be taken to mean that Letham places the tradition of the church on a level above or even equal to Scripture, which he acknowledges must always be the authoritative “norming norm”, but it does exemplify Letham’s high ecclesiology and his appreciation of the catholicity of the church from the earliest times, in both East and West.

Letham’s approach may deter some readers who, for the most part, are far more at home with their Bible than with their Irenaeus, Basil or Cyril – or at least they think that they are! – but patient study of Part 1 will be rewarding (I had to read through it twice, very carefully). Familiarity with the vocabulary and themes opened up in Part 1 will enable readers to gain far more from the rest of the book. Very helpfully, key theological terms are printed in bold, and are listed at the end of every chapter, and at the end of the book is a Glossary which explains every each of them, as well as the contributions of key theologians, in a concise fashion. It would be very helpful to read this Glossary before attempting Part 1.

Letham deals skilfully with the weighty subject of the *Filioque* Controversy, which culminated in the Great Schism between East and West in 1054. He concludes that

² Letham explains that “The WCF distinguishes between the Lord revealing himself to his church and, in doing so, revealing his will. While the two are inseparable, the distinction is important, for at all stages of redemptive history God progressively reveals who he is. It also distinguishes between revelation and inscripturation. The revelation precedes the Bible.” Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019), 64.

*The Cyrilline phrase from the Father in the Son seems to me to express the mutual indwelling of the three, avoids any residual subordination, and also directs us to Jesus' baptism. It also avoids a focus on the Spirit apart from Christ, for we receive the Spirit in Christ.*³

He refers to ongoing discussions between East and West, though there is no imminent likelihood of any startling breakthrough. More to the point, for the benefit of the reader, Letham's concern throughout is to maintain the unity of the Godhead whilst strenuously guarding against modalism. The three persons of the Trinity are equal and identical as to their being; they are differentiated only according to their distinctive missions, which are reflected in the order of their processions. Even so, their respective missions necessarily involve all three persons because their works are inseparable.

Part 2 contains several interesting discussions, not least in relation to John Owen's understanding of the ministry of the Spirit in the earthly life of Jesus, enabling him to learn obedience as a human being. Letham addresses the criticism, raised by some, that Owen was guilty of an "incipient Nestorianism" by implying that "the Spirit empowered the incarnate Christ while the Son who had taken his humanity into union was passive", though he could have dealt with this charge more thoroughly, especially

³ *The Holy Spirit*, 57.

bearing in mind the widespread influence of Owen in this whole field of Christology.⁴

We may have to await another volume in this series for further elaboration.

Characteristically, Letham gives prominent place to the gathered church and its worship, and especially emphasises the sacraments, believing this to be necessary “since the sacraments have been neglected in recent generations under the influence of post-Enlightenment individualism.”⁵ By inveighing against the widely understood separation between water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism, between sign and reality, he strongly repudiates what he sees as the gnostic tendency of “disparaging matter”. The important New Testament distinction, he maintains, is not between “water baptism” and “Spirit baptism”, but between “the powerless baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus, efficacious by the Spirit.” This section repays careful reading and rereading because it very much goes against the flow of much contemporary western evangelicalism. Lest, however, readers suspect that Letham is dismantling the entire Reformation, he insists that “[t]his does not mean that God’s grace in baptism is given automatically ... Grace is not given to a baptized person on the grounds of baptism; rather, it is due to the electing grace of God in Christ. That grace is given in baptism ‘to those to whom it belongs.’ Not all who are baptized will be saved.”⁶ This is important and necessary clarification.

⁴ Ibid., 129-30.

⁵ Ibid., 180.

⁶ Ibid., 179-87.

Letham strongly emphasises the unique historical nature of Pentecost, that it should be seen along with Christ's "death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation" as "a theological unity".⁷ This conviction shapes his approach to some of the more controversial sections towards the end of the book. Whilst many readers will sympathise with Letham's criticisms of Martyn Lloyd-Jones' views in relation to a "great postconversion (*sic*) effusion of the Spirit", and the latter's overdependence on historical examples, "often in Wales,"⁸ I am somewhat surprised that Letham barely engages at all with the history and theology of revival; he could easily have interacted with Jonathan Edwards' considerable work on the subject – Edwards does not even merit a place in the *Index of Names* – as well as important and seminal contributions by W. B. Sprague and Iain Murray. Chapter 11, *Discerning the Spirit's Redemptive Work*, is disappointingly short, a mere seven pages.⁹ It is tempting to ask whether the brevity of Letham's treatment is itself a reflection of his rejection of "post-Enlightenment individualism".

That said, the most absorbing section of this book is the lengthy *Appendix* which deals with *Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Renewal*.¹⁰ Tracing the history of these movements from Azusa Street, Los Angeles, in 1906, and differentiating carefully

⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 248-49.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 255-61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 263-97.

between Oneness Pentecostalism, Charismatic Renewal and the so-called ‘Third Wave’, Letham demonstrates that “Pentecostalism has no uniform theology or agreement on the details”. He refers to Frank Macchia who “underlines the point that Pentecostal theology cannot be identified with Protestantism. It is a new and different form of Christianity in addition to Rome, Orthodoxy and Protestantism.” This is a bold, if not devastating, summary, but Letham backs it up by proving that Pentecostalism is “a rejection of the classic Protestant doctrines (*sic*) of justification. Rather, Macchia adds, it is ‘an eschatological gift of new creation through the Spirit of God,’ a statement drawn from Ernst Käsemann.” Having already investigated the question of whether the miraculous spiritual gifts of the New Testament are substantially the same as Pentecostal and charismatic manifestations in the last century – and concluded to all intents and purposes that they are not – Letham also identifies the place of mysticism and individualism within these movements.

This portion of the book may well prove to be the one which is pored over the most, and which contributes to the greatest amount of discussion; it would be a healthy thing if this were the case. Letham is far from uncharitable; he acknowledges that “[m]any Pentecostal and charismatic churches hold firmly to the apostolic gospel. Nevertheless”, he continues, “a movement that has no discernible distinctive theology and is based not on the textuality of the Bible but rather in experience cannot, as such, be judged to be

in harmony with the biblical gospel.”¹¹ This is a strong claim, but a timely one, and its implications need to be considered within ecclesiastical circles beyond those which identify as Pentecostal or charismatic.

Like his other works, this book is a treasure trove to be enjoyed, historically and indeed aesthetically as well as doctrinally. We await the next two instalments with great anticipation.

Paul Yeulett is the minister at Grove Chapel Camberwell and Chair of the Affinity Theological Study Conference.

¹¹ *The Holy Spirit*, 297.

Providing for Pastors:

How to Give Time, Energy, and Money to Support the Work of Pastors

Jeremy Walker, Evangelical Press (2023), 144pp, ([£12.99 epbooks.org](https://www.evangelicalpress.org/))

Providing for Pastors is a brief primer on a subject rarely covered in popular publications: compensating clergymen. The author of this work, Jeremy Walker, has served as a pastor of Maidenbower Baptist Church in Crawley since 2003 and is the book review editor for *The Banner of Truth Magazine*. Other titles authored by Walker include *The Brokenhearted Evangelist* (2012), *The New Calvinism Considered* (2016), and *Passing the Baton* (2023). At the time of writing this article, *Providing for Pastors* is the first book listed on the homepage of Evangelical Press.

This short volume, penned last year by Walker, aims to provide a biblical foundation for congregational giving. This publication is broken into six sections, the first half of which sees Walker lead his readers through a logical progression of reasons why pastors must be financially supported by their churches. Observing this series of arguments payoff as the book progresses is one of the greatest joys of reading this concise guide. Walker writes that “providing for pastors is a simple matter of obedience to Christ in his word” (41). Thankfully, readers are given thorough biblical support as to why this is a “simple matter” in this title.

Walker begins by demonstrating that Christians are to give. As those who have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them, they should have hearts that reflect the charitable nature of Christ, as he gave up his life for them. Therefore, believers are to give their time,

labour, and material resources for the sake of Christ. The question raised by Walker at this point is where a Christian's efforts should be primarily directed toward. The answer provided forms the main thesis of the first chapter: We should primarily labour for the sake of our local churches. While contributing to other organisations and bodies is not off-limits to a believer, the congregation to which the Christian belongs must be the main recipient of their contributions.

Walker then poses a new question: What should a church (the recipient of the believer's funds) primarily devote itself to? The "preaching of the word of God" (16) is the answer given. By drawing from key New Testament texts, the author skilfully demonstrates how vital this focus is for churches. While other aims such as building maintenance and developing an online presence might be tempting distractions for congregations, "The first concern of any church should be the spiritual health of its members," (18) writes Walker. This spiritual care is accomplished by supporting those who preach. Here, we can see Walker's argument come together: Christians must give to the church to compensate those who work diligently for its well-being through preaching. Additionally, those who oversee and determine a pastor's salary must do so generously, when possible.

Following the establishment of the principles found in the early chapters, the latter half of this title focuses on the practical. One interesting scenario that is presented explores how a pastor is to teach these ideas without sounding self-serving. After all,

elders are not to be “lovers of money”¹ and the possible appearance of greed may deter pastors from wanting to talk about pastoral compensation. Walker suggest several possible solutions to this problem but assures his readers that teaching on this matter is “part of a preacher’s duty” to teach “the whole counsel of God” (43). Other issues briefly handled by Walker include compensation for a visiting preacher, providing book budgets for ministers, retirement funds, housing situations, church mergers, and cooperation between sister churches. These various topics prove to be an invaluable resource for those who handle and consider church finances.

Overall, this is an excellent read for those interested in this subject. While this short guide could be completed in one lengthy sitting, it uses its pages efficiently to cover the issue at hand. The biggest critique I can offer this book regards its length. While Evangelical Press lists this title as having 144 pages on its website, the edition that I hold in my hand ends on page 85. What caused this discrepancy? I cannot say. However, I would have enjoyed 59 more pages of content.

Walker makes several references to works of the past in *Providing for Pastors*, which is appreciated. However, this is a topic which could be explored in greater length and detail by surveying what Protestants have historically taught on this matter. Such an addition would be warmly welcomed if a future expanded edition of this title is to be released and would add substantially to the page count.

¹ 1 Tim 3:3.

Length aside, Pastor Walker has given the church a valuable resource in *Providing for Pastors*. This book could potentially have a great impact on prosperity of many preachers and their families, perhaps convincing congregations to compensate their shepherds more fairly. For this fact alone, I am grateful for Pastor Walker's efforts, and I look forward to reading his next publication.

R.A. Miller is a secondary teacher at Central Baptist Christian School in Brandon, FL, USA.

*This Earthly Life Matters:
The Promise of Arnold A. van Ruler for Ecotheology*

Arnold A. Van Ruler. Ernst M. Conradie (editor), Dirk van Keulen (Introduction) Douglas G. Lawrie (Translator). Pickwick Publications, 2023, 284pp, p/b. (£29.99 hive.co.uk)

Arnold Albert Van Ruler (1908-1970), a professor of dogmatics at the University of Utrecht, is little known in the Anglophone world. Primarily because not many of his works have been translated. The few that have been translated into English, include *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics* (1989), *The Christian Church and the Old Testament* (1971) and *I Believe* (2015).¹ There have been several doctoral dissertations on Van Ruler.²

Sleddens and Wissink described Van Ruler as “one of the greatest representatives of Dutch Reformed thought”.³

Van Ruler’s approach has been described as “creation theology” (W. H. Velema), and he has been called “a theologian of earthly reality” (L. J. Van den Brom). It is good

¹ Excerpts from some of Van Ruler’s books have been translated by Ruben Alvarado - can be found here: <http://84.80.12.175/commonlawreview/theological/van-ruler/>

² These include: T. G. Hommes, *Sovereignty and Saeculum: Arnold A. Van Ruler’s Theocratic Theology. Ph.D. Diss.*, Harvard University, 1966; Gareth Hodnett, *Ontology and the New Being: The Relationship between Creation and Redemption in the Theology of Paul Tillich and A.A. van Ruler. PhD Thesis.* University of Stellenbosch, 2002; Allan J. Jansen, *Kingdom, Office and Church: A Study of A.A. Van Ruler’s Doctrine of Ecclesiastical Office.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); and J. P. De Vries, *Een theocratisch visioen: De verhouding van religie en politiek volgens A.A. van Ruler.* [A Theocratic Vision. The relationship between religion and politics according to A.A. van Ruler] (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Academic, 2011).

³ W. Th. G. Sleddens and J. Wissink (1975) *De Structuur Van De Theologie Van Dr. A. A. Van Ruler, Bijdragen*, 36(3)(1975), 234. DOI: 10.1080/00062278.1975.10597064.

then to see this volume dedicated to Van Ruler's approach to ecotheology. Van Ruler's thought was largely shaped by theocratic ideas – his “main thesis was that the Torah has by no means been abolished in the Christian system , but rather has been established and made effective for the nations”.⁴ These led him to be involved with the beginnings of the “Protestantse Unie” (PU) which was founded to promote the theocratic vision of P. J. Hoedemaker (1839-1910), whose writings had a great influence on him. Particularly Hoedemaker's view of a State church. De Vries notes that “Besides as a political design of life, Van Ruler also uses theocracy as a structure of theological thought and as an encompassing sense of life.”⁵ There are only some glimpses of this in this volume.

Dirk van Keulen who contributes a useful introduction to this volume and a brief biographical sketch, had edited in Dutch *Van Ruler's Collected Works*. Selections from these, translated into English by Douglas G. Lawrie make up this volume. Topics include essays on the themes of God, creation, providence, being human, sin, this earthly life, and animal protection. Topics have been included to show Van Ruler's significance for ecotheology.

⁴ Ibid., 235.

⁵ De Vries *Een theocratisch visioen*, 327.

Van Ruler is not an easy read. Some of the selections in this volume comprise mainly bullet points. He does come up with some great aphorisms though. A small selection will illustrate:

- God did not create me in order to get me down on my knees and to extend grace to me as a sinner.
- The Creator is revealed in creation – that is the mystery that evokes worship.
- Not only Holy Scripture is the word of God; the entire created reality is that too.
- Heaven is created reality. Just as much as the earth is.
- Our knowledge of God is never direct and unmediated. It is always mediated.
- Even when we question anthropologically – and question thoroughly – we automatically question theologically.
- the Creator \neq creation
- The world is indeed a “cosmos” but in the sense that it is a jewel, a bracelet on the arm of the Creator.

Conradie’s introductory essay included here provides an excellent overview of Van Ruler’s approach. He observes: “Van Ruler’s polemical intention is clear, namely, to affirm creation as good, also eschatologically. There is no need to add something to creation or to replace it by something else. There is also no need or possibility to escape from being a creature.”

One of Van Ruler’s key points is that of re-creation. A point made by Herman Bavinck, who understood re-creation as a restoration not a repristination. As Conradie

discerns: “Van Ruler’s oeuvre may indeed be understood as an extrapolation and eschatological radicalization of Bavinck’s position.” And elsewhere, Dirk van Keulen has described Van Ruler’s approach as “a radicalised reception of Bavinck’s central thought that ‘grace does not abolish nature, but affirms and restores it’”.⁶

This notion of re-creation as well as his emphasis on creation are key elements that provide a useful approach to ecotheology. He has a strong doctrine of creation. He is clear that the world was created by God and thus it is God’s world. Creation was an intentional and conscious act of God. Creation is not God, not divine and not demonic, not an emanation of God. It was created, *ex nihilo*, from nothing. He makes an interesting observation:

In paganism and philosophy the world is necessary, but it is not good; it is an unavoidable drama in which human beings suffer. In Christianity, the exact opposite holds: the world is not necessary—it could also not have been there—but that it is there depends on the goodness of God and therefore it is in its totality a good thing.

As well as a focus on creation he maintains the importance of eschatology, in particular he writes: “God will not create a new world to put it in the place of the present

⁶ D. van Keulen, “Leads for ecotheology in Arnold A. van Ruler’s work”, in E. M. Conradie (ed.), *Creation and Salvation* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 206).

world. God will renew this old world of ours and this renewed world will be the new world.”

Overall, this is an excellent introduction to Van Ruler and provides some important insights into a creation-affirming Christianity.

Steve Bishop is a trustee of ThinkingFaith Network and maintains the neo-Calvinist website www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk



Affinity is a partnership of gospel churches, evangelical agencies and individual Christians committed to working together to advance the work of the gospel in the UK and Ireland and around the world.

ISSN: 2046-9071

www.affinity.org.uk

  @affinitytalks

office@affinity.org.uk

PO Box 905
Haywards Heath
RH16 9TJ

07936 048259

affinity
gospel churches in partnership

Registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales with registered charity number 1192455