

CENTER FOR  
PASTOR THEOLOGIANS  
JOURNAL



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**Essays on  
Hope**

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# CENTER FOR PASTOR THEOLOGIANS JOURNAL

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## EDITORIAL

At the Center for Pastor Theologians, we are engaged in a project reflecting on virtue formation. The essays contained in this volume of the *Center for Pastor Theologians Journal* pursue a deeper understanding of hope and how followers of Jesus are formed in hope. This volume continues our project of bringing theology into conversation with the findings of the social sciences, finding in that conversation areas of agreement, as well as places of tension, that enable us to develop a richer understanding of the role of hope in the life of discipleship to Jesus.

Hope is a word we use regularly in daily life to describe an aspiration, a wish, or a dream of something we long for in the future. To hope for something is to have a desire for that thing to come to pass. And while this definition certainly resonates with the biblical and theological usage of hope, when we ground our understanding of hope in the narrative of God's work in Christ and the Spirit, a much fuller picture emerges.

Biblically, hope is not a wish or a dream; hope is a settled conviction that what is not yet will be, that the promises God has made will come to pass. As such, a hopeful life is one lived from this settled conviction. Biblical hope is fundamentally eschatological; it orients our hearts and minds to the reality of God that calls us to live in the world of appearances and suffering as those whose lives are built on the foundation of hope for the promised eternity in God's presence. The essays in this volume of the *CPTJ* explore many dimensions of a hopeful Christianity.

In the first essay, Phil Anderas offers a reflection on the formation of a pastor theologian in hope, rooted in his thoughtful engagement of themes from Luther's theology. Anderas encourages us to see that meditation, prayer, suffering, and bearing the cross are the formative elements of hopeful pastors, far more than degrees and "success." Ultimately, this is a call to theological formation in hope in its proper object: the word of God that kills and makes alive. All true theologians must pass through this forge and so become hopeful servants of the Lord who has sent his word.

Next, Nathan Barczy offers pastoral insight into cultivating hope in an age of AI. In this article, Barczy, who serves as a chaplain at MIT, offers us expert analysis of the growth and impact of AI on our world. Barczy calls us to consider what it means to be human, how reflection on AI can help us to sharpen our understanding of the biblical vision of *imago Dei*, and how engaging these conversations can shape us as a hopeful people.

In the following essay, Tim Fox offers a fascinating dialogue between the theme of hope and the life of God in 1 Timothy and the Reformed scholar Petrus van Mastricht. Fox suggests that the interweaving of hope and God's life runs through 1 Timothy as a critical theme. He then connects this theme to the work of a Reformer, showing in action how the biblical text informed Mastricht as a pastor theologian. Through this dialogue, Fox calls us to our work as those whose hope is anchored in the living God.

Chris Ganski then provides us with an eschatologically infused vision of a church that witnesses to the hope that is ours in Christ in an age of despair. Beginning with evidence of the currently increasing despair, Ganski encourages us to reflect on the hopefulness which should characterize the church in exile. He calls us to honestly consider how we too often place our hope in this-worldly objects. When the church does this, we easily fall into the surrounding despair, thus failing to offer the witness to hope that is our calling. Ganski concludes his essay by grounding our hope in the eschatological reality of Christ's resurrection, encouraging the church to fulfill our vocation of hopefulness that is so desperately needed today.

In the concluding essay, David Morlan directs our attention to the immediate context of the post-Covid world, offering a vision for the church's mission of spiritual transformation. Morlan centers this vision in the dynamics of our larger culture and its impact on the church. The "Twittering Machine" has created a culture of narcissism, and the church has fallen into these narcissistic tendencies. To break out of the celebrity culture which has taken root in the church, Morlan calls us to be converted back to Christianity, to refocus on the proper mission of the church by emphasizing a non-manipulative evangelism that calls the church out of her self-focus. This focus on conversion is itself a means of conversion for the church, who will then be freed to pursue her hopeful mission.

Our mission at the CPT is to equip pastors to be theologians for today's complex world. A world such as this, marked by a persistent posture of fear, needs a church rooted in hope, and so needs pastors who are equipped to shepherd in hope. We commend these essays to you and pray that they will encourage all who are engaged in the pastoral vocation that is undergirded by hope.

Dr. Joel Lawrence  
*Executive Director*  
*The Center for Pastor Theologians*



## SPES INVICTA FACIT THEOLOGUM: THE VIRTUE OF HOPE IN THE FORGE OF THE THEOLOGIAN

PHIL ANDERAS<sup>1</sup>

### I. INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther is known more for his evangelical emphasis on the gift of faith than for his mystical teaching on the virtue of hope, and rightly so. As Irenaeus is the holy church's *doctor Incarnationis*, Athanasius of the Trinity, Ambrose of the mysteries, Augustine of predestination and grace and love and the two cities and the saint's battle against his flesh, Cyril of the real union of the two natures in Christ, Maximus of the integrity of each in its distinction from the other, Thomas of creation and virtue, Calvin of mother Church, Owen of mystical union, Kierkegaard of the self at peace with itself because it rests transparently in God, Dostoevsky of sin, Chesterton of magnanimous mirth not only in man but in God, Bonhoeffer of life-together-in-discipleship no matter the cost, von Balthasar of beauty, and John Paul the Great of human persons embodied as male-and-female, so Luther is our *doctor iustificationis*, our greatest teacher (after St. Paul and John) of justification by faith alone.

Of course, the faith that justifies because it apprehends Christ is not an active but a passive virtue. The whole point of *this* gift—which the Spirit gives where and when he wishes through preaching and sacrament—is to enable an otherwise spiritually-incapacitated child of Adam to receive The Gift That Surpasses All Others: “For God so loved that world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). A strange virtue, that, which does nothing, receives everything, and makes condemned men sing and dance for joy like the children free grace has made them. You can almost see poor Aristotle shaking his head, Pelagius smirking, John Eck enraged, and Stanley Hauerwas telling you to get serious and read MacIntyre. But even if 10,000 aristocrats of the Spirit (with Tom Wright himself at their head) come to us preaching another gospel, we poor sinners will remember the apostolic anathema, sing a verse or two of “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less,” and go on dancing for joy.

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<sup>1</sup> Phil Anderas is Senior Pastor at St. John Lutheran Church in Roanoke, VA.

But believe it or not, Luther was quite versatile as a teacher of Christian doctrine, and as exegete, and as *Seelsorger*. The Lord gave him a deep, commanding grasp of the orthodox faith. He knew the Scriptures inside and out. And he had his scars. He knew a thing or two about life in the warzone “between God and the devil” (as Heiko Oberman subtitled his biography);<sup>2</sup> like holy Jacob, brother Martin had striven with God and men and demons, and prevailed. Occasional exaggerations about the Pope aside (who after all had a death-warrant on Luther’s head) and inexcusable grumpy-old-man-rants against the Jews justly condemned (and Luther was neither the first nor the last anti-Semite in our family history, alas), if you work through the works of Luther’s last decade in particular you will find a “treasure trove” of insightful exegesis, dogmatic theology, spiritual teaching, and practical wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

When Julius Köstlin made that claim in the nineteenth century, he had the sprawling *Lectures on Genesis* (eight volumes in English translation) especially in mind. The lectures are Luther’s last great work: he was 51 when he began at Gen 1 in June 1535—already an old man by the standards of the day—62 and months from death when he nearly finished Gen 50 in November 1545. It was a massive investment of time and energy, clearly, and, one supposes, an intentionally-chosen teaching focus for the last leg of his pilgrimage. What did Luther think he was doing in these “lectures”?

John Maxfield argues for an ecclesial goal.<sup>4</sup> Most of his students were training to serve as pastors in the evangelical Church, and Luther invested the last decade of his life preparing them for faithful/courageous Word-and-sacrament ministry. That is right, I think, but not quite complete. For at the heart of Luther’s vision for pastoral ministry was the last thing you might expect: holiness. A pastor worth his salt has to know God as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew him. He must be on *intimate terms* with El Shaddai, who for reasons known to him alone delighted in these ancient Bedouins and sent his Son to carry on famously with them, sit at table with them, and on occasion—for their own great good—enter into situations of (shall we say) “*competitive agency*” with them. He brought them to the brink, led them to the end of themselves, sent them to Sheol—not to destroy them

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<sup>2</sup> Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> With this caveat, I hereby correct an academic sin of omission in the third part of *Renovatio: Martin Luther’s Augustinian Theology of Sin, Grace & Holiness* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019). There, I made the case that the old Doctor is more useful than the young Reformer as a teacher of Christian doctrine. I stand by that judgment—but! But. That having been said, may I commend the example of Shem and Japheth as a methodological principle for our approach to the sometimes-massive failures of our fathers in the faith? Luther was not holier than Noah, a godly man who—having built an ark for the salvation of his household, condemned the world, and become an heir of the righteousness of faith—got rip-roaring drunk and lay exposed in his tent; but then again, neither are we. Have a care, my friend, before you rush to expose the nakedness of your fathers.

<sup>4</sup> John A. Maxfield, *Luther’s Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008), 15–18.

but to raise them up and welcome them into the most intimate communion with himself, by his Spirit, through his Son.

*That* is how you make a theologian: “It’s by living, no, it’s by suffering, dying, and being damned, not by reading, thinking, and speculating, that you become a theologian.” So Luther on the Psalms circa 1519, a youngish professor but growing up fast, one year from his excommunication by Leo X. For these are the conditions of the possibility of the genesis of hope: and it is hope alone, unconquered and unconquerable hope, that makes a theologian.<sup>5</sup>

So we can see Maxwell’s theory, and raise him one. Luther’s theospiritual *paideia* is on full display in the Genesis lectures. In particular, his interpretation of the deeds and sufferings of Noah, Abraham, and Jacob are all worth careful study in this regard. But here our task is to harvest old Dr. Luther’s insights into how God worked *mirabiliter per contraria* to transform Joseph the patriarch from a fundamentally just if naïve young man into a true theologian. The lectures on the life of Joseph (Gen 37, 39–50) date from the last years of Luther’s life (1544–45) and as such show us the considered judgments of a battle-tested, world-weary man. They are worth listening to, not as straight exegesis so much as mystagogy into the art of theology and a theological life.

## II. ORATIO, MEDITATIO, TENTATIO,

We turn first to the methodological “preface” Luther wrote in 1539 for the first volume of his collected German works, since it lays out the premises of his spiritual theology in lapidary form and so serves as a hermeneutical shortcut into the lengthy lectures on Joseph.

<sup>5</sup> I am playing with—but also interpreting—a well-known saying of Luther’s at table circa 1531: *Sola experientia facit theologum*. Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 1:16.13, hereafter WA; Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 54.7. Hereafter LW. Back in 1516, young Dr. Luder had categorized theology (with the Franciscans and Augustinians before him, the Puritans after, and right down to Dr. Vanhoozer) as a practical rather than theoretical *scientia*. To describe it, he coined an unusual phrase: *sapientia experimentalis*. Mark well, this little gem is found in a marginal note on the sermons of Johannes Tauler (WA 9.98.21), a Dominican mystical theologian of the fourteenth century with whom Martin was deeply engaged at this time. In 1544, some thirty years later, Luther was still quoting Tauler with (critical) approval: “Our afflictions are the surest argument and pledge that we are sons of God. There is a saying of Tauler’s, though he does not speak in the terms of Holy Scripture, but uses an alien and foreign way of speaking: ‘A man should know that he has done great damage if he does not await the work of the Lord,’ viz., when God wants to crucify him, mortify and reduce the old man to nothing, which doesn’t happen except by suffering and cross. There indeed you support the work of the Lord, who forms you, planes you, and cuts off the rough branches; and whatever there may be that hinders eternal edification he cuts off with ax, saw, mattock. Just as David says in Ps 37: ‘Submit to God, and be formed by him’” (WA 44.397.12–20, cf. LW 7.133; the Psalm reference is less a quote of Ps 37 than a summary of its content).

In a whimsical yet deadly serious paragraph, Luther diagnoses the disease that infects the theologian:

If you feel and are inclined to think you have made it, flattering yourself with your own little books, teaching, or writing, because you have done it beautifully and preached excellently; if you are highly pleased when someone praises you in the presence of others; if you perhaps look for praise, and would sulk or quit what you are doing if you did not get it—if you are of that stripe, dear friend, then take yourself by the ears, and if you do this in the right way you will find a beautiful pair of big, long, shaggy donkey ears. Then do not spare any expense! Decorate them with golden bells, so that people will be able to hear you wherever you go, point their fingers at you, and say, “See, see! There goes that clever beast, who can write such exquisite books and preach so remarkably well.” That very moment you will be blessed and blessed beyond measure in the kingdom of heaven. Yes, in that heaven where hellfire is ready for the devil and his angels. To sum up: let us be proud and seek honor in the places where we can. But in this book, the honor is God’s alone, as it is said, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5); to whom be glory, world without end. Amen.<sup>6</sup>

Pride, vanity, longing for the praise of men, for recognition, for status: these vices spell the end of true theology before we even get started. What can be done to counteract them?

#### A. ORATIO

St. David, *the* prophet in Luther’s estimation, shows the way in Ps 119. Real theology begins with prayer (*oratio*). Since the Bible exposes the folly of *adam’s* wisdom—“Not one book teaches about eternal life except this one alone!”—you have to despair of your own reason and wit. Otherwise, “your presumptuousness will plunge you and others with you out of heaven (as happened to Lucifer) into the abyss of hell.” Satan, not Kant, was the first massive mind that tried to put religion inside the bounds of reason alone. It did not work out so well for him. But until the miracle of grace begins to pull you out of Adam’s darkness into the light of Christ, there is not much of an alternative. What then can the would-be theologian do to be saved? “Kneel down in your little room and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding.” After all, that is what David did. He had read Moses and many other books besides, yet

still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures himself, so that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher. For such practice gives rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that

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<sup>6</sup> WA 50.660–61; LW 34.287f.

the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped by their reason.<sup>7</sup>

Who is the better exegetical aid: your library of commentaries, your brilliant mind, or the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, bears witness to the Son, and speaks through the prophets? If this is not mere rhetoric, then the conclusion to draw from the davidic theologian's practical syllogism is—to *pray*. Without ceasing, to pray: as I believe Karl Barth once said, when he too had grown old, in his little book about *Evangelical Theology*.<sup>8</sup>

### B. MEDITATIO

But if study without prayer is blind, prayer without study is empty. The second rule for theological reality is *meditatio*. Not “meditation” as you think of it in its Platonic or Zen-Buddhist varieties, but pretty much just prayerfully reading your Bible. A lot.

Secondly, you should meditate, that is: not only in the heart, but rather also outwardly (*eusserlich*) ever pressing and rubbing (*treiben und reiben*) the oral speech and literal word in the book (*mündliche rede und buchstabische wort im Buch*), reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you have complete understanding. You will never be a particularly good theologian if you do that.<sup>9</sup>

Luther is deeply impressed by the way David speaks once and again of God's law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, word, and promise: “He will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, about nothing except God's Word and commandments.”<sup>10</sup> A good theologian does the same, not merely because he is in love with the Bible (though there is that) but because he knows the Bible is the greatest means of grace our good God has given his people.

Tragic detours start the moment when, for whatever reason, we stop thinking/feeling/living this fundamental theo-spiritual reality: that the Word is *enough*. “If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32). Nah, thinks self: there must be more than this. Behold the origins-story of every gnostic of whatever shape or size: “Did God *really* say? You will not ‘surely die’! *You will be enlightened. You will be like God . . .*” Try to transcend the Word, to get above, around, behind, beneath it, and you will fall to your

<sup>7</sup> WA 50.659; LW 34.285f.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (London: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1963; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> WA 50.659.22–28; cf. LW 34.286.

<sup>10</sup> WA 50.659; LW 34.286.

death like Eve, Cerinthus, and any number of popular teachers today. You may make the bestsellers list. You may be highly “spiritual.” But it will be by association with that preening spirit who despises the Word-made-flesh-of-Mary, hates the Jews and their scrolls, and tricks the impressionable into preferring a genius to the apostles.

No, to be spiritual is to grab hold of the letter of the Bible and never let it go, to make your home inside these holy words and to hide these holy words inside your heart: “for God will not give you his Spirit without the external Word (*eusserlich wort*).”<sup>11</sup> The Bible! Make no mistake: the Spirit speaks *here*, in the book that bears witness to the Word made flesh, the book of God.

### C. TENTATIO

Last but not least, the third rule is this: you will not become a true theologian until you suffer. *Tentatio. Anfechtung*: the Latin (“temptation”) is easier to translate than the German, which epitomizes the core experiential reality of those disciples who dare to stick out their necks as servants of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. Plotinus said you cannot really define beauty, but if you have seen it you will understand what he is trying to talk about. Same with *Anfechtung*. It is ineffable in its awfulness, and if you have yet to suffer it you will make neither head nor tail of this paper. But if you have passed through the fire and the water, well, you know.

My heart is in anguish within me!

The terrors of death have fallen upon me.

Fear and trembling come upon me,  
and horror overwhelms me. (Ps 55:4–5)

Someone forgot to tell Krister Stendhal about the Psalter, apparently; the brooding, introspective conscience of the West in fact began in the East long centuries before Augustine supposedly invented the self. An extraordinarily beautiful spiritual creature invented the self, when he reckoned it better to reign in his hell than to serve in God’s heaven; and as Adam-king stood by and did nothing, the sword of Gen 2:16–17 hanging useless in its sheath, this wicked spirit deceived mother Eve by promising her she could become her own true self, too. The demonic poison drunk and swallowed, the first-formed suffered *Anfechtung*. They tried (in vain, of course) to cloak their shame with fig leaves and hid from the presence of the very God who—before the pyrrhic triumph of the self—had been the delight of their unfallen hearts.

And so it has been ever since. *Anfechtung* is the inheritance of all Adam’s daughters and sons; and as Kierkegaard explains so well in *Sickness unto Death*, if you think you are the exception, it proves you are in despair too. Cain suffered it after he killed his brother; his punishment was more than he could bear. Noah surely suffered it, surrounded by floodwaters on every side, the earth’s peoples drowned in judgment. Our father Abram suffered it

<sup>11</sup> WA 50.659.32f; cf. LW 34.286.

the night the Word came in a vision to speak with him: “Behold, a dreadful and great darkness fell upon him” (Gen 15:12); and it took four millennia before our dear depressed Dane was able to articulate Abraham’s anguish on Moriah. (And what shafts of terror pierced Isaac’s heart, as he lay bound on the altar and watched his father raise the knife?) Rebekah suffered it when she could not conceive the promised messianic seed, then again when Esau and Jacob fought in her womb. So did Leah when she realized Jacob did not care about her at all (Gen 29:32). So did Rachel, when she watched Leah’s stock rise boy-by-baby-boy, while hers precipitously fell. St. Cheater suffered it at the Jabbok, when the Word—who-would-become-flesh wrestled him all through the night—he refused to let go till the *logos asarkos* blessed him!—after which he limped along for the rest of his pilgrim days. Moses hid his face when the fire burned in the bush, and the bush was not consumed: “for he was afraid to look at God.”<sup>12</sup> Holy Hannah suffered it, not that Eli understood. David complains about his *Anfechtung* in two out of every three of his songs; the sons of Korah, in Pss 42–43; Asaph, with first unnerving and then consoling frankness, in Ps 73; Heman, in the incomparable Ps 88, a most sacred psalm. And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Jonah and Jeremiah, Isaiah and Hezekiah, Simeon Peter and Saul of Tarsus and St. Paul, Augustine and Mechthild and Tauler and John Crucis and John Owen and poor William Cowper.

And yet, not one of the saints can hold a candle to the Holy One himself, in his agony in the garden and his reproach before his people and his abandonment on the tree. For us and for our salvation, Messiah went lower into the pit of death and hell than you and I will ever go, or ever have to go. For us and for our salvation, he drank the foaming cup of the fierce wrath of God the Almighty all the way down to the dregs.

Jesus began to be greatly distressed and troubled. He said to them: “My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death . . .” And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said: “Abba, Father! All things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36)

And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:44)

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice: “Eloi! Eloi! Lema sabachthani?” Which

<sup>12</sup> Exod 3:6: a cameo of the *verbum incarnandum* and a striking prophecy of the complete penetration of the Lord’s humanity by the fire of his divinity in the real union of the two natures—yet without his humanity being consumed, merely purified by the all-consuming fire. See Severus of Antioch, *Homily* 14.13.

means: “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:33–34)

There you have the Man who drained the cup for us; he is the Son of God, his only Son, the Beloved.

When this tortured God gives one of his dear ones but a sip of this bitter wine, it is all you can do to keep from drowning as wave upon dark, fearsome wave crashes down upon your head. Just read Ps 88; or maybe, look back in your journals and find the 88’s you have written yourself. I know a man in Christ who eighteen years ago was thrust down into the third hell at least; and not for the last time, either. Perhaps you, gentle reader, have spent a season in this strangely christological place too?

If so, you know that what threatens to be your undoing proves to be your remaking; this is how you become a man of God. “Do your best to present yourself to God *as one approved after testing*, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). It is your making as a theologian, worth far more than your DPhil, Dr. Habil., first five book deals put together, pearl of great price, your sanity, even (if the Truth is to be trusted) your soul. “If anyone would come after Me . . .” Always, the path up is the path down, that holy, wretched downward mobility in Jesus that is the way of the Cross; and in the words of one of the better collects, may you, my friend, find this way to be “the way of life and peace.” For when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, parading about Wheaton or Cambridge or Duke with those magnificent donkey-ears of yours. Not anymore. Now that suffering has made you old, you have no choice but to stretch out your hands as Another dresses you (a small but sturdy olive-skinned Man, with dark curly hair, fire in his eyes, mirth in his smile, and scars on every inch of his body) and carries you where you would never have chosen to go.

No. 21. A theologian of glory (*Theologus gloriae*) calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross (*Theologus crucis*) calls the thing what it is. This is clear: he who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in sufferings. Therefore he prefers works to sufferings and glory to cross, power to weakness, wisdom to foolishness, and in general good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls “enemies of the cross of Christ” (*Inimicos crucis Christi*) [Phil 3.18]). Indeed: for they hate cross and sufferings, but love works and their glory. And so, the good of the cross they call evil and the evil of a work they call good. And that God is not found except in sufferings and cross, has already been said. Therefore friends of the cross (*amici crucis*) say that cross is good and works are evil, because through the cross works are destroyed and Adam is crucified, who through works is rather built up. For it’s impossible that a man not be puffed up by his good works, if he hasn’t first been emptied (*exinanitus*) and destroyed by sufferings



and evils, until he knows himself to be nothing and the works to be not his but God's.<sup>13</sup>

That is from the celebrated *Heidelberg Disputation*, which good Father Staupitz arranged in April 1518 as an opportunity for Luther to articulate and defend his Augustinian theology before it was too late. Oswald Bayer, the doyen of German Luther studies, thinks Luther left this severe ("Catholic") *Kreuzmystik* in the rearview mirror when he discovered his evangelical theology of the promise later that spring; but Bayer is clearly wrong. Here is Luther in the fall of 1539 laying down a spiritual method for theology that culminates in exactly the same excruciating point, to wit: the theologian's experiential participation in the affliction, suffering, and death of God's Son. In *Of the Councils and Churches* (also 1539) Luther caps his discussion of the seven sacramental "marks" of an orthodox church with *die heilige Kreuz, Nachfolge*, martyrdom, the experiential theology/spirituality/mysticism of the holy Cross.<sup>14</sup> The Genesis lectures, the culmination of his career as a teacher of Holy Scripture—and not least the penetrating analyses of the death, descent into hell, and resurrection of St. Joseph—sing the same song.

Old married-with-kids, rogue priest, fat doctor that he was, on this point at least the "fully Reformational" Luther had not budged a bit: in the making of a theologian in the forge of *Anfechtung* there are no shortcuts, no evasions, no St.-Peter-style refusals of the Cross.

For as soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real Doctor of you, and by his *anfechtunge* will teach you to seek and love God's Word. For I myself (that's if I, mousepoop, may even myself be mixed with the pepper) have very much my papists to thank, that through the devil's raging they have so beaten, oppressed, and distressed me, that is, they have made a pretty good theologian, which I'd hardly have become otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

These, then, are David's/Luther's methodological rules: *oratio, meditatio, Anfechtung*. Follow them, and you will find that even the best books of the fathers begin to taste stale. Not only that: the longer you keep at them,

<sup>13</sup> WA 1.362.20–33; cf. LW 31.53.

<sup>14</sup> "Seventh, one knows the holy Christian people outwardly by the holy relic of the holy Cross (*dem heilthum des heiligen Kreuzes*), that it must suffer all misfortune and persecution, all manner of *anfechtung* and evil (as the Our Father prays) from the devil, world, and flesh, inwardly sadness, timidity, fear, outwardly poverty, contempt, sickness, being weak, so that it becomes like its head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they hold fast to Christ and God's Word, and therefore suffer for Christ's sake . . . When someone condemns you for Christ's sake, curses, reviles, slanders, plagues you, that makes you holy (*das macht dich heilig*), since that kills the old Adam, since he must learn patience, humility, meekness, praise and thanks, and to be cheerful in suffering. That means then by the Holy Spirit to become holy and renewed into new life in Christ (*durch den Heiligen Geist geheiligt und erneuet zum neuen leben in Christo*), and so a man learns to believe God, to trust, to hope, to love, as Rom 5 says: "Tribulatio spem & c." WA 50.641.35–642.6, 642.27–32, cf. LW 41.164–5.

<sup>15</sup> WA 50.660.8–14; cf. LW 34.287.

the more you teach and preach and lecture and write, the less you will be pleased with your own theological self. The Word of God will be everything to you, then; Christ will be all, your life will be one long invocation of the Spirit in the same direction, and the glory will be Father's alone. "When you have come this far, then you can hope that you have begun to become a real theologian."<sup>16</sup>

### III. DIV-SCHOOL YEARS: JOSEPH'S FORMATION IN *SHEOL-SCHUL*

The "history of the most holy Patriarch Joseph"<sup>17</sup> takes up the last hundred pages of volume 6 and the whole of volumes 7–8 in Luther's Works—a whopping 600 pages in the *Weimar Ausgabe*. Obviously, I cannot do justice to these lectures in this paper; but we will hit some highlights.

Now, at the start it is imperative that you suspend your critical faculties just a little. Luther stood in the great tradition of OT exegesis that began with a wonderworking rabbi from Nazareth, was advanced by his apostles, continued more or less without interruption through the patristic, medieval, and Reformation eras, and continues still to this day in, for example, women's Bible studies, books by Peter Leithart and Nancy Guthrie, the pulpits of good churches, and the like. His was an uninhibited, midrashic, spiritual/theological, believing, God-is-actually-real, and above all confidently christological approach to interpreting the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalter. The first book of Moses, *der liebe Genesis*, was Luther's favorite; and "just as there is nothing more beautiful in Holy Scripture than Genesis as a whole, so also this example [viz. Joseph's] is outstanding and memorable among the rest of the patriarchs and plainly of such a kind that I am not able to do it justice in words and thoughts."<sup>18</sup>

You know the story, so I will not rehearse its details here. For Luther, following Stephen in the great sermon that led to his death (Acts 7, especially vv. 9ff), the narrative-arc of Joseph's life is plainly christological. Despite his status as a chosen son—or rather, precisely because of it—our hero is envied, conspired against, and in effect killed by his brothers; he then descends into hell in Egypt, suffering fearsome injustices; after which he is raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the king. But the whole drama of his long-sufferings is a story of salvation: because this grain of wheat fell into the earth and died, when he rose again he was able to provide the entire famine-stricken *oikumene* with food. To top it all off, when given the chance he does not destroy his brothers but forgives them. Point by point, it is as if the Joseph-story were written to foreshadow the passion and triumph of the Lord.

Ah, but it *was*! "If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me" (John 5:46). Abraham rejoiced that he would see his day; Isaiah saw his glory and spoke of him; was Moses alone, of all the prophets,

<sup>16</sup> WA 50.660.26f; cf. LW 34.287.

<sup>17</sup> WA 44.232.6.

<sup>18</sup> WA 44.234; LW 6.313.

denied the privilege of seeing the glory of the Son in our flesh? Moses, who stood with Elijah and spoke with Jesus about the great exodus he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem? (Luke 9:28–36). “Oh you foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25–27). “Joseph is a figure of Christ, and his descent into hell is indicated in this passage.”<sup>19</sup> “Joseph is the image of the Son of God.”<sup>20</sup> “There cannot be a greater similarity than that between Christ crucified and Joseph.”<sup>21</sup> “Now Joseph is buried and dead, and he has his Preparation and Sabbath; his father is dying too, but they will both rise again by divine power.”<sup>22</sup>

And so the very holy and good Joseph was crucified, died, was buried, and descended into hell during these two years. Now the Lord will come and liberate, glorify, and magnify him, just as he called him, justified and gave the Holy Spirit and Son, who descended with him into prison. Now the Passion Week is at an end, for soon Joseph will be restored to life and will rise again.<sup>23</sup>

Let us tease out a point or two from this. First, for Luther the typological depth of the Joseph-story is not mere ornamentation but the hermeneutical/spiritual key to reading the story itself well. Joseph represents Christ. Yes, his very life is an embodied prophecy. But Joseph also participates in Christ and—by way of his own hellish sufferings—is conformed to the image of Christ and him crucified.

Not least in the just-quoted excerpt, Luther has Rom 8:28–30 very much in mind. The God of Joseph is the God who works all things for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose. That “all things” includes terrible things like betrayal, violence, false accusation, unjust imprisonment, and years—years—of sheer forgottenness. God uses nasty “all things” like these for the good of his elect, by forcing them (as it were) to serve the sanctification of his children. Think about that: the most terrible things you have suffered, the most terrible things you have done, all are pressed into your service by the strong grace of your Father. For those whom he foreknew, he predestined—for what? To become just like his Son, ultimately in the happy glory of the resurrection, but first—and by way of—the strange glory of the cross. That way, Jesus will not be an only child, but the firstborn among many brothers. And all those whom our generous Father set his love upon and chose in Christ before the foundation of the world, the same he called, justified, and glorified by the gift of his Spirit

<sup>19</sup> viz. Gen 37:24; WA 44.284; LW 6.379.

<sup>20</sup> WA 44.288; LW 6.385; cf. Rom 8:29.

<sup>21</sup> WA 44.293, LW 6.392.

<sup>22</sup> At the end of Gen 37; WA 44.303.39–40; cf. LW 6.406.

<sup>23</sup> On Gen 40:20–23; WA 44.394.12–16; cf. LW 7.129.

and his Son. Such a one was Joseph, our father in the faith and our brother in Christ, by the Spirit, through promise.

Now mark this well: when Joseph went down to the depths, the Son of God went right down with him. For Luther, this is the plain meaning of the paradox that frames Gen 39 (vv. 2–3, 21, 23): “But the Lord was with Joseph.” Our stunted scriptural imaginations, bludgeoned by post-Kantian dogmatic prejudice and encased within the immanent frame as by walls of ugly reinforced concrete, hear this refrain and assume it implies a vague sense of divine “presence” by way of providential effects: *Gottes Wirkung auf uns*, as Risto Saarinen’s book names and exposes. But Irenaeus and Athanasius and Hilary knew better, as did Luther and Calvin, as did—refreshingly—Robert Jenson in his last little book.<sup>24</sup> God has always made himself known through his Word/Wisdom/Glory/Radiance/Image/Son, and throughout *torah* he carries on famously with the patriarchs and matriarchs by way of this Son in the form of the Messenger of the Lord who, mysteriously, *is* the Lord (see e.g. Gen 15:1–7; 16:7–14; 18:1–21; 19:24; 22:9–18; 28:12–17 [John 1:51]; 32:22–32; 48:15–16; Exod 3; 14:19–25 [Jude 5]; Josh 5:13–6:2; cf. John 1:1: the *logos*, who was with God in the beginning, *is* God).

*Sapere aude*, my critically-minded friends. What do you suppose the Son of God was doing before he became flesh of Mary? Twiddling his thumbs in heaven, making the occasional appearance to an Isaiah or an Ezekiel, but mainly fretting about what Wellhausen & Friends would do to his “pre-critical,” sloppily redacted book? Not quite. I could tell you what he was doing; but I am just a man. St. John is an apostle: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . He was in the world . . . *He came to his own*” (John 1:1, 10–11). He came to his own: to Eve, to Noah, to Abram, to Hagar, to Jacob, to Joseph. *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for all ages* (Heb 13:8). He was there the whole time: in the promise of the serpent-crushing Seed, by the side of the proto-martyr, in the ark tossed about in storm and sea, in the agonizing years of so-where-is-your-promise-now childlessness, by a spring of water in the wilderness, on Moriah the mountain of sacrifice and vision, at Bethel and in Paddan-aram and by the Jabbok, in the pit and in Potiphar’s house and in prison. And every single ancient sinner who received the Son by faith became a child of God, pure and righteous in his Maker’s sight, not by works nor by willpower but by the blood that would be shed one day by the angelo-morphic God-Man who befriended them. You see, the *logos* does not make *theologoi* from a distance. He comes close: closer than we might like. That is what he is up to in the high *Anfechtung* of St. Joseph. Jesus sends him down into hell, but he goes down with him; and by his presence, grace, and power, he transforms *Sheol* into a *Schul*:

The fastings and miracles which are recounted in the legends of our saints, Francis, Ambrose, Augustine, etc., are nothing. What is said was lived, that’s pure child’s play. But the lives of the

<sup>24</sup> Robert Jenson, *A Theology in Outline: Can these Bones Live?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 49.

patriarchs? These are examples that show what the Christian life is, what are the true exercises of piety and of patience. Very well, there goes Joseph, we must let him rest in hell. Now Joseph is buried; let us leave him to rest in *schola* [or: *sheola*] in hell, as his father says, in his *Schul*.<sup>25</sup>

Luther is commenting on Gen 37:34–36, when Jacob learns of his son’s “death.” In the last line he’s referring in particular to Jacob’s lament in v. 35: “No, I shall go down to *Sheola* to my son, mourning.” Luther had long since stopped writing out his lectures, or even notes; as in the aforementioned book by Jens, for our knowledge of his teaching we rely on the transcripts of his students. Here, the published edition of those student notes in WA 44 reflects the ambiguity that occasions this time-honored genre. Probably, Luther said: “... let us leave him to rest in *Sheol*, as his father says, in his *Schul*.” He loved his puns, and in this case, as so often, it packed a punch too: Joseph is in hell with Jesus, not by tragic necessity nor by random chance, but by the redemptive/formative purpose of the Lord.

Not only for the inhabited world, nor even for preservation of the holy “seed” lodged in Judah’s loins, but for Joseph himself. *Sheol* is his *Schul*: his school. The Son of God is his teacher; suffering, *Anfechtung*, the holy cross is his pedagogy, whip, chalk, board, books, etc., for as our experts say, only experiential learning will do. Gritty promise-grasping faith, stubborn hope in God who raises the dead, stouthearted courage in the face of real and present danger, long-suffering patience are graces that name the wisdom, science, skill, virtue, or “art” that the pupil will acquire in his master’s school.

This is the theology and wisdom (*sapientia*) of Christians, and although we have yet to attain it, we should nevertheless be exercised in it and accustomed to it (*adsuefieri*) every day, so that in the paroxysm and calamities that we undergo we’ll be able to say with steady and tranquil heart: You can’t hurt me, I’m a Christian. You don’t harm me; you just challenge me. Go fear for yourself ...

So, then: God humbles his own in order to exalt them, kills to make alive, confounds to glorify, subjects to extoll. But this is the art of arts and science of sciences (*ars artium et scientia scientiarum*), which typically isn’t learned and understood except with great labor and only by a few. Still, it’s true and certain—just as the example of Joseph testifies.<sup>26</sup>

The learning outcome? By the end of his training, Jacob’s lost son will become a saint, bishop, *doctor ecclesiae*, evangelist, preacher of grace, *servus servorum Dei*, *verus Pontifex* (read: Pope), poet, and true theologian.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> WA 44.304.21–27; cf. LW 6.407.

<sup>26</sup> WA 44.299.30–34, 300.3–6; cf. LW 6.400–401.

<sup>27</sup> WA 44.571f; LW 7.365; WA 44.599f; LW 8.27f; WA 44.611; LW 8.44; WA 44.617; LW 8.51.

## IV. WHAT HAPPENS IN THE FORGE?

The problem is those damn donkey ears you and I and Thérèse de Lisieux and everyone else is born with. Strip away our infinitely-crafted pretenses and we are all either sons of Adam or daughters of Eve. Each one of us loves self, hates God, other selves, and anything else that threatens to get in the way of my sacred pursuit of my own life, my own autonomy, my own happiness however I jolly well choose to define it. We are, in fact, congenital self-addicts from our mother's womb. And we remain so long after our rebirth in the Second Adam by water and the Spirit—till death completes what Christ began in our baptism and carried along at the nourishing breasts of our new mother, holy Church—certainly long after, for whatever mix of motives, we set out to become theologians. And the very fact that you are irritated with me for pointing this out proves it. Even when we pray and meditate, read Scripture and sing Psalms, share the gospel, preach sermons, write clever books, etc., we are in large part using God to serve our imperial selves.

We were given the gift of being creaturely images of the infinite God, made for loving communion with God who is love, God the Three-in-One, made to glorify and enjoy him forever. But after Adam, you and I are dead-set on praising, glorifying, and enjoying our own selves; and if we develop a taste for the things of God, it is because we instinctively sense how useful his omnipotence will prove in the pursuit of our own glory. In short: instead of using things to enjoy God, you use God to enjoy things. Well, not so much the things themselves, but your imperial self as it invents itself as a self by the demonic/adamic/Nietzschean act of conquering, colonizing, accumulating, possessing, and otherwise mastering other selves and their stuff. For what you are really after at the end of the day is just your own self: the power, beauty, glory, and permanence of the self you are not quite sure you are and feel/fear you need to shore up, secure, and solidify by decking it out in the fig leaves of doctorates, pastorates, book deals or even (if worse comes to worst) a reputation for sanctity. “But, you say, ‘I am born from a famous and illustrious heritage, I am a doctor of the law, I am a philosopher.’ Correct indeed! But all these are to be used, not enjoyed, according to the distinction of Augustine.”<sup>28</sup> That's Luther on Gen 41:40 in 1544, but he had been brooding on this dark Kierkegaardian theme for a long time by then. Here he is lecturing on Rom 5:3–5 in the developmentally critical winter of 1515/16, knee-deep in Augustine's advanced works against the Pelagians and neck-deep in Tauler:

If God should not test us by tribulation, it would be impossible for any man to be saved. The reason is that our nature has been so deeply curved in upon itself (*in se ipsam incurva*) because of the vice of the first sin that it not only turns the finest gifts of God in upon itself and enjoys them (as is evident in the case of legalists and hypocrites), indeed, it even uses God himself (*ipso Deo utatur*) to

<sup>28</sup> WA 44.433.22f; cf. LW 7.181.

achieve these aims, but it is ignorant of this very fact, that in acting so iniquitously and perversely and in such a depraved way, it is even seeking God for its own sake. Thus the prophet Jeremiah says in Jer 17.9: “The heart of man is perverse and inscrutable; who can understand it?” That is: it is so curved in on itself that no man, no matter how holy (if a testing is kept from him) can understand it.<sup>29</sup>

Are we really that bad? Maybe you are not, but I am, and Luther was, and so were Sibbes, Owen, Newton, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer. In the Romans lecture, Luther goes on to offer a German-mystical solution to the disease of the proud/insecure self. Staupitz probably taught it to him, but he may have got it straight from Tauler:

The cross puts to death everything we have, but our iniquity tries to keep itself and its possessions alive. Therefore our very good God, after he has justified us and given us his spiritual gifts, quickly brings tribulation upon us, exercises us, and tests us so that this godless nature of ours does not rush in upon these enjoyable sins, lest in his ignorance a man perish in eternity. For they are very lovely and vigorously excite enjoyment. Thus a man learns to love and worship God purely, not just because of his grace and his gifts, but he worships God for his own sake alone. Thus “he chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb 12:6 [Prov 3:12]), and unless he did this, the son would quickly be drawn away by the sweetness of his new inheritance. He would luxuriate in his enjoyment of grace received and offend his Father more deeply than before. Therefore in the most excellent order the apostle says, “*Tribulatio* produces patience, and patience *probationem*,” that is, that we should be proven (*probat*). *And hope does not disappoint us*. Without a probation of this sort, as I have said, hope would founder, indeed, it would no longer be hope but presumption; in fact, it would be worse, for it would be enjoyment of the creature instead of the Creator. And if a person remained in this state, he would be confounded for all eternity. Therefore tribulation comes, through which a man is made patient and proven (*probat*); it comes and takes away everything he has and leaves him naked and alone, allowing him no help or safety in either his physical or spiritual merits, for it makes a man despair of all created things, to go out from them and from himself and outside himself and all things, and to seek help in God alone. Ps 3.3 sings about this: “But You, O Lord, are my upholder and my glory.” Now that’s what hoping is, and hope happens through testing (*spem fieri per probationem*). Whereas of necessity the ungodly, who are accustomed to trust in their own virtues, do not want to be quiet and to undergo tribulations in order that they may be proven . . .<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> WA 56.304.23–305.2; cf. LW 25.291.

<sup>30</sup> WA 56.305.9–306.4; cf. LW 25.292.

You know what it means to luxuriate in grace received.

“Pastor, what a powerful sermon!”

“Yes, it was, wasn’t it . . .”

“But what sets you apart is how *deep* you take us; most preachers today are so superficial.”

“Why thank you, that really is kind.”

“Have you thought about turning this series into a book? The broader church needs to hear your voice, not just the local parish.”

“It really does, doesn’t it?”

And before you know it, you are helping your (that is: Christ’s) flock get your halo set just-so on top of those donkey ears of yours, and without noticing it you have not actually *adored* the Lord for months or years because you are so busy adoring your brilliant, expository but not in a rigid way, historically-informed, culturally-sensitive self.

The only remedy our good Father has for such a perverse poison as Adam’s pride is a share in the cross of his humble Son. Our poor Lord God has no choice but to take away everything we have, so that we will be made ready for him to give us his most precious gift: himself.

He does the whole thing this way, because it is the Nature of God first to destroy and annihilate whatever is in us, before he gives his gifts; just as the Scriptures says: “The Lord makes poor and makes rich, he brings down to hell and raises up” [1 Sam 2.7, 6]. By this his most godly counsel he makes us capable of his gifts and his works. And we are capable of receiving his works and his counsels only when our own counsels have ceased and our works are quieted and we are made purely passive before God.<sup>31</sup>

For in this way he acted in his own proper work, which is the first and exemplar of all his own works, i.e. in Christ. And then, when he wanted to glorify him and establish him in his kingdom (as the most holy thoughts of all the disciples ardently hoped and expected) *maxime contrarie* he made him die, be confounded and descend into hell, contrary to all expectations. Thus he caused also St. Augustine to descend to the depths, and in opposition to the prayers of his mother he caused him to go astray, that he might reward her far beyond what she asked. And so he deals with all his saints.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Luther on Rom 8:26. WA 56.375.18–24; cf. LW 25.365.

<sup>32</sup> WA 56.377.4–10; cf. LW 25.366.



Note that when he uses the expression, “we do not know what we should pray,” the apostle isn’t trying to say that holy and good people are asking for things which are contrary or harmful, but rather that they are asking for too little, things that are too lowly or insignificant in comparison with what God wants to give them. Therefore he says “our weakness” and not “our iniquity,” for we are too weak and impotent to make such big asks. Therefore God, hearing and coming to grant our requests, destroys our weak thinking and our still too humble ideas and gives us what the Spirit asks for us. It is as if a man should write his father asking for silver, but the father is disposed to give him a thousand pieces of gold. The father throws away the letter and disregards it, and when the son learns of this and realizes that the silver is not coming to him as he requested, he is made sad . . . This weakness will be crucified in you through the cup of suffering, and you will be made strong.<sup>33</sup>

As an aside, to guide his students, the young friar adds: “Concerning this patience of God and suffering, see Tauler.”<sup>34</sup> That might be a bridge too far for my evangelical brethren; would you consider John Newton instead? Or here is the hymn on Jonah that concludes the penultimate chapter of Dr. Packer’s magnificent book about *Knowing God*—cherished stanzas I first learned of from Tim Keller:

I asked the Lord that I might grow  
In faith and love and every grace;  
Might more of his salvation know,  
And seek more earnestly his face.

’Twas he who taught me thus to pray  
And he, I trust, has answered prayer!  
But it has been in such a way  
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favored hour  
At once he’d answer my request,  
And by his love’s constraining pow’r  
Subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel  
The hidden evils of my heart;  
And let the angry powers of hell  
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed  
Intent to aggravate my woe;

<sup>33</sup> WA 56.379.26–380.15; cf. LW 25.369.

<sup>34</sup> WA 56.378.13; cf. LW 25.368.

Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,  
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low

“Lord what is this?” I trembling cried,  
“Wilt thou pursue Thy worm to death?”  
“Tis in this way,” the Lord replied,  
“I answer prayer for grace and faith.

“These inward trials I employ  
From self and pride to set thee free;  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,  
That thou may’st seek thy all in Me.”

Joseph learned a great deal of theology from his dad: about God, creation, sin, the promise of the serpent-crushing Seed, the righteousness of faith, the sacraments (circumcision, altar and sacrifice), the painful contrast between the suffering church of the cross and the splendid church of glory, etc. But there is theology, and then there is theology. It is one thing to think or write about God, another to know and be known by Him. One thing to unfold a sweeping trinitarian metaphysic, quite another to abide in communion with the Father, in the Spirit, through the Son. Plato or Milbank or Hart can do the one far better than you or I are likely to ever pull off; but for them “everything is merely objective . . . [they] remain in their metaphysical thinking, as a cow looks at a new door.” If all goes well for you, as it went so terribly well for our hero and as it also went for dear Jim Packer, you will enter into the kind of *mystical knowing of the living God* that Joseph was graced to receive in his Sheol-Schul. To wit: “That God cares.” That God—GOD—YHWH—HOLY! HOLY! HOLY!—*tres hypostases realiter distinctae in unitate inseparabili essentiae*—FIRE!<sup>35</sup>—cares about . . . *me?*

In the whole history of Joseph we see nothing but the highest and infinite virtues in every kind of life, in prison, disgrace, exile, desertion and afterward in glory, exaltation, and power. To be sure, he was haunted and tossed up and down, backward and forward, and yet he always composed himself and held God in his eyesight and waited in hope for His work with the highest faith and forbearance.

But Joseph isn’t only set before us as an exemplar of all virtues, but a description of God is also placed before our eyes in a beautiful

<sup>35</sup> Blaise Pascal: “The year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology. Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, martyr, and others. From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight, FIRE. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Your GOD will be my God. Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD.” Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony Levi, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 178.

manner, in order that we may know *quid sit Deus*. Philosophers dispute and search speculatively *de Deo* and arrive at some kind of *notitiam*, just as Plato intuitively and recognizes the divine government of the universe. But everything is merely objective; it isn't yet that *cognitio* which Joseph has: that God cares, that he hears and helps the afflicted. This, Plato is not able to establish. He remains *in cogitatione Metaphysica, wie ein kue ein neues thor ansibet*. But that at last is *vera cognitio* by which we recognize that God is willing, wise, and mighty to help and to have mercy, as when Joseph firmly establishes: "God will not abandon me, even if I must face my death." Likewise: "God does not respect or care for you because of your power, even if you are prince of the whole world." On his left, he is not broken by his sufferings; on his right, he is not puffed up by his success.

This, then, is *vera cognitio Dei*: to know that his nature and will are what he reveals in the Word, where he promises that he will be my Lord and God and commands me to take hold of this nature and will by faith. There indeed lies a sure and firm foundation, in which souls find rest.<sup>36</sup>

Plato is not always wrong, and David Hart has beautiful things to say about God. But the *Timaeus* will not do you any good when your brothers betray you and *The Beauty of the Infinite* will puff you up if you make a thing out of reading it. But Joseph . . . Joseph has learned to *know* God, the real God of the Bible, who hides himself in flesh and suffering and cross and *eo ipso* makes himself known. Sure, he knows all about the *ipsum esse subsistens* that God simply is. He knows Boethius' definition of a person *cond.* He can talk processions, relations of origin, and subsistent relations all day long. On the hypostatic union, he outmans Chemnitz himself. None of this is unimportant; for everything there is a season. But after the forge, Joseph has bigger fish to fry. Or, he knows now what these high-powered terms, definitions, and distinctions are for. He knows how to use them rightly, now that he has become a holy fool in Christ. For Joseph has graduated from that divinity school where a crucified headmaster so thoroughly humbles his own that, when the time comes to raise them from the pit and institute them into the office of the Word, it does not go straight to their heads.

For it was far more difficult to retain the Word after his liberation than *in calamitate et tentatione*, in the bearing of which he was unconquered (*invictus*), did not defect from God, did not sin by impatience and indignation against God. But far greater strength of heart is required when he conquers himself (*seipsum vincit*) for this is the highest and most beautiful virtue, as Solomon says in Prov 16. "Better is a patient man than a strong man, and he who lords over his soul (*dominatur animo*) than the conqueror of a city" [v. 32]. In this life, the highest glory is in military matters,

<sup>36</sup> WA 44.591.26–592.9; cf. LW 8.17.

as the most remarkable gifts were present in Achilles, Alexander the Great, Scipio; but to these bravest of heroes Solomon prefers Joseph, David, and Moses. And not one of them can be compared to Joseph, since he is ruler of his own soul (*dominator animi sui*) through humility.<sup>37</sup>

#### V. CONCLUSION: TRUE THEOLOGY AND TRUE THEOLOGIANS

There are two interrelated sides to this happy outcome: one to do with the character of true theology, the other with the character of the theologian. True theology is *Worttheologie*, a theology delighted by, bound to, obsessed with, soaked in the Word of God in its two parts: promise and command, law and gospel. This is the true knowledge of God: not to cook up clever thoughts about what we think he ought to be like, but to listen to what God has in fact told us of himself, his heart, his purposes, his mighty deeds, *in Verbo*. To hear and heed the Bible, that is, and to echo it as faithfully as we can.

But you must not stop at that, not if you wish to live the life of God. For God is the One who raised his Son Jesus from the dead, having previously raised up his people Israel from bondage in Egypt, having previously raised up his servant Joseph from the pit, having previously promised redemption/righteousness/blessing to whoever clings to the Seed of Eve, having previously created all things out of nothing. Come what may, you must learn to trust the promise of this untamed yet faithful God. You must obey his command to take him at his word, to take him for the God he tells you he is. You must grab on to him in the flesh he took of Mary, really present *PRO TE* in the Word, baptism, Eucharist, absolution and yes, in his *heilige Kreuz*; and you must not let him go until he blesses you.<sup>38</sup> You must climb up the mountain with the fire and the knife in your trembling hands, with your son at your side and the wood on his back. And even if he slays you, refuse to stop hoping in him.

<sup>37</sup> Luther on Gen 41:40. WA 44.436.10–20; cf. LW 7.184–85.

<sup>38</sup> On Gen 32:6: “I shall cling to the Word of God and be content with it. There I shall die: there I shall live. There is sufficiently abundant protection in the promise of God not only against the devil, the flesh, and the world but also against this sublime temptation. For if God were to send an angel to say: ‘Do not believe these promises!’ I would reject him, saying: ‘Depart from me, Satan, etc.’ Or, if God himself appeared to me in his majesty and said: ‘You are not worthy of my grace; I will change my counsel and I will not keep my promise to you,’ there I would not give him ground, but it would have to be fought out bitterly against God himself. It is as Job says: ‘Even if he kills me, nevertheless, I will hope in him’ (Job 13:15). If he should cast me off into the depths of hell and place me in the midst of devils, nevertheless, I believe that I am going to be saved: because I have been baptized, I have been absolved, I have received the pledge of my salvation, the body and blood of the Lord in the Supper. Therefore I want to see and hear nothing else, but I shall live and die in this faith, whether God, or an angel, or the devil says the contrary.” WA 44.97.37–98.9; cf. LW 6.131.

To laugh at death and hell and to conquer is not the mark of a weakling but of an unconquered and fearless heart, the heart of a lion.<sup>39</sup>

Do this, suffer this, conquer by devil-and-death-defying *hope* in our lionhearted Lamb, and you will find that you have become a *Worttheologe crucis* in the depths of your bleeding soul. You will hold the praise of men in contempt. You will fear nothing but the loss of God. And because of his promise, you will not even be scared of that. You will care nothing about status, be it high or low, rich or poor, known or unknown, laughed at or celebrated; it will all matter about as much to you as the pecking order in my daughter's middle school class matters to St. Michael the Archangel. There will be but one thing, that is to say One Living Reality (he is also Three), left for you to long for.

Christ—the Bishop of souls, and the one who looks into hell and death—ALONE sees, ALONE cares for Joseph; and he rejoices that such a beautiful sacrifice is being offered to him. Therefore, when everything looks desperate, and there isn't so much as a sliver of support or solace left—that's where the Lord's help begins, who says: "I'm with you, Joseph; let my looking after you be enough for you."<sup>40</sup>

Whom have I in heaven but You?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire, besides You.  
 My flesh and my heart may fail,  
 but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.  
 For behold: those who are far from You shall perish;  
 You put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to You.  
 But for me, it is good to be near God.  
 I have made YHWH GOD my refuge,  
 that I may tell of all *your* works. (Ps 73:25–28)

Not mine. Yours.

<sup>39</sup> WA 44.427.20–22; cf. LW 7.173.

<sup>40</sup> Luther on Gen 39:21–23. WA 44.373.37–41; cf. LW 7.100.



## YOU ARE NOT AN ALGORITHM: CULTIVATING HOPE FOR SCIENTIFIC AND THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE IN A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

NATHAN BARCZI<sup>1</sup>

“[A] well-read man will at once begin to yawn with boredom when one speaks to him of a new ‘good book,’ because he imagines a sort of composite of all the good books that he has read, whereas a good book is something special, something unforeseeable, and is made up not of the sum of all previous masterpieces but of something which the most thorough assimilation . . . would not enable him to discover.”

Marcel Proust

### EPISODE 1: IS THAT YOU?

A 2013 episode of the science-fiction show *Black Mirror* depicted a near-future in which a young woman, grieving the tragic death of her partner, receives a strange message from a social media platform. It seems that the young man had been sufficiently active on the site to allow the platform’s algorithms to construct a chatbot version of him, one with whom the young woman can have a conversation over text that is indistinguishable from what it was like to text with him before his passing. The young woman is not immediately comfortable with the technology, but in the end succumbs to a mix of grief and curiosity, and subscribes. Then, another message: the technology has improved and can now make use of the young man’s voice records to allow for a simulated phone conversation. It improves again: the woman can video chat with her departed partner. Another improvement: a perfectly lifelike physical replica of the young man shows up on her doorstep, as though he had never been gone. And of course, that is the question the show is raising: at that point, is he gone,

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after all? If the algorithm governing the simulated actions and words and minute facial expressions can perfectly replicate what he would have done in real life, how is that different from him still being alive, present, even conscious? On what grounds would we say that the replica is just a replica?

## EPISODE 2: WE KNOW HOW YOU FEEL

The data-rich world in which we live encourages us to hand over more and more of our decisions to AI that claims to know us better than we know ourselves. Netflix recommends our next binge-watch; Spotify provides a feed of musical suggestions (but one which always seems to regress back toward the mean, retreating to the safety of the chart-toppers). There are algorithms to tell us what to purchase, where to vacation, where to eat, whom to date.

In her book *God, Human, Animal, Machine*, Meghan O’Gieblyn quotes Yuval Noah Harari arguing that handing over our decisions to the algorithms

would officially mark the end of liberal humanism, which depends on the assumption that an individual knows what is best for herself and can make rational decisions about her best interest.

“Dataism,” which he believes is already succeeding humanism as a ruling ideology, invalidates the assumption that individual feelings, convictions, and beliefs constitute a legitimate source of truth.

“Whereas humanism commanded, ‘Listen to your feelings!’ he writes, “Dataism now commands: ‘Listen to the algorithms! They know how you feel.’”<sup>2</sup>

In politics, of course, there are algorithms funneling us toward different conversation partners in our social media feeds, shuttling us into our red or blue echo chambers, exposing us to countervailing views only when they are most likely to generate outrage, the better to motivate the sort of engagement that advertisers value more highly. Increasingly sophisticated large language models are now able not only to predict the content that you are most likely to engage with, but to serve up new content, much of it incendiary or misleading, from chatbots masquerading as real human beings. Writing in the *MIT Technology Review*, Karen Hao says: “Because of their fluency, [large language models] easily confuse people into thinking a human wrote their outputs, which experts warn could enable the mass production of misinformation.”<sup>3</sup> Bots sow confusion and division into debates over politics, Covid-19, the war in Ukraine, and other complicated issues, frustrating the cultivation of an informed public that can engage in civil discourse and democratic governance. The prevalence of these fake

<sup>2</sup> Meghan O’Gieblyn, *God, Human, Animal, Machine: Technology, Metaphor, and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Anchor, 2021), 227.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Hao, “The race to understand the exhilarating, dangerous world of language AI,” *MIT Technology Review*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/05/20/1025135/ai-large-language-models-bigscience-project/>, accessed October 19, 2022.



accounts is unknown, sufficiently uncertain to have thrown a wrench into Elon Musk's proposed purchase of Twitter for \$44 billion in 2022.

As Bradley Honigberg wrote for *Just Security*, a publication of the Reiss Center on Law and Security at New York University School of Law,

New AI capabilities are rapidly increasing the volume, velocity, and virality of disinformation operations. As they continue to improve and diffuse, they further threaten to erode trust in democratic governance and encourage citizens to doubt the possibility of truth in public life. The profound cynicism introduced by AI-enhanced disinformation can be used to fuel mob majoritarianism and create new opportunities for illiberal politicians to campaign on promises to restore “order” and “certainty” by curtailing free speech and other civil rights. Such an outcome would hasten what Timothy Snyder has dubbed a “politics of eternity” in which malicious actors “deny truth and seek to reduce life to spectacle and feeling.”<sup>4</sup>

One could even imagine a scenario in which the bots could simply converse with one another, having rendered the human discussants quite unnecessary.

### EPISODE 3: GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT

It is a well-documented fact that AI, far from offering neutral and objective insights, often ends up infected with the worst of human biases. Karen Hao explains:

Studies have already shown how racist, sexist, and abusive ideas are embedded in these models. They associate categories like doctors with men and nurses with women; good words with white people and bad ones with Black people. Probe them with the right prompts, and they also begin to encourage things like genocide, self-harm, and child sexual abuse.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most striking examples of this comes from an algorithmic image generator called Midjourney. Type in a phrase, and Midjourney returns an image, often eerily specific, and most certainly weighted down with cultural biases. Doctors are men. Lawyers are men. Men are white; women are white; pretty much everyone is white unless you specifically query “black man,” in which case you still sometimes get a white man wearing goth.

The reason for this is not complicated. The models underlying AI and machine learning are just recognizing patterns in enormous quantities of data and then using them to generate new predictions. If you want to train a model to generate a picture of a fish on request, for instance, you just throw massive quantities of images at it, tell it which ones are fish and which ones are not, and then let it learn exactly what patterns—pixel by

<sup>4</sup> Bradley Honigberg, “The Existential Threat of AI-Enhanced Disinformation Operations,” *Just Security*, July 8, 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/82246/the-existential-threat-of-ai-enhanced-disinformation-operations/>, accessed October 19, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Hao, “The race to understand.”

pixel, if you like—distinguish “fish” from “not a fish.” (Incidentally, when this exact exercise was run at the University of Tübingen<sup>6</sup> and then the emergent patterns were examined, something interesting happened. It turned out that one of the strongest indicators that a picture contained a fish were these strange finger-like protuberances along the fish’s underside. Only, they were not finger-like, they were fingers, namely the fingers of people holding up the fish they had caught, because it turns out that is a feature of the vast majority of pictures of fish on the internet.) As you can imagine, then, the predictions generated by an AI model are only as good as the data it takes in. Garbage in, garbage out, as they say—or in this case, bias in, bias out.

These biases matter. In early 2022, NPR reported on an algorithmic tool known as Pattern used by the Justice Department to identify prison inmates eligible for an early release program; a report issued by the department in late 2021 found that the results were uneven, disproportionately forecasting higher recidivism rates for prisoners of color and therefore ruling that they were ineligible for the program.<sup>7</sup> O’Gieblyn tells a similar story of Eric Loomis, a Wisconsin man whose six-year prison sentence for resisting arrest was determined, in part, by an AI model called COMPAS that forecasts recidivism rates. Loomis attempted to challenge the algorithmic input, demanding to know what inputs it had relied on to determine his sentence, and was told that under Wisconsin law he could not do so. The decision was upheld by the Wisconsin Supreme Court. O’Gieblyn relates a similar story about Darnell Gates, a Philadelphia man on probation who learned that the frequency of his probation check-ins was determined in part by an algorithm that continually predicted his level of risk. O’Gieblyn quotes a New York Times interview in which Gates asks about the predictive model, “How is it going to understand me as it is dictating everything that I have to do? How do you win against a computer that is built to stop you? How do you stop something that predetermines your fate?”<sup>8</sup>

#### INTERLUDE: COMMON THREAD

What’s the common thread here? Simply this: the most sophisticated AI-neural nets, large language models, foundation models, etc. are currently exercises in machine learning. We are not yet approaching AGI, artificial general intelligence—nothing is out there that is approximating true intelligence, certainly not consciousness. Our most advanced AIs are extremely good at recognizing patterns, but nothing more. A conversation

<sup>6</sup> Wieland Brendel, “Neural Networks seem to follow a puzzlingly simple strategy to classify images,” Medium.com, February 6, 2019, <https://medium.com/bethgelab/neural-networks-seem-to-follow-a-puzzlingly-simple-strategy-to-classify-images-f4229317261f>, accessed October 19, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Carrie Johnson, “Flaws plague a tool meant to help low-risk federal prisoners win early release,” heard on *Morning Edition* and available at <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/26/1075509175/justice-department-algorithm-first-step-act>, accessed October 19, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> O’Gieblyn, *God, Human, Animal, Machine*, 208–9.

with ChatGPT is not an interaction with a conscious agent that can pop out of the conversation and ask whether it is a conversation worth having: it does one thing and one thing only, and that is predict the most likely string of English words that should follow whatever you say to it. Midjourney receives text and predicts, pixel by pixel, the most likely visual image associated with it. It has no idea what “red” is; it does not understand the concept of negative space or know how to draw the eye to a particular region of an image. It simply projects the query it receives onto the space of images in its inventory. The best chess player in the world is a human being—unquestionably so, because even when champion human chess players lose to DeepMind or Watson, the AI is not really playing chess. It is predicting how each successive move enhances its probability of winning, and doing so incredibly effectively, but it does not know what a pawn is, or what a game is, or what it might be doing instead of playing chess.

AI can never leave the space of the data that it is fed. It can generate predictions based on assimilating past information, but its outputs, by definition, are always functions of its inputs. Everything that it generates is derivable from what it receives, even if the derivation process becomes inscrutable even to those who program it. For AI, there can never be anything new under the sun.

#### EPISODE 4: WHAT IS HUMAN, AFTER ALL?

The teaching that humanity is made in the image of God, or *imago Dei*, is regarded as core to Christian doctrine and the bedrock of Christian anthropology—arguably the reason we can speak of theological anthropology at all. But there is a surprising diversity of views on what the doctrine actually means. Historically, the *imago Dei* has been defined in terms of capacities such as rationality, language, or worship;<sup>9</sup> in terms of humanity’s intrinsic relationality (between God and humanity, between one another, specifically between male and female);<sup>10</sup> and in terms of functions—the kingly, priestly, and prophetic vocations many see initiated in the opening pages of Genesis.<sup>11</sup> These differences matter. On the one hand, if *imago*

<sup>9</sup> For surveys of such views, see e.g. Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1984), 80; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939); Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Rochester, NY: E.R. Andrews, 1886); and for surveys of patristic thought see John McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) and Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). This interpretation originated at least as early as Philo and the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon. See Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 80.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, edited by Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 183–92.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion*, NSBT 36, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 23; David H. Kelsey, “Personal Bodies: A Theological Anthropological Proposal,” in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. Richard Lints, Michael Horton, and Mark R. Talbot (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 139–58.

*Dei* is central to what it means to be human, then how we define it may subtly, or not so subtly, influence how we include and exclude persons from the community of humanity. How we conceive of this core doctrine will certainly affect how we envision what humanity is for and the contours of the true, good, and beautiful in human lives at both the individual and societal level. And most Christians would agree that *imago Dei* constitutes the starting point for ethical reflection on humanity.

AI represents an increasingly significant field for such ethical reflection, as the technology presses into questions of how to define human nature and the extent to which our use and reliance on AI might alter that definition. Some would say that human nature is fundamentally beyond our power to change, but would still contend that we are attaining the capacity to change humanity into something at variance with that nature; most such voices sound a warning, while some focus on the benefits of transcending the limitations of human nature as we know it. Already, some ethicists and theologians have tried to apply the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to these questions: What can we do? What we should do? What lines should not be crossed? What pathologies can and should be overcome? These reflections, of course, depend on how *imago Dei* is defined, and so we can expect the diversity of views on the doctrine to be reflected in a diversity of responses to the ethical challenges raised by AI.

Here, I want to put this question on its head and ask: can reflection on AI help clarify what we mean by *imago Dei*?

This is not necessarily to ask if scientific reflection will improve our exegesis of the text. *Imago Dei* is inescapably an exegetical question: we believe that humanity is created in God's image because we are told as much in Gen 1 (as well as Gen 9 and Jas 3). The answer to the question of what *imago Dei* means must ultimately depend on what these texts mean. The meaning of the doctrine is not necessarily dependent on modern scientific reflection on AI.

But consider that doctrines do not merely mean something—they do things. Our beliefs do not just contain and convey information; they motivate action, as we move from dogmatics to ethics, and from knowledge to wisdom. The actions we take are driven by the commingling of beliefs, affections, habit, and moral imagination—and here it is eminently plausible that reflection on AI could clarify the doctrine of *imago Dei* in at least one of three ways. AI could expand the scope of the doctrine of *imago Dei* by opening up new modes of being human. On the other hand, it could restrict the doctrine's scope, closing off possibilities for lives lived bearing God's image. And such reflection could refocus our attention, giving us eyes to see the *image of God* where we had previously overlooked it—or blinding us to the *imago Dei* staring us in the face. These are just three possibilities, not by any means an exhaustive index of ways in which our understanding of *imago Dei* could be shaped by reflection on AI but meant only to suggest possible lines of contemplation.

Here is one such line of thought, exploring how reflection on AI focuses both our attention and our moral imagination on creaturely limitations.

Isaiah Berlin famously distinguished between positive and negative freedom: freedom to be what we are meant to be, versus freedom from constraint.<sup>12</sup> The technological society in which we live, bolstered by centuries of the development of expressive individualism, has clearly come down on the side of negative freedom. Freedom equals choice, and technology expands the set of available choices, offering progress understood as increased control and mastery over nature, including human nature.

The Christian teaching that humanity is made in the image of God pushes back against this narrative, suggesting that we can coherently talk about what we are made to be and how we ought to live. I believe that reflection on the potential and pitfalls of AI can help sharpen our understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God. In particular, deliberation over the application of nascent technologies that offer control over our own selves draw attention to the importance of the body, reminding us that whatever else the image of God may denote, we cannot think of it apart from the embodied existence of a humanity that shares materiality with the very “dust of the earth.” Theologians and biblical scholars can gain from the reflections of technologists and bioethicists on AI, particularly as they think about how the teaching that we are made in the image of God functions on a practical level—not only what the doctrine means, but what it does.

In our modern, efficiency-focused, results-driven society, it is often said that you cannot manage what you cannot measure. But conversely, it is also the case that we tend to pay attention only to the things that we measure, so that what begin as indicators of the things we care about in pursuing the good become ends in themselves, obscuring the real goods for which they proxy. One example of this phenomenon is Robert Kennedy’s famous speech pointing out that GDP includes the output involved in building prisons and military spending, things that most would prefer to see diminish.

We see something similar when we consider what it means to be human and find ourselves focusing on measurable, quantifiable attributes, whether rationality, creativity, language, tool-making and -using, or brain activity. Take a conception of humanity that focuses on such measurable characteristics and combine it with the ideal of negative freedom, and it is not surprising to see developments in AI that aim to remove constraints and push beyond limitations, seeking an enhanced humanity: smarter, stronger, healthier.

The desires and drives that underlie this process are hardly new. Oliver O’Donovan’s lectures published under the title *Begotten or Made? Human Procreation and Medical Technique*<sup>13</sup> were occasioned by the advent of artificial reproductive technology in the early 1980s but contain insights of great prescience and relevance to our modern questions. Similar remarks

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<sup>12</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

<sup>13</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?: Human Procreation and Medical Technique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

could be made about John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*,<sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*,<sup>15</sup> or the mid-century work of philosopher Jacques Ellul, just to restrict our attention to the twentieth century. Each of these works enters into dialogue with a much older tradition; it is clear the questions we are wrestling with here are not fundamentally new, even if they find new expressions with the introduction of new technologies.

It is not hard to see why this is the case. AI offers the potential to transcend the limitations of being material, embodied creatures, bound to space and time and to the givenness of the natural world and our natural selves. The biblical record suggests that this drive is as old as humanity itself. The fall was motivated by the desire to become "wise," "like God." The tendency to place our trust in technology is evident as early as the generations immediately following Cain, who domesticate animals, develop musical instruments, and forge instruments from bronze and iron. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the technology itself is the problem, but what does come in for sharp critique is the boastful application of technology to amplify the self and dehumanize the other—the violence of Lamech, the hubris of Babel.

Running parallel to the line of Cain, we find the line of Seth. No mention is made of their having developed any sort of technology; instead, we simply read that the line of Seth called on the name of the Lord. The contrast between these two lines, then—the one cursed, the other carrying the seed of the promised Messiah—is not that one pursues technology and the other does not; it is that one lives in a relationship of dependence on God, while the other devotes constant energy to escaping the bonds of that relationship.

Here is where reflection on AI can clarify what it means to bear God's image. A technological mindset, at its core, views the limitations of creaturely finitude as obstacles to be overcome; it is fundamentally allergic to dependence—and therefore, allergic to the limitations inherent in embodiment. But what it misses is how integral those very limitations are to our experience of being human.

There is a scene in the original Matrix film where the main character Neo, having come to understand the nature of his reality as a grand illusion electronically mediated to his mind, is training for battle with his mentor, Morpheus. The two are about to square off while in the Matrix's virtual reality, but Neo lacks the requisite skills. The solution? A few associates, back in the real world and with access to Neo's mind, type a few commands at a terminal; Neo's eyes flutter momentarily, and as they regain their focus, he intones with equal parts astonishment and gravity, "I know Kung Fu." (Later in the film another character "learns" to fly a military helicopter in the same way.)

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<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

In the real world, the process of acquiring practical wisdom cannot be so forgetful of the body. On the contrary, the acquisition of many skills actually involves physical repetition to the point where there is a degree of cognitive forgetfulness involved, as actions become habits. A pianist practicing her scales, a shortstop fielding a ground ball to start a double play, a speaker of a foreign language who has achieved true fluency, all share in common the feeling of doing something which once had to be thought through step-by-step, but has now become “second nature,” and which indeed must have done so in order to be done with any degree of excellence. We do not often notice how much of the process of navigating our world day to day is done in this way, thinking with our bodies, and so we are prone to forget how much of our competence to live in the world depends on our being embodied, with all the limitations involved.

Reflection on AI offers us the opportunity to consider the goodness of creaturely limitations. Even to consider such goodness is deeply counter-cultural in the modern world, which values freedom above all else and defines freedom as the absence of obstacles to pursue whatever direction it seems will lead to my own happiness and fulfillment. Deliberation over what lines should not be crossed implicitly assumes that in loosening the constraints of embodied existence, we risk changing ourselves in ways that we should avoid; whichever side of the debate one lands on, one assumes by entering the discussion that the body matters, that it is inescapably part of what it means to be human. Reflection on AI offers the opportunity to reflect deliberately on aspects of our embodiment that we so often take for granted, and in so doing to elucidate more of what it means that humanity bears God’s image as embodied beings.

And if such limitations are inherent in what it means to be human, then this has implications for the meaning of the *imago Dei*. In his seminal *Resurrection and Moral Order*, published not long after *Begotten or Made*, Oliver O’Donovan points out that Christian reflection on ethics always presumes an unambiguous affirmation of the body and the material world because it begins with the incarnation and resurrection of the Son of God.<sup>16</sup> If the second person of the triune God not only took embodied human nature to himself but, having defeated death, was raised, ascended, and seated at the right hand of the Father still inseparably united to that same nature, then Christian moral reflection can never treat the body as a distraction or an obstacle to human flourishing. “He was made man,” with all the limitations that entails, and he is man even now, reigning in heaven. Scripture says of him that he is not only made in the image of God, but that he is the very image of God, and he has not chosen to reveal himself apart from the same material stuff that was made by, through, and for him in the very beginning.

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<sup>16</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

## EPISODE 5: YOU ARE NOT AN ALGORITHM

And this is where I think the Christian story has something important to say about why AI could never be truly human. Christian anthropology is often thought to begin with the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. It might be better to say that the doctrine of *imago Dei* begins with the one who is himself not merely made in the image of God, but who is the very image of God himself—the man, Jesus Christ, eternal logos made flesh.

Let us pause here to recognize the scandal of that phrase; let us not let it pass easily by because we have grown used to confessing it weekly or daily in the words of the Apostles' Creed. The eternal logos made flesh; God made man. Within a certain logic, this cannot be. The divine cannot become human; the infinite cannot become finite; the eternal cannot be fit into a temporal history. *Finitum non capax infiniti*: the finite cannot contain the infinite. This has always and everywhere been a scandal; many of the great heresies repudiated by the church over the centuries have been nothing other than brilliant, well-intentioned attempts to smooth over the scandal. Arius reduced Jesus to the first and greatest of God's creatures; Nestorius united the worship but held apart the natures for fear that human suffering would contaminate divine immutability; again and again, the greatest theological minds of each generation stumbled against the rock of those four, simple words, that for us and for our salvation, he was made man.

Christians confess a mystery: not a problem to be solved by logical derivation, but a miraculous wonder to confess and adore. Dana Gioia writes,

Christianity is not animated by rules or reverence; it is inspired by supernatural mystery. "*Certum est quia impossibile*," said the Church Father Tertullian about Christ's resurrection. He believed it not because it made sense, but just the opposite: "It is certain because it is impossible." The truths of Christianity, from the Incarnation to the Resurrection, are mysteries beyond rational explanation. The Trinity is both three and one. Christ is both human and divine. A virgin gave birth to a son.<sup>17</sup>

As John Webster has written, "For the Christian confession, God is *capax finiti*—precisely because he is the true infinite who can call creaturely forms and acts into his service without compromise either to his own freedom or to the integrity of the creature."<sup>18</sup> What God has done is not derivable from what has come before. It was not, and could not have been, predicted.

In becoming incarnate, Jesus did not take an abstraction of human nature to himself. Jesus of Nazareth was a particular, specific, human—a man, born at a specific time and place, son of Mary, carrying her DNA across the waves, to the cross, and up to the right hand of the Father

<sup>17</sup> Dana Gioia, "Christianity and Poetry," *First Things*, August/September 2022, 21.

<sup>18</sup> John Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology," in *The Domain of the Word*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 138.



Almighty. He was an Aramaic-speaking Jew, and while we cannot be certain what he looked like, we can be certain that he was not the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus of children's storybook Bibles—which, by the way, is the image Midjourney returns for the query “Jesus,” because most of the images it can find of Jesus have normalized his humanity, depicting him as an abstract man as imagined by the (predominantly white) artists rendering the depiction. This is where racial bias becomes truly insidious: not where it overtly claims that one's own race is superior, but where it assumes that one's own race is simply normal, and all others are variations on the mean.

The incarnation pushes back against the idolatry of normalization. The incarnation says that the particular, specific, and concrete, in all its full diversity, matters. The fact that Jesus was incarnate gives a theological grounding to the fact that Revelation depicts the worship of the new heavens and new earth ringing out with the praises of “every tongue, tribe, and nation,” not flattened out to some universal culture, but eternally singing God's praises as each one is uniquely and vitally able. What binds together a world handed over to the algorithms and the ideal world of white supremacy turns out to be that both are, quite simply, boring: normalized, flattened, homogenous. Both are outgrowths of the same idolatry—of sameness, of familiarity, of control.

The real world, by contrast, is the creation of the perfectly simple triune God; the one who gives rise to difference in order to communicate his goodness to what is not himself: another mystery! To bear the image of God is to be made in the image of him who was the very image of God. It is therefore to be concrete, specific, particular. You are not a norm. You are not derivable. You are not an algorithm, and neither is your neighbor. Get to know her: you will be surprised.

### CONCLUSION: REFLECTING WITH HOPE

How does all this connect to the theme of this collection of essays on hope? I believe that theological reflection on AI—necessarily an interdisciplinary practice in which theologians and scientists become conversant with one another's field of study or, at least, with one another—fosters the theological virtue of hope precisely because of how complex, unwieldy, and unpredictable the results of such reflection can seem.

Let me explain this by making one final reference to the work of Oliver O'Donovan. In *Self, World, and Time*, O'Donovan distinguishes hope from two other modes we have of addressing the future.<sup>19</sup> One of them is anticipation, our expectation that the world will go on as it always has, that there are certain regularities in the physical world or even in human nature that can simply be taken for granted. “In the morning, the sun will rise”—that is anticipation. Deliberation is the mode of addressing the future in which we introduce our own capacities to plan, strategize, and influence the course of events. Given our expectations for how things normally go,

<sup>19</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 121–24.

we expect to be able to exert causal influence and achieve our goals. “When the sun rises, we take the bridge”—that is deliberation.

Hope is neither of these. Hope is precisely what is required when anticipation and deliberation fail to deliver. The sun rises, and there is the bridge, but the enemy is there too, and we are outnumbered and surrounded. Hope looks for salvation from outside; it is what made Barth and Bonhoeffer, in different ways, characterize the Church as “Advent people.” To enter dialogical, interdisciplinary reflection on AI is an exercise in hope, one which will develop it further as a theological virtue, precisely to the extent that the prospects for mere anticipation and deliberation seem dim. Or conversely, to shut down dialogue and refuse to articulate a theological anthropology in the midst of the debate out of fear would be to look to anticipation and deliberation only, refusing hope. We, as ecclesial theologians, should at the very least exercise hope—and, for that reason, faith and love as well—in pursuing such discussions within the church, with those in our congregations whom God has gifted scientifically, expecting that God’s Spirit is present in those conversation on the basis of his promise. Our churches should be welcoming homes to theologically rich and scientifically informed conversations about AI, as an exercise in hope.

## “WE TOIL AND STRIVE BECAUSE WE HAVE OUR HOPE SET ON THE LIVING GOD”: GOD’S LIFE AND THE PASTOR’S HOPE

TIM FOX<sup>1</sup>

God’s life/immortality is an important theme throughout 1 Timothy. According to 4:10, the Christian’s (and therefore the pastor’s) hope is placed on God as the *living* God. How does knowing God as the uniquely *living* one give us hope? In this essay I will show how our hope and God’s life repeatedly interweave in 1 Timothy, then turn to the seventeenth-century Reformed scholastic Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706) for help in understanding why these are so closely related, and finally end with some implications for pastoral faithfulness and perseverance today.<sup>2</sup>

### I. LIFE AND HOPE IN 1 TIMOTHY

In 1 Tim 4:6, Paul shifts from a discussion of wider ecclesial matters (prayer, male and female conduct, leader qualifications, false teachers) to a discussion of Timothy’s own ministry, before returning again in chapter five to wider ecclesial matters such as the treatment of widows and then elders. At 4:6 Paul says that if (or perhaps “as”) Timothy places these things before the church, he will be “a good servant of Christ Jesus,” that is, a servant who is “being trained by the words of the faith and of the good teaching which [he] has followed.” Pastors can only train *with* the word insofar as they are already being trained *by* it. At 4:7 Paul slightly shifts his imagery to athletic training: avoiding false teaching, Timothy must “train [him]self for godliness; for while bodily training is somewhat beneficial,

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Fox is the senior pastor of Christ the King Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas.

<sup>2</sup> Petrus van Mastricht was a quintessential pastor-theologian in the Reformed tradition of the Netherlands and Germany. His ecclesial vocation ranged widely, with him serving at different points as both a pastor and a theologian, across multiple churches and universities. On top of this, even his scholarship ran the gamut, with him being a professor of both Hebrew and theology. Reflecting the sweeping nature of his own life and ministry, his *Theoretical-Practical Theology* is famous for combining rigorous scholasticism with warm practical application, all undergirded by straightforward exegesis on selected passages. The later pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards was deeply influenced by and enthusiastic about Mastricht’s *Theology*.

godliness is beneficial for all things, [because] it has a promise of life now and of [life] future.”<sup>3</sup>

To ensure that Timothy (and we) do not miss the point, Paul somberly underscores that this is a “trustworthy saying, deserving of full acceptance” (4:9). Indeed, at verse 10, Paul says that this godliness-unto-life is the very point of Christian life and ministry (cf. 1:5), continuing the imagery of athletic and strenuous effort: “We toil and strive for this thing, because we have hoped upon the God who is living.”<sup>4</sup> Godliness—the posture of appropriate devotion and fear toward God, rooted in God’s mighty acts of salvation in Christ<sup>5</sup>—holds promise not just for *this* life (like bodily training) but also for the *eschatological* life to come. And hope, which is part of what it means to be godly,<sup>6</sup> is oriented toward God as the *living* God. Indeed, at 3:14–15 Paul has already framed Christian/ecclesial ethics (as well as the purpose of the letter itself) in terms of God’s life: “I am writing these things to you so that . . . you may know how one ought to behave in God’s house, which is the *church of the God who is living* (ἐκκλησία θεοῦ ζῶντος).”

Paul has already described and praised God in terms of his vitality and immortality and will return to them again at the end of the letter. Having opened the letter by describing God as “our savior” and Jesus as “our hope” (1:1), Paul gives his first “trustworthy saying, worthy of full acceptance, that ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’” (1:15). Paul then rejoices that God showed mercy toward him—the chief of sinners—so that he would be an example “to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον, 1:16). At 1:17 Paul now bursts out in praise to God—the “King of the ages” (βασιλεὺς τῶν αἰώνων), the immortal<sup>7</sup> one, to whom belongs glory “forever and ever” (εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων). While the *word* “hope” does not appear here, the *concept* does, as we can see a clear association between God’s life/immortality, kingly rule, and eschatological salvation.

But at the end of the letter, Paul *does* explicitly link them, as he did in 4:10. As previously mentioned, in 6:12 Paul charges Timothy to “take hold of . . . eternal life” before charging him “before the God who is *giving life*<sup>8</sup> to all things” to keep “the command” free from reproach “until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:13–14). As before, Paul now praises

<sup>3</sup> Γύμναζε δὲ σεαυτὸν πρὸς εὐσέβειαν· ἡ γὰρ σωματικὴ γυμνασία πρὸς ὀλίγον ἐστὶν ὠφέλιμος, ἡ δὲ εὐσέβεια πρὸς πάντα ὠφέλιμος ἐστὶν ἐπαγγελίαν ἔχουσα ζωῆς τῆς νῦν καὶ τῆς μελλούσης.

<sup>4</sup> Εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ κοπιῶμεν καὶ ἀγωνιζόμεθα, ὅτι ἠλπίκαμεν ἐπὶ θεῷ ζῶντι, ὅς ἐστιν σωτὴρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων μάλιστα πιστῶν. I take the first person plural to speak generically about believers, as in 2:2; 6:8, 17.

<sup>5</sup> See 3:16: “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit . . .” While the death of Jesus is far from absent in 1 Timothy (e.g., 2:6; 6:13), notice how Paul focuses in 3:16 on his eschatological *triumph* that has arrived and is proclaimed and believed in the *present*.

<sup>6</sup> See 6:11, where Paul charges Timothy to pursue godliness (among other virtues) before charging him in 6:12 to “take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.”

<sup>7</sup> I.e., “imperishable” - ἀφθαρτος.

<sup>8</sup> ζωογονέω.

God for his immortality and sovereignty: he who is the "only sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords . . . the only one having *immortality* (*ἀθανασία*) . . . To him be honor and eternal dominion (*κράτος αἰώνιον*)" (6:15–16). At this point Paul suddenly shifts to exhorting rich Christians, perhaps because a soaring view of God's glorious sovereignty is necessary for escaping Mammon's many dangers (cf. 6:9–10). Paul says that Christians who are rich "in the present age" (*δὲ νῦν αἰῶν*) must be charged not to "hope upon (*ἠλπικέναι ἐπὶ*) the uncertainty of riches" but "rather [to hope] upon God (*ἐπὶ θεῷ*)" (cf. 4:10!), who richly provides us everything to enjoy (6:17). In other words, the immortal God is the one who gives and sustains our very lives and all that they entail. The rich must do good and be generous, thereby storing up treasures for the future (*εἰς τὸ μέλλον*; cf. 4:8b) "in order that they might take hold of real *life*" (6:19).<sup>9</sup> To summarize this section: since God is the living, immortal, and life-giving one (6:13, 16), the rich must not hope upon wealth (which is by definition uncertain and transient), but rather they must hope upon *him*, who not only gives wealth *now* in the present life (the realm of "bodily training"), but especially gives wealth in the "real" life to come.

First Timothy is clear then that we do not hope in God abstractly, but rather we hope in him as the living and immortal one who gives (but never receives) life. Like Job, whose life was the only thing God left him (Job 2:6), Paul shows that we must defy despair; we must *hope* for God to *live*, and therefore to *resurrect*, at the end of history. As Job declared in hope: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God . . ." (Job 19:25–26). But what does it mean to say that God is alive, and what does this have to do with the formation of hope? I turn now to Maastricht for help.

## II. MAASTRICHT ON GOD'S LIFE AND IMMORTALITY: DOGMATIC AND PRACTICAL MEANING<sup>10</sup>

After treating *what* God is (spiritual, independent, simple, immutable) and then how *great* he is (one, infinite, great), Maastricht shifts to consider what qualities God *has*, i.e., "those attributes by which he is conceived by us to work."<sup>11</sup> He begins with God's life since "all God's remaining attributes are active by his life";<sup>12</sup> if he were *not* alive, he *could* not be majestic, blessed, knowing, willing, etc. He then argues that when Jesus says that "just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26), he is indicating two things: (1) with reference to

<sup>9</sup> ἵνα ἐπιλάβωνται τῆς ὄντως ζωῆς. Therefore the rich must be *unlike* the self-indulgent widow, who is "dead while she lives" (5:6), but *like* the "real (ὄντως) widow," who hopes upon God (*ἠλπικεν ἐπὶ θεόν*) and therefore prayerfully depends on him and serves others (5:5, 10).

<sup>10</sup> Petrus Van Maastricht, *Faith in the Triune God*, vol. 2 of *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Van Maastricht, *Faith*, 229.

<sup>12</sup> Van Maastricht, *Faith*, 233.

divine *substance* (οὐσία), God's life does not come from any other (something true for all three divine Persons); and (2) with reference to divine *relations* (ὑπόστασις) between the Persons, the Father's life does *not* come from any other, but he eternally communicates his life to the Son (generation).<sup>13</sup> The main point here is that God is uniquely alive in that, unlike all creatures, he does not derive life from another. It is not just that "God lives," but that "God lives *preeminently*"; moreover, "he is the source of all life, for he is the one who communicates life, not only to the Son through generation [i.e., through the divine nature], but also to all living things [creatures] through grace."<sup>14</sup> Mastricht argues that this is what Scripture means when it calls God "the living God" (e.g., Deut 5:26; Acts 14:15), and why he is called "life" (1 John 5:20; Col 3:4) and "the fountain of life" (Ps 36:9; Jer 2:13), the one "in whom we live, move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God is "living" par excellence. This is why he is fundamentally different from idols (Jer 10:8, 10; Acts 14:15)—and so can actually save. And this is why he swears by his own life (Deut 32:40; Isa 49:18)—and so can actually be trusted to do what he promises.<sup>15</sup>

What makes God's life different than the creature's? Mastricht first gives five contrasts: (1) God's life coincides with his essence, our life and essence do not;<sup>16</sup> (2) we live dependently on God, he has life in and from himself; (3) we possess life from him, he possesses his own life; (4) our life is finite (there was a time when we did not have life), his life is infinite so that "when we say that he has life, we always speak in the present tense"; and (5) our life is in flux, God's life is at once boundless, whole, and perfect.<sup>17</sup> Later, in treating God's immortality, Mastricht points out that God cannot die because God cannot change, and death is the greatest of all changes.<sup>18</sup>

Mastricht explains later how God is pure act (he has no potential, i.e., he never "becomes" something more or less), while we are composed of potency *and* act.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, God "operates by himself," while all creatures, in all acts, are never truly independent of God (let alone the rest of his creation) but can only act "in a secondary and dependent manner."<sup>20</sup> In his treatment of God's immortality, Mastricht lays out three kinds of immortality to show how we are similar to and different from him: (1) Immortality by God's grace toward that which is naturally mortal, i.e., being able not to die (what Adam possessed in Eden and what we will

<sup>13</sup> And, by implication, the Father and the Son eternally communicate life to the Spirit (procession).

<sup>14</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 232.

<sup>15</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 232. Cf. Heb 6:13: "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself."

<sup>16</sup> E.g., because my childhood pet rat did not have an essence that coincided with its life, it tragically ceased to exist once my dad started the lawnmower under which it had recently hidden. Unlike my rat, God cannot not live.

<sup>17</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 234.

<sup>18</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 246.

<sup>19</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 240.

<sup>20</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 241.

possess in glory); (2) Immortality through nature, though a nature still subject to change or destruction by the Creator's absolute power, and so is still in some sense "mortal" (what angels and the human soul possess); (3) Immortality through the "omnimodal independence" of one who therefore *cannot* change or die (what God alone possesses). Even so, with all these differences between our life and God's life, from creaturely life we can still speak analogically (not merely equivocally) about God's life.<sup>21</sup>

#### A. MASTRICHT'S PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

What does God's life and immortality mean for us practically? Why and how does knowing God *as the living God* foster hope in us, particularly in the pastoral vocation that must submit itself to "the words of the faith and the good doctrine" (1 Tim 4:6) by which Timothy and we must continually be trained?

##### 1. Worship

In line with Paul's doxologies in 1 Timothy (1:17; 6:16), Mastricht's first applications of God's life and immortality deal with glorifying and worshipping him. God glories in his own life (e.g., his oaths), and so should we. Indeed, the songs of the saints and angels in Revelation repeatedly praise and describe God in terms of his vitality: "Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, *who lives forever and ever*, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him *who lives forever and ever . . .*" (Rev 4:9–10).<sup>22</sup> Hope, like godliness, is primarily about knowing and relating to God (John 17:3 says that eternal life *is* knowing God), and so we cannot have or grow in hope without knowing and worshipping God as the *living God*.<sup>23</sup>

##### 2. Humility

Mastricht also focuses on various ways that God's life should humble us. First, knowing him as the living God should make us *grateful*, since we derive all our life from him: both natural life *and* spiritual/eternal life.<sup>24</sup> We cannot take credit for any aspect of our lives; like the "real widow" of 1 Tim 5:5 we are entirely dependent upon him and so must gratefully set our hope upon him.

Second, Mastricht argues that knowing God's immortality should underscore our own *mortality*. This is particularly salient in the recent

<sup>21</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 246–47.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Jesus's description as the living/resurrected one in Rev 1:5, 18, etc.

<sup>23</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 242, 247.

<sup>24</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 243, defines "spiritual life" as something we possess in the present, and "eternal life" as that life which we will possess at the consummation. I would argue that these are two sides of the same coin—we are already experiencing the (partial) invasion of future eternal life into the present.

and unprecedented cultural moment, in which most governments in the world (with wide support) radically weakened, shamed, and/or criminalized fundamental social, economic, and even religious realities because so many people were (and still are) terrified of suffering and dying from a virus that (nevertheless) continues to evade our attempts at controlling it. In the West we live longer, wealthier, and healthier lives than nearly anyone else in the world (let alone our ancestors),<sup>25</sup> and yet Covid-19, which has overwhelmingly killed those who were *already* close to death through age and/or ill-health, has revealed a long-standing and deep-rooted refusal to face our creaturely mortality.<sup>26</sup> But Maastricht reminds us that we need to be humbled in the face of God's immortality—we “who carry our breath in our nostrils . . . who are exposed to all kinds of death—natural, spiritual, and eternal—who can be deprived of life by the most trivial causes.”<sup>27</sup> Facing God's life and immortality should cause us to realize that we are merely “dust and ashes” (Gen 18:27) and that we (and everything else) are short-lived and fleeting (Ps 39:4-5).<sup>28</sup>

Third, Maastricht argues that knowledge of the living God should *rebuke* us. How easily people live as if God were “lifeless and senseless, a God who neither sees, nor hears, nor observes, nor understands, nor rewards or avenges whatever they do on the earth.” We think he does not and cannot really act, and so we do not act rightly toward him. Insofar as we function as if he were lifeless, we also refuse to “love, seek, fear, revere, call upon, or

<sup>25</sup> For a recent sermon on 1 Timothy 5 (widows), I did a bit of research on ancient Roman vs. modern American female mortality. (Paul says that Timothy's church should only enroll widows older than 60.) Based on my research, I figured that in the first-century, a 60 year-old Roman woman had outlived ~85% of other females (with about 50% of girls dead by 10), while in America (2019), a woman needed to reach 93 to have outlived 85% of females; at 60 she has outlived only 14%. See CDC WONDER database (<https://wonder.cdc.gov>), and Walter Scheidel, “Demography,” in W. Scheidel, I. Morris and R. Saller, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 43.

<sup>26</sup> This is not a new problem, of course. Calvin points out that even though many people like to pontificate about the fragility of human life, “there is almost nothing that we regard more negligently or remember less. For we undertake all things as if we were establishing immortality for ourselves on earth. If some corpse is being buried, or we walk among graves, because the likeness of death then meets our eyes, we, I confess, philosophize brilliantly concerning the vanity of this life. Yet even this we do not do consistently, for often all these things affect us not one bit. But when it happens, our philosophy is for the moment; it vanishes as soon as we turn our backs, and leaves not a trace of remembrance behind it. . . . Who, then, can deny that it is very much worthwhile for all of us, I do not say to be admonished with words, but by all the experiences that can happen, to be convinced of the miserable condition of earthly life; inasmuch as, even when convinced, we scarcely cease to be stunned with a base and foolish admiration of it, as if it contained in itself the ultimate goal of good things. But if God has to instruct us, it is our duty, in turn, to listen to him calling us, shaking us out of our sluggishness, that, holding the world in contempt, we may strive with all our heart to meditate upon the life to come.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.9.2.

<sup>27</sup> Van Maastricht, *Faith*, 247.

<sup>28</sup> Van Maastricht, *Faith*, 248.



worship" him. This functional dead-God-ism also appears as despair, that is, the opposite of hope: "Those who, set amidst whatever difficulties, despair for their souls as if they did not believe that God in heaven is the one who lives, who sees and knows their lot, and who can bring them help."<sup>29</sup> The apostle Paul set his hope on the living God, in spite of his suffering-filled life and ministry, because he saw in the resurrected Jesus that the living God really does give life to the dead: "He was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4). God's life rebukes our despair.

### 3. Consolation and Hope

Mastricht also repeatedly considers God's life in terms of consolation and hope. God's vitality is "a foundation for solace, in whatever difficulties of all our life, that God our Redeemer lives (Job 19:25) and that he is the strength of all our life (Ps 27:1)," whether these difficulties concern natural life (e.g., disease, poverty, violence, dying), present spiritual life (e.g., discouragement about the presence and power of our sin), or future eternal life (e.g., anxiety about final judgment).<sup>30</sup> Similarly, under his treatment of God's immortality, Mastricht argues that knowing him as the immortal one "conveys to the godly, even in the horror of death, the sweetest solace, that they have God covenanted to them," the living God who for our sakes "delivered his Only Begotten over to death, that he might abolish death and bring life and immortality through the gospel (2 Tim 1:10)." Because the living God has sworn to us the promises of the gospel by his own life, the corruptible *must* put on incorruptibility (1 Cor 15:53).<sup>31</sup>

The flip side of this consolation is eschatological hope. Mastricht says that contemplating God's life should give us a "zeal for blessed immortality." The desire for immortality is universal, though it manifests in various ways. He says that, beyond actually desiring to live beyond our deaths, humans also seek immortality through having children and through seeking fame. We strive for immortality not only with natural works (e.g., food, medicine, safety) but also with heroic, virtuous, or even criminal works. Everyone wants to be immortal because we all have immortal souls. But how do we attain to true hope? Mastricht gives three elements for its pursuit: (1) Its *source* is the uniquely immortal God, who is "united to us by burning love and desire" (Ps 42:2); (2) its *agent* is Jesus, "to whom the Father granted to have life in himself, that he would be the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), indeed life itself for his own (Col 3:4)"; (3) the *instruments* by which we find God's life through Jesus are the knowledge of God and Christ (John 17:3), faith in them both (John 14:1), a "burning desire for blessed immortality" (2 Cor 5:2–4), a good life in all things (Phil 3:20–21), and a good death in faith (Rev 14:13). "And after all these things cannot but

<sup>29</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 243.

<sup>30</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 244.

<sup>31</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 248–49.

follow a blessed deathlessness.” Knowing, believing, and obeying God as the living one draws us deeper into the hope of the resurrection, not only because he is uniquely alive (and therefore the source of life), but especially because as *this kind* of God he has committed himself to *us* so that we can trust him in the present to do what he has promised in the future.<sup>32</sup>

### III. TOILING AND STRIVING WITH HOPE IN THE LIVING GOD TODAY

Here I will extend Mastricht’s points in a couple of directions for today. First, on worship. As pastors, it is our job to lead God’s people in worship, but of course many of us find it easy to just go through its motions, even without the congregation (or ourselves!) noticing. Contemplating God’s vitality and immortality can warm the pastor’s cold heart. In a world of such overwhelming busyness and suffocating efficiency, we must slow down to worship God as the only one who is truly self-existent. We are totally dependent upon him, no matter how well-educated we are or how large our ministries might be. Every facet of our lives comes from him as a gracious gift. No matter what disappointments and frustrations we face, let us join the apostle Paul in praising the living God for his rule over all things, not least death itself!

Second, on humility and dependence. How easily we like to think (or act like) that the living God *needs* us to be serving him. How mindlessly we come to function as if church, ministry, and kingdom were riding on our shoulders, carried along by our talents and diligence. But we need to be humbled by God’s life and immortality. We always depend on him; he never depends on us. Like Paul’s “real” widow in 1 Tim 5, we need to express our dependence in prayer. (Not just talk or preach about prayer.)

We also need to be humbled in the face of our mortality; some day a pastor will preach at *my* funeral. Are we pacing ourselves appropriately, so that we do not run ourselves into an early grave (or, worse, moral failure)? Or are we living as if we are immortal, making excuses and exceptions for ourselves as we tell ourselves how important and irreplaceable we are? Similarly, do we remember that in the end even we “professional” Christians are really nothing but vapor? In spite of our degrees, books, or memberships, in a hundred years it is almost certain that nobody on the planet will remember who we were. God’s immortality should underscore our own frailty, which should severely limit our estimation of our abilities and importance. As Mastricht points out, we need to be “rebuked” by the reality of God’s life, for we often act as if God were actually dead by our failing to trust him to do what he has promised in his timing and in his way.

Third and finally, savoring God’s vitality and immortality should foster eschatological hope in us: “we toil and strive *because* we have our hope set on the living God” (1 Tim 4:10)! In the face of our and our ministries’ vaporous vanity, what else can sustain us other than God’s promise (sworn by his own life!) to mightily resurrect us and our flocks and this world at the

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<sup>32</sup> Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 249.

end of history? For "just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26). And *because* the Son has life in himself, he really is the one who "gives life to whom he will" (5:21), and we really can believe his promise that "an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out" (5:28–29). God forbid that we become *Sadducean* pastors, functionally scoffing at the resurrection because we have failed to heed the lesson of the bush (Mark 12:24–27)! For the fundamental reason that God *is* the God of Abraham is not only that the patriarch is currently looking forward to his resurrection, but that God is the *living* God, that is, YHWH—the self-existent "I AM" (Exod 3:14–15). Do our hearts and ministries reveal that we really believe that he is the God of the living?



## PEOPLE OF HOPE IN AN AGE OF DESPAIR: HOW ETERNITY AND HISTORY GROUND THE CHRISTIAN'S FUTURE

CHRISTOPHER J. GANSKI<sup>1</sup>

### I. THE AGE OF DESPAIR

We live in an age of increasing despair. This despite the fact that the world is a far safer place than it has ever been. This despite the fact that poverty rates around the world are at their lowest level in history. This despite the fact that life spans have increased and wealth has spread to more and more people. This despite the fact that our technologies have gotten more powerful and sophisticated. Yes, violence, disease, poverty, and inequality continue to exist, but within the larger perspective of history we have made incredible progress. And we continue to make progress. We have reason to hope. This at least is the argument for progress that Harvard professor Steven Pinker makes in his recent book, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*.<sup>2</sup> Pinker wrote his book to counter the mood of cultural despair around social progress. He argues that if we look at the bigger picture, never have we had so many reasons to be hopeful about the possibilities of human progress in history. Nevertheless, even though objectively speaking the world seems to be a far better place now than it was 100 years ago, for most people *it does not feel better*. We do not experience it as better. All the progress Pinker has named has yet to translate into an increase in broad social hope.

On September 5, 2019 the Joint Economic Committee of Congress published a report titled *Long Term Trends in Deaths of Despair*. The report tracks the dramatic rise since 1999 of “deaths by despair” which they define as deaths by suicide, drug and alcohol poisoning, and alcoholic liver disease and cirrhosis.

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

Mortality from deaths of despair far surpasses anything seen in America since the dawn of the 20th century . . . The recent increase has primarily been driven by an unprecedented epidemic of drug overdoses, but even excluding those deaths, the combined mortality rate from suicides and alcohol-related deaths is higher than at any point in more than 100 years . . . Rising unhappiness may have increased the *demand* for ways to numb or end despair, such that the cumulative effects show up years later in the form of higher death rates. But the proliferation of a uniquely addictive and deadly class of drugs has meant that the *supply* of despair relief has become more prevalent and more lethal.<sup>3</sup>

The increase in “deaths by despair” are not limited to pockets of poverty, violence, and inequality. They are distributed broadly across social classes. Pinker’s book makes a compelling case that the world is a better place by most measures, but he cannot make sense of the despair problem. And neither can our secular culture. That is because despair is not merely a material problem, an economic problem, a social problem, or a freedom problem. It is a meaning problem. Despair cannot be simply solved through social action, congressional committee, innovative policy making, or a stronger economy. At its heart, despair is a spiritual condition. It has to do with where we find ultimate meaning and purpose in life.

Hope is the opposite of despair. In what do we hope? What is the fundamental basis of our hope as a people? It would seem the American psyche is like a rickety old China cabinet filled with fragile teacups. Just the slightest vibration or tremor seems to rattle and break us to pieces. Why is that? The mass fragility of our culture and its susceptibility to despair reflects the fact that we have placed our hope in things which the apostle Peter would describe as perishable, subject to corruption, and of depreciating value.

We need a hope that is not fragile; a hope that can confront despair; a hope that is “imperishable, undefiled and unfading.” This kind of hope must be in something that is beyond this present world and time. The apostle Peter opens his first letter with a greeting of hope: “Blessed be our God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet 1:3).<sup>4</sup> Real hope is a living hope that finds its basis in the triune God.

Peter is writing to scattered Christian communities he describes as exiles. He addresses these exiles as a people of hope (a major theme throughout the letter) for an important reason: these Christians are struggling.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Joint Economic Committee of Congress, *Long Term Trends in Deaths of Despair*, September 5, 2019, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2019/9/long-term-trends-in-deaths-of-despair>.

<sup>4</sup> All biblical quotations are from the ESV.

<sup>5</sup> For social-cultural background on 1 Peter see Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

They are in social and political exile. They do not have a land. They do not have political freedom and autonomy. They do not have social equality. Their life cannot be secured by wealth and cultural power. They are suffering and vulnerable. Some are persecuted. They are cultural minorities. And yet Peter reminds them that they *must not despair* or pity themselves because they are a people who have been born anew into a “living hope.” The church today is very susceptible to American cultural despair. There are many churches and Christians living in despair. This is in part because we have tied our hope and sense of meaning too closely to the American dream, identity, and destiny. Peter calls us to be a different kind of church in the world. He calls us to be a church in exile. And a church in exile is defined by a deep hope in God.

## II. EXILED, NOT DESPAIRING

What does it mean for the church in exile to be a people of hope? We must first answer the question, what does it mean to hope? Hope is a universal human experience. Every person, regardless of race, culture, or creed, hopes in something. Hope is desire aimed towards the future. Hope is the heart’s orientation to the future. It is our imagination of ourselves within a story whose unfolding is towards flourishing. There is great diversity in the different things in which we place our hope: a future career, falling in love, getting married, having children, a well-planned vacation, the eradication of injustice in the world. Regardless of what it is, no one can live without hope. This is an existential impossibility. Without hope we die. Hope is the necessary oxygen for the soul that gives us the desire to continue living. When life seems to offer no future that is worth living, despair sets in. To lose hope leads to death by despair.

Victor Frankel in his memoir *Man’s Search for Meaning* chronicles his life as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps of Birkenau and Auschwitz. Frankel’s profession before his imprisonment was as a psychotherapist. The organizing question of his memoir has to do with what permitted some prisoners to psychologically survive the concentration camp where others had failed. In his estimation, the capacity for hope was central. “The prisoner who had lost hope in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay.”<sup>6</sup> Frankel tells the story of a hopeful prisoner who shared a dream with him that they as prisoners would all be liberated on March 30, 1945. This hope gave him the will to survive. It was February 1945 at the time. When March 30 came and went without their liberation, the man who had the dream became delirious and lost consciousness. The next day he died of typhus. Frankel says, “The ultimate cause of my friend’s death was that the expected liberation did not come, and he was severely disappointed. His faith in the future and his will to live had become paralyzed and his body

<sup>6</sup> Victor Frankel, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon, 1959), 74.

fell victim to illness.”<sup>7</sup> He lost his footing as he grasped at mere illusion and fell to his death in despair.

Peter describes the Christian hope as a “living” hope. A “living” hope is contrasted to a “futile” or “dead” hope. A hope that is not living is a hope that fails us when we need it most, a hope that turns out to be an illusion. A living hope is “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1 Pet 1:4). Peter maintains that living hope must not be vulnerable to decay, corruption, defilement, or loss of value. The category of “inheritance” is helpful to understand this hope. Christian hope is not just a feeling or mood we have about things turning out for our good in the distant future. Christian hope is something we can grasp. Inheritance in Peter’s context evokes the imagery of land and material blessing, something tangible we can possess. In the OT, the Jewish hope for inheritance was tied directly to the promise of land to Israel. God promised Abraham and his descendants a land and said, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen 12:2). God came through on these promises, but, as it turned out, exile proved to Israel that the inheritance of land, progeny, reputation, and material blessing was subject to corruption, decay, and loss of value. In exile, the people had to learn a deeper hope: God himself was Israel’s true inheritance. Being God’s people in the land was the means by which they were meant to experience God as their inheritance. It took the experience of exile for the people to learn to hope in God alone, not just the material blessings he provided.

Frankel in his memoir shares another insight about surviving the death camp that relates to finding hope in situations when the material conditions of our life are dire and desperate. According to Frankel, during the darkest hours of our life, hope must be fueled by a vision of the beloved. He says,

I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss . . . [and that is through] the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when a man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring suffering in the right way—in an honorable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words “The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.”<sup>8</sup>

Frankel opens our eyes to see how hope is related to imagination. To hope is to see and envision, not just the future, but what we love most. Contemplating what we love gives us the will to survive. In hope we have capacity to see and behold a glory and love that is weightier than our suffering is heavy. The question is, Do we have a beloved in which we

<sup>7</sup> Frankel, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Frankel, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 38.



can become lost in perpetual contemplation? Who or what should be the beloved object of our imagination? The right answer, of course, is God. God is our beloved. God the one in whom we hope.

However, if we are honest, most of us do not tie our hope very deeply to God. Our hope is like Israel's, tied to this-worldly blessings and the earthly inheritances God provides. While these are good things and worthy objects of penultimate hope which provide real meaning—children, family, marriage, career, a household, community, citizenship, service to country, making a difference in the world—they cannot give us the fullest, deepest meaning for which we were created. Someday we will experience a kind of exile in relationship to all these things because they are perishable, corruptible, and fading.

Consider this: every relationship and love in our life will someday come to an end by death. Everyone you love will someday die if you don't die first. Every institution, movement, or community you hold dear and have given your life to—whether it be your marriage, your family, a career, our nation, a neighborhood—is subject to defilement, moral failure, and corruption. If you are lucky, your career and health will be good for many years, but these too begin to fade. Like a new car that you drive out of the dealer's lot begins to depreciate in value, so our bodies, careers, and accomplishments depreciate and fade in value over time. All the things we give ourselves to will eventually turn to dust. What is your hope after these things give out?

This is why the experience of exile is a gift. It helps us see that having merely this-worldly hope is not a living hope. It ends ultimately in futility and death. Life in exile allows us to find the deepest meaning and reason for hope in this world, which is God alone. As C. S. Lewis says, quoting one of the mystics, "He who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only."<sup>9</sup> Do you believe this can be true?

### III. THE HOPE OF INHERITANCE IN GOD

How is hoping in God alone a tangible inheritance? How does this become real? Christian hope is not a vague belief in God or a sentimental thinking about life after death. It is quite concrete. Peter wants us to know that Christian hope is grounded in the facts, actions, and events of God the Trinity in history. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet 1:3). There are three dimensions of the basis of Christian hope in the context of 1 Peter.

#### A. THE MERCY OF GOD THE FATHER

The first is that Christian hope is grounded in the great mercy of God the Father. God becomes the beloved contemplation of our hope because we have become his beloved children. Christian hope is distinguished

<sup>9</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Harper Collins, 1949), 34.

from all other hopes in that it promises an inheritance we do not deserve. Most hopes we have are things we are working towards, things we fight for or believe we deserve or should possess as a right. Not so with Christian hope. You cannot earn this hope. Christian hope is grounded in an act of the Father's mercy in saving us. Christian hope understands that misery is our deserved inheritance because of our sin and rebellion against God. And yet, it is mercy that we have received. This is an especially precious basis for our hope when the things of which we despair the most are not the circumstances of our life, but our very selves. How do you hope when you have lost all hope in yourself? When you hate yourself? When you do not feel like you deserve any future? So many of the deaths by despair in America today reflect this kind of personal hopelessness. Biblical hope is not grounded in our own sense of worthiness, but in the great mercy of God as our Father.

Perhaps you feel like the prodigal son who threw away his inheritance and trashed his life. Perhaps you think you only deserve to be a hired hand that eats with the pigs. But the great mercy of the Father is this: he sees you coming home, he does not stand with his arms crossed at the threshold. No, he runs towards you, he wraps you with his royal robe, he slaughters a lamb and throws a party on your behalf. The Father delights in you. You are his beloved daughter, his beloved son. No matter how badly you screwed up your life, great mercy is your inheritance. What God the Father says to his own Son, Jesus, he says to you and me: "This is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased" (see Matt 3:17). Our hope is grounded in the fact that because of the Father's mercy we have become objects of God's beloved contemplation. He loves us beyond measure.

## B. THE NEW BIRTH IN CHRIST THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT

The second basis for Christian hope is being "born again." We can also call this the new birth. What does it mean? How is it related to hope? First consider what we receive at the time of our biological birth. Birth is all-encompassing and determinative. It sets the course of our life. At birth, without any input from ourselves, we are given a name, a sex, an ethnicity, DNA, a culture, a language, a nationality, a socio-economic status, and a family. When the Bible speaks of being born again or the new birth, it should evoke for us comprehensive transformation to a new life and identity. New birth is cosmic in magnitude. To be born again marks our entrance to a *whole new order of existence*. To experience the new birth is to undergo an inner transformation that fundamentally distinguishes and alters our life and identity from that which came before it. It touches the very foundations of our personality, everything about us. Even though we might not feel it or experience it fully, new birth means that through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit there is a new principle of life at work in us.

The Spirit is the power of new creation itself, and that Spirit dwells within us. The same divine power that will bring complete and total renovation of the cosmos has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy

Spirit. The same Creator Spirit that hovered over the “formless and void” depths, the same Spirit that was the breath of life in Adam, the same Spirit that surrounded the virgin womb of Mary—that Spirit has been poured out richly into our hearts for the sake of complete and total renovation and renewal of your life. Sometimes we despair in life that we can ever change as persons. And yet, we can hope that real change is possible because we have received new birth.

This is very important because it means that the basis of Christian hope is not just something in the distant future, but a present possession and possibility. Hope emanates from the very foundation of our life as indwelt by the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit is at work here and now in our hearts and lives. It is the hope of present possibility. We need not despair. As Paul reminds us, “Hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). To be a people of hope is to understand that there is now in us, through the new birth, a power of renovation, the energy of cosmic renewal now at work in us that will one day remake all things. In Jesus Christ, the world’s future already dwells within us. It is the power of God’s loving presence.

### C. RESURRECTION HOPE

Finally, there is a third basis of hope, which anchors all the rest in real history. We have a “living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” This living hope is an orientation towards the future, but its ultimate basis is in the past. It is in the singular event of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. When all reason for hope seemed lost, when it seemed as if sin, injustice, death, corruption, and the curse would have the final word, Jesus triumphed. In the resurrection he was vindicated, and so was our hope for the full restoration of creation. His resurrection is the guarantee, the down payment, the advance proof that we will follow his lead. We will have a body like his. We will be raised from the dead and all of creation itself will experience new birth.

To hope is not a specific action, but a posture of our imagination and a moral orientation. Hope is an adjective that describes all our actions. We live in hope. To hope means our actions are grounded in the sure promise that Jesus will put all things right. His resurrection is like a pathway cleared through a dense and dangerous wilderness of corruption and death whose journey we will someday complete. Hope means all our experiences of suffering are not vain. Hope means our losses of love are not final and irrevocable. Hope means, however incomplete or frustrated our efforts at justice may be, they are not meaningless or lost. Hope is the emotional frontline of our soul against the politics of despair, cynicism, and corruption. Hope is the antidote to the thinking that says, “Well, this is just the way things are.”

## IV. CONCLUSION

*To hope is to not to live in the world as it is but as it will someday be.* It is to live in the world as it will one day be in Jesus Christ. And what it will be is a place where our bodies will be fully alive by means of the presence of divine love, and the whole creation will be filled with the righteousness, beauty, and glory of the Lord. This is what Paul means when he says that someday we will attain “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). Hope is an experience of freedom now because it is based upon a certain future. It means we walk into the future, not with fear and trepidation but with freedom and trust. This is what it means to be a people of hope.

## CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY IN THE POST-COVID WORLD: DYNAMICS OF PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE GROWING DESIRE FOR HOPE

DAVID S. MORLAN, PHD<sup>1</sup>

### I. INTRODUCTION

The mission of the church to go outside its walls and make disciples is desperately needed in the world today. According to a recent *World Happiness Report*, the general public is the most unhappy it has been in fifty years. Yet the mission to actively engage non-Christians with the gospel of hope is also facing scorn by some within the church demanding change. In the wake of scandals of abuse and misuse of power, in the backwash of celebrity pastors and absurd hypocrisy, and in the fallout of sociological manipulation and unabashed business methodology, the voice of correction within the church is unmistakable: pastors need to take it down a notch. Pastors need to pump the brakes. Pastors need to take their eyes off the masses and on to the select few who walk in the doors of their churches. The admonition of Scot McKnight typifies this attitude, “*TOV* summons pastors—get a good grip on this—to pastor the people they have, not the people they don’t have. Growth, in all its aspects, is the work of the Holy Spirit, not the work of the pastor, the leaders, or the church.”<sup>2</sup> Pastors who go beyond this have become “too big for their britches”<sup>3</sup> and likely have immoral and selfish motives. The argument of this essay is to say this sort of broad correction to the current sins of the church may in fact be a misdiagnosis of what the core issues are, and, if pastors indeed “take it down a notch” by taking their eyes off the broader community in the process, it squanders our moment in history to offer unshakeable hope to a fracturing culture of despair. The positive side of this essay will be to explore personal and

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<sup>2</sup> Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called TOV: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2020), 219. Of course, the Holy Spirit uses pastors, leaders, and churches to reach the lost. The disconnect between the responsibility of the church and the role of the Holy Spirit is one reason why the evangelical church needs a revived vision of the church’s mission.

<sup>3</sup> McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 198.

corporate dynamics of transformation and deep spiritual change that have historically accompanied authentic Christian conversion. It is here, with the prospect of deep fundamental change offered by Christian conversion, that the desires for change currently felt by non-Christians in the broader culture and embattled Christians within the church overlap.

## II. NARCISSISM, JUSTICE, AND TRUTH-AS-POWER IN CULTURE

My two conversation partners in part one will be Irish political theorist Richard Seymour and American NT scholar and evangelical cultural commentator Scot McKnight, already quoted above. In his work, *The Twittering Machine*, Richard Seymour claims that the current alignment of social media, technology, politics, and entertainment have formed an almost invincible force in broader culture that he calls “The Twittering Machine.”<sup>4</sup> This “Machine”<sup>5</sup> has created a context and platform that produces certain predictable and recognizable results. These results are twofold: foster social friction/drama and profit off that societal friction.

The Machine has created a digital interpersonal connection in which the average person can “disseminate falsehoods, for random bullies to swarm on targets and for anonymized misinformation to spread lightning-quick. Above all, however, the Twittering Machine has *collectivized* the problem in a new way.”<sup>6</sup> We are all connected in a way that bypasses traditional gatekeepers and creates new dimensions of social reality. Seymour continues, “the mediation of social reality through an image is no longer organized by large, centralized bureaucracies. Instead, it has devolved to advertising, entertainment and, of course, the social industry.”<sup>7</sup> Because of this “hyperconnection” and its detachment from historic, external verifiers of information, and its new propagators of advertising, the Machine itself pushes toward creating its own content, which is driven by drama (i.e. social division). This drama creates interdependent but opposed forces of celebrity and anti-celebrity. The tension between these opposite energies creates a powerful addictive force that draws people into an almost Hegelian pattern of thesis/antithesis/synthesis.

I believe Seymore’s framework of addiction, celebrity, and the troll response to the celebrity provides an insightful sociological grid for discerning dynamics that are at play in the church’s moral crisis. While particular

<sup>4</sup> Richard Seymour, *The Twittering Machine* (London: Verso, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> In the remainder of this essay, I will use the term “Machine” to refer to the collective impact of social media, technology, politics, and entertainment. Similar to Seymour’s Twittering Machine is what researchers at Barna call “digital Babylon.” They describe it this way, “We at Barna have adopted a phrase to describe our accelerated, complex culture that is marked by phenomenal access, profound alienation, and a crisis of authority: digital Babylon . . . through screens’ ubiquitous presence, Babylon’s pride, power, prestige, and pleasure colonize our hearts and minds.” David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 34.

<sup>7</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 37.

issues in the church might feel unique to the church,<sup>8</sup> *how* issues are framed are not. Referring to social media giants, Seymour says,

They are agnostic about what users post because their trade is in attention—an abstract commodity—not content. With two billion people ceaselessly churning out content, the platform is so designed as to automatically convert the stuff of everyday life into economically valuable informatics. Content stimulates users to produce more content in a virtuous, or vicious, circle.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the particulars of the issues are irrelevant, what is relevant is that the controversy and stimulation it creates fosters dependence on the platform itself. *Christianity Today's* wildly popular podcast, “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill” (*TRFMH*) can certainly testify to this. On this show, the particulars of Mars Hill issues are discussed, but the framework of the show, both the causes of the problem (narcissism, see below) and the proposed solutions to it (reorganizing structures to decentralize power), fits eerily well into the pre-existing cultural narrative, which, according to Seymour, is fostered by the Machine.

What is increasingly clear as I reflect on the effect of the Machine is that three of its more unique “calling cards” overlap in a striking way with three of the biggest complaints about the church: celebrity/narcissistic pastors, cries for justice in response to those leaders, and the quest for power in the form of truth-telling. The connection between these three related issues can be summarized like this: a culture of celebrity produces an inevitable sort of narcissism which is severely self-orientated *and* creates a “trolling” anti-celebrity backlash, self-oriented in its own way, that aims to bring these self-appointed celebrities to justice. The tension between these two poles is the quest for power under the banner of truth-telling. Who we believe is telling the truth is who has the power to effect change.

The first domino in this chain reaction is the prospect of fame and personal addiction to the dopamine hits that being “liked” produces in the Machine. *TRFMH* describes Mark Driscoll’s rise to fame and documents a dramatic shift and deterioration of his personality. If we use Seymour’s framework, this shift is to be at least partially explained by the massively addictive reality of being on the front end of the social media complex and the constantly high volume of dopamine hits Driscoll obviously received in this season of the church. Seymour describes the addiction this way,

There is something spellbinding about what other people are attending to: this is the “viral” aspect of fame. By “making the web more social,” as Mark Zuckerberg boasted, the platforms have converted ordinary social interactions into potential celebrity pseudo-events: quantifiable, and easily reproduced pieces of

<sup>8</sup> For example, the particularly damaging impact of ungodly pastors, unchecked by weak elder boards.

<sup>9</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 90.

information, or memes. On the addiction machine, celebrity is reduced to the barest mechanism of *orchestrating attention*.<sup>10</sup>

When “ordinary social” events are given the opportunity to be bigger than what they normally would be, it is very tempting to opt in for the “potential celebrity pseudo-event.” When regular church work, unsung and often overlooked, suddenly has the chance to receive attention (for God’s glory, of course), then the dynamics of church work itself might change.

Given the unique “up-front” role of pastors in church settings, it is easy to see how the itch for more attention can be fostered in a culture of celebrity making. McKnight warns that “Celebrity pastors want every Sunday to be a buzz event”<sup>11</sup> and that “big screens on the pastor in service”<sup>12</sup> are likely signs that narcissism is not far behind. McKnight continues, “That’s what every celebrity pastor wants: ‘mass recognition.’ The aim is fame, glory, and the main stage.”<sup>13</sup> Of course the temptation to pride in the pulpit is not a recent phenomenon. John Bunyan wrote of its dangers in his *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* published in 1666. Yet, given the cultural framework of the Machine and the acceleration and pathway to narcissism, something about it does feel new. Hence, once a pastor is addicted it creates a “new narcissism,” an “elaborate hall of mirrors in which we can’t stop looking at ourselves.”<sup>14</sup>

Reflecting on this broader new narcissism Seymour states, “A feed filled with topless mirror shots, gym photos, new hair, and so on, might be seen as a peculiar form of idolatry. But it is less a tribute to the user than to the power that the machine has over the user.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the Machine itself is used to foster this narcissism but in a way that creates momentum for backlash, an equally addictive counterpart that fans into flame an intensifying drama in the name of justice. The Machine created a double-addiction: addiction of the narcissist to himself and addiction of viewers to the narcissist.

The reaction against new narcissism comes with the feel of a grassroots justice campaign, but its function within the Machine is that of a troll. As Seymore says, “Trolls are the anti-celebrities. They are the propagandists of human failure.”<sup>16</sup> These campaigns of righteousness work to dismantle the celebrity narcissist. It is filled by a desire to cut them down to size. Seymour explains,

Complaints about narcissism are almost always, as Kristin Dombek writes, about the “selfishness of others.” It is always other people whose too-hot selfies, too-glamorous dinners, too-happy relationship photographs, too-charming holiday snaps, evince

<sup>10</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 94.

<sup>11</sup> McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 186.

<sup>12</sup> McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 188.

<sup>13</sup> McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 188.

<sup>14</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 94.

<sup>15</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 107.



narcissism. Narcissism in this sense is, as Wilde said of wickedness, “a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus when trolling aspects of the Machine’s culture decides that a person is “too big for his britches,” they act to execute justice quickly on the narcissistic leader. Reflecting on ways to counteract the seeds of narcissism, McKnight suggests a striking way forward: “In the circle of *TOV*, a service culture forms at such a deep level that anything smacking of celebrity gets a quick smackdown.”<sup>18</sup> To me what is striking about this language is the “fight fire with fire” aggression of it. Anything that *smacks* of celebrity gets a *smackdown* from the justice warriors. Is this language of smackdown prophetic, in line with the Hebrew prophets speaking oracles to godless kings, as McKnight suggests? Or is the threat of “smackdown” more in line with current broader trends of justice trolls?

In the midst of the battle between these forces is the question of power. Taking power back, accusation of too much power, and misuses of power. The fight over who should have it is closely related to the quest to be believed. The credibility of the very institutions that verify truth itself hangs in the balance over which side to choose. Institutions are the fodder in the middle of the fight between celebrity and troll. Who is telling the truth? Whose narrative will be believed and thus win the day? In his chapter “We Are All Liars,” Seymour says that this tension is really a “crisis of knowing.”<sup>19</sup> In the marketplace of facts, “what is true” is a contested question. Seymour continues,

Disagreement about “basic facts” is a condition of a functioning democracy. A fact is just a measurement, and there is always some legitimate disagreement over the relevance of the measurement, the tools used to make it, the authority of the people doing the measuring, and so on. There are no facts without values, so only in a police state can there be a factual consensus.<sup>20</sup>

Because truth is highly contextual, located within time and space and in the container of innumerable variables, and because the Machine rips content from that context, it creates a space in which misinformation, lies, and misrepresentation become commonplace. It is the Tower of Babble, endless talk with confusion and fighting as its fruits. Thus plays for power come in strong as a result.

These characteristics overlap in a significant way in the current complaints about toxic church culture. Misuse of authority by entrepreneurial leaders, narcissism, and celebrity-cults highlight this broader cultural phenomenon. I believe it is important to connect these trends to the current issues in the church. It appears our crisis is the evangelical cultural

<sup>17</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 94.

<sup>18</sup> McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 200.

<sup>19</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 149.

<sup>20</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 144.

subset of this wider cultural phenomenon that can be seen played out in universities, corporations, and governments throughout the world where the Machine is the dominant cultural mediator. It is important to connect these two because the correctives for these issues might not be fixing something theologically or even structurally inherent within the church, but rather the correct diagnosis of a sickness, ubiquitous within culture, that is making its effects felt within the local church. For example, McKnight gives several potential fixes: pastors must share the pulpit more,<sup>21</sup> pastors must reject broadly accepted principles of leadership,<sup>22</sup> churches need to quit highlighting people who serve,<sup>23</sup> and churches need to shift attention away from preaching to prevent toxic culture.<sup>24</sup> Yet, if the problems are framed *and exacerbated* by the broader cultural narrative, the fix to those problems is likely *not* going to be found in the answers shaped by the same cultural narrative.

Some (not all) of the problems seen today in the church are the fruit of the uncritical adoption of the technologies used by the Machine and the powerful influence the Machine has on the church. What I see in the church currently is an uncritical reaction to the problems these technologies created, using the very framework provided by that same culture.<sup>25</sup> The result of this is that churches make decisions that destabilize their structure and weaken their mission, all in the name of justice.

### III. REFOCUSING ON THE MISSION

What is needed in the church, and what is yearned for more broadly in the culture, is a true alternative to the celebrity-troll-power narrative. Seymour himself suggests a surprising way forward that ironically also aligns with McKnight's earlier work as a scholar.<sup>26</sup> Seymour writes,

To break an addiction, the neuroscientist Marc Lewis has argued, is a unique act of reinvention. It requires a creative leap. The addict gives up meth not by going cold turkey or taking pharmaceutical substitute, but by breaking the compulsory force of habit. It is not a matter of a single 'crossroads' decision, like a vote or a purchase in which everything immediately resolves into clarity. It is a process of becoming different. For the individual addict, that might mean

<sup>21</sup> McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 199.

<sup>22</sup> McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 208–9.

<sup>23</sup> McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 197.

<sup>24</sup> McKnight and Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, 212.

<sup>25</sup> "There remains the stubborn and alarming fact that more contact with the social industry platforms corresponds to more misery, more self-harm, more suicide. Which raises urgent questions about how these platforms are conditioning us." Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 90.

<sup>26</sup> Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

undergoing intensive psychotherapy, learning a new art or skill, or religious conversion.<sup>27</sup>

Seymour, who is not an evangelical in any way that I can tell, is suggesting that a vision of a deep religious conversion is what is needed in the world to counteract the destructive influence of the Machine. He continues, “Recovering addicts don’t simply get back what they have lost: they tend to develop entirely new and more sophisticated capacities. New ways of being in the world.”<sup>28</sup> Again, he asks hopefully, “What if, in deliberate abdication of our smartphones, we strolled in the park with nothing but a notepad and a nice pen? What if we sat in a church and closed our eyes?”<sup>29</sup>

What is needed is a deeper understanding of conversion itself and a renewal of the *continual* conversion of pastors as leaders in the church. A totally fresh alternative to the Machine is advocating for a renewed, wholesale, unapologetic call for radical conversion to Jesus. Themes of repentance, forgiveness, restoration, and transformation are more true to the church’s historic mission than the celebrity-troll-power narrative by which many in the church are trapped today. It also provides a pathway of authentic hope and real change rather than modeling to the world unforgiveness and withering judgment for “offenders.” Conversion, itself a long ignored evangelical pillar, may well provide a depth of change that many are longing to experience. The combination of personal-identity-quest disillusionment, COVID related heartache, and mental health breakdown has created a kind of crisis that people may in fact be looking for the kind of profound transformation Jesus calls people to and that his church has been entrusted to foster.

It may seem counterintuitive to foster an outward orientation to non-Christian, non-church goers when there are so many problems in the church itself. What McKnight is advocating seems to track with the logic that the church needs to sort itself out first before any concerted effort to outreach. Yet, is the solution in the church really improved methods, better management systems, and more stringent accountability structures? All of those can be easily manipulated and corrupted as quickly as their previous structures were. Rather, a solution is found in the core message evangelicals deliver to outsiders: a message of rebirth, an invitation to experience New Creation, not just a reorganization. It also tracks with Jesus’s pattern of calling disciples, while they are *still* a mess, into his mission. Jesus refocused their attention off themselves (Matt 16:24) and onto the coming kingdom of God (Matt 6:33). I suggest that freedom from the self is actually what the wider culture longs for (while not using that language of course). Furthermore, freedom from the self provides a sense of hope and renewal needed with embattled church leadership.

Gavin Wakefield’s brief but excellent work on conversion shows a growing number of people have no contact with churches. This distance

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<sup>27</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 212.

<sup>28</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 212.

<sup>29</sup> Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, 216.

between non-Christians and the church is consistent with broader trends in the post-Christian West and is an important reminder for pastors caught-up in *church world*. Most people in our communities have zero interaction with our churches. Because of this Wakefield writes that “it would be short-sighted to go only to the ‘lapsed.’” He suggests furthermore that, “churches which put their emphasis on recovering former churchgoers may need to look more widely.”<sup>30</sup> While it may seem as if *everyone* thinks badly about the church, the reality is that most people do not think about the church at all. Moreover, because of the ever-expanding gap between what people think Christianity is versus what Christianity actually is, conversations about the gospel are surprisingly fruitful. In an extensive interview with thousands of Christians who converted after the age of sixteen, it was found that the second major factor (after “friends” for women and “spouse” for men) in them coming to Christ was a relationship with a minister who shared the gospel with them.<sup>31</sup> For better or worse, God uses pastors to help people come to Christ. A renewed effort in this direction may also bring disoriented pastors back to an invigorated relationship with Christ.

So how do pastors foster an evangelistic push towards non-Christians while not relying on tricks of social manipulation? I think Tim Keller’s vision of the “fruitful” ministry—as opposed to just “faithful” or “successful”—is a useful rubric.<sup>32</sup> I see two moves pastors can make to this end of a fruitful ministry. First, a renewed confidence that Christian conversion is actually good for people. It is not something to be embarrassed about but speaks to a need people have in culture. Research shows that people who convert to Christianity, “see themselves happier after the conversion.” But the happiness factor has an important caveat: if conversion is marked by “selfish reasons” they may not experience any marked increase in happiness. However, “people who make their faith an interior experience, and those who are willing to face questions through it tend to be healthier.”<sup>33</sup> Not only do versions of “diet Christianity” or self-oriented Christianity not work, they also decrease joy and are more likely to not stick. But genuine, life-giving conversion is an eternal gift of joy that starts giving right away.

A second move towards fruitful ministry is a renewed emphasis on the meaning and practice of baptism as an expression of saving faith. For a multitude of reasons, children today are focused on forming their identity non-stop. For example, helping middle and high schoolers create and form their personal identity is a *primary* goal in Denver Public Schools, which is where my three sons attend. Through curriculum taught in all their classes (including mathematics!) they are being told to make their own identity. Identity creation—not identity discovery—is the expectation. Interestingly,

<sup>30</sup> Gavin Wakefield, *Conversion Today* (Cambridge: Grove, 2006), 23.

<sup>31</sup> For women (Christian friend 24%, minister 17%) and for men (spouse 22%, minister 16%). Wakefield, *Conversion Today*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Wakefield, *Conversion Today*, 18.

the message of the gospel and the dramatic expression in baptism is set up to address this expectation. Because our culture pushes people to create and maintain distinct identity markers, baptism offers a fresh and yet historically rooted option for an identity in Christ jam-packed with meaning.<sup>34</sup> I have been surprised to discover that many people on the fringes of the church community are jumping at the chance for baptism. Baptism is a new identity, death of the old self and birth of the new. Conversion as expressed through baptism offers a fresh, radical alternative to the tired and anxiety producing cultural expectation of creating your own identity.

A renewed orientation to conversion also requires a deeper appreciation of conversion itself. While I do not have space to expand on all the theological contours of conversion here, it is worth being reminded of its characteristics. In the NT, the terms such as *metanoia* (repentance) and *epistrepho* (turn/convert) are used together to express the theologically-charged Hebrew term *shuv* (to turn/to repent). These words are used to indicate wholesale change in an individual life or community. One's mind is changed, one's heart is transformed, and one's life direction is altered. The nature of conversion, the message of repentance, and self-denial require fundamental displacement of the self and submission to the will and direction to God and his Word. As Stanley Jones states in his classic work on conversion, "The center of conversion is the conversion of the will,"<sup>35</sup> or as he says later, "conversion converts *everything*."<sup>36</sup> Conversion is a radical reorientation of the self around God and his desires for the individual. In his work on conversion, Michael Lawrence makes the point that conversion is not becoming *nice*; it is becoming *new*.<sup>37</sup>

The process in which change happens can appear suddenly (the road to Damascus) or over time (the road to Emmaus). The work by Richard Peace argues that conversion in the NT, while showing varying rates of time in the process, tends to have three distinct phases: insight (in which the person understands the world differently based on the content of the message), turning (doing and thinking differently), and transformation (dealing with the internal and external consequences of the change).<sup>38</sup> Beverly Gaventa sees three types of conversion in the NT. There is *alternation* in which conversion follows rather than disrupts already established convictions. It is a culmination of previous beliefs and life experiences. Second, there is a *pendulum-like swing* sort of conversion. This is when the convert has thoroughly rejected a previous worldview or religious system in favor

<sup>34</sup> "Conversion requires a change in religious worldview and identity . . . a rupture with a former identity and the ubiquitous utilization of the converted's new identity in all areas of life." Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 140–41.

<sup>35</sup> E. Stanley Jones, *Conversion* (Nashville: Abingdon Classics, 1959), 198.

<sup>36</sup> Jones, *Conversion*, 198.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Lawrence, *Conversion: How God Creates a People* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 17.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

of a newly chosen religious system. Finally there is *transformation*. This type of conversion is when an individual's past is not rejected but rather reinterpreted in light of the new religious experience. An example in church history of this transformative kind of conversion can be seen in Martin Luther's famous conversion story. His conversion while reading Scripture caused him to reinterpret his past using his new spiritual framework.<sup>39</sup>

The sociologist Lewis Rambo has put together a classic model of conversion showing seven stages that are involved in most conversion experiences.<sup>40</sup> This model is very helpful for us to better understand the dynamics at play in conversion. The first stage is *context*. "Context" is the overall environment in which change takes place, including the large-scale culture. Everything we discussed so far about the Twittering Machine fits in the context. It is the geo-political reality that people live in and all the technologies that mediate cultural realities. What is most important about this stage is that a major shift in context makes the self more likely to be changeable. When there is a breakdown of societal and institutional credibility, it creates a sensation of a loss of home. When change is too rapid and extreme to be absorbed by systems of meaning (such as family, religion, education, government), then it creates significant dissonance between those system's expectations and how people actually feel. This loss is called historical dislocation and it makes people open to significant personal and spiritual change.

The second stage in Rambo's model is *crisis*. This is where the church's opportunity lies. So many people are in crisis! Crisis usually precedes conversion: it is the rupture in life of some kind and makes people understand they cannot do life in the way they have done it before.<sup>41</sup> Because the context is unstable, more and more people are in crisis.

The third stage is *quest* in which people seek to resolve their predicament. The church can easily create spaces for "questers" in their community. The only limit is the local church's imagination.

The fourth stage, *encounter*, occurs between the questing person (s) and the advocate of a new alternative. The focus here is not just the potential convert but also on the pastor, advocate, or missionary; their interplay is crucial in the process. Again the church could easily create space for this stage.

Fifth, *interaction* is the intensification of the contact in which the advocates and potential converts "negotiate" changes in thoughts, feelings and actions.

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<sup>39</sup> Beverly Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 42–43.

<sup>40</sup> Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 17.

Sixth, *commitment* is a phase in which people decide to devote their lives to a new spiritual orientation. This state of turning is what Rambo calls the “fulcrum of the change process.”<sup>42</sup>

Seventh, *consequences* involve ongoing aspects of further conversion or transformation. In Christian terms it is discipleship, growth, sanctification, or walking by the Spirit. I believe the church is uniquely equipped to own stages three through seven. If Rambo’s model is close to accurate, the church has a remarkable opportunity to see many come to Christ, and in the process the church might reorient itself back into God’s mission.

There is one final observation on conversion that is important for one to understand the relationship between the church’s moral crisis and its mission to the unbelieving world. The observation is that the lack of an emphasis on conversion is the fruit of the lack of the church’s understanding of the preeminence of Christ. Because of the lack of belief in the power and utter uniqueness of Jesus there is a corresponding disbelief in the power to change an individual, whether it be a disoriented church leader or your unbelieving next-door neighbor. This observation can be illustrated in the publication of two particular books. First, in John Stott’s final book, *The Radical Disciple*, he names several important aspects of meaningful engagement disciples of Jesus need to have with the world. The first and most important is this: that Christians respond to the spirit of secular culture by affirming, “the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ. . . . There is nobody like him. He has no rival and no successor.”<sup>43</sup> The key mark of discipleship is “nonconformity.”<sup>44</sup> He implores disciples with the words of Paul, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”<sup>45</sup> But the second book I want to highlight is one that was written to honor John Stott and his book *The Radical Disciple*. In this second book, *Living Radical Discipleship*, the various authors mention many aspects of Stott’s ministry and themes in *The Radical Disciple*, but nowhere is the actual heart of discipleship mentioned.<sup>46</sup> But what is mentioned are themes of global politics, social justice, and ecological imperatives. To be clear, all of these are critical and at least hinted at in Stott’s own work. However, what is notable in terms of current cultural shifts is that all of these are in line with a trending discernible pattern of this world, while what is conspicuously missing is the core conviction that all those themes must rest on the preeminence of Christ. I highlight this not to criticize the book *per se*, but to note that the trend away from the utter uniqueness of Christ is also a move away from the necessity of conversion to Christ.

<sup>42</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> John Stott, *The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 19–20.

<sup>44</sup> Stott, *The Radical Disciple*, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Stott, *The Radical Disciple*, 19.

<sup>46</sup> Laura S. Meitzner Yoder, ed., *Living Radical Discipleship* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2021).

## IV. CONCLUSION

I began this essay by suggesting that the contours of the current ills of the church can be seen more clearly using Seymour's *The Twittering Machine* as a framework. The shame and embarrassment many Christians feel in the church due to its narcissistic pastors and misuses of power have pushed some to rethink or reject core structures that lay in the foundations of church institutions. While restructuring and rebuilding may be necessary for many churches to regain integrity and lost trust, it is also true that many of the proposed fixes miss the mark and may make things worse in the church. Moreover, Christian leaders ought to be suspicious of solutions that come from the same place that caused or, at the very least, amplified the problems in the first place.

Instead I have suggested that it is a better use of energy and resources to engage in mission and evangelism to our local communities. Key to this is a re-emphasis on conversion and the power of the gospel to authentically transform people. The power of the gospel to do this gives hope to a self-obsessed world that they can find freedom from the self in Christ. It also gives hope to self-obsessed Christians that they can once again deny themselves, pick up their crosses, and follow Jesus afresh.

It may seem as if the church is stuck in a mess of its own making. And it is true that Christ's Bride has many problems. However, it is also true that the church's message is still the most compelling message in the world today and one that the world desperately needs and even longs for. While it may be tempting to mute our message out of embarrassment caused by bad actors in the church, this is not the right path. Instead, the church ought to re-engage in its mission to the world. Doing this will help those who need hope and will redirect a church that has lost focus.







## BOOK REVIEWS



David Moffitt. *Rethinking the Atonement: New Perspectives on Jesus's Death, Resurrection, and Ascension*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022. xv + 298 pp. \$30.79, paperback.

David Moffitt's *Rethinking the Atonement* provides a perceptive and insightful contribution to the ongoing discourse on the Christian doctrine of atonement. As Reader in New Testament Studies at the University of St. Andrews and a leading researcher in Hebrews scholarship, Moffitt is well-positioned to elevate the importance of Hebrews in contemporary debates on atonement, which have often focused on the Pauline epistles and the Gospels. Indeed, Moffitt devotes a significant portion of the book to an in-depth analysis of the Epistle to the Hebrews, occupying more than two-thirds of the text. This emphasis on Hebrews is so central to Moffitt's argument that the book could have easily been titled *Rethinking the Atonement in Hebrews*, were it not for the final 83 pages devoted to other NT texts.

The book is divided into fifteen chapters, each of which (apart from chapters 1, 4 and 10) is a republication of some of Moffitt's most significant articles. The first ten are devoted to an in-depth analysis of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Moffitt explores key themes of atonement such as Jesus's death (chapter 2), the inauguration of the New Covenant (chapter 3), Jesus's resurrection (chapter 5), Yom Kippur (chapter 6), Mosaic Law (chapter 7), analogical theology as a means to understand Jesus's service at the heavenly tabernacle (chapter 8), and Jesus's perpetual work as the heavenly high priest (chapter 9). Throughout this section, Moffitt emphasizes that Jewish apocalypticism, rather than Platonic idealism, is the most appropriate way to understand Hebrews' theology of atonement. In chapter 11, he concludes his focus on Hebrews by providing a brief analysis of early Christian reception of Jesus's heavenly sacrifice. The remaining chapters are dedicated to analyzing atonement in Matt 12 (chapter 13) and 27 (chapter 12), Acts (chapter 14), and 1 Cor 15 (chapter 15).

Moffitt's aim in writing this book is apparent from the opening chapter, in which he posits that Jesus's sacrificial atonement extends beyond his death on the cross to include his resurrection and ascension. He draws extensively from his earlier work, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Brill, 2011), to argue that the Hebrew Bible's sacrificial system involved a multi-step process, with the spilling of animal blood being only one part of a more comprehensive ritual culminating in the offering being presented to God inside the temple. Considering this, Moffitt contends that when Hebrews speaks of Jesus's atoning sacrifice, it does not simply refer to the event of his death, but also encompasses his resurrection, ascension, and his presentation of himself as the sacrifice on behalf of humanity at the heavenly tabernacle. To quote Moffitt's own words, "The resurrection and ascension are not just important addenda to the main event of the crucifixion . . . Rather, Jesus's resurrection and ascension are themselves fully and robustly salvific . . . the goal of many

of these essays is to show that Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension are all atoning" (p. 5).

The book's central claim has been criticized by some, particularly among Protestant circles, thinking it undermines the significance of the cross. If Jesus's death is not the definite time when atonement is secured, Moffitt's view runs the risk of depicting Jesus's death as not really "finishing" anything at the cross, as John 19:30 states. In response, Moffitt takes care to address this concern throughout the book. He clarifies that he is not seeking to diminish the importance of the cross, as though Jesus's death is a lesser event, but rather that atonement is a multi-step process that extends beyond Jesus's death. At one point, Moffitt clarifies that the fact that Hebrews does not conceive of Jesus's atonement as being completed at the cross, "does not mean that Jesus' death/work on the cross is not salvific. The point, rather, is that Jesus does more to effect salvation than simply die." (p. 137, n. 7). While Jesus's death is certainly a vital component of his sacrifice, Jesus's salvific work would be incomplete without a larger sequence of events, including his resurrection and ascension.

In conclusion, David Moffitt's *Rethinking the Atonement* offers a fresh perspective on the Christian doctrine of atonement, with a particular emphasis on the book of Hebrews. By drawing on his extensive research in Hebrews scholarship, Moffitt challenges traditional views of atonement that focus solely on Jesus's death on the cross. Although his view has been criticized for potentially undermining the significance of the cross, Moffitt addresses this concern throughout the book and clarifies that Jesus's death remains a vital component of his sacrifice. Overall, it is a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions on atonement theology and is recommended reading for scholars and students alike.

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J. Patout Burns, Jr. *Augustine's Preached Theology: Living as the Body of Christ*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. xviii + 374. \$45.00, hardcover.

There's a story about a theological colloquium that assembled fifteen scholars to discuss the interpretation of Scripture. This prestigious group of Old and New Testament scholars, historical and systematic theologians, academics and practitioners gathered for multiple days to discuss the nature of Scripture, how it should be read, and its place in the life of church and academy. As the gathering drew to a close a senior scholar remarked wryly that the work they were called together to do was, in historical perspective, once the work of a single person. But now, for various complicated reasons

concerning the study and practice of theology, it took fifteen people to assemble one “Complete Theologian”—a person who was, more often than not, a pastor.

The story behind this fragmentation is long and complex, and no simple explanatory narrative can be supplied here. But at least one reason concerns the end of scriptural and theological reflection. If, as this institution has argued repeatedly and convincingly, the social location of the tradition’s theological production has often been the church (and not only the academy), then it is also the case that the central “artifacts” of the church’s theological culture have not always exclusively been the commentary, the systematic theology, or equivalent text. Instead, the *sermon* has been a central place where the great minds of the church have applied the various disciplines of theology toward the end of serving God’s people. It was through *preaching* that the Great Tradition was developed and extended through time.

That is a way of thinking about the church’s intellectual and spiritual life that perhaps has gone out of fashion. (And that, too, is a story that cannot be told quickly.) But it is a way that could be retrieved. And J. Patout Burns’s *Augustine’s Preached Theology* provides, by way of Augustine of Hippo, an excellent example of the kind of preaching that marries theological rigor with pastoral sensitivity. It is thus an example of how the sermon could once again function in the church’s life.

The preliminary chapter provides a concise description of the principles that undergirded Augustine’s interpretation of Scripture. For Augustine, interpreting the text was a theological task informed by doctrinal conclusions which were drawn from Scripture. The *totus Christus*, an interpretive principle that pervades his reading of the Psalms, was a result of meditating on the ways that pro-Nicene Christology helps us make sense of otherwise puzzling passages (p. 18). Similarly, the double love commandment is another Scriptural insight that then exercises a constraint on what various Scriptures might teach and thus on what the preacher can and cannot say to the gathered church (p. 21). Preaching, Burns makes clear, was always for Augustine a *theological* task that required tools forged in the deep work of contemplating and systematizing the truths of Scripture.

Following this introductory chapter, Burns organizes Augustine’s corpus of sermons into nine groupings. Categorizing and describing Augustine’s preaching in this way is a formidable task; over seven hundred of Augustine’s sermons have been preserved. Burns’s deep familiarity with Augustine yields the following chapters: “Riches and Poverty,” “Sin and Forgiveness,” “Baptism,” “Eucharist,” “Marriage,” “The Ministry of the Clergy,” “The Saving Work of Christ,” “The Human Situation,” and “Christ and the Church.” Each of these chapters is a miniature meditation on the interplay between congregational needs, scriptural truths, and theological reflection. Burns is clear that Augustine wears his learning lightly; pure doctrinal exposition was rare in Augustine’s preaching (p. 22). Nonetheless, it was impossible for Augustine to speak pastorally about the human situation

without carefully reflecting on the nature of guilt, concupiscence, and original sin—one example among many that is evident in this book.

The final chapter on “Christ and the Church” is a particularly generative example of this. Augustine demonstrated his interpretive, homiletical, and theological practice not only when exhorting his congregations on how to live but also regarding who they were as the church. Burns shows how Augustine’s preaching shepherded his readers along a path of Christological doctrine, scriptural echoes, and practical implications. Augustine taught his congregation that membership in the church was something far different than any other kind of association; to be a Christian is to be caught up in the ongoing work of the Holy Trinity in creation. “In various ways, Augustine attempted to demonstrate that the Savior, himself constituted by a personal union of divine and human, was joined in a similar personal union to the faithful who formed his body, the church. . . . The activities of Christians who were joined into that ecclesial body continued and completed the work of the Savior on earth” (p. 278). Significantly, these insights were not tucked away in volumes meant only for the few; they were presented to the gathered church as deep and yet accessible truths for their contemplation and living.

Burns’s *Augustine’s Preached Theology* is an excellent summary of the sprawling corpus of Augustine’s sermons. But it is more than just a gaze back into the church’s past by way of the Bishop of Hippo; it also charts a way forward. By looking *back* to Augustine we can look *ahead*—seeking to retrieve once again the place of the sermon as a central site of the church’s work of extending the Great Tradition.

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Oliver D. Crisp. *Participation and Atonement: An Analytic and Constructive Account*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022. xii + 260 pp. \$29.99, hardcover.

In this philosophically rich work, Crisp deploys analytic philosophy for a fresh analysis of Christ’s reconciling work. Readers of his earlier material will recognize some similar positions and discussions, but he also makes important and surprising revisions.

Crisp’s opening section establishes foundational terminology and assumptions. The first chapter delivers definitions of common soteriological terms like “motif,” “metaphor,” “model,” “doctrine,” and “theory.” Particularly noteworthy is his definition of theory. Drawing from its use in the sciences, Crisp suggests that very few theologians offer theories of atonement but instead construct models of atonement. In the second chapter, the author



defends the notion that God's distributive justice requires punishment for sin. Consequently, if atonement is to occur, then Christ's death must possess adequate "intrinsic, objective moral value" to compensate for sin (p. 46). As a result, he rejects both acceptilation and acceptation accounts of atonement since they either deny such inherent value or ground the value in divine choice.

In the second section, he reviews traditional accounts of Christ's work like moral exemplarism, ransom, satisfaction, and penal substitution, identifying the particular mechanism of atonement operative in each. He finds exemplarism deficient on both biblical and theological grounds as it does not provide a sufficiently robust mechanism of the atonement. Regarding ransom, he contends that it is merely a motif of atonement and not a model or doctrine of it, though one could wonder if this is a fair rendering of how the patristics would have understood their accounts. He circumspectly distinguishes satisfaction from penal substitution because of their distinct mechanisms of atonement. In contrast to the previous motifs and models discussed, satisfaction is endorsed with minor qualifications. This is notably in contrast to the following chapter entitled "Problems with Penal Substitution" (p. 119). Selecting just a few of the common criticisms of the view, Crisp initially refutes several of the critiques, particularly the one regarding God's freedom being limited if he cannot forgive without some form of satisfaction. Though charitable in many respects, Crisp finally contends that the transference of guilt from the guilty party to Christ, which is constitutive of penal substitution, "remains perhaps the most significant intellectual problem that defenders of penal substitution must address" (p. 145). Even though some recent articulations defending the transference of guilt have emerged, Crisp chooses to take up a version of satisfaction theory in the remaining parts of the book as a more viable option than penal substitution.

The remaining chapters canvas several different, yet relevant topics. For instance, in the first chapter of section three, he articulates a moderate Reformed view of original sin. In keeping with his earlier positions, he rejects the notion that Adam's progeny bears original guilt for his sin. Nonetheless, Adam's descendants are still affected by original sin which "*leads to death and separation from God irrespective of actual sin*" (p. 165, emphasis original). While he realizes the moral issue raised when one is punished for someone else's sin, he contends it is a better position than one in which people are also guilty of Adam's sin (p. 168). Though he is consistent in rejecting the transferability of guilt, one can see how critics might say it makes little difference in the end whether guilt is transferred when the actual penalty is delivered irrespective of guiltiness.

From here the author further elaborates on his proposed version of satisfaction by distinguishing between substitution and representation. Whereas the former displaces the person, the latter signifies Christ's acting on behalf of his people. Crisp thus explains the mechanism of Christ's work in his modified Anselmian view as a "*vicarious, reparative, and penitential act of soteriological representation*" (p. 189, emphasis original). As a human, Christ

can represent humans before the Father. While not personally responsible for our sins, he can vicariously perform a penitential act on our behalf, namely, a grand apology. Thus, he concludes that “Christ’s incarnation, life, death, and resurrection constitute one complex performative act by means of which he offers an apology on behalf of fallen humanity” (p. 199).

What though, is this apology and why does it result in salvation? Crisp says that Christ “does pay the penalty for human sin that includes death and alienation from God on the cross” (p. 202). One might think that he is hedging towards some kind of penal substitutionary account but in the lines immediately preceding, he writes that Christ “does not bear the punishment or guilt for human sin. Thus, penal substitution is excluded” (p. 202). It is not entirely clear how Crisp can affirm that Christ pays a penalty on the one hand but then deny he pays some kind of punishment on the other hand. Furthermore, he never fully explains what differentiates a penalty from a punishment, which is one weakness of his proposal. Nevertheless, Christ’s bearing of this penalty, in keeping with Anselmian logic, is of “the right sort of value needed to bring about atonement for all humanity” (p. 201). As a result, it alone is capable of reconciling God and humanity.

While some practitioners might be disappointed that the work does not engage more with biblical exegesis, its approach is very much in line with other seminal works in soteriology like Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo?*, a work with which it shares much in common. As such it will guide ministers of the gospel to be clear about the presuppositions, mechanism, and consequences of Christ’s work in their teaching. For those wishing to sharpen their terminology and presentation of Christ’s work, this book is worth the read.

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Katelyn Beaty. *Celebrities for Jesus: How Personas, Platforms, and Profits are Hurting the Church*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022. 193 pp. \$22.88, paper.

Katelyn Beaty is editorial director for Brazos Press. She previously served as print managing editor at *Christianity Today* and is the author of *A Woman’s Place: A Christian Vision for Your Calling in the Office, the Home, and the World* (Howard Books, 2017). Her new book, *Celebrities for Jesus*, is a piercing analysis of the ways celebrity has compromised the contemporary evangelical movement.

The book is divided into three parts. In chapter one, Beaty juxtaposes fame and celebrity. Fame is connected to the desire to be responsible for something that will inspire or otherwise bless future generations. Fame arises from a life well lived and is at its finest when it comes to those who

are not chasing it. “Celebrity is fame’s shinier, slightly obnoxious cousin. It shows up to the family reunion in a Tesla, expecting a red-carpet roll-out. It will definitely share the whole thing on Instagram Live” (p. 11). Building on the work of historian Daniel Boorstin, Beaty argues that celebrity is a uniquely modern phenomenon that feeds on mass media. Unlike fame, celebrity is not a by-product of a virtuous life, wise leadership, or humanitarian accomplishments; rather, it relies on magazines, film, the internet, and social media to create an aura of well-knownness. Celebrity is a shortcut to greatness, renown without the cultivation of virtue, “social power without proximity” (p. 17). For Beaty, this final feature is the most troublesome. The absence of true knowledge and accountability leaves abundant opportunity for social power to be misused.

Chapter two focuses on the first evangelical celebrities. Beaty gives special attention to Billy Graham, arguing that while Graham sought to resist celebrity, his approach to ministry stimulated the dynamics of celebrity that now pervade American evangelicalism. Graham joined a tradition of charismatic communicators who preached an individualistic gospel, used mass media, and aligned themselves with mainstream celebrities to make their message more relevant (p. 25). The subsequent chapter traces the development of the megachurch, which, according to Beaty, has “altered our understanding of the pastor in powerful and concerning ways” (p. 46). Here, she recounts the story of Willow Creek and Bill Hybels, showing how the church explicitly sold its celebrity pastor approach to other churches.

Having defined celebrity and provided historical context—how did the American church get here?—part two of the book concentrates on three temptations associated with celebrity: abusing power, chasing platforms, and creating persona. Chapter four presents Ravi Zacharias, Mark Driscoll, Carl Lentz, and John Crist as examples of the spoliation that can occur when we put people in special, spiritual categories of power without ensuring the accountability that all power requires. In chapter five, Beaty critiques (unflinchingly!) the Christian publishing industry, showing how publishers often prioritize those with celebrity status. “The pressure to turn a profit gives platform an outsized role in who gets book deals. Quality of writing, educational credentials, and hard-won wisdom are not enough to get a contract. Writers are told they must also have platforms . . . By contrast, someone with a large social media following, who can’t write or doesn’t have much to say, will find plenty of publishers and agents who want to publish their book. Numbers rule” (pp. 102–3). Chapter six examines the costs of celebrity for the celebrity, while also considering why we look to Christian celebrities to fulfill our spiritual and psychological needs.

In the final part of the book, Beaty demonstrates how the church has sought to fight celebrity with celebrity. Instead of critiquing the wider celebrity culture, the church has simply adopted it. “In a time when church attendance and affiliation are declining, Christians hope representatives with mega-platforms might turn the tide. This explains why some megachurch pastors have cozied up with pop star Justin Bieber, who regularly speaks of his faith in Christ. . . . He’s a good spokesman for the Christian brand” (p.

148). The church of the next generation, Beaty says, is better off abandoning the obsession with cultural relevance or credibility and pursuing ordinary faithfulness instead.

This is an insightful and timely book; in writing it, Beaty has done the church a great service. In our celebrity-obsessed culture, pastors will likely be tempted to create an aura of well-knownness, pursuing whatever path might lead to a mega-platform, all the while thinking they can wield the power of celebrity for gospel purposes. Beaty does a masterful job of showing that, like the One Ring made by Sauron himself, celebrity cannot be wielded without it changing us into someone, or something, else.

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Matt R. Jantzen. *God, Race, and History: Liberating Providence*.

Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021. pp. xi + 195 pp. \$100, hardcover.

In recent years, the doctrine of providence re-emerged as a pressing theological issue. In Scotland, both historical theologian Mark Elliot and systematic theologian David Fergusson published important volumes on the doctrine (Mark W. Elliott, *Providence: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Account* [Baker Academic, 2020]; David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* [Cambridge University Press, 2018]). In America, the Los Angeles Theological Conference of 2019 brought together some of the best theologians of the English-speaking world to consider the matter in greater depth (Those papers are published in Oliver D. Crips and Fred Sanders, eds., *Divine Action and Providence: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* [Zondervan Academic, 2019]). It is in this context that Matthew Jantzen published his doctoral dissertation on the relationship between the doctrine of providence and race, titled *God, Race, and History*.

Jantzen begins chapter one with Langdon Gilkey's infamous assertion in 1963 that the doctrine of providence was "the forgotten stepchild of contemporary theology" (p. 11). The lack of sustained theological focus on the doctrine since that time leads Jantzen to ponder two questions. First, what caused the doctrine's decline, and second, why have attempts to retrieve the doctrine failed? The conventional answer to the first question, proposed by twentieth century theologians like Gilkey and G. C. Berkouwer, is that the doctrine of providence withered in the face of the human suffering and violence that marked the first half of the twentieth century. For Jantzen, this answer is deeply problematic because it suggests that the doctrine crumbled in the face of predominantly *European* suffering. That the doctrine functioned so well in the nineteenth century in the

face of the human suffering and violence caused by colonialism, chattel slavery, and the racial logic that funded them is the real problem that must be addressed. And once it is, the answer to the second question—why have attempts to retrieve providence failed?—becomes self-evident. The doctrine of providence does not need to be recovered; it needs to be liberated.

Jantzen establishes his case by looking at three prominent accounts of providence in modern Protestant theology: G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Barth, and James Cone. In chapter two, Jantzen argues that Hegel's doctrine of providence amounts to intellectual colonialism. Hegel, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, interprets world history as the progressive movement of the divine spirit from past to present and east to west, arguing that God's self-revelation in the incarnation comes to its fulness in European man. For Jantzen, this is not merely an abstraction of the doctrine of the incarnation; it is a racialization of the doctrine. Hegel accomplishes this by abandoning the traditional epistemological humility of the likes of Augustine and Calvin to transform the doctrine of providence into an account of God's revealed will as it pertains to world history. It is precisely this epistemological hubris that made it possible to warrant colonial genocide and slavery.

In chapter three, Jantzen argues that the "radical antithesis" to Hegel's doctrine of providence is the one forged by Karl Barth. In the century between the two thinkers, the providential election of the European white male withered in the face of world war and genocide. In Barth's context, the perpetuation of a Hegelian doctrine of providence threatened to give a quasi-divine imprimatur to both eastern and western ideologies. Against this backdrop, Barth forged his own doctrine. Jantzen argues Barth's doctrine of providence in *Church Dogmatics* III/3 must be read against the backdrop of his occasional writings from the same period. Such a contextual reading demonstrates that although Barth shared Hegel's belief that the doctrine of providence was "a conceptual lens" by which we interpret God's relationship with his creation, Barth reversed Hegel's divinization of European humanity by positing Jesus Christ as the divine subject and the meaning of world history. Therefore, Jantzen argues, Barth's doctrine of providence is the radical antithesis of Hegel's because Barth "attempts to foreclose upon the possibility that the doctrine may be used by European humanity as a discursive technology of self-sacralization" (p. 99).

In a move reminiscent to Hegel, Jantzen argues in chapter four that Black theologian James Cone sublimates Barth's negation of Hegel's doctrine of providence. Cone understood the dangerous potential of Hegel's attempt to discern God's providential work in the vicissitudes of history, but he also believed that Barth's Christological turn was only a first step towards correcting Hegel. After Barth's turn away from the Eurocentric anthropology of Hegel to the particularity of Christ, Cone asked, "who is Jesus Christ for us today" (p. 110). The answer to that question lay in what Cone called the "Blackness" of Jesus. According to Cone, in the cross and the resurrection, Jesus—the Jewish messiah—becomes the light to the nations of which Isaiah spoke. Jesus's Jewish flesh comes to include the

nations. For this reason, Jesus is also black, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he is present to those who suffer for their blackness in twentieth century America. In this way, Cone follows Barth's attention to Christ's particularity without abandoning the notion that God's providential activity can be known here and now. For Cone, it can be known when we see Christ's activity in and among the poor and oppressed.

Chapter five unfolds in two parts. The first half of the chapter is a comparative analysis of Hegel, Barth, and Cone, while the second part is Jantzen's attempt to construct a doctrine of providence based upon the strengths of all three thinkers. Jantzen's comparison of the three doctrines brings forth important positive and negative features that inform his own constructive move. Positively, these doctrines point us to the importance of the incarnation, the creatureliness of humanity, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Negatively, Jantzen notes the persistence of masculine assumptions about divine action and the tendency to reduce the significance of the Spirit.

In the second half of chapter five, Jantzen constructs a doctrine of providence that promises to build on the work of Hegel, Barth, and Cone while overcoming the problems of masculinity and deficient pneumatology. By defining providence in terms of Christ's presence through the Spirit, Jantzen at once emphasizes the Christological baseline for determining God's action as well as the Spirit's objective and subjective action. Objectively, the Spirit makes Christ present to us today; subjectively, the Spirit is how human participation in Christ's present action occurs. All of this reflects the Spirit's own divine agency, preventing both the occlusion of the Spirit's personhood and anthropocentric projections of masculinity onto divine agency.

Jantzen concludes his study by giving an example that suggests how his "constructive account of providence . . . might help shape judgments about where, how, and in whom the Spirit is making Christ present now" (p. 167). Jantzen focuses on Durham, North Carolina, a city where attempts in the 1970s to become a representative of the "New South" or the "post-Racial South" resulted in economic renewal and regentrification that ultimately made Durham "whiter, richer, and pricier" (p. 170). It is in this context that Jantzen asks, "where is the Holy Spirit at work in Durham, North Carolina, today?" Jantzen gives two examples. The first is the work of Durham C.A.N. (Durham Congregations, Associations, and Neighborhoods). Durham C.A.N. uses broad-based community organizing influenced by the work of Saul Alinsky to make sure that the people who are most impacted by policy decisions regarding zoning and urban renewal have a voice. A second example is the Moral Mondays movement led by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II of the North Carolina NAACP. Following in the footsteps of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the Moral movement used mass mobilization and civil disobedience to prioritize the voices and needs of people whose lives were negatively affected by the actions of the North Carolina General Assembly in the middle of the last decade. Jantzen concludes, "Durham C.A.N. and the North Carolina NAACP represent two particular sites of

human activity *through* and *in spite of* which the Spirit continues to make Christ present to creation, joining together those who ought not otherwise be together in order to give life to ordinary, overlooked, and oppressed bodies in anticipation of the end of all things in Jesus Christ” (p. 176).

As I noted above, the doctrine of providence has become a theological hot topic. Theologians who seek to rehabilitate the doctrine will do well to pay attention to Jantzen’s work. A doctrine that overcomes the concerns of twentieth century Europeans without attending to the challenges posed by slavery, Jim Crow, and contemporary conversations regarding systemic racism will be an impoverished doctrine. Jantzen demonstrates that while Hegel is part of the problem, he may also play a part in the solution. Barth’s critique of Hegel rightly undermines any certainty we can have regarding God’s providential actions in human history. Nevertheless, the Spirit is at work and Christians have a calling to bear witness to its work in the world when and where they see it. James Cone’s work shows us what it might look like to heed Barth’s warning while still taking cues from Hegel. This “yes” and “no” to a Hegelian doctrine of providence follows a pattern we see in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s own thinking. Influenced by Hegel, King developed a dialectical logic that held in tension the hopefulness of the social gospel and a sober assessment of the effects of sin. For that reason, he was able to speak with great conviction about God’s providential action even as he struggled to come to terms with the magnitude of the task before him. By pointing us first to Cone and then to the work of community organizers like the Rev. Dr. Barber, Jantzen is pointing us back to the Black church tradition that helped King to remain grounded in the dialectic of Good Friday and Easter Sunday as he pointed his people to the Spirit’s movement as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

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R.R. Reno. *The End of Interpretation: Reclaiming the Priority of Ecclesial Exegesis*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022. xviii + 173 pp. \$16.59, paper.

This book is a brief but diverse foray into the theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) by one of its leading proponents. R.R. Reno, currently the editor at *First Things*, has here drawn together and revised a number of his own papers and essays, most of which were previously published elsewhere. Compiled immediately after the discontinuation of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, for which Reno served as the general editor, the present work contains some of Reno’s mature reflections both on that series and on theological interpretation in general.

For Reno, TIS is more a sensibility than a method. It is not a replacement for non-theological modes of reading such as historical criticism, and Reno objects only when these non-theological readings claim a “final interpretive authority” for their results (p. 26). TIS, instead, occurs simply when interpreters read the Bible doctrinally and attempt to discern how church teaching accords with Scripture. To this end, he argues throughout for “the imperative of accordance” (p. xv). Accordance, for Reno, is the belief that what the Bible teaches and what the church proclaims are, in substance, one and the same. Reno views accordance as a “presumption” (p. 7) which one brings to the task of interpretation, and one held in common by Protestants and Catholics. It is further a presumption which is exegetically fruitful as it drives the interpreter deeper into the text of Scripture itself, rather than taking the at times easier approach of seeing a contradiction between Scripture and church teaching.

Reno argues for accordance in the first two chapters before offering both historical and exegetical case studies. Chapter 3 discusses Origen’s spiritual reading and offers an extended reflection upon a single comment in which Origen makes an etymological interpretation of “Ramesse” in Exod 12:37 to mean “the commotion of a moth.” Through scriptural collation with other examples of moths, Origen argues that Exod 12:37 spiritually makes the call to follow Christ. This interpretation gives Reno occasion to reflect on the relationship between Scripture’s literal and spiritual senses and to argue for the necessity of spiritual reading. Chapter 4 likewise offers a historical vignette, surveying Reformation readings of James. Here Reno demonstrates how the Reformers’ belief in justification *sola fide*, when brought into tension with James’s statement that a person is justified “not by faith alone” (Jas 2:24), led to deeper exegetical reflection, rather than a simple assumption of contradiction between the Bible and Protestant doctrine.

Chapters 5–7 turn more directly to exegesis. In chapter 5 Reno demonstrates how a doctrinal commitment to creation *ex nihilo* leads to the necessity of extended reflection upon the meaning of Gen 1:1–2, deeper reflection than would be had if one used only historical-critical methods. The next chapter discusses Jesus’s farewell discourse in John and reflects on the relationship between Christian unity and the doctrine of the atonement. Reno takes aim at the modern ecumenical movement’s use of John 17:21 (“that they all may be one”) and attempts to offer a fuller reading of this verse. Chapter 8 then reads the social hierarchy implied in 1 Corinthians in conversation with the medieval allegory *Piers Plowman*. Reno argues that *Piers Plowman*, in its depiction of various social strata, provides a fruitful entryway into understanding Paul’s “political vision of hierarchy” (p. 151) in 1 Corinthians. The work’s final chapter offers explicit reflections on the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, as well as on the postliberal approach often associated with the “Yale School” and scholars such as George Lindbeck and Hans Frei.

*The End of Interpretation* is wide ranging and tied together primarily by the theme of accordance. As a reader, however, it was unclear to me



when, if ever, in Reno's understanding, Scripture is allowed to contradict or challenge church teaching. For a Roman Catholic such as Reno, a strong belief in accordance makes sense. What made less sense to me, particularly as a Reformation historian, was Reno's argument that the Reformers did not differ materially from their Roman Catholic counterparts on the idea of accordance. Reno's chapter on Origen's spiritual reading also seemed to overreach. Rather than more modestly arguing for the fruitfulness of spiritual reading, Reno defends every particularity of Origen's interpretation of Exod 12:37 as legitimate instances of seeing divinely intended meaning. This prevents him from ever addressing questions such as the limits of collating different verses of Scripture or the legitimacy of Origen's etymologies. Instead, he boldly—and to my mind, unnecessarily—concludes, “If we mistrust what Origen sees, then in all likelihood it's because we're not confident that God exists” (p. 75). Equating distrust of a particular instance of Origen's exegesis with atheism, it seems to me, is less than helpful.

As might be surmised, Reno has a flare for strong arguments. While this will be unlikely to convince the skeptic, for those already sold on some form of TIS, Reno's work does showcase a particular type of TIS in practice. Chapters 1, 2, and 8 are the most programmatic, while the rest of the chapters can be read more or less on their own. Pastors and readers will need some prior acquaintance with TIS in order to understand Reno's work, but otherwise it is clearly written and argued.

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Nancy R. Pearcey. *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023. 352 pp. \$21.99, paper.

In *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes*, best-selling author and apologist Nancy Pearcey traces the American cultural crisis of masculinity to the secularization of Western society since the Industrial Revolution—and offers what she sees as the biblical solution to the problem. Pearcey's treatment of masculinity weaves together many theological, sociological, exegetical, and historical threads. And while the scope and ambition of the project is impressive, the results are mixed.

#### Overview and Appreciation

There are several things to appreciate about *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, including an often nuanced portrait of masculinity centered on the calling of fatherhood. I confess that the book's title (and its lead endorsement) colored my assumptions going in. Like many Christian books and sermon

series on masculinity, I feared *Toxic War* might amount to a baptizing of cultural stereotypes about men and a cherry-picking of tough-guy or outdoorsman-friendly biblical references. I have witnessed first-hand the ways Christian teaching on men and masculinity perpetuates vice rather than virtue. But Pearcey in many sections won me over. She is often unafraid to challenge macho masculinity (e.g., p. 47), and the book's thesis draws a contrast between "biblical" and "secular" scripts of masculinity. Moreover, the staunchest defenders of strict gender roles may be surprised by *Toxic War*, which highlights again and again the importance of fathers not only providing and protecting but nurturing, caretaking, and sharing the burden of domestic responsibilities.

The core of Pearcey's book is a historical sketch of changes in the social role of and expectations for men since the colonial era in America. On a basic level, Pearcey's argument is that the Industrial Revolution combined with an ongoing process of secularization have created unique challenges and crises for male identity. While not particularly novel, this argument is strong and sound. Inasmuch as she correctly identifies and diagnoses many of the problems facing men in America, this is a valuable read and a far more robust and nuanced discussion of masculine identity than many of those on offer in the marketplace of Christian masculinity. There are, I am sure, aspects of her historical work that professional historians will critique (more on this below), but I do think it is worth noting that the broad sweep of her narrative is cogent and coherently presented.

Pearcey also concludes each chapter with reflections on masculinity, often with ample reference to biblical themes or texts. These were some of the sections I appreciated most in the book, such as her discussion of how the NT redefines the meaning of strength (pp. 48–49) and her insistence that Christian men should not view the more "gentle" virtues like the fruits of the Spirit or the beatitudes as gendered (p. 30). While she does not always signal it explicitly, Pearcey's vision of masculinity leans far more into the cultivation of Christian virtue *in general*, as opposed to the too-common Christian script oriented more towards being a strong leader. In this sense, Pearcey's book may serve as a helpful corrective to hierarchy-obsessed and strength-focused portraits of Christian masculinity. She also avoids many of the pitfalls of certain expressions of complementarian ideology. For instance, she speaks in defense of traditional marital roles but sees the subjugation of women to men in the curses of Gen 3 to be a result of the fall rather than a fact of the created order (pp. 29–30). Still, she defends complementarianism as the traditional and biblical view over and against egalitarianism and "liberal" views.

### *When the "Biblical" Script Turns Toxic*

Perhaps the greatest weakness of this central part of the book is Pearcey's over-equating the rise of toxic masculinity—both in terms of the script men follow and cultural attitudes towards men—with the displacement of a "biblical" manhood by a "secular" script. It is not that she is wrong to point out that American culture has been in a long process of de-Christianization since the colonial era. Rather, this alone is an incomplete explanation of

the crisis of toxic masculinity *in the church*. There are times when reading *Toxic War* where it feels like everything bad that happens in the world with reference to masculinity can, for Pearcey, be boiled down to a simple “secular = bad” formula. But reducing the problem of toxic masculinity to simple “biblical” and “secular” scripts obscures the complexity of the crisis.

Pearcey’s biblical-secular contrast is heavily underwritten by the sociological work of Brad Wilcox, which she uses to suggest that conservative Christian men are, relative to other social groups of men, the least violent and most engaged in the lives of their families and kids (pp. 14–15, 36–37). While I am not in a position to evaluate the sociological merits of Wilcox’s work, the basic insight strikes me as sound. And I do think (in certain settings) it is worth noting that most Christian men do not live up to the toxic stereotype that may prevail in some quarters. The idea that *most Christian* men are sleeping around, closet porn addicts, or abusing and beating their children is ridiculous and not supported by the evidence. However, what is most damaging is not necessarily the frequency of these problems—though this is certainly also an issue—but the church’s failure to address them in its own ranks. Even worse, churches and denominations have often engaged in active cover-up and minimization of unspeakable wickedness in the name of male authority or institutional “integrity.” The consistency with which Pearcey returns to this claim based on Wilcox’s data can feel like a special pleading that not all Christian men are toxic. This is of course true so far as it goes. But Pearcey slants her narrative through use of this data, implying that the *real* problem is with the liberals, secularists, and “nominals,” and that conservatives are somehow off the hook. But, of course, it remains the case that some men do cause serious harm, even while articulating self-consciously “biblical” visions of masculinity. This is, indeed, why the word *biblical*—a term Pearcey uses constantly—can at times be so unhelpful. Where the *biblical* script can turn toxic is when Christian communities give cover to men who appear to be or present themselves as godly while causing great harm, or when passages about male headship are made into an ideology of hierarchy and domination.

Pearcey’s framing leaves some important questions—I might argue, the *most* important questions—unanswered. In her concluding section entitled “When Christian Men Absorb the Secular Script,” she notes multiple examples of men who are very involved in church, but nonetheless commit egregious sins against their families and communities. This is clearly an issue Pearcey cares deeply about, and she devotes significant sections of the book to the problem of abuse. To her credit, she gives many challenges to Christians and church leaders to take more seriously both the possibility and reality of abuse in their communities. However, it is exactly here where her thesis about secularization shows its cracks. These abusers are self-evidently not the “nominal” Protestants she says are the real problem again and again. She brushes past what is perhaps the most pernicious and alarming aspect of the sexual abuse crisis perpetuated by men in the church. These apparently God-fearing men do not merely “hang around the fringes” of Christian communities becoming confused about what’s really “biblical.” Instead, scandal after scandal and exposé after exposé

suggest that too many churchgoing men and church leaders themselves participate in and perpetuate perversions of Christian ideology that are toxically patriarchal. How to account for the existence of these types of abusers—those featured in Amazon’s *Shiny Happy People* or documented in SBC investigations—Pearcey has little to say. How do we account for the robustly religious commitment of the most dangerous abusers in Christian communities, men like Ravi Zacharias who are able to leverage their apparent proximity to God for unspeakable evil? For these men and for a church seeking to address the abuse crisis and renew our communities, the “secular” script is not the problem.

*(Colonial) America, the Beautiful*

A second issue with *Toxic War* is Pearcey’s tendency to romanticize the past. In particular, her portrait of masculinity in colonial America is almost idyllic. In this chapter, she frames the argument thus: “How did America go from a colonial society that celebrated hardy pioneer men on the frontier to one that openly derides masculinity as toxic?” (p. 72) While she insists that she is not romanticizing the colonial era (p. 75), one is often left with the impression that all would be well with manhood in America if we could somehow reverse the clock and go back to the “good old days” when well-educated gentleman-farmers cultivated their minds, families, and land, all the while philosophising about republicanism and Lockean ethics. Here I think Pearcey falls too much into the common pattern among conservatives (as recently critiqued by Richard Reeves in his *Of Boys and Men* [Brookings, 2022]). See especially his chapter entitled, “Seeing Red: The Political Right Wants to Turn Back the Clock”) in seeing the solution to the masculinity crisis to be a turning back the clock to an era to which we cannot, in fact, ever go back. Indeed, there may be things for men of our day to learn from the male and moral values of colonial America, but I also imagine there are things to critique, even from a “biblical” perspective. Pearcey grants (in a very brief section) the injustice associated with slavery in this era and how this affected the available scripts for masculinity, but this certainly warranted more attention. While I cannot speak as an expert on American history, colonial or otherwise, I wondered what other historians of men and masculinity may think about Pearcey’s portrayal of colonial America. In particular, I was curious what the masculine values in cities and among lower class workers might have been, and whether aristocratic men spent long amounts of time away from children.

It would be disingenuous to say that there was not much that I appreciated, learned, and found enlightening about Pearcey’s historical narrative. At its best, *Toxic War* elucidates historical developments and attitude shifts regarding religiosity among both men and women in America. Moreover, Pearcey shows how surprisingly pro-feminist some biblical emphases are, and how feminist movements themselves have often been indebted to the biblical tradition.

*Incomplete Solutions*

Pearcey's proposed solutions to the masculinity crisis involve men renewing a sense of calling to fatherhood and family headship, as well as a reintegration of working and family life. I appreciated the many ways Pearcey encourages men to think *beyond* mere provision and protection for their role in the family. This is perhaps especially crucial as we move into a twenty-first century reality where fewer and fewer families can support themselves with a sole "breadwinner" husband and "caretaker" wife. However, Pearcey's proposed solutions are not without their shortcomings.

First, the nuclear family is very much central to her vision in a way that, I would argue, is somewhat alien to the NT. Pearcey has very little to say about singleness or how men can understand their calling as Christians *independent* of marriage and the fathering of children. Since both Jesus and the Apostle Paul were single, celibate men, this would seem incomplete as a "biblical" vision for masculinity. Second, many of Pearcey's solutions, again, lean into nostalgia for a bygone era, a return to the good ol' days when men worked from home. Her chapter on "Bringing Fathers Back" leans heavily into work-from-home solutions to the crisis, and inasmuch as these provide opportunities for some men to be more present and involved in their children's lives, well and good. However, Pearcey's anecdotes skew towards well-educated, academic, and flexible-hours vocations, not accounting for the millions and millions of dads (and moms) who work in professions where such an integration of work and home life is simply not possible. Throughout the book, Pearcey acknowledges that this presents a challenge for men and for families, but her solutions in this regard skew towards the upper class and fall short of addressing the breadth of the problem or impracticality of different lifestyles for some. To be clear, I am as much in favor of fathers spending more time with their kids as anyone. But on this score the culture is, happily, already trending in this direction. (See the conclusion to Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 4th ed., [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017].) I do not think this is a result of a return to Christian values as Pearcey understands them. It is just an outworking of many "secular" men's desire to be more present in family life.

*Not So Critical Engagement*

Given that this book is obviously speaking into an ongoing conversation in a post-#MeToo, post-#ChurchToo world, it is striking how little Pearcey engages with would-be detractors of her thesis. I grant that not every book needs to engage with opposing narratives and voices in a robust way, but Pearcey's book clearly presents itself as an academically researched volume written for a popular audience. Despite this, her direct engagement with the prominent ongoing conversation in the church about masculinity is decidedly muted. This is especially noticeable considering she mentions John Wayne directly as a trope of unhealthy masculinity in her acknowledgements (p. 271), an unsubtle reference to Kristin Kobes Du Mez's *Jesus and John*

Wayne (Liveright, 2020). Indeed, it is hard not to read Pearcey's historical narrative as a direct response to *Jesus and John Wayne*. Despite this, Pearcey never once cites Du Mez's book or engages directly with its thesis. As a reader who is sympathetic to many aspects of Pearcey's treatment, but who also finds Du Mez's work compelling—I would have appreciated a more robust and critical dialogue about what has gone wrong with masculinity, not merely in the culture, but in conservative Christian *subculture*. The closest the book comes to this critical engagement is Pearcey's chapter on muscular Christianity. However, within a book full of historical value judgments, Pearcey fails to grapple in any serious way with the ongoing reality and legacy of this muscular Christianity. She simply writes, "Around the middle of the century, the evangelical movement differentiated itself from fundamentalism. Most evangelical churches no longer teach Muscular Christianity. Yet they are still puzzled over how to minister effectively to men" (p. 188). This amounts to a dismissal of Du Mez's thesis without any semblance of a counterargument.

This brings me to a final critique, namely that of sometimes sloppy argumentation and data slanting. I noted in the introduction to this review that a strength of Pearcey's book is synthesis of a wide range of sources, its disciplinary integration and breadth. But this also shows up as a weakness in her tendency to sometimes make unfounded sweeping claims. At times, it is clear Pearcey is speaking as a non-expert. I will give one example related to my own area of expertise, NT studies. In her chapter entitled "'Taming' Men," Pearcey offers a brief word study of the Greek term *πραῦς* (*praus*) as part of her discussion of Jesus's self-description as "meek and lowly in heart" (Matt 11:29, KJV). From a certain perspective, Pearcey recognizes, this is a decidedly un-masculine portrayal of Jesus. To counter this concern, she writes, "[I]n the first century [A.D.], the meaning of the word 'meek' (Greek: *praus*) was quite different from what it is today" (p. 156). Instead of the traditional meaning of *meek*, Pearcey argues (citing a preaching blog and sermon website) that the term means "power under control." This is, quite simply, incorrect. The term straightforwardly—and certainly in context in Matt 11:29—means exactly what you think it means: *gentle, soft, mild, meek*. Pearcey's conclusion is not the only problem with this word study. Her methodology is also an issue. The classical examples she cites for this meaning are from the fourth and fifth centuries BC. The issue here is not only that it is wrong to expand the meaning of the term *πραῦς* in the text she (indirectly) cites to "power under control"; it is also that the citations are chronologically nowhere near the first-century usage she is claiming to represent. Both her gloss of the term and the methodology used to arrive there would be immediately dismissed by any serious standard for ancient lexicography. Instead of offering an apologetic for Jesus's meek and mild self-presentation, perhaps we can let stand that Jesus does not here portray himself in strong, manly terms. What if *πραῦς* actually does mean something offensive to our sensibilities of masculinity? What if Jesus really does mean that he is gentle as opposed to strong?

*Conclusion and a Call to Pastors*

Though I have spent a fair bit of time above critiquing what I see to be problems and shortcomings in *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, I will say again that there was much in this book that I found helpful, fascinating, even wise. Moreover, as a work of cultural apologetics, I understand Pearcey's desire to reclaim some of the moral high ground from an increasingly post-Christian culture as it relates to masculinity. However, if the church wants to do this without the air of hypocrisy, we must turn our strongest critical energies inward to the log in our own eye, the evil in our own communities. We must tend to the very real and very serious crises of abuse and toxicity among male evangelical leaders, a crisis that cannot be solved and accounted for by simply pointing the finger out at the secular world. Sometimes—oftentimes, even—conservative, churchgoing men adopt toxic scripts and call them biblical. These are not “nominal” Christians. In fact, many *pastors* engage in explicit and dehumanising ways of talking about women, and an alarming number of pastors and leaders have been outed as heinous abusers in recent years. Until *other* pastors openly and routinely condemn them for this error and show that their ways of teaching are a perversion of the gospel of grace, no amount of shouting down the secular culture's worldliness will eradicate the more nefarious and deceptive toxic masculinity from our midst.

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