

**BULLETIN OF  
ECCLESIAL THEOLOGY**

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**Essays on  
Forgiveness**

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## BULLETIN OF ECCLESIAL THEOLOGY

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## EDITORIAL

“To err is human, to forgive is divine.” Many of us were taught this adage growing up—from parents, Sunday school teachers, or kindly neighbors. It acts as a proverb, a bit of general wisdom that prepares us for life in a world in which inevitable human erring creates pain and injury, and declares to us that the God who created the world is a God of forgiveness. As with all such proverbs, this phrase contains a measure of simplified truth, shaping our view of experiences that that will in turn form us as we live in a broken world in deep need of forgiveness.

But as is also the case with such sayings, the general truths cannot contain the messy realities. As we inevitably discover, the process of forgiveness is fraught with complexity. This is especially the case in today’s world, in which a false understanding of forgiveness has too often been used as a means of avoidance, a weapon against those who have been harmed, and a flattened-out process that isn’t truly forgiveness, but simply a strategy for moving on. Too often, this has meant that that which is to be forgiven has not actually been addressed, and those called to forgive remain mired in the pain and hurt of past trespasses.

Both biblical scholarship and the social sciences declare the essential nature of forgiveness to the life of following Christ. Jesus told us to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. The Scriptures tell us that forgiveness is the way to true life with God and neighbor, that we must move toward a person who has harmed us if we are to move closer to God. Our failure to forgive is a hindrance to our understanding the depth of God’s forgiveness of us, and so a barrier to truly experiencing the depth of God’s love. At the same time, the social sciences reveal the complexities of the process of forgiveness, allowing us to see that a quick pastoral demand to forgive can bring great harm to a human soul, not allowing a person who has been transgressed against to go through a proper process of forgiveness.

The essays in this volume of the *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* invite us to explore both the essential nature of forgiveness for our life with God and neighbor and the complexity of the process of forgiveness. Chris Castaldo starts us off with a historical treatment of the doctrine of justification in Peter Martyr Vermigli’s theology. In dialogue with Calvin’s vision of the

*duplex gratia*, Castaldo shows how Vermigli offers insight into the nature of human need and Divine forgiveness through the doctrine of double justification. Next, Adam Copenhaver demonstrates the relationship between Paul's letter to the Colossians and his letter to Philemon, making the case that the theology of Colossians is the theological background to Paul's call for Philemon to forgive Onesimus and accept him back, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. In making these connections, Copenhaver takes us into the deep logic of Gospel forgiveness, allowing us to see how the theology of forgiveness is not merely an abstract theological construct, but is the driver behind forgiving acts within the Body of Christ. Following this, Ed Gerber offers an exposition of Matthew 5:21-26. His exegetical study helps us to see that anger is part of the human experience, and that we are justified in being angry with those who do us harm. However, the Gospel calls us beyond our right to anger, into a divinely empowered act of forgiveness that enables us to move past the natural life into the supernatural life of God. As such, we witness to, and embody, the love and grace of God.

Continuing in close exegesis, Scot Hafemann explores the relation between the new and the old in 2 Corinthians 5, arguing that it is the eschatological social location of the new creation that calls us to live the cross-shaped life, a way of life that has forgiveness at its very core. Hafemann explores the pastoral guidance that Paul gives the Corinthian believers in his call to love one another, a love which is lived out in forgiving relationships among the new community. In the next essay, Dave Morlan takes us into the challenges of depression and anxiety that pastors face. For many pastors, admitting the emotional and mental-health challenges we face is itself anxiety producing. Morlan invites us into Paul's own challenges with anxiety, the rise of depression in our society, and the reality that depression is to be expected in the pastoral calling. He then provides us with a practical way to determine if we are experiencing depression and anxiety and encouraging us as pastors to take steps to deal with the emotional challenges we face in the pastorate. In the final essay, we come back to historical analysis, as Matt O'Reilly offers a vision of forgiveness rooted in John Wesley's life and ministry. Directing our attention to the relation between the fear of death, anxiety, and forgiveness, O'Reilly calls pastors to proclaim the Gospel of assurance—the Gospel that proclaims we are forgiven, that death is defeated, and that we as individuals and congregations can live in forgiving relationships with one another, and so be transformed by the Spirit of Christ.

As pastors, we have the privilege of being invited to shepherd the pained souls of our congregations. To help guide the people entrusted to our care, we must be able to offer them a clear vision of the God who forgives, and of the Gospel through which his forgiveness has come to us. It is our hope and prayer that these essays can encourage the church to be the community of forgiveness that we are called to be by the grace of God.

Joel Lawrence  
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## TWO JUSTIFICATIONS: WHY THE GOSPEL IS GOOD NEWS EVEN FOR OUR WORKS

CHRIS CASTALDO<sup>1</sup>

Imagine this scenario.

As you are exhaling in the fellowship hall after a Sunday morning service, a church member approaches you, mentioning that he is rejoicing in divine forgiveness. "Praise God," you respond. But then he explains how much he is enjoying an adulterous affair, even singing the words of Fanny Crosby's hymn as he drives home from his liaisons:

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,  
To every believer the promise of God;  
The vilest offender who truly believes,  
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.<sup>2</sup>

Choking on your coffee and biscuit, you look at him with incredulity. "Is that really how Fanny Crosby intended her hymn to be taken?" you ask. "After all, it is titled, 'To God Be the Glory.'" "Sure," he responds confidently, quoting the bumper sticker, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." "Besides, Pastor," he continues, "didn't you say that justification is by faith alone, apart from works?"

After insisting that this friend visit your office tomorrow to talk further about his religious freedom, you suggest he read 2 Corinthians 7:1 and James 2:14-26 to consider the relationship of faith and works in the doctrine of justification.

Driving home, the church member's words echo through your head. How can you persuade him that embodied virtue is not superfluous, but essential, to the Christian life? Is there a biblical way to show him how virtuous works are a necessary dimension of justification?

There is. The great Reformers John Calvin and Peter Martyr Vermigli wrestled with this vital question in their day, and their insights can help pastors to communicate this life-changing truth in ours.

<sup>1</sup> Chris Castaldo is the lead pastor of New Covenant Church, Naperville, Illinois.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Professor Tony Lane for this illustration.

## 1. UNDERSTANDING JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

The Reformation doctrine of *sola fide*, faith alone, revolves around a basic question: Why does God Almighty—the Holy One who abides in unapproachable light—embrace sinful men and women as his children? The Protestant answer begins by recognizing that fallen humanity is unable to secure even the smallest measure of divine merit by performing good works. The perdurance of sin in the life of a believer prevents such achievement, for even the purest and most heroic examples of human virtue remain tainted by the fall and therefore cause one to miss the divine standard.

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus said (Matt. 5:20). And even the most scrupulous religionist, who may perhaps feel optimistic looking at the Pharisees’ bar, would have to admit defeat after Jesus’ next stipulation: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). Indeed, the impossibility of attaining divine holiness requires one to embrace Christ, whose perfect righteousness is the sole reason for Christian hope.

The particulars of this Reformation doctrine come into focus when compared with the Roman tradition. By contrast, Trent insisted that one’s forgiven status is fully and finally realized in the culmination of a religious process, a faithful life nurtured by grace conveyed through the sacraments in which one grows in holiness.<sup>3</sup> In the course of growing, one merits divine favor, and, by doing so, receives the divine embrace. While the initial grace of salvation cannot be merited, faithful people merit for themselves and for others all the graces needed to obtain eternal life.<sup>4</sup>

While the distinction between forensically imputed righteousness (the Protestant view) and actually merited righteousness (the Roman view) may sound like theological hairsplitting, it is crucial for understanding what was at stake in the Reformation, a distinction that is also of great importance to pastoral ministry today. The Reformers consistently distinguished God’s work in accepting sinners—the “not guilty” verdict that pronounces sinners to be sons and daughters—from the internal renewal of the Spirit, which actually sanctifies.

It is at this point that the watchword “faith alone” is so important to Reformation Protestants.<sup>5</sup> From the earliest days of the Reformation, *sola fide* became a way to describe how one receives justifying grace. Like opened hands that receive a gift, faith appropriates the alien righteousness of Christ, an attributed righteousness that is the reason for one’s acceptance. Thus, it is not meritorious works but “faith alone” that secures forgiveness.

<sup>3</sup> N. P. Tanner, ed. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 Vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 673–74.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed (Citta del vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), para. 2027.

<sup>5</sup> By “Reformation Protestants” we are designating Christians in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions.

In the words of Paul, “And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5, ESV). Tony Lane helpfully summarizes:

Justification refers to my status; sanctification to my state. Justification is about God’s attitude to me changing; sanctification is about God changing me. Justification is about how God looks on me; sanctification is about what he does in me. Justification is about Christ dying for my sins on the cross; sanctification is about Christ at work in me by the Holy Spirit changing my life.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to emphasize, however, that while Reformation Protestants assert that we are justified by faith alone, this faith does not remain alone. In Calvin’s words, “For we dream neither of a faith devoid of good works nor of a justification that stands without them,”<sup>7</sup> a conviction that echoes down through generations to the present.<sup>8</sup> In spiritual union with Christ, we undergo the sanctifying work of the Spirit, which produces the peaceable fruit of virtue. Such fruit truly belongs to the Christian. But in what sense does it belong to justification?

Lane explains the logic of Calvin’s position, so-called “double justification,”<sup>9</sup> noting that “God both accepts and rewards the good works of the justified believer, in addition to accepting the believer himself.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, as persons are engrafted into Christ, their blemished works are covered by Christ’s sinlessness, which causes the imperfections of those works to be expunged. In addition to explaining how genuinely good (but flawed) works may be pleasing to a holy God, the doctrine of double justification enabled Calvin and other Reformers to give an account for the range of biblical data that portrays God as rewarding human works.

## II. DOUBLE JUSTIFICATION IN CALVIN AND VERMIGLI

Calvin emphatically denies that human works accrue merit in the sight of God.<sup>11</sup> The nonbeliever who tries to earn God’s favor by his religious performance does so in vain. It is “not that no works may be done,” says

<sup>6</sup> Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment*. London: Clark, 2002., 18.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1:798 (3.16.1). Or in the Westminster Confession: “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love.” (“Of Justification,” in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chap. 11.2.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Jonathan Edwards strikes this note when he writes, “And one great thing he [Jesus] aimed at in redemption, was to deliver them from their idols, and bring them to God” (Jonathan Edwards, “Discourse: Men Naturally are God’s Enemies” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2, [1834 reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998], 139).

<sup>9</sup> Lane, *Justification by Faith*, 17–44.

<sup>10</sup> Lane, *Justification by Faith*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin asserts, “Our righteousness is not in us but in Christ...we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ” (*Institutes* 3.11.23). About the value of works he writes,

Calvin, “or that what is done may be denied to be good, but that we may not rely upon them, glory in them, or ascribe salvation to them.”<sup>12</sup> This is the reality for every person outside of Christ, even for the most kind and altruistic. For the Christian, however, the situation is different. When the Father accepts a believer’s works, it results in his smile.

On the face of it, this may sound patently Pelagian. If works are worthless, how can they possibly elicit God’s favor when produced by a Christian? It’s because God accepts works from a person who is in union with Christ—whose identity is forensically grounded in the victorious Savior and inhabited by the Spirit—for such works reflect God’s righteous character. Furthermore, in steadfast love and mercy, God sees the sinful elements of those works—the tainted motives, selfishness, pride, and folly that is inevitably intermingled—as covered by Christ’s blood. This is what allows the Father to accept in those works what is genuinely virtuous and pleasing. “Everything imperfect in them is covered by Christ’s perfection, every blemish or spot is cleansed away by his purity,” writes Calvin.<sup>13</sup> Once again, this acceptance is not because the believer’s works are inherently righteous, but rather because of union with Christ. In other words, it is only because Christians are embraced “in Christ rather than in themselves” that they and their righteous deeds are said to be accepted.<sup>14</sup>

Calvin develops this idea, for example, when he considers the Apostle Peter’s encounter with Cornelius in Caesarea, about whose conversion Peter states that “anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:35). Calvin comments, “Therefore, God accepteth the faithful, because they live godly and justly.”<sup>15</sup> Peter’s words can be reconciled with other texts of Scripture, Calvin indicates, only in the light of the “double acceptance of man before God.”<sup>16</sup> In the first case, God accepts the sinner in Christ by faith alone, and subsequently God receives him as a new creation with regard to his works.

Whenever Calvin makes this point, he remains clear that our acceptance is never merited but is owing entirely to divine grace. He asserts that

“The power of justifying, which faith possesses, does not lie in any worth of works, but because it is an instrument whereby we obtain free the righteousness of Christ” (*Institutes* 3.18.8).

<sup>12</sup> *Institutes* 3.17.1.

<sup>13</sup> *Institutes* 3:17:8. In this context Calvin provides a salient definition of justification: “But we define justification as follows: the sinner, received into communion with Christ, is reconciled to God by his grace, while, cleansed by Christ’s blood, he obtains forgiveness of sins, and clothed with Christ’s righteousness as if it were his own, he stands confident before the heavenly judgment seat.”

<sup>14</sup> *Institutes* 3:17:5.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon The Acts of the Apostles*, in Vol. XVIII of *Calvin’s Commentaries*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 440.

<sup>16</sup> While Calvin uses the language of “double acceptance” at this point in his 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, he unpacks the idea more fully in his earlier versions, for example, in the 1539 and 1543 editions. It also appears in the 1541 French version. These earlier editions generally manifest a more pastoral emphasis and do not possess the same apologetic concerns of the final 1559 version.

acceptance comes “by reason of our works”<sup>17</sup> because the Father is pleased with deeds that are performed in Christ and approves of them because the Savior’s righteousness compensates for their shortcomings. In other words, the Father overlooks whatever defects remain in our works. Again, as Calvin put it: “Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God’s sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ’s sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ’s purity, and is not charged to our account.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, “by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified.” This is the essence of Calvin’s doctrine of “double justification.”<sup>19</sup>

It is important to recognize, however, that while Calvin expressed this concept, he did not use justification language to describe internal renewal or the rewarding of human works. Instead, he categorically distinguished the event of justification from the process of sanctification. His terminology for this relationship was “*duplex gratia*” (“double grace”).<sup>20</sup> Even though Calvin affirmed the idea of “double justification” (that God rewards our virtuous works as he accepts us in Christ), he consistently limits the terminology of justification to the forensic activity of divine acceptance.

Calvin’s unwillingness to describe God’s approval of human works with the language of justification provides important clarification concerning the inability of one’s virtue or works to secure divine favor. That is standard Reformed theology. And it’s vitally important, especially from a pastoral point of view when it is essential to clarify *the specific reason* for one’s acceptance. At the same time, Calvin’s categorical distinction between justification and sanctification may at times let the side down insofar as the *duplex gratia* cannot easily explain how justification involves the Spirit working in the human soul. In other words, Calvin’s doctrine of double grace so bifurcates justification and sanctification that his distinction lacks the linguistic flexibility to articulate a thoroughgoing doctrine of double justification, even though the concept is woven into the fabric of his overall doctrine.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> J. Fraser (tr.), *Calvin’s Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles 1–13* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1965) 308–309.

<sup>18</sup> *Institutes* 3:17:10.

<sup>19</sup> *Institutes* 3:17:10

<sup>20</sup> While always going together as a function of union with Christ, justification and sanctification are properly distinguished in the *duplex gratia*. In Calvin’s words, “Now, both repentance and forgiveness of sins—that is, newness of life and free reconciliation—are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith” (*Institutes* 3:3:1). Cornelius P. Venema, “Calvin’s Understanding of the ‘Twofold Grace of God’ and Contemporary Ecumenical Discussion of the Gospel.” *MJT* 18 (2007) 67–105 [70]. Or in Venema’s words, the “twofold benefit of our reception of the grace of God in Christ as comprising the ‘sum of the gospel.’” Cf. Lane, *Justification by Faith*, 24, fn. 15.

<sup>21</sup> A technical distinction to keep in mind: “double justification” (*duplex iustificatio*) is concerned with how God rewards our works despite their imperfections, while “twofold grace” (*duplex iustitia*) refers to the two graces of justification and regeneration.

There were, however, other Reformers in the opening years of the Reformation who were capable of articulating a full-throated doctrine of double justification.<sup>22</sup> One such Reformer was Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), the Italian Augustinian Prior who converted to Reformed Protestantism when he fled north of the Alps to teach with Bucer at Strasbourg. From there he went to Christ Church, Oxford, before eventually returning to the Continent where he settled in Zurich.<sup>23</sup>

Vermigli's doctrine casts an eschatological light upon justification when he explains how God's end-time judgment is currently rendered in the lives of his children in an already/not yet sequence.<sup>24</sup> In keeping with Calvin and other Reformed figures, he is careful to insist that the basis of this justification is solely the imputation of Christ's righteousness.<sup>25</sup> However, he asserts that justification also has a present and future orientation that is not by faith alone, but must necessarily include virtuous works. For Vermigli, it is not sufficient to simply speak of divine acceptance (in terms of "justification") without also connecting it to the Holy Spirit's work of internal renewal.<sup>26</sup> He thus recognizes "two meanings of the phrase 'to justify,' namely, in fact or in judgment or estimation."<sup>27</sup> In other words, Vermigli includes both forensic righteousness and actual righteousness in his doctrine of justification. Frank James explains:

<sup>22</sup> In addition to Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), there was Martin Bucer (1491–1551) and Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531). Bucer's formulation described a primary justification (*prima iustificatio*) which is concerned with the forgiveness of sins, and secondary justification (*secundaria iustificatio*) which is the result of virtuous works performed in the power of the Holy Spirit. See Brian Lugioyo, *Martin Bucer's Doctrine of Justification: Reformation Theology and Early Modern Irenicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For Oecolampadius, see Jeff Fisher "The Doctrine of Justification in the Writings of John Oecolampadius," in *Since We Are Justified by Faith: Justification in the Theologies of the Protestant Reformation*, edited by Michael Parsons (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), 44–57.

<sup>23</sup> The definitive account of Vermigli's life was written by his successor at the Schola Tigurina in Zürich: Josiah Simler, "Oration on the Life and Death of the Good Man and Outstanding Theologian, Doctor Peter Martyr Vermigli, Professor of Sacred Letters at the Zurich Academy," in Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Life, Letters, and Sermons*, trans. and ed. John Patrick Donnelly, The Peter Martyr Library, Vol. 5 (Kirksville: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999), 9–62.

<sup>24</sup> Pietro Martire Vermigli, *In epistolam S. Pauli apostoli ad Romanos commentarii...* (Basel: Petrum Perna, 1560), 1263. For the English translation, see Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Predestination and Justification: Two Theological Loci*, trans. and ed. Frank A. James, III, The Peter Martyr Library Vol. 8 (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2003), [171]. Hereafter, Vermigli's Justification *Locus* will be listed as *Romanos*, followed in brackets by pages from Frank James's English translation.

<sup>25</sup> Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1194 [100].

<sup>26</sup> Peter Leithart uses the language of "deliverdict" to convey this notion—a forensic verdict defining one's "status" that simultaneously describes the spiritually liberated "state" of the justified person.

<sup>27</sup> Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1182 [88]. The latter of these, justification "in judgment," constitutes the fundamental cause. Immediately after making this statement, Vermigli explains why the renewal of the Spirit and "way of life acquired from good works" ultimately relies upon forensic imputation to accomplish justification, since such works remain "imperfect and incomplete."

To [Vermigli's] mind, "forgiveness" is more than a simple, single, judicial act. Forensic justification is like a pebble dropped in a pond; it creates ripples throughout the lifetime of a sinner. Certainly, it does address decisively the legal matter of guilt derived from Adam. However, even after the judicial acquittal, there remains a moral need for the justified sinner continually to seek forgiveness for subsequent sins...It is this ongoing need for forgiveness, even after justification has been pronounced, that requires a necessary relationship with sanctification.<sup>28</sup>

The presupposition that undergirds Peter Martyr's doctrine of double justification—one shared by all Reformed theologians—is the profound sinfulness of humanity,<sup>29</sup> a belief that Frank James has described as "intensive Augustinianism."<sup>30</sup> According to James, "It is [Vermigli's] profound conviction that the Adamic fall rendered all of humanity legally guilty before the divine judge and morally corrupt in their souls, thus bringing alienation and condemnation from God."<sup>31</sup> With this conviction, Vermigli affirmed that the virtuous life of the justified is a necessary component of justification (albeit not the ground), a life of love that delights the heart of God and finds his reward.<sup>32</sup> In the Italian reformer's words: "We have never denied that the works of those now justified are acceptable to God."<sup>33</sup> Although weak and mutilated, these works are buttressed by the perfect righteousness of Christ. This double movement of grace constitutes the basis of future justification.<sup>34</sup>

#### 111. THE IMPORTANCE OF DOUBLE JUSTIFICATION IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

We must remember that the writings of Calvin and Vermigli were motivated by pastoral concerns. On one hand, they were eager to encourage dejected Christians who were weighed down by guilt and shame—a struggle on which Vermigli reflected from his days as a Catholic priest. For instance, he insists:

<sup>28</sup> Frank A. James, III, "The Complex of Justification: Peter Martyr Vermigli Versus Albert Pighius," in *Peter Martyr Vermigli: Humanism, Republicanism, Reformation*, ed. Emidio Campi, Frank A. James, III, and Peter Opitz (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2002), 51.

<sup>29</sup> Martyr doesn't hesitate using Augustine's phrase *massa perditionis* to describe this plight. Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1196 [102]: "Omnes nascentes massa perditionis complectitur, a qua labe homines operibus suis emergere posse, et vindicare sibi iustificationem iuxta sacras literas fieri non potest."

<sup>30</sup> James, "The Complex of Justification," 52–53.

<sup>31</sup> James, "The Complex of Justification," 52–53.

<sup>32</sup> Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1289 [195], 1321 [227], 1274 [182], 1227–28 [134], 1288 [195].

<sup>33</sup> Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1227–28 [134]. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed., J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles, *Library of Christian Classics*, Vols. 20–21 (London: SCM, 1960), 3:17:5, 10.

<sup>34</sup> In a personal letter to Calvin in 1555, Vermigli described this renewal as "Christoformia," Christ-centered virtue that emerges from one's union with Christ" (McNair, *Early Writings*, 24).

Certainly no one understands except those who have experienced how difficult it is for a bruised heart, dejected and weary with the burden of sins to find comfort...If we, like the Sophists, commanded a person to have regard for his own works, then he would never find comfort, would always be tormented, always in doubt of his salvation and finally, be swallowed up with desperation.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, our Reformers sought to assure Christians that even though our best works are tainted with sinfulness and fall short of God's glory, they matter to God and give him pleasure, and should therefore be pursued with the utmost seriousness.<sup>36</sup> They recognized it is possible to so denigrate human works on account of their imperfection that we can pull the rug out from underneath the enterprise of holy living. After all, why strive to cultivate virtue when even our best attempts will be measured and found wanting?

In view of this danger, Calvin and Vermigli both affirm the necessity of good works, without which one's faith is questionable. But they contend for these works in a way that altogether removes human merit from the picture. We can therefore breathe a sigh of relief that God's fatherly grace embraces our works in the same way a Dad cherishes the crayon drawing of his little daughter. To be sure, there's much one can scrutinize, but the child's contribution is received according to the Father's steadfast love. In Calvin's words, we "remarkably cheer and comfort the hearts of believers by our teaching, when we tell them that they please God in their works and are without doubt acceptable to him."<sup>37</sup>

This idea of God's adoptive love was recently illustrated for me by a friend who has adopted a seven-year-old boy named Emmanuel. Mark explained how he and his wife traveled to Ethiopia to stand before a judge, who declared that a particular child from the orphanage was now their son. With joyful tears, they embraced Emmanuel, but since a few remaining documents were still in need of processing, their son had to remain at the orphanage for a few more days. "Each day," Mark said, "we visited that orphanage to love twenty-four boys, and one son." Emmanuel's environment and life situation appeared to be the same—he remained in the squalor of the orphanage; but the decisive change had in fact occurred. On the basis of the judge's legal pronouncement, everything about his identity and future hope was now different. This would include the pleasure he would now bring to his parents in their new relationship—sometimes because of the child's manifest virtue, and other times despite it.

Likewise, the legal pronouncement of the Father has drawn us from the alienating shadows of sin into the warm light of adoption. No longer

<sup>35</sup> Vermigli, *Romanos*, 1208 [114].

<sup>36</sup> Calvin writes, "He who is justified will not forget that a reward is laid up for him, but be incited by it as the best stimulus to well-doing" (*Acts of the Council of Trent: with the Antidote*, 6th Session, can. 31).

<sup>37</sup> *Inst.* 3:15:7 [1536/39].

rebels under condemnation, we are now sons and daughters, embraced by divine favor. But the legal declaration is not the end of the story. Just as Mark visited Emmanuel each day and eventually brought him home to live as a family member, God likewise desires relationship with his children. In both cases, the legal verdict is the ground, but it is not the goal of justification. God wants us to flourish in Christ as beloved children, no longer bound by the fetters of sin, developing into maturity as members of his body who are built up in love (Eph 4:15–16).

It is not surprising that Vermigli was particularly drawn to the biblical concept of adoption.<sup>38</sup> He recognized that Scripture presents justification in a variety of metaphors and analogies (e.g., being washed and clothed in clean garments,<sup>39</sup> the economic transaction of crediting,<sup>40</sup> horticultural activities such as grafting,<sup>41</sup> and marriage<sup>42</sup>), but in adoption he found an image that captures both the legal and relational dimensions of justification. Whatever image one may choose, our calling is to reflect carefully upon the way it elucidates the dynamic tension between acceptance and internal renewal by the Spirit.

With the biblical tension in mind, double justification strikes the important balance between confidence and caution before God—the need for us to rest in Christ while also working out our salvation with fear and trembling. On the question of whether it is best to articulate a tension such as Calvin's—his *duplex gratia* of forensic justification and actual sanctification, or whether one chooses to follow Vermigli's formulation of a forensic ground that leads to a broader outworking of actual righteousness, one will want to assess the particular needs of a pastoral situation. Both faithfully represent the tenets of the Reformed tradition, starting with the awakening power of the Holy Spirit, the establishment of one's union with Christ as the locus of salvation, a forensic declaration of forgiveness as the reason for divine acceptance, and divine inhabitation as the empowering impulse of holy living.

Yes, we enjoy freedom in Christ, a perfect redemption about which we should sing with Fanny Crosby. But Scripture is equally clear about the fact that God doesn't want his children to remain "vile offenders." Our Christian freedom can never be an excuse to indulge in vile acts that flout God's law, such as the adultery of our hypothetical church member at the beginning of this article. Instead, it should spur us to grateful acts of love and righteousness, an embodied holiness that lays hold of the purity in which we will one day stand before the Lord. As the conclusion of Crosby's hymn declares:

<sup>38</sup> James, *Predestination and Justification*, xxxvi.

<sup>39</sup> Ezek 16:10–14; Zech 3; Matt 22:11–14; Rom 13:12–14; 1 Cor 15:51–54; 2 Cor 5:1–4; Gal 3:26–27; Eph 4:20–24; 6:10; Col 3:9–10, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Num 21:4–9; John 3:14–15; Rom 4:3–12, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Ps 80:8–10; Isa 5:1–2; 2:21; 15:5; Mark 12:1–12; John 15; Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 6:15–16.

<sup>42</sup> Ezek 16:1–53; Hos 1:2; 11:1–12; 1 Cor 6:15–17; Eph 5:23–32; Rev 19:7, 9; 21:9.

*Great things He has taught us great things He has done  
And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son  
But purer and higher and greater will be  
Our wonder our worship when Jesus we see.*

A THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN  
RECONCILIATION: PAUL'S LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS  
AS THE THEOLOGICAL  
SUBSTRUCTURE FOR HIS LETTER  
TO PHILEMON

ADAM COPENHAVER<sup>1</sup>

“That little s\*\*\*head.” It was a Sunday morning, just minutes before the worship service would begin, and a parishioner insisted on meeting with me privately in my office regarding an issue that could not wait. No sooner had the door closed than the colorful words erupted from his mouth. He proceeded to tell me what he had just learned himself, that another person in the church had been betraying his trust and stealing from him repeatedly, egregiously, and even criminally. He had a legitimate grievance and a right to feel wronged, and he demanded I (as the pastor) act swiftly in retribution to bring down the wrath of God upon this horrible sinner in the church. I countered with a gentle reminder of God's mercy and a suggestion that forgiveness and reconciliation might be more appropriate goals, but in his present moment of rage, this believer could only scoff at the seemingly impossible notion of reconciliation.

The apostle Paul himself faced a similar situation of intense interpersonal conflict between two believers named Onesimus and Philemon. Their relationship with one another was complicated not only by their grievances against one another, but also by the social and cultural dynamics of first-century slavery. As a runaway slave, Onesimus could only expect harsh treatment from his master, Philemon, who had a social duty to punish Onesimus sufficiently enough to reinstate and to preserve the status quo of household management. Paul, however, envisions a different course of action in light of their shared faith in Christ. He writes a brief letter to Philemon containing a radical appeal for reconciliation whereby Philemon will welcome Onesimus not as a slave but as a beloved brother. Paul, too, charts a seemingly impossible course of reconciliation, yet at the same time, Paul is confident that Philemon will obey and even go beyond what Paul asks (Phile 21). On what grounds could Paul be so confident?

In this paper, we will propose that Paul's letter to the Colossians provides the “theological substructure” for his letter to Philemon and thereby the grounds for his confidence that Philemon will fully understand and apply

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Paul's request. When Philemon embraces the theology Paul sets forth in Colossians, he will have the framework he needs for properly determining how to manage his conflict with Onesimus. Colossians, therefore, provides the foundational theology we need for establishing a Christian perspective of reconciliation today. In this paper, we will first consider the letter to Philemon, including both the story of conflict that preceded it and also the nature of Paul's appeal within the letter. Second, we will establish the relationship between the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon. Third and finally, we will undertake a reading of Colossians in light of the conflict between Onesimus and Philemon, demonstrating how Colossians provides the theological substructure for Paul's appeal to Philemon.

## II. THE STORY BEHIND THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

Paul's letter to Philemon stands out as the shortest, most personal, and most dramatic of all his letters. The letter contains just enough information to allow us to reconstruct the basic narrative of events behind the letter. A slave named Onesimus has fled from his master, Philemon, and found his way to the imprisoned apostle Paul.<sup>2</sup> The conflict between Onesimus and Philemon may have several layers that developed over time. Philemon may have come to regard Onesimus as "useless" (Phile 11), and whether Onesimus deserved it or not, we can imagine how such a devaluation would strain their relationship. Onesimus may also owe some kind of debt to Philemon (Phile 18), perhaps because he stole from Philemon, or perhaps because his lack of productivity and his unsanctioned departure have deprived Philemon of income. Philemon likely feels angry and deprived, having suffered financial loss because of Onesimus, and Onesimus likely feels hurt and scared, as he now faces the terrifying prospect of returning to his master. Their grievances against one another may be much more than this, but they are in all likelihood not less.

Paul finds himself in the middle of this dispute because of his personal relationship of Christian influence with both Onesimus and Philemon. At some point in the past, Paul played an instrumental role in evangelizing and discipling Philemon (Phile 19), so that Paul now counts Philemon a partner in the gospel (Phile 1, 17). More recently, Paul led Onesimus to faith in Christ (Phile 10), so that Paul now counts Onesimus as dear to himself and a useful partner in ministry (Phile 11–13). Both Onesimus and Philemon are now true and sincere Christians who respect Paul's leadership and will presumably listen to his counsel, and Paul, therefore, has become the mediator in this dispute between them. He has counseled Onesimus in person, and he now counsels Philemon via his letter to him.

<sup>2</sup> He may have intentionally sought Paul's help as a mediator in the dispute, or by some divine coincidence he may have happened upon Paul in prison. On the whole, it seems less likely that Onesimus would have coincidentally encountered Paul in prison, for if Onesimus had been arrested as a runaway slave, he would not have been held in the same prison cell as a Roman citizen. Therefore, it is more likely that Onesimus intentionally sought Paul's assistance, likely because Onesimus knew of Paul's relationship with Philemon.

We know from other historical sources that masters such as Philemon had basically two options in dealing with a runaway slave such as Onesimus. First, masters could administer strict punishment upon a thieving or runaway slave, perhaps including selling them to less desirable stations of slavery (e.g. working in the mines, where lifespans were short), corporal punishment, or even execution. Because slaves had only utilitarian value as "living property" rather than human value and dignity (Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.2.4–5), traditional moral values and human rights offered them minimal protection from their masters, who could be encouraged to punish them severely enough to effectively dissuade both the guilty slave as well as all other slaves from repeating his transgressions.<sup>3</sup> Or, second, masters could show some measure of mercy toward a slave by sympathizing with their plight, giving to them the benefit of the doubt, and overlooking a wrong rather than reacting in anger. By so doing, masters might actually enhance their own reputation, earn the favor and loyalty of their slaves, and increase the productivity of their households.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of time within the Roman empire, the laws and customs shifted between these two options for masters.<sup>5</sup> But both options share in common an attempt to preserve

<sup>3</sup> Cicero (ca. 106–43BCE) suggests a master should "coerce and break" slaves with the whip (Cicero, *De republica* 3.37; cited by Longenecker in James W. Thompson and Bruce W. Longenecker, *Philippians and Philemon* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016], 155). Tacitus records an instance in 61CE where a slave had murdered his master, leading to a debate within the Senate regarding whether or not the entire slave force of that household – numbering 400 slaves – should be executed. A senator named Gaius Cassius convinced the Senate to execute all 400 slaves, including children and women. He argued that surely some of those slaves were aware of the plot, or saw clues, or heard rash words from the murderer, and yet none of the slaves betrayed their fellow slave to protect their master. Cassius further argued that slave owners will only survive if their slaves are afraid enough of their masters to betray their fellow slaves and give up the plot before it can be accomplished. Cassius argued, "You cannot control these dregs of society except through fear," and further, "Every punishment that is used to provide a negative example contains some element of injustice, but the individual injustices are outweighed by the advantages to the community as a whole" (Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.42.45; cited by Jo-Ann Shelton, ed., *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*, 2nd edition [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 146).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Columella (ca. 4–70CE) contended for a master to care for his slaves with generosity and justice, for such treatment "contributes greatly to the increase of his estate" (*De re rustica* 1.8.18; cited by Longenecker in Thompson and Longenecker, *Philippians and Philemon*, 158).

<sup>5</sup> The following two laws (cited by Shelton, *As the Romans Did*, 184–185) represent a benevolent attempt to protect slaves from excessive punishment, and the fact that such laws were deemed necessary reflects the kinds of abuse slaves may have experienced. First, a law established during the reign of Claudius (41–54CE): "Certain slave-owners abandoned their sick and worn-out slaves on the island of Aesculapius [Greco-Roman god of healing] since they were loathe to provide them with medical care. Claudius ordered all slaves so abandoned to be granted their freedom. And if they recovered, they were not to be returned to the control of their master. He also decreed that anyone who chose to kill a slave rather than abandon him should be arrested on a charge of murder" (Suetonius, *The Lives of Caesars: Claudius* 25.2). Second, a law established during the reign of Hadrian (117–138CE): "Hadrian forbade masters to kill their slaves; capital charges against slaves were to be handled through official courts and execution, if necessary, carried out by those courts. He forbade a master to sell a male or female slave to a pimp or to a gladiator trainer without first showing good

the status quo by restoring the relationship between a master and slave to the way it was prior to the slave's offense, where the master rules over the slave and the slave obeys the master in all things. In other words, masters had an obligation to manage an errant slave in a way that would reinforce cultural conventions by reinscribing the relationship of the past, whether through harsh punishment or an act of mercy.<sup>6</sup>

Paul, however, writes to Philemon with a radical appeal, that Philemon must not only receive Onesimus back as a form of restoring their former relationship, but Philemon must welcome Onesimus back in an entirely new way in Christ, no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, as a beloved brother forever, as if Philemon were welcoming Paul himself (Phile 15-17). This represents a sharp departure from anything Philemon would have known from his own social and cultural context. Paul leans upon Philemon not only to forgive Onesimus's crimes and restore their former relationship, but even more importantly, to establish an entirely new and ongoing kind of relationship in light of their mutual membership in the body of Christ, where they are brothers with one another. The absolute uniqueness of this appeal forces us to consider both how Paul derived such a vision for their relationship and also how he could express confidence that Philemon would come to embrace and enact his vision.

Paul's vision for reconciliation can only be understood in light of his theological worldview as reoriented around Christ. N. T. Wright has demonstrated how Paul's letter to Philemon represents the apex of Paul's theology, as Paul draws upon the deep riches of his understanding of Christ and the church to reach an otherwise unimaginable conclusion about how Philemon ought to regard Onesimus. The letter to Philemon, in other words, arises from Paul's worldview, which is itself a Jewish worldview that has been reworked around the central premise of "the unity of the Messiah's people."<sup>7</sup> Further, Paul's worldview centers on the *crucified* Messiah, so that

cause ... He forbade private prisons ... If a slave-owner was murdered in his own home, not all his slaves were to be tortured for evidence but only those who were close enough to have had some knowledge of the case" (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae* [Aelius Spartianus, *The Life of Hadrian*] 18.7-11).

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to N. T. Wright for the concept of "reinscribing" a past relationship, which he demonstrates from Pliny's letter to Sabinianus (N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013] 3-74; Pliny's letter may be found in *Pliny the Younger Complete Letters*, trans. P. G. Walsh [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 9.21). One of Sabinianus's slaves has wronged Sabinianus and fled in fear to Pliny for help. Pliny appeals to Sabinianus to show mercy and to forgive this slave's offense rather than acting in anger, for the slave has shown genuine remorse, and if Sabinianus shows mercy now, he will be all the more justified in showing anger should the slave offend again. Pliny asks Sabinianus to reinscribe their previous relationship, not to effect any kind of new relationship. Wright acutely observes, "Here we see one of the most fundamental differences between Pliny and Paul. Pliny's appeal, we remind ourselves, reinscribed the social dynamics already present. Paul's subverted them" (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 15).

<sup>7</sup> "The new symbolic praxis which stood at the heart of his renewed worldview was the unity of the Messiah's people. In letter after letter he spells it out in more detail, but here in Philemon we see it up close: in this case, the unity of slave and free. Paul puts everything he has into making this unity a reality" (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 30, *emphasis bis*).

the cross itself supplies what Wright calls the "theological substructure" for his pastoral appeal to Philemon.<sup>8</sup> When we see the world in the way Paul saw the world, through the lens of the crucified Messiah now reconciling all people – and indeed all of creation – to himself, then we can see how Paul came to his vision for how Philemon ought to reconcile with Onesimus.

But if Paul's appeal could only be fully understood and appreciated in light of such an in-depth analysis of his worldview from all of his other letters, then we must marvel at the stark contrast between the enormity of this requisite theological substructure and the brevity of the letter he actually writes to Philemon. We know of Paul's capacity to write long letters, where he carefully lays a theological foundation before building the practical exhortations upon it (e.g. Romans). But for Philemon, Paul presumes the foundation already to be laid and gives only basic and even cryptic instructions – not even commands (Phile 8-9) – and then expresses confidence that Philemon will act in accordance with Paul's vision and do "even more" than Paul says (Phile 16), as if Philemon can see farther down the path of reconciliation than Paul articulates in his letter.

Paul's presumption that Philemon shares his vision for reconciliation can only mean that Paul presumes Philemon already has access to his entire theological substructure.<sup>9</sup> Paul likely expects Philemon to have absorbed this substructure to some degree through their personal relationship and history together, but Paul's appeal to Philemon regarding Onesimus is radical and pioneering, and the stakes are enormously high – Paul risks the fate of Onesimus upon Philemon's compliance when he sends Onesimus to Philemon with the letter rather than first sending the letter and waiting for Philemon's response.<sup>10</sup> Surely Paul would not entrust such a delicate and consequential situation to only a brief and suggestive letter to Philemon, when he desires such a revolutionary kind of Christian reconciliation. In fact, Paul's confidence rests, at least in part, upon the theological substructure he has set forth in the accompanying letter to the Colossians.

### III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

The letter to the Colossians also arises from within a historical narrative that must be reconstructed from clues within the letter. For Colossians, this narrative centers upon Epaphras as the personal connection between Paul and the church in Colossae, for Paul himself has never been to Colossae (Col 2:1). In the opening thanksgiving (Col 1:3-8), Paul credits Epaphras

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Wright also acknowledges Paul's assumption that Philemon shares his mindset, though Wright does not consider why Paul could make this assumption: "What matters in reading the letter [to Philemon] is of course that Paul could assume that Philemon's worldview had been turned inside out and upside down by the impact of the messianic announcement about Jesus" (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 32).

<sup>10</sup> Paul's confidence in Philemon's obedience was probably a major factor in Onesimus's decision to voluntarily return to Philemon. We often overlook the risk Onesimus himself took in making such a journey prior to discovering how Philemon would react to his return.

with evangelizing Colossae and establishing the church to whom Paul writes, and Epaphras has now returned to Paul with a report regarding the present state of the church in Colossae. Paul further calls Epaphras both “one of you” (Col 4:12) and “our beloved fellow servant” (Col 1:7), suggesting Epaphras was native to Colossae but had also at some point been trained by the apostle Paul and had become Paul’s coworker. We may therefore speculate that Epaphras was commissioned to Colossae under the auspices of Paul’s mission, so that Paul feels some sense of ownership over the church there. He now writes in response to Epaphras’ report and out of a shared concern with Epaphras that the church grow in maturity (Col 1:9–10, 28–29; 4:12). Paul’s polemic in the letter may also suggest a false teaching in Colossae that needed to be addressed (Col 2:4, 8, 16–23). Thus Colossians, like Philemon, contains an independent narrative that sufficiently accounts for why Paul felt the need to pen the letter in the first place.

However, upon closer inspection, the two letters intersect at several points:

- (1) Onesimus is named in both letters and travels with both letters from Paul to Colossae (Col 4:9; Phile 12).
- (2) In Colossians, Paul describes Onesimus in a way that parallels very closely his instructions in the letter to Philemon. He introduces Onesimus alongside Tychicus, who carries the letter and whom Paul describes as “the beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow slave in the Lord” (ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφὸς καὶ πιστὸς διάκονος καὶ σύνδουλος ἐν κυρίῳ; Col 4:7). Then, when Paul describes Onesimus, he retains the positive adjectives, but he eliminates the language of servant and slave to call him “our faithful and beloved brother who is one of you” (τῷ πιστῷ καὶ ἀγαπητῷ ἀδελφῷ, ὅς ἐστιν ἐξ ὑμῶν; Col 4:9). He thus introduces Onesimus in Colossians in the same way he appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus, no longer as a “slave” (δούλος) but as a “beloved brother” (ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν; Phile 16).
- (3) The list of people who were with Paul and send their greetings overlap significantly. Both letters include Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, while only Colossians mentions Jesus who is called Justus (Col. 4:10–14; Phile. 23–24).
- (4) Within the greetings, both letters give the most attention to Epaphras, who is from Colossae, has evangelized Colossae, but now remains with Paul at the time both letters were written. Thus, Paul feels it necessary to justify Epaphras’ ongoing absence from Colossae and to pass along Epaphras’ ongoing concern for the Colossian believers (Col 4:12; Phile 23).
- (5) Archippus appears at the end of Colossians and at the beginning of Philemon (Col 4:17; Phile 2), providing a point of transition and continuity between the letters.
- (6) Paul is in prison at the time of writing both letters (Col 4:3, 18; Phile 1, 22).

- (7) Both letters envision being read aloud in a gathering of the entire church in Colossae. Colossians explicitly addresses the church in Colossae (Col 1:2) and anticipates a public reading of the letter to the church (Col 4:16). The letter to Philemon is addressed not only to Philemon but also to Apphia, Archippus, and the entire church that meets in Philemon’s house (Phile 1–2).<sup>11</sup> The letter itself contains not only personal instructions written to Philemon in the second person singular (Phile 3–20) but also has instructions for the church written in the second person plural (Phile 21–22). Because Onesimus is from Colossae (Col 4:9), we presume that Philemon’s household was in Colossae, and therefore the church in Philemon’s house was the church in Colossae. The church in Colossae was to hear both letters read.
- (8) More broadly speaking, Colossians includes various theological themes common to Paul but expressed in a manner particularly relevant to the situation in the letter to Philemon. This can be seen most explicitly in the household code, where Paul offers extended discussion on the relationship of slaves and masters (Col 3:22–4:1) but omits the extended discussion of husbands and wives in the Ephesian household code (Eph 5:22–33).

Taken together, this evidence suggests Paul composed both letters while he was in prison surrounded by the same members of his cohort and as he was preparing to send Onesimus to Colossae. Because we know his coworkers were constantly coming and going from him, we must conclude that both letters were written in close proximity of time; otherwise, his list of greetings would surely have changed to reflect the ongoing travels of his cohort. If so, and unless Onesimus made two trips to Colossae within that close proximity of time, then both letters must have been sent simultaneously to accompany Onesimus on his one trip from Paul to Colossae. The simultaneous occasion of these two letters has often been recognized but rarely fully appreciated.<sup>12</sup>

This reconstruction of the simultaneous occasion for both letters reveals the dramatic scene Paul envisioned unfolding in Colossae upon the arrival of his letters. When Tychicus and Onesimus arrived in Colossae, the news would quickly spread that a message from the apostle Paul himself has arrived. The church would gather in Philemon’s house, where they would have immediately recognized Onesimus and realized his precarious situation. (In such a small town, how could a person *not* know what had transpired

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion and examples of private letters written in anticipation of a public reading, see Adam Copenhaver, *Reconstructing the Historical Background of Paul’s Rhetoric in the Letter to the Colossians*, LNTS 585 (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 51–54.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Wright calls Colossians “the companion piece to Philemon” and says, “we have to envisage the actual situation of Onesimus going back to Colossae (in the company of Tychicus, assuming this to be the same journey as that described in Colossians 4:7–9),” but then Wright explores at length the theological underpinnings of Paul’s letter to Philemon without ever acknowledging the role the letter to the Colossians might have played in establishing this theology (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 33, 14).

between this runaway slave and the master in whose house they now sit?) Surely the atmosphere was nervous and perhaps even hostile as Tychicus stepped forward to read. First, he would read Colossians, with its theological lessons and guiding exhortations for the church. Second, he would read Philemon, with its pointed and personal appeal to Philemon regarding Onesimus. The first letter would establish the theological substructure, the second letter the pragmatic superstructure. Paul can be confident that Philemon will do even more than he asks, for he presumes Philemon will now be operating not only under the anticipatory gaze of his local church, but also and especially out of the theological vision set forth in Colossians.

#### IV. COLOSSIANS AS THE THEOLOGICAL SUBSTRUCTURE OF PHILEMON

We turn our attention now to the specific question of how Colossians supplies the theological substructure for reconciliation in Philemon. This is not to say that everything in Colossians is written directly toward the situation between Onesimus and Philemon, as if there are no further lessons to be gleaned from Colossians, nor is it to say that Colossians itself contains the entirety of Paul's theological substructure that has relevance for the letter to Philemon, as if his other letters have nothing to add. But it is to say that Colossians contains the essential substructure Paul deemed necessary for Philemon to come to embrace Paul's vision of reconciliation. We will consider how each unit of text within Colossians contributes to this theological substructure for reconciliation and thereby constructs a roadmap of sorts for reconciliation in the church today.

##### A. REMINDER OF HOW THEY RECEIVED THE GOSPEL AND FIRST TRUSTED IN CHRIST (COL 1:1–8).

Paul begins the letter with a customary greeting followed by a thanksgiving. He uses this thanksgiving as an opportunity to remind the Colossians of how they became Christians when they heard and received the gospel from Epaphras and thereby came to know the grace of God, and how the gospel has now demonstrated its vitality in and through them, as they have demonstrated faith in Christ and love for the saints. He thereby beckons them all to remember back to their first moments of faith in Christ and to acknowledge the transformation they have experienced as the gospel has grown and born fruit among them.

Everyone in the church has a salvation story, including even Onesimus and Philemon, whose stories are remarkably similar in that Paul will insinuate they both received the gospel not from Epaphras but from Paul himself (Phile 10, 19). In this way, Paul begins controlling the narrative by shifting the focus away from the immediate narrative of the present conflict and toward the foundational and shared narrative of faith in Christ. This makes the gospel central to what brings believers together even in conflict, and it unites believers around their shared experience of salvation in Christ through the gospel. What we have in common is much greater than what

tears apart. Paul, therefore, begins by reminding Onesimus and Philemon of the gospel they have received and of their mutual faith in Christ.

##### B. PRAYER FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH, INCLUDING TRANSFORMATION IN KNOWLEDGE OF THE WILL OF GOD THAT THEY MIGHT PLEASE GOD IN EVERY WAY (COL 1:9–14)

Paul next describes specifically how he continually prays for the Colossians to grow in maturity by being filled with knowledge of God's will and spiritual wisdom that will in turn guide them toward living in a manner worthy of Jesus as they desire to please God in every way (1:9–10). His prayer insinuates their present lack of such wisdom and the need to exchange their current patterns of thinking and behavior for those patterns that will please God, even as they continue growing in knowledge of God and bearing the fruit of good works (1:11–12). Further, Paul reminds the Colossians that the strength they need to live this new way of life can come only from God, indicating the demanding nature of pleasing God in all things (1:11). At the same time, this life must be lived with an attitude of thanksgiving towards God for what they have received in Christ, including a future inheritance, deliverance out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of Christ, and the forgiveness of sins (1:12–13). These themes will re-emerge throughout the letter in the form of theological teaching and exhortation.

Before Paul lectures the church, or addresses Philemon and Onesimus directly, he leads them all in didactic prayer together, articulating through prayer the broad contours of his desired outcome for them. He desires that they will be filled with the spiritual wisdom they need in order to discern how they might manage this situation in a way that is worthy of the Lord Jesus and pleasing to God. His prayer faces honestly the difficulty of walking that path, and doing so with gratitude towards Christ, who has placed them on this path of spiritual growth when he led them out of darkness and into his kingdom. Paul's prayer for the church applies also to Onesimus and Philemon, for Paul anticipates that their need for spiritual wisdom as they seek to discern how what it would look like to please God in how they manage their conflict by walking the path of reconciliation.

##### C. REMINDER OF FOUNDATIONAL CATECHETICAL TEACHINGS ABOUT CHRIST AND ESPECIALLY HIS WORK OF RECONCILIATION (COL 1:15–23)

Paul's prayer finally gives way to the famous hymn about Christ (1:15–20) and its application to the Colossians (1:21–23). The hymn has often been recognized for its poetic and even hymnic characteristics as it extols the person and work of Christ.<sup>13</sup> The first half of the hymn presents

<sup>13</sup> F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 2: The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15–20," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (1984): 99–111; Matthew E. Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context: An Exegesis in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Hymnic and Epistolary Conventions*, WUNT

Christ's work with regard to creation, where all things were made by, through, and for him, and all things are sustained by him, so that he has absolute supremacy and authority over all things (1:15–17). The second half of the hymn presents Christ's work with regard to redemption, where Christ, in whom the fullness of deity dwells, is the head of his body, the church, having accomplished reconciliation on a cosmic scale through his peacemaking work on the cross and having secured eternal pre-eminence by his resurrection from the dead (1:18–20).

Throughout the rest of the letter, Paul will repeatedly appeal to the hymn and develop arguments from it, suggesting that Paul presumes the Colossians are already familiar with it and affirm its veracity.<sup>14</sup> The hymn may even have been a catechetical device familiar to the Colossians through the teaching of Epaphras. In other words, he presumes they already have agreement regarding the truth of these statements, so that the hymn functions as the theological substructure to Colossians, and therefore is the bedrock foundation upon which the entire edifice of both letters stands.

Paul next draws upon the hymn's theme of reconciliation and he applies it directly to the Colossians (1:21–23; note the repetition of ἀποκατάλλασσω in 1:20 and 22). He reminds them that they were themselves formerly enemies of God who were hostile toward God in their minds, but God reconciled them to himself through the death of Christ and aims to present them blameless before him. Thus, Paul invites the church in Colossae, including Onesimus and Philemon, into poignant reflection upon the foundational (even catechetical) teachings they have received about Christ, namely his peacemaking work on the cross and the cosmic reconciliation he has achieved and has already applied to all who believe. This theological teaching about reconciliation between believers and God provides an essential model for Paul's appeal for reconciliation between one believer and another. If Onesimus and Philemon can grasp the magnitude of the reconciliation they have received in Christ, then the implications for how they must reconcile with one another will not be difficult to infer.

#### D. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GOAL OF THE MEDIATOR (COL 1:24–2:5)

Paul shifts now to a description of his own ministry, thereby explaining and validating why he is concerned for the Colossian church. He identifies himself as a servant who has been entrusted by God with the responsibility of making Christ known to all people (1:25–27). Toward this end, Paul labors to see all people grow to maturity in Christ (1:28–29) and he suffers for the sake of the church, even as Christ himself suffered (1:24). He then

(Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 3–30; S. E. Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus*, JSNTSup (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 31–45.

<sup>14</sup> For a full analysis of how the hymn provides the foundation for Paul's argumentation in Colossians, see Adam Copenhaver, "Echoes of a Hymn in a Letter of Paul: The Rhetorical Function of the Christ-Hymn in the Letter to the Colossians," *JSPL*, no. 4.2 (2014): 235–55.

affirms that he has labored in this way already for the Colossian church, for he wants to see their hearts strengthened and drawn together even as they grow together in Christ (2:1–3). He wants to see them stand firm in Christ, with order and unity, rather than being pulled apart by teachings contrary to Christ. Paul writes, therefore, as a servant, out of his duty to Christ, and with a willingness to personally suffer for the sake of the church.

This sets the stage for the personal nature of Paul's appeal to Philemon, where he will remind Philemon of how he has personally gained from Paul's sacrificial ministry so that he is now indebted to Paul (Phile 19). Further, Paul will offer to personally pay Onesimus's debt, taking upon himself the cost of reconciliation, even though he is a third party to the entire conflict (Phile 18). Paul thereby sets aside his own rights and takes upon himself the role of Christ on the cross. Even as Christ suffered for the sins of others in order to reconcile them to God, so also Paul will be willing to suffer for Onesimus and Philemon, that they might be reconciled to one another, and that the church thereby might be unified and strengthened.<sup>15</sup> He does not enter the fray from an authoritarian posture lecturing down to the congregation, but he operates as a servant of the church entrusted with a sacred duty from Christ for which he is willing to sacrifice his time, comfort, finances, and dignity.<sup>16</sup> He will likely disappoint both Onesimus and Philemon in his refusal to adjudicate the matter and take one side over the other, but Paul stands with Christ for the sake of the church, and he hopes that Onesimus and Philemon will receive his counsel more willingly when they know it comes from this posture of humble servitude on their behalf.

#### E. REMINDER OF WHAT THEY HAVE RECEIVED IN CHRIST (COL 2:6–15)

In Colossians 2:6, Paul finally gives his first imperative in the letter, and it is a broad injunction to live all of life under the lordship of Christ.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther beautifully summarizes how Paul plays the role of the suffering Christ: "What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights (Phil. 2:7) and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and rights, and receive us into favor for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly advocates our cause and so heartily takes our part. For we are all his Onesimus's if we believe." (Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of Saint Paul to Philemon," 1546 [1522] in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol 35.1, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960], 390; cited by Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris; Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], 188). Wright draws a similar comparison: "As Paul could say of Jesus, 'he loved me and gave himself for me', so also Onesimus might well say, in days to come, 'Paul loved me and gave himself for me'" (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 33).

<sup>16</sup> It has been my experience that a mediator often loses a lot of dignity by engaging warring Christians, for both sides can quickly agree on this one point, that the person who stepped in to try to help them reconcile now shoulders the blame for all their problems! When everyone is angry, the mediator often becomes everyone's target, but Paul is willing to endure such shame for the sake of the church.

Paul gives an initial warning about false teaching (2:8), a theme he will develop at length in the next section (2:16–23), but for now he simply introduces the very real possibility of believers being taken captive and led away from Christ by vacuous teachings. He then theologizes at even greater length regarding what believers have already received and become in Christ, for the Christ who himself possesses the fullness of the divine nature in his being has given the fullness of his blessings to his people (Col 2:9–10). This fullness comes by virtue of union with Christ, in which the accomplishments of Christ have been applied directly to believers. Paul uses the imagery of circumcision and baptism, both of which signify membership in the people of God, to say they have died with Christ as a spiritual form of circumcision in which their flesh died, and their baptism represents their burial with Christ and resurrection with Christ to new life (Col 2:11–12). As a result, they have gone from being dead in their sins to be raised to new life in Christ, their sins having been forgiven (2:13), and they now belong to the Christ who has triumphed over the written code of the law and over the spiritual powers of evil (2:14–15).

Paul encourages the Colossian church, including Onesimus and Philemon, to reflect on what they have personally received in Christ. From an abstract, theological perspective, they can reflect on their union with Christ and the new life he has given them through the forgiveness of their sins and his victory in the cross. But from a more tangible, practical perspective, they can reflect on their baptisms which symbolize their union with Christ and membership in the body of Christ. Both Philemon and Onesimus now have stories of baptism to share, perhaps having both been baptized by the hand of Paul, and Paul surely intends for them to relate those stories to one another. Paul envisions their baptismal testimonies functioning as a heuristic tool leading them into deeper reflections regarding their shared union with Christ and the kind of lifestyle they must now live as those who belong to Christ. This adds an aquatic layer to the substructure Paul is building for their reconciliation with one another.

#### F. APPEAL TO LEAVE BEHIND THE OLD WAYS OF THE WORLD (COL 2:16–23)

Here Paul delivers specific warnings regarding false teachings that might lead the church astray, and each warning is followed by an explanation of how the false teaching runs contrary to Christ. First, Paul warns against being judged according to Jewish regulations, since such regulations were shadows of a former age pointing to Christ (2:16–17). Second, Paul warns against succumbing to the pressure to engage in worship rituals associated with pagan deities, for such worship is detached from Christ and disconnected from the body of Christ, through which all spiritual growth comes from God (2:18–19). Finally, Paul warns against living under the rules and patterns of the world in general, because Christians have died in Christ out of the world and because the world's systems are completely incapable of

solving the ultimate problem of the flesh (2:20–23), a problem which can only be resolved in Christ (contrast 2:13 with 2:21).

These warnings expose the fallacy of living according to any system of thought or behavior that runs contrary to Christ, that neglects the body of Christ, and that does not resolve the problem of the flesh. Paul thereby undermines the rules of the world that dictate how we manage life, whether those rules are spoken or unspoken, and whether they are social, cultural, philosophical, or religious. Philemon's culture had established rules directing him to reinscribe his past relationship with Onesimus through either punishment or forgiveness, and Onesimus's only options were to flee or to return and receive whatever justice Philemon deemed appropriate. But Paul appeals for Onesimus and Philemon to reject the rules of the world and develop instead a new kind of theological vision that penetrates through the veneer of the world's rules to see the underlying problem of the sinful flesh and the solution that is found only in Christ and the church.

#### G. APPEAL FOR A NEW MANNER OF LIFE IN CHRIST AND IN THE BODY OF CHRIST (3:1–17)

Paul, having previously repudiated false patterns of thinking and conduct (2:16–23), now moves to the development of proper patterns of thinking that lead to transformed conduct (3:1–17). He calls the Colossians to have a new mental disposition centered upon the resurrected and exalted Christ, with whom they have been raised to new life and in whom their present life now resides (3:1–4). Their entire way of thinking about life in this world must be directly informed by Christ, and this must necessarily lead to new patterns of conduct. They must mortify the behaviors that were suitable to their former way of living before they knew Christ, including sexual immorality, evil desires, greed, anger, slander, and lying (3:5–9). Paul further justifies this moral appeal on the basis of their new identity as the body of Christ who are called to be renewed into the image of Christ, and here he adds a direct implication, namely the irrelevance of the world's ways of identifying people, including the distinctives of slave and free (3:10–11).<sup>17</sup>

Here Paul calls upon Onesimus and Philemon to recognize the extraordinary work of renewal being experienced not only in their own life, but also in the life of the other person, who also is being renewed in knowledge into the image of Christ (3:10). The Onesimus of today who returns to Colossae is no longer the Onesimus of yesterday who left Colossae, and the Philemon of today who receives Onesimus back to Colossae is no longer the Philemon of yesterday who saw him leave. Both have a new identity

<sup>17</sup> Paul seems to be taking advantage of two possible interpretations of *ἄνθρωπος* as referring either to an individual person or to corporate humanity. In 3:9–10, Paul seems to have the individual sense in mind as he speaks of the transformation believers undergo in Christ by taking off the old person and putting on the new. But in 3:11, he says “where” (*ἔπου*, with reference to *ἄνθρωπος*) there is no Greek or Jew and so forth, suggesting a corporate humanity including people of multiple backgrounds. This shift seems abrupt to modern readers but was sensible in Paul's mind, for he could not conceive of separating what a believer has received individually in Christ from their membership in the corporate body of Christ.

in Christ and both are being transformed by Christ, and both therefore must no longer be regarded as the person they were yesterday. This opens the door to establishing a new relationship today based on the person they have become and are becoming.

Paul then exhorts the Colossians to put on new behaviors appropriate for God's people, including compassion, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving any and all complaints against one another (3:12–13). Further, they must put on love, which will bind the body together, and be ruled by peace, which will allow the church to truly be the *one* body they were called to be (*ἐκλήθητε ἐν ἐνὶ σώματι*; 3:14–15), a place where the Word of Christ dwells richly and where everything is done for the honor of the Lord Jesus with thankfulness to the Father (3:16–17). All of these exhortations call for personal transformation within the context of interpersonal relationships inside the body of Christ. Paul sets forth a vision of unity and he calls upon each believer to put on the characteristics that will allow them to become the unified body of Christ together in Colossae.

We can easily see how Paul's specific exhortations apply directly to both Onesimus and Philemon. Instead of anger and slander, they must put on meekness and patience, and they must forgive one another, no longer holding past grievances against each other. They must be bound together in love and ruled by peace as members together of the one body of Christ in Colossae. The unity of the body is not optional, and therefore Onesimus and Philemon do not have the option of prolonging their feud or of leaving or casting the other out of the body. Their only option is to piece together a new kind of loving and peaceful relationship with one another in the church.

Thus, Paul lays a clear and compelling foundation for his specific appeal for Philemon to forgive the debts of Onesimus and to receive him not as a slave, but as a full member of the body of Christ, a beloved brother. Surely this is the *least* Philemon could do if and when he comes to think and act in accordance with Paul's exhortations in Colossians 3. Paul has set a trajectory for Philemon and Onesimus to go much further in establishing this new kind of relationship, as they envision what it means to be equal members of the body of Christ, where there is no slave and free, where offenses are forgiven, and where love and peace reign. As Philemon and Onesimus embrace this vision and put it to work, they will soon discover why Paul is confident Philemon will do *even more* than he specifically asks (Phile 21).

#### H. APPEAL FOR ESTABLISHING A NEW WAY OF RELATING TO ONE ANOTHER WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR FORMER SOCIAL POSITIONS (3:18–4:1)

Paul's inclusion of a household code has often been treated as disconnected from the rest of Colossians, but when Colossians is read as the theological substructure undergirding the reconciliation of Onesimus and Philemon, the household code's essential role becomes clear. In the code, Paul gives instructions to specific groups of people based on their social role

within standard household structures. He gives brief instruction regarding marriage (3:18–19) and parenting (3:20–21), followed by extended instruction to slaves and masters (3:22–4:1). Christian slaves are to obey their masters in everything and prove themselves trustworthy and hardworking even when their master is not watching, since they serve the Lord Jesus in all things and will ultimately receive an inheritance from him. They should view their slave labor as a form of service to the Lord Jesus, wherein they control their inner disposition and can please him with their attitude even when they have no control over the duties they perform throughout the day. Christian masters, too, must function in light of their master in heaven, the Lord Jesus, and they must thereby treat their slaves with justice and fairness, recognizing that all wrongdoers – including masters – will be judged without partiality.

Here Paul sets a course for how Onesimus and Philemon will function in their daily labor at home. Their expressions of forgiveness and reconciliation on Sunday must carry over to their conduct on Monday. They must both continue within their former societal roles but now they must also be transformed by the lordship of Christ in how they discharge their respective roles. They will work alongside one another in the household as master and slave, while at the same time recognizing their new relationship with one another as brothers in Christ, who both serve Christ as their master. This is the essential substructure that will prevent them from simply reinscribing their former relationship.

For Onesimus, this means that he cannot simply return to his previous manner of being a slave. If, in fact, he has earned the reputation of being “useless” (Phile 11), he must now be useless no longer, but must live up to his nomenclature – Onesimus means “useful” (BDAG, 711) – by becoming the hardest working and most faithful slave he can possibly be. No more stealing or lying or lazing; he must toil for the Lord Jesus. Paul puts Onesimus on notice with these instructions, and at the same time he puts Philemon at ease, for forgiveness here does not permit Onesimus to continue repeating his former mistakes. He must become a new kind of slave in Christ.

And for Philemon, this means he cannot return to his former ways of managing his household. To whatever degree he has been exacting and difficult to please, placing unfair expectations upon his slaves and perhaps even running Onesimus down as “useless” (Phile 11), he must now set aside these former patterns of malice and slander and instead become the most just and reasonable master he can possibly be. He will treat his slaves in accordance with the virtues of Christ, who is also his master, and he will therefore employ compassion, kindness, humility, and patience as his trademarks. Now Philemon is put on notice and Onesimus is put at ease, for reconciling does not mean Philemon can continue in his past conduct toward Onesimus. He must become a new kind of master in Christ.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Many Christians today criticize Paul for failing to call for the abolition of slavery, as if Paul capitulated to his culture and took the easy way out with this household code and

### I. APPEAL TO CONSIDER IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC WITNESS (4:2–6)

Paul now charges the Colossians to become active participants in the mission of making the gospel known among those who do not yet know Christ. He first instructs the Colossians to pray for his own mission, as he discharges his duty (δεῖ; 4:3) to speak and to make known the gospel in new places as God opens doors (4:2–6). Then he commands the Colossians again to live out their lives in Christ with a kind of wisdom that shows due consideration “for those outside” (πρὸς τοὺς ἔξω; 4:5), that they might speak and act in a way that will create opportunities for the gospel wherein they can discharge their duty (δεῖ; 4:6) to make the gospel known in how they respond. These instructions orient the Colossian church toward those outside the church in such a way that they will use wisdom to discern how to conduct themselves in a manner that will be most advantageous for the gospel to reach outsiders in their own community. The world is watching, so act accordingly.

This adds one more layer of consideration for Philemon and Onesimus, who must recognize that the path they chart from this point forward will be scrutinized by those who are outside Christ to determine the value of the gospel itself. These folks who are outside Christ may very well be inside Philemon’s household, where they will watch every word and action of these two professed Christians, to see whether or not God’s grace has truly transformed their relationship with one another. In other words, nothing short of the salvation of their own friends, family, and neighbors is at stake in how they move forward with one another. If they do not reconcile, the gospel will be undermined; but if they reconcile and undergo the transformation Paul has set forth, the gospel will be validated and all around will want to hear what has precipitated such a radically new vision for masters and slaves. Paul raises the stakes on reconciliation and trusts Philemon and Onesimus to apply wisdom in determining the particular steps they will take.

### J. PLACEMENT OF THEIR STORY OF CONFLICT AND RECONCILIATION WITHIN THE BROADER BODY OF CHRIST (4:7–18)

In the closing section of Colossians, Paul issues a series of greetings and final instructions that weave the Colossians into Paul’s broad network of churches and workers. He first introduces Tychicus as the letter carrier

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even with sending Onesimus back to Philemon. But when we read the household code in light of the situation between Onesimus and Philemon, we see that the household code’s instructions regarding slave and free reveal less about Paul’s posture toward slavery as an institution and more about Paul’s vision for specific Christian masters and slaves who live within a society where slavery is an institution. It would have actually been easier for Paul to simply call for the abolition of slavery as an institution than to expect Christian masters and slaves to learn to operate as brothers together in Christ. Such a reorientation of the slave–master relationship embeds the seeds that will invariably lead not only and merely to the abolition of slavery but also to the even more radical and elusive embracing of one another forever as equals without distinction.

who will have further information to share about Paul’s personal situation, along with Onesimus (Col 4:7–9). In addition to his careful introduction of Onesimus as a brother rather than as a slave, Paul also indicates Onesimus will share in Tychicus’ work of informing the Colossians about Paul (note the plural γνωρίσουσιν in 4:9, applying to both Tychicus and Onesimus). Second, he sends greetings from six of his coworkers, who represent a diversity of Jews and Gentiles working together for the gospel, indicating that his team reflects the ideal he has previously established (Col 4:10–14; cf. 3:11). Paul gives brief commentary about a few of these coworkers, especially Mark, whom Paul reminds the Colossians to welcome when he comes to them, and Epaphras, whom Paul affirms as laboring in prayer for the Colossians even when he is not physically present with them. Finally, Paul gives a series of rapid-fire closing instructions: the Colossians are to work together with the Christians in neighboring Laodicea to pass along his greetings and to swap letters with them (4:15–16), and they are to exhort Archippus to accomplish the ministry duties he has received in the Lord (4:17), and they are to remember Paul’s chains even as they receive his greeting and blessing (4:18).

In this series of greetings and instructions, Paul effectively folds the Colossian church into the broader body of Christ, and Onesimus and Philemon along with them. Here Onesimus and Philemon realize they stand in good company in several ways. In the presence of Tychicus, they find that Paul has not left them without personal companionship and guidance as they forge a way ahead. In Mark, they find a person who has previously walked their path of conflict and reconciliation, for Mark was at one time in conflict with Paul but has now apparently reconciled and become a coworker with Paul, and Mark will surely tell the story when he arrives in Colossae. (The fact that Paul must remind the Colossians to actually welcome Mark demonstrates their awareness of his former estrangement.) In Epaphras, Onesimus and Philemon are reminded of the fervent prayers that stand behind them. In the churches of Laodicea, they will find close support and camaraderie. And in Archippus, they realize they are not the only ones with a difficult path to walk. Tychicus stands with them, Mark has gone before them, Epaphras stands behind them, and Archippus stands alongside them. In short, their experience, though difficult, is not unique, and they will one day have a story to share with other Christians about their own experience of reconciliation.

### V. CONCLUSION

Paul’s response to the complicated interpersonal conflict between Onesimus and Philemon provides a model for reconciliation in the church today. For Paul, reconciliation between estranged Christians requires nothing less than the forging together of a new kind of relationship as beloved brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. This approach to reconciliation can, on the one hand, be set forth succinctly as a simple appeal to an aggrieved Christian (Phile 16), but on the other hand, this simple appeal

can only be fully understood and appropriated when it is received as the theological apex of an underlying theological substructure (Colossians). Thus, for Paul, the conflict between Onesimus and Philemon requires careful attention to theology centered upon who Christ is, what Christ has accomplished, who we have become in Christ, and how Christ calls us to live. This theological reflection in turn determines the path forward. It eliminates what might otherwise be viable options for managing the conflict, including abandoning their relationship with one another, whether by emancipation or separation, or simply reinscribing their former relationship, whether by punishment or merely forgiving the past offense. Instead, Paul's theological vision as set forth in Colossians allows for only one viable path, and it is the far more difficult path of Christian reconciliation whereby they will forgive past offenses and then forge a new kind of relationship as brothers together in the body of Christ. The theology of Colossians provides the rationale behind both Paul's appeal to Philemon and his confidence that Philemon will be obedient to do even more. As Onesimus and Philemon put into practice Paul's theological vision, their conflict will be transformed into an opportunity for profound Christian growth together.

Reconciliation, therefore, requires much more theological work than is often presumed, but it also presents a much richer opportunity for spiritual growth than is often realized. Many Christians today manage conflict with one another by harboring unresolved grievances toward one another, or by forgiving and releasing the grievances only to then reinscribe the relationship of the past, or by simply leaving the church and walking away from the relationship altogether. When we allow these approaches to be pervasive in the church, we deny Christians the opportunity to do the serious theological work that will result in their spiritual growth. Instead, Paul's theological vision of reconciliation requires interpersonal Christian conflict to be confronted with meticulous theological catechesis that will in turn provide the substructure for forgiving and establishing together a new relationship centered in Christ. As Christians today learn to think according to the theological substructure of Colossians, they will understand and heed the appeal to do what once seemed impossible – to forgive those Christians who have wronged them and to welcome them no longer as strangers<sup>1</sup> but as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.

## GIVING UP THE ANGER YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO: FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST'S FIRST ANTITHESIS (AN EXPOSITION OF MATTHEW 5:21-26)

EDWARD GERBER<sup>1</sup>

C.S. Lewis once said that everyone likes the idea of forgiveness; until, that is, they have someone to forgive. This difficulty with forgiveness—of a person's offering it, of a pastor's speaking about it—is amplified by a lack of clarity about what forgiveness is and what it entails. Is forgiveness an emotional state? Is it a decision? Does forgiveness always entail the gift of trust? Is forgiveness indistinguishable from a reconciled relationship? Should the Christian really always forgive? And if so, for what reason? Ought they forgive to heal themselves? To provide a pathway of healing for the other? Do it for God alone? The following examination of Matthew 5:21–26 will seek to find clarity on these and related questions to help the pastor and parishioner navigate these very complicated waters.

Known in Sermon on the Mount studies as the first of Jesus' "six antitheses,"<sup>2</sup> the overarching message of Matthew 5:21–26 is typically understood in terms of loving one's neighbour. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law erroneously believe that they fulfill the requirements of the Law merely by not murdering their neighbour, as indicated in the sixth commandment (Exo 20:13). Jesus teaches that the true intent of the Law, and therefore true righteousness, is not mere restraint of vice but promotion of virtue: love of one's neighbour that seeks their restoration through reconciliation. Forgiveness is not explicitly mentioned in this first antithesis. This is likely why most commentaries offer zero to scant reflection on the topic.<sup>3</sup> The present paper will argue, however, that this first antithesis of Jesus can legitimately be seen to offer a potent contribution to a Christian understanding of forgiveness. Specifically, I will argue that, looked at on the backdrop of the Gospel of Matthew more broadly, this first antithesis of Jesus offers us resources to understand: (i) what forgiveness is, (ii) why we ought to forgive, and (iii) how we can become equipped to do it.

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<sup>2</sup> Or, maybe, five; see Evans (2012), 120.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., Hendriksen (1973); Barclay (1975); Davies and Allison (1988); Hagner (1993); Hare (1993); Gundry (1993); Glasscock (1997); Bruner (2004); Evans (2012).

## I. WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

It is critical at the outset to establish that the overarching question Jesus is answering in his first antithesis concerns how the righteous person should respond when they have been a victim of personal injury or caused personal injury to another. Establishing this context will enable us to see that, although the term is not used in this text, Jesus nonetheless exposes the substance of what forgiveness is in vv. 21–22.

That the concept of personal injury lies at the heart of this first antithesis is clear in vv. 23–24 and vv. 25–26 respectively, as the former section deals explicitly with what to do when you are the offender (i.e., have caused injury), and the latter section deals explicitly with what to do when injury incites litigious action. The concept of personal injury may seem less clear in the first section of the text, vv. 21–22, but is nonetheless present. This becomes evident when it is remembered, as commentators on the sixth commandment make clear, that there is a difference in the Law between murdering someone and killing them. Individuals are forbidden to murder, precisely because it is an action whereby the individual, usually in anger, leapfrogs over due judicial process to respond on their own to the perception or reality of personal injury. This is forbidden. If a capital crime has been committed, it is the duty of the state to take the life of (i.e., to kill, not murder) the offender.<sup>4</sup> Jesus recognizes this duty of the State (in principle, at least)<sup>5</sup> in v. 21: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’” The prescribed judgment for murder, of course, was being killed by the state.

So, how should one respond when injured, or even when one simply feels injured? Jesus does not as a matter of first principle encourage injured parties to go to court. As vv. 23–26 make clear, he encourages them in a spirit of true righteousness—a following after the will and example of God<sup>6</sup>—to seek reconciliation, to repair the broken relationship. But what makes reconciliation possible? According to the logic of vv. 21–22, the *first step* toward making reconciliation possible is the injured person’s choice not only not to retaliate by engaging in actions such as murder—and thereby seek to harm the offender for harm done (v. 21). It is also to give up the anger that fuels the desire to retaliate in the first place. To wit: those who refuse to give up their righteous anger but instead nurture it, and inevitably begin acting on it to harm those who have hurt them, even by doing things as seemingly harmless as hurling childish epithets—*ῥακά* = “You blockhead!”<sup>7</sup>, *μωρό* = “You fool!”—will themselves, says Jesus, be

<sup>4</sup> See Waltke (2007), 427–8.

<sup>5</sup> I.e., there is no intention in this remark to say anything, one way or the other, on Jesus’ views on capital punishment.

<sup>6</sup> Righteousness in Matthew’s Gospel is essentially unpacked as doing the will of God; cf., 3:15; 5:20; 6:10.

<sup>7</sup> “Blockhead,” “numbskull,” “buffoon” are all sufficient modern day equivalents of the Aramaic “raca,” which literally means “empty,” but was used as a term of reproach in the

subject to/liable to/caught in/held fast<sup>8</sup> in various forms of judgement (v. 22).<sup>9</sup> It is important to stress here that it is not righteous anger itself, or righteous anger alone, that must be given up (to do so, would be to become less than human: see below). It is righteous anger that combines with, or is inclined to combine with, the desire or action to wound the offender in return. This meaning is evident in the word *ὀργίζω*, which connotes an angry emotion, perhaps righteously constituted,<sup>10</sup> combined with the desire or intent to harm. Thus, *ὀργίζω*—anger is perhaps best translated as wrath or malice.<sup>11</sup> That wrath or malice is specifically in view here is also evident in Jesus’ apparently relativized prohibition against name-calling. Tellingly, although Jesus here forbids calling anyone a blockhead (*ῥακά*) or a fool (*μωρό*), Jesus himself calls the religious leaders a bunch of fools (*μωροὶ*) in Matthew 23:17.<sup>12</sup> Given we can be safe in assuming that Matthew in no wise believes Jesus is a hypocrite, this suggests that name-calling in and of itself is not the issue. The issue is name-calling maliciously intended. When Jesus calls the Pharisees fools in Matthew 23:17, therefore, we are being invited via the echo-chamber created by Matthew 5:22 to see that he is not doing so with a desire to injure but to restore. If righteous anger in humans remains righteous—i.e., does not become intermingled with the urge to wound—it can remain. But when our righteous anger transmogrifies into, or even becomes intermingled with, the desire and/or action to harm—into *ὀργίζω*—Jesus calls us to give it up.

To give up this sort of anger, I am arguing, is the substance of forgiveness in Jesus’ view, at least in Matthew. It is the giving up of the righteous anger in humans that so quickly, and often inescapably, combines with the festering desire, fantasy, and/or action to harm.<sup>13</sup>

days of Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> On this range of meanings, see Friberg’s *Analytical Greek Lexicon*, #9746. Suffice it to note here that this range of meanings allows one to consider whether the consequence of holding on to one’s anger will bring about external (“subject to”) or naturally occurring/internal (“caught in/held fast in”) forms of judgment. More about this will be said below.

<sup>9</sup> Namely, as we will argue below, judgment from God, (22a), society in the courts (22b), and one’s self (22c). It is not clear whether the katabasis is intentional, but if the succeeding judgments funnel down in turn from God, society, and the self, the katabasis is nonetheless present.

<sup>10</sup> In Romans 1, for example, the term is used to describe God’s righteous anger at human suppression of him and decision, in his righteous anger (rightly, his wrath), to allow human beings to suffer the consequences of their decisions—which is, in essence, to become like the idols they worship: morally blind, deaf, dumb, and dead.

<sup>11</sup> See Moulton-Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek NT*, entry 3259.

<sup>12</sup> “You blind fools [*μωροὶ*]! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?” (Matthew 23:17, NIV)

<sup>13</sup> I first heard forgiveness described in this manner in a talk at a Classis meeting of the Christian Reformed Church given by Cornelius Plantinga Jr. Plantinga did not, however, describe it thusly with reference to Matthew 5. It is admitted that there is tension here in this description with reference to righteous anger: righteous anger is good; it is a signal of the imago Dei in the human being. Nonetheless, since righteous anger can so quickly due to our fallen nature morph into a desire to harm (i.e., into wrath), there must be a decision to relinquish it. We are not called to relinquish the truth (“what she did to me was wrong”)

Forgiveness defined in this way, it should be understood, is not reconciliation itself but a necessary *precursor* to reconciliation. If unforgiveness may be pictured in the image of a person who has crossed their arms in front of them, in a gesture of being closed off in anger to the offender and nurturing a desire to harm him or her, even by alienation; and if reconciliation may be pictured in the image of the embrace of the other in restored relationship; then forgiveness may be pictured as the midpoint, whereupon the one who has given up their anger stands with arms open in a gesture of the *possibility of embrace*. The one who embodies the choice to forgive, therefore, in circumstances of genuine injury, says: 'I have a right to my anger because what you did to me was wrong. But I am choosing to put the heat and flames of my anger away so that we might one day, by God's grace, be reconciled. I no longer seek your harm or nurture a desire in myself for you to be harmed. Instead, I forgive: I give up my desire to make you pay for what you did along with the anger that fuels that desire. I do this in order to pave the pathway toward reconciled relationship with you.'

Granted this definition, it might be observed that, from an emotional or psychological perspective, Jesus' call to forgive is the call to do what is most unnatural for the human being in the case of being (or feeling) victimized. For what is the natural human response when harmed? As Matthew's Jesus acknowledges, either directly or tangentially in his fifth and sixth antitheses, the reflexive human response to injury (whether real or perceived) is anger and, usually, some form of retaliation.<sup>14</sup> The anger, it should be stressed again, all other considerations aside, is righteous: the true victim has a right to it. Her birthright as a sacred creature under God is violated and rightly flares up as anger—because a human being should not be violated in any way by another human being. To fail to be angry at the violation of the image is, in fact, to fail to be fully human. The desire to pay back harm for harm is also entirely natural. What is unnatural, in fact, as the OT and Jesus recognize, is to bind oneself to the law of retaliation (*lex talionis*) and therefore not engage in forms of justice that exact more than measure for measure: eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Typically, the human response is: "You take my eye, I take your eye *and* your arm; you take my arm, I take your arm *and* your leg; you take my leg, I take your leg *and* I take out your whole tribe." But Jesus will have none of it. Retaliation must be given up, as well as the anger that gives rise to it.

but the emotion that repeatedly certifies it (the righteous anger). I relinquish the anger not because it is not right; I relinquish the anger because, in my currently imperfect and fragile state, it does not lead me to righteousness. A burning coal may be a good thing; but if a burning coal in my hand impels me to cast it in another's face against Jesus' instructions to me, I best choose not to hold that burning coal anymore.

<sup>14</sup> The fact that the Law sought to restrain unequal retaliation, and Jesus addresses this standard in his fourth antithesis, witnesses to the element of human passion assumed to be operating here, which in the form of ire is regularly inclined to exact high interest on offense. Violence in history is a playbook of how retaliations invariably escalate on the wings of anger due to injury. Gang warfare is but an aggravated microcosm of this all too common human phenomena.

As further substantiation of the interpretation we are offering, it is certainly inconclusive but not beyond the realm of possibility that Jesus' words here in Matthew 5:21–22 are to evoke memories of Cain. Matthew's ordering of Jesus' antitheses roughly mimics the ordering of the second table of the Law (murder; adultery [and theft?]; false testimony). The early stories in Genesis likewise roughly mimic the ordering of the second table of the Law (murder = Cain/Lamech; adultery = Lamech; stealing = "sons of God"). Memories of Cain are also captured elsewhere in Matthew and the NT,<sup>15</sup> and so seem to have been alive and well in the cultural encyclopedia of antiquity.<sup>16</sup> More significantly, Genesis 4 makes it clear that Cain's homicidal behavior arises from psychological realities that are mirrored in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:21–22. Abel, who offers a better gift at the altar than Cain, receives the favour of God that Cain feels he, too, is due. Abel then, by his ongoing existence, becomes the cause of Cain's sense of injury: as long as Abel is around, Cain is made painfully aware of his inadequacy. This "injustice" for Cain—this "victimization" by Abel's glorious existence—leads to הרה: a hot and kindled, burning anger, or wrath, otherwise translated in the Greek OT as ὀργή.<sup>17</sup> Cain's failure to check his burning anger, and rule over it, despite the divine encouragement to do so, results in Cain's taking "justice" into his own hands. Abel, the source of Cain's injury, is murdered.<sup>18</sup> If only Cain—false victim though he was—would have embraced the call to embody forgiveness by choosing, as Jesus puts it in Matthew 5, to put away his anger (ὀργίζω). The Keeper would have kept his brother instead of his anger. Reconciliation would have become a possibility.

## II. WHY SHOULD WE FORGIVE?

### A. GOD HAS FORGIVEN US

The preeminent reason why we should give up our anger and forgive in this way, as mentioned in Matthew 6:12–15, and likely implied in 5:22a, is because we ourselves are in need of forgiveness from our Heavenly Father. He is willing to give up his righteous anger and does. If we fail to forgive others for their sins, therefore, we ourselves will not be forgiven but subject to "[God's] judgement" (cf., 6:15; 5:22a). Later in Matthew's Gospel, Peter wonders how many times a Christian should give up his

<sup>15</sup> Matt. 23:35; Lk. 11:51; Heb. 11:4; 12:24; 1 Jn. 3:12; Jude 1:11.

<sup>16</sup> Cain is mentioned some 97x in Philo, and another 22x in the Pseudepigrapha.

<sup>17</sup> TWOT on הרה: "This word is related to a rare Aramaic root meaning 'to cause fire to burn,' and to an Arabic root meaning 'burning sensation,' in the throat, etc. The Hebrew verb is always used in reference to anger. The meaning of the root ... emphasizes the 'kindling' of anger, like the kindling of a fire, or the heat of the anger, once started. The verb and its derivatives are used a total of 139 times."

<sup>18</sup> The Apocalypse of Moses is noteworthy in this regard when it links Cain's action directly to his wrath: "Going, [Adam and Eve] both found Abel murdered from the hand of Cain his brother. And God says to Michael the archangel: 'Say to Adam: 'Do not reveal the secret that you know to Cain your son, for he is a son of wrath [ὅτι ὀργῆς υἱὸς ἐστίν]'" (3:1–2 OPE).

anger toward the one who sins against him. Jesus tells him that he should, in effect, be Lamech's—Cain's descendant's—antipode: if Lamech sought vengeance in sevenfold fashion, Peter should forgive in sevenfold fashion (cf. Gen 4:23–24; Matt 18:21–22). The rationale Jesus gives in parabolic form in Matthew 18:23–35—which evinces intratextual connections with 5:21–26<sup>19</sup>—concerns the forgiveness of God, forthrightly construed as the restraint of anger (ὀργίζω, 18:34). God has been to us like the merciful master, putting away his anger, forgiving his servant a debt of astronomical proportions. The forgiven servant's subsequent behavior, then, of angrily grabbing and choking his own servant for a pittance of a debt, refusing to forgive him, is unacceptable (vv. 28–30). The anger he refused to put away for others thus boomerangs back to him. The Master, once restrained, restokes his righteous anger—his wrath (ὀργίζω)—and lets the unmerciful servant have it (18:31–34). The lesson, says Jesus, is that we must learn to forgive “from the heart” (ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν). As the seat of the emotions, Jesus' injunction here is doubtlessly the call not only not to retaliate but also to put away the anger that gives rise to it. God has done it for us; we must therefore do it for others.

The rationale that we must forgive because God has forgiven us is not explicitly provided in Jesus' first antithesis. Nonetheless, if intratextual connections with this portion of Matthew are granted, this substructure of thought can certainly be seen to underpin Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5.<sup>20</sup> Whatever the case, Jesus provides plenty of additional rationale to forgive in Matthew 5:21–26 itself. In a word, Jesus seems to teach that we should give up our anger and forgive, not only to make reconciliation possible, but in order to avoid spreading around the experience of hell—and doing so on a multiplicity of levels.

## B. AVOID HELL

It may seem an overreach or inadvisable editorial flourish to summarize Jesus' rationale in this fashion, especially given that the term hell is used but once. Even still, there is a fairly straightforward connection between the concept of ὀργίζω-anger and the concept of hell. Ὀργίζω-anger, as we have said, is an anger, potentially righteous, that is fused with a desire to harm another. It is an anger that—in phenomenological terms, and as explicitly captured in the Hebrew term הַרָה (see n.17 above)—smolders and burns into a bonfire of wrath; and wrath in Scripture, either passively or actively, always bends toward the harm of its targets.<sup>21</sup> This idea of ὀργίζω-anger

<sup>19</sup> Besides the obvious thematic overlap, note especially the emphasis in each text on how the refusal to deal with anger will lead to exacting justice: “paying the last paying” (5:26), “paying back all that is owed” (18:34).

<sup>20</sup> Note well the resurfacing of themes from Matthew 5–6 in Matthew 18–19, and in the same order.

<sup>21</sup> The dragon in Revelation 12, for example, once bounced from heaven is filled with wrath (ὀργίζω), and thus goes off to wage war against “those who obey God's commands” (12:17). The wrath of God himself, in Romans 1, is defined as God's giving human beings over to the degrading and dehumanizing consequences of their idolatrous self-abuse. For a more active example of God's wrath in Matthew's Gospel, see the parable of the wedding

as an ever-present smoldering and damaging emotion links well with the concept of hell—or, the “Gehenna of fire” (τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός), as Matthew 5:22 puts it. In literal terms, Gehenna was a garbage dump, just outside Jerusalem, of continual smoking and burning. Eschatologically, the “Gehenna of fire” or “fire of hell” was a place of fiery pain and punishment. Metaphorically, there is no reason to imagine that the term could not have been used to describe present experiences and would not have been used this way by Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

A question that might profitably be asked of our text, then, in light of this link between a smoldering anger and smoldering hell, is: “And what kind of hell does the anger of unforgiveness create or bring down on us as individuals and societies?” An everlasting hell is not out of the question, to be sure, and there is no intent in this paper to eclipse the fearful possibility of eternal consequences. But there seems also to be some more immediate and immediately identifiable application to the three clauses of Matthew 5:22 when examined in context.

### 1. Hell toward the Other: Anger Goes toward the Offender (v. 22a)

In the first place, we ought to forgive, Jesus seems to teach in v. 22a, precisely because our ὀργίζω-anger, even if initially righteous, will create hell for others. Unless in our hurting state our righteous anger is put aside, we will inevitably foster a desire to hurt those who have hurt us. As we burn in anger, we will inescapably begin to desire for our perpetrators to burn in other ways. Instead of establishing the conditions that might lead to restoration, therefore, we will end up harbouring malice. For in the nature of the case, as fallen human beings, although our righteous anger is good, it so easily goes wrong, leading us to give up the fight for the redemption of the sinner. Besides earning us judgment—and, probably, “the judgement”

feast in Matthew 22, where the dishonored and injured king, who is overcome with wrath, calls in his army to deal with those who have dishonored him. William Barclay is helpful in this regard when he distinguishes between thumos and *orge* anger: “There is *thumos*, which was described as being like the flame which comes from dried straw ... It is an anger which rises speedily and which just as speedily passes. There is *orge*, which was described as anger become inveterate. It is the long-lived anger; it is the anger of the man who nurses his wrath to keep it warm; it is the anger over which a person broods, and which he will not allow to die.”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus seems to use the concept of hell in this way, in fact, in Matthew 5:27–32, in his second antithesis. Lust may bring a person to an eternal hell at the end of time, if not repented of. Yet, one need not wait for the end of time to experience the hell of lust. For lust is, as experience evinces, a burning, insatiable fire within the “soma” of the one lusting. Is there any reason (whatever other meanings may reside or accrue) not to hear Jesus addressing his audience in the mode of wisdom? “Don't lust!” he says, “For, among other things, it's a profound form of self-abuse! It's to throw your body into hell, right here, right now.” How many of those addicted to pornography in our churches right now wouldn't agree with this assessment of our Lord? Or again, how many of those in our churches who are holding on to their anger, and nurturing it, wouldn't agree with the idea that unforgiveness, too, is a type of internal burning and, as such, a form of self-abuse?

(τῆ κρίσει) of God himself (for reasons already established)<sup>23</sup>— this will create hellish conditions for the objects of our ire. Thus, we must put aside our righteous anger in order to avoid creating hellish conditions for others.

## 2. Hell in Society: Anger Gone Viral (v. 22b)

Another reason we must forgive is because holding on to our anger and acting on it, even in trivial ways, will inevitably let loose hellish conditions on society at large. As v. 22b in conjunction with vv. 25–26 seem to suggest, the one who angrily says “Raca” in response to injury might ignite anger in the recipient that provokes them to report to the Sanhedrin (τῷ συνεδρίῳ), who will then arbitrate the anger and alleged injury in court. Or, again, as Jesus warns in vv. 25–26, if matters are not settled on the road on the way to court, the judge will be called, a verdict rendered, enforcement enacted, and the perpetrator will not get out until the last “penny” is paid.<sup>24</sup>

What is Jesus’ point here? Although finally indefinite, Jesus’ emphasis on the gritty litigious process and especially “not getting out until the last penny is paid” seems to put the stress on the desire of the wounded party for “justice”: “As I have been wounded, so must you be wounded *with punishing accuracy* (the last penny), even if by the courts.” Jesus’ additional emphasis on the fact that a personal dispute—at least in theory resolvable between the parties immediately involved (v. 25a)—spills over into society at large suggests a corporate emphasis. In this way, it seems possible that Jesus’ point here is not merely to protect individuals from exacting court cases. He intends in a bigger way for us to imagine a society that fails to operate on the principles of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation. Imagine a society instead where everyone who has been injured by another holds on to their “righteous anger” (that has become wrath) and demands justice—which is to say, demands that all perpetrators pay. Given that everyone has been or will be injured by others, and given that everyone, therefore, has a “right” to punish others for wrongs done, such a society would indeed become a litigious hellhole. Everyone would burn with rage at everyone else and seek their demise. Instead of reconciliation, you would have a society of perpetual litigious warfare.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See above. It may be observed that Matthew has a well-developed sense of the eschatological judgment of God that will occur on the last day: see, e.g., 5:21f; 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36, 41f; 23:33.

<sup>24</sup> κοδράντης, the smallest Roman coin.

<sup>25</sup> A microcosm of this hell on earth can exist in families, where everyone who has been hurt by other family members harbors anger toward them and secretly, or perhaps not so secretly, wishes their ill. Such families become microcosmic prolepses of hell, where bitterness, resentment, backbiting, and infighting reign; places where scarcely can a person say a kind word to another, if they haven’t already alienated themselves from each other completely.

## 3. Hell in the Self: Anger Gone Inward (v. 22c)

A final reason we should forgive, Jesus seems to teach in v. 22c, is because unforgiveness is a quick way to light an inferno within one’s own soul, to make *oneself* “liable”—or, literally, to cause oneself to become *held fast in, caught in*<sup>26</sup>—the “fire of hell.”

Scarcely could there be a better description of what happens to the human heart caught in the trap of unforgiveness. As the injury is replayed in the mind, righteous anger burns ever hotter, and resentment grows. The desire for payback is kindled and rages hot. The harm experienced by others, while wrath is left to crackle and burn, is endlessly recycled as self-harm. The glowering ash-pit outside Jerusalem becomes the glowering ash-pit in one’s chest. Even if the other is made to pay, what has been done cannot be undone, and thus anger—and the self-harm it brings—can remain. Proponents of therapeutic models of forgiveness frequently cite these facts as potent reasons to forgive. Do yourself a favour: forgive.<sup>27</sup> Although it is not the primary or exclusive reason to forgive, and should not be treated as such, Jesus seems to agree with this motive. Why keep the fires of hell alive in yourself? Be wiser. Give up your anger. Forgive.

The somewhat strange conditional conjunction (“therefore”) that opens v. 23 should be observed before moving on, because it adds breadth and depth to the argument I am trying to make here.

In verses 21–22, Jesus addresses his listeners as victims, assumes an experience of the reception of harm, and instructs them on how to respond to it. But then in vv. 23–25, he pivots and addresses his listeners solely as perpetrators, the cause of harm, and thus (at least perceptually) in the position of needing to be forgiven. To address human beings as both victims and perpetrators is straightforward enough and carries an obvious pastoral punch when it comes to calling people to forgive. What is not as straightforward, however, is the causal conjunction that joins the listener as victim to the listener as offender. In essence, we hear Jesus saying, “You must forgive, lest hell be unleashed in you, toward others, and in society as a whole”; and our natural expectation, then, is to hear Jesus continue, “Therefore, forgive!” or “learn to forgive!” What he says instead, though, is: “Since you are called to forgive others in order to avoid proliferating experiences of hell, seek out the forgiveness of others whom you have wounded and/or offended.” What’s the logic here?

Besides some pastoral implications that we will discuss below, one of the inferences we might make is this: unforgiveness, as we have been arguing, is a festering anger that boils and bursts out to harm others, fostering conditions of hell on earth—in you, for others, for society as a whole; therefore, if you have been the source of causing another to burn inwardly in this damaging way, to be filled with a wrath that will consume them and potentially you or others, go to that person and seek to put out

<sup>26</sup> See again fn.8 above.

<sup>27</sup> “When you forgive someone for hurting you, you perform spiritual surgery inside your soul” (Smedes, 1984, 45).

the flames! Do whatever you can, in other words, so that they will not be consumed by the anger that you have caused, and thus become subject to the judgement of God, or the courts, or their own affective crematorium.<sup>28</sup>

Provided there is something of an echo or allusion to the Cain and Abel story here, as argued above, there may be evocative significance in Jesus' imagining a scene by the altar in vv. 23–24:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift (δῶρον) at the altar and there remember that your brother (ἀδελφός) has something against you, leave your gift (δῶρόν) there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come offer your gift.

With the story of Cain and Abel in mind, perhaps we are being invited to imagine: What if Abel had left his gift (δῶρόν) at the altar and ministered to his brother's (ἀδελφός) point of need? What if Abel, in other words, discovering that his brother Cain had something against him, went to Cain and apologized for the hurt caused, even though inadvertent, and pleaded with his brother Cain, as it were, to open his arms to make possible reconciliation? There is no indication in the text of Genesis that Abel was culpable for wrongdoing. Tellingly, Jesus' words here in v. 23 and v. 25 are, in this regard, ambiguous: "if . . . you remember that your brother has something against you (ἔχει τι κατὰ σου)," "when your adversary is taking you to court." The focus is not on the presence of guilt, but on the presence of injury, first (v. 23), and the presence of acting on it, second (v. 25), whether justified or not. This in no way implies that the victim is always correct; neither does it imply that one should never defend one's actions. It implies, instead, that Jesus' followers who, either rightly or wrongly, are simply perceived as perpetrators, and come to know this, should be overcome with such compassion, concern, and love for the well-being of others that they seek to do what is best for them. And in the case of anger that might become wrath, followers of Jesus are called to do what they can to extinguish the burning and backdraft at once.

### III. HOW CAN WE LEARN TO DO IT?

Read on the backdrop of Matthew's Gospel as a whole, and Scripture as a whole, Jesus' words in Matthew 5:21–26 can be seen to contain at least eight gems of practical and pastoral wisdom that can help those who have been injured to forgive.

<sup>28</sup> Frequently, authors on forgiveness (like Smedes) include "reconstruction of the offender" as instrumental in forgiveness, whereby the victim intentionally takes to mind empathic considerations of the offender (e.g., that they were abused as children, abandoned, etc). These considerations "soften the heart" of the victim and thus aid in the forgiveness process. Here in Matthew, however, Jesus appears to commend a "reconstruction of the offended," whereby the one who has done the offending is so moved by considerations of the victim—and the damaging fires of anger that may be lit within them—that they ardently seek to be forgiven by those they've victimized.

#### A. REMEMBER HOW MUCH GOD HAS FORGIVEN YOU

As mentioned above, elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus explicitly establishes that we human beings ought to forgive one another because God has forgiven us. If we fail to forgive others, God will not forgive us. As Matthew 5:21a seems to imply, the one who holds on to their anger in this way, instead of giving it up as God does, will face the judgment of God. Part of the rhetorical impact of the story of the unmerciful servant in this regard is that Jesus encourages his listeners to apprehend both the *fact* of God's mercy as well as its *extent*. That God has forgiven us our debts is rationale enough to forgive others. That God has forgiven us our debts when they far outdistance other's debts to us constitutes an argument from the greater to the lesser. If God has forgiven us our gargantuan debt, who are we not to forgive others the trifles they owe us? Indeed, the one who insists on holding on to their anger despite God's relinquishing his anger rightly faces the judgement of God. Thus, in our battle to forgive, we do well to remember God's forgiveness of us.

#### B. TRUST THE JUSTICE OF GOD

To say that one must forgive, however, and do so by giving up the anger one has a right to, does not mean that one must give up on the concept of justice altogether. It is rather to shift the burden of righteous anger back on to the One who can act on it with perfect justice, and who, one day, promises to do so. The concept of judgment lurks strong in Jesus' first antithesis, and the entirety of Scripture is clear. "It is mine to avenge," says the Lord, and one day, God will judge the world. We in the West today may not like this teaching, most likely because we have not suffered atrocities in equal measure to other parts of the world. Our collective existence has been sheltered and plush. Yet, Scripture is clear: one day, the dead will rise and there will be a judgment. This doctrine should strike fear in the hearts of unrepentant offenders. And this doctrine should strike peace in the hearts of those who have been victimized but have seen little justice here on earth. More often than not, offenders get away. Justice is not meted out. Or, human justice is meted out, but it neither satisfies nor changes the past. Neither does it prevent offenders from perpetually punishing their victims by denying the truth and hiding in the shadows. But one day, Scripture assures, God will shine his light and none will escape from it. The truth will out. To trust this teaching of Scripture is to receive power today to forgive. I need not hold on to my righteous anger and act on it to bring balance back to the universe. God will hold it for me and act on it in his own way, in his own timing, with his own infinite wisdom. The scales of justice may appear broken in the present. But the Christian can abide within the homeostasis of hope.

#### C. DO NOT GIVE UP

It is nonetheless true, however, that, even with the hope of eschatological justice, victims of crimes will, at times, and certainly in the immediate

aftermath of violation, be overcome with paroxysms of anger. Another piece of wisdom implied in Jesus' definition of forgiveness, then, is to refuse to give up. For, if to forgive is to put away anger, then to forgive is not the presence or absence of emotion per se but the decision to take responsibility for one's emotional life. Forgiveness is a choice. One may not be able to prevent the flames of anger from arising within, and they may arise with exhausting frequency; but one can choose what to do with that anger once it has surfaced. One can choose to put it away. And one can choose to do so every single time it arises. Jesus' instruction to Peter in Matthew 18 insists on exactly this practice. How much should one choose to forgive, and put away their anger? Seventy-seven times; i.e., as often as necessary. The psychology behind this decision accords with, and will doubtlessly have the same effects of, Paul's instruction for attaining a peaceful disposition in trying times; viz., to train one's mind to focus on objects that are worthy of focus: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil 4:8). We cannot control the circumstances of our lives, or what others do to us; and, frustratingly, we cannot change the past. But we can choose how to respond to these things. To hold on to the righteous anger that has become wrath within us, and threatens to stay with us even as the day passes into night, is to give the devil a foothold.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Jesus teaches, when we are wounded and rightly angry, we need to make the decision, as often as necessary, as hard as it feels, to give it up. And do not give up giving it up. God will not condemn us for failing—for we will fail—but he will condemn us for not trying.

#### D. HOLD THY TONGUE

Another thing we can do if we're struggling to forgive is to learn to hold our tongue. Shut it. Don't rehearse the pain by giving malicious voice to it. Indeed, there is the intimation in Matthew 5:22, especially when listened to with other Scripture in mind, that if we add words to our anger, if we give voice to it, we might also give fuel to it. We're angry and thus say "You blockhead!" or "You fool!" or more likely we utter and mutter these sorts of things behind people's backs in order to soil their reputation and satisfy a sense of justice. But, so often, rehashing wounds and lashing out in response to them proves not to vent anger but oxygenate it. Experience bears this out. Who among us, in relaying a painful episode, and giving voice to it, has not managed to resurrect his or her wrath? This is not to say that there are not places and times to share traumatic experiences. It is to say that once we have come to grips with what has happened to us, once we have processed it with others, and once the decision to forgive has

been taken, then, to aid this decision, wisdom says: "Now hold thy tongue. Speak about it no longer. Let sleeping dogs lie."<sup>30</sup>

A qualification is in order here. Suggesting, as we have, that one should never give up the fight to forgive and decide in wisdom to hold one's tongue may give the impression that forgiveness is simply an issue of "mind over matter." "Just try harder," it might sound like we are saying. The qualification that is to be made, therefore, involves the Psalms encouragement to us to present our laments and complaints before the Lord. We may refuse to give up giving up our anger; but part of what will help us give it up is to give it up before the face of our Lord. We may decide that the time has come to hold our tongue and speak no more before others or in the murmurings of our own hearts; and yet, we may also decide in purity of heart, to continue to give voice to our pain and anger before the Lord.<sup>31</sup>

#### E. REPENT—REFLEXIVELY, QUICKLY

We noted above Jesus' somewhat strange transition from addressing the victim in vv. 21–22 and then, with a causal conjunction, the offender in vv. 23–26. The logic, we noted, might be: since anger can have hellish consequences for individuals and whole societies if not dealt with properly, if you know that you have done something—or even been perceived to do something—to ignite the fires of anger in another, to incite the emergence of hell, go to that person and do what you can to put those fires out, to be a balm, to repent and seek for them to open the door toward reconciliation with you. For in this way you might save people from waves of judgment. In addition to this logic, another idea may be present within Jesus' strange transition. Namely, the call to forgive by giving up one's anger is not easy but mandatory. One of the actions that will aid us in our bid to embody forgiveness toward others, then, is to embody repentance toward others. For we who know ourselves to be offenders and recognize how frequently and easily we can hurt others, and we who thus engage in the habit of humbling ourselves before those whom we have wounded (and thus open ourselves to witnessing the pain that we have caused) will be much more inclined to forgive the pain others have caused us. Therefore, when we discover our offense, we ought to be the sort of people who reflexively and quickly repent.

<sup>30</sup> The idea that holding one's tongue is wise and can reduce ill effects is pervasive in the book of Proverbs. "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent" (10:19, ESV). "Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent" (11:12, ESV). "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent" (17:28, ESV). "Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble" (21:23, ESV).

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to my friend, Professor Iain Provan of Regent College in Vancouver for the suggestion to include this important qualification.

<sup>29</sup> Eph 4:26–27: "In your anger [ὀργιζέσθε] do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry [παροργισμῶ], and do not give the devil a foothold" (NIV).

## F. CONTEMPLATE THE PASSION OF CHRIST

Matthew's passion narrative makes clear that we have suffered no harm that Christ has not suffered more intensely. This is the case not because Christ has suffered every kind of violation but because the violation he has suffered has been as one who is perfectly innocent (27:19). If anyone has a right to their anger, in other words, and would be completely justified in allowing his or her anger to burn hot and effectively in wrath, that someone is Jesus. Even still, in fulfillment of his own teaching in Matthew 5, Jesus does not act on his anger, but puts it away. When Judas betrays him; when Peter denies him; when the soldiers arrest him; when the witnesses lie about him; when his captors abuse him; when Pilate fails him; when the brigands on either side of him heap insults on him; when his life ebbs away; Jesus refuses to give anger a foothold and act on it. But instead, he forgives. This is his supreme gesture, of course, of trust in God the Father—that the Father will vindicate him, and not finally allow him to be put to shame. That Jesus was fully justified in his trust becomes manifest as the Father raises him up. Matthew does not, of course, explicitly urge his readers in Jesus' first antithesis to meditate on Jesus' passion and the Father's vindication of him. Nonetheless, as the ultimate expression of one who neither acts on their righteous anger nor holds on to it, and who comes out very well in spite of it, such a reading is certainly justified. Further, it is hard to imagine a greater source of inspiration. In Christ, not only do we find the beauty of forgiveness, we also find its end: God the Father will vindicate us; and he will also usher in the sort of wondrous reality that promises to utterly overcome and wash away all that once wounded us.

## G. BE CLEAR ON WHAT FORGIVENESS IS AND IS NOT

If forgiveness, as we've been arguing, is defined by Jesus as a giving up the anger we have a right to in order to open the door toward reconciliation, then this clears up some common misconceptions that can bedevil Christians who, in obedience to Christ, are seeking to forgive.

For example, Christians can sometimes speak as though forgiveness is a feeling; thus, one can know that they have forgiven when their feelings of hurt and anger are gone. Forgiveness, in this way of thinking, puts pressure on the individual to change their feelings. And, if their feelings are not transformed, the anger itself will soon be accompanied by additional feelings of guilt and, possibly, fear of the judgment of God (for unforgiveness). To define forgiveness in terms of how one feels, therefore, is a bedeviling enterprise, indeed. Forgiveness as Jesus defines it, however, allows one to acknowledge one's feelings while focusing not on the feelings themselves but on one's behavior with reference to one's feelings. This can empower victims to focus on what they can do, therefore, and not on what they cannot do. This is true, of course, because forgiveness as Jesus defines it is not determined by how one presently feels but by what one is *doing* with how they feel. Anger is natural, and it arises naturally, and is typically uninvited. And the feeling of anger may never completely go away, just as surely as the

harm caused by another's offense may never fully go away. The question is, however: what am I doing with my anger? If I am seeking to put it away, redirecting my thoughts, putting my anger to God via godly lament, and thus opening the door to the possibility of reconciliation, then I can know that I am embodying forgiveness as Jesus calls me.

Does forgiveness require repentance? Christians can think that forgiveness should only be offered to those who demonstrate remorse and/or repent. The lever of forgiveness, in this construal, is put in the hands of offenders rather than victims. In Jesus' view, however, injured parties can and must act prior to any remedial gestures or actions on the part of offenders.<sup>32</sup> They can and must work to give up their anger, along with desires to retaliate, regardless of the remorse and/or repentance of those who have hurt them. Remorse, within this paradigm, signals to the one who has already decided to forgive and is embodying that forgiveness toward offenders via the posture of open arms that an offender has come to the place of accepting responsibility for their action. To the posture of forgiveness, in other words, is now added the presence of truth, and thus the greater possibility of embrace, of reconciliation. Trust, however, is still an issue. Full reconciliation, ensuing in the embrace of the other in the arms of true community, requires not only truth but sufficient evidence that former perpetrators will not repeat their crimes. Although never fireproof, the evidence that former perpetrators may be trusted rests not in declarations of repentance or signs of remorse—such as tears—but lives which express an authentic “about-face,” a turn-around: i.e., true Christian repentance.<sup>33</sup> Articulating and grasping this truth is important for protecting victims from misconceptions about forgiveness that will lock them into endless cycles of abuse.

Once again, it must be stressed that forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing. In the former, one opens their arms wide and says, “It *can* be right between us again: I am not holding on to the anger I have a right to and I will not seek to punish you and exclude you for what you did to me.” In the latter, once the offender has expressed remorse and embodied repentance, and to the degree they can be sufficiently trusted, embrace can be enacted. To put a finer point on it: in this fallen world, the Christian need not believe that dutifully embodying forgiveness toward and with reference toward others will always entail restored relationship.

<sup>32</sup> There might be an argument to be made that Jesus calls Christians to embrace an ethic of premediated forgiveness. Even before an offense has been committed, we commit ourselves not to act on our anger and, in fact, give up the anger itself.

<sup>33</sup> Paul is unequivocal. Remorse and repentance are not identical. If godly, remorse will lead to repentance; if worldly (self-pitying, superficial), it will only lead to death. “Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death (2 Cor 7:8–10, NIV).”

Sometimes, forgiveness will open the door to a relationship that will not be properly restored until the world-to-come comes in its fullness.

## THE FORGIVENESS-BASED VIRTUE OF THE NEW CREATION: THE NEW "SOCIOLOGICAL" LOCATION OF THE BELIEVER

SCOTT HAFEMANN<sup>1</sup>

In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul declaims that those who live under the sovereignty of the rule of the Messiah (i.e., they are "in Christ") have obtained a new social identity as a "new creation" in the midst of the old. In delineating the contours of this new identity Paul ties the forgiveness of sins that is the foundation of the new covenant (Jr 31:34), of which Paul is an apostolic servant (2 Co 3:6), to the ethic of love that in 2 Corinthians 5:14–15 defines what it means to be a "new creation." It is this "forgiveness-based virtue of love" that becomes the lens for understanding one's own identity as a new creation as well as that of all others (5:16). The implications of this new social location are then mapped out in 5:18–21, with Paul himself as the archetype of this new identity.

Hence, 2 Corinthians 5:14–21 provides an apt case-study of the dynamics of community identity-formation as a function of the establishment and maintenance of an insider/outsider self-understanding. Depending on one's focus, such a dynamic can be analysed either through the lens of "social identity theory" (SIT) or via the "sociology of deviance." The former approach focuses on how, in the establishment of "in-group categories" (Paul and his church are a "new creation") the formation of group identity leads to a process of "self-categorization" within the group (cf. the categories of "church," "saints," "brothers," "beloved," etc. for the Corinthian "believers") and "depersonalization" towards outsiders (cf. Paul's use of the image in 2 Co 11:20 of an animal devouring his kill to describe his opponents).<sup>2</sup> In the latter approach, inasmuch as deviance is a relative "social product," "social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them

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<sup>2</sup> For SIT and its application to the realities of the NT, see now J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), esp. the presentation of the method by Philip F. Esler, "An Outline of Social Identity Theory," 24. This essay is adapted from my "New Creation and the Consummation of the Covenant (Galatians 6:15 and 2 Corinthians 5:17)," in my *Paul: Servant of the New Covenant: Pauline Polarities in Eschatological Perspective*, WUNT, 435 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 300–43.

as outsiders” (cf. the rule in 2 Co 5:15).<sup>3</sup> Thus, in terms of the community’s understanding of “deviance,” the ethic of love in 2 Corinthians 5:15 has an implied positive and negative “social” function in determining the identity of the new creation – those who do not embody the ethic of love and evaluate others accordingly cannot be identified as a new creation despite their “theology.” Rather, their identity is still formed by the “old things” that no longer exist for those of the new creation.

### 1. THE OLD AND NEW THINGS

Though the outcome of the church’s self-understanding is sociological, its source is biblical, which pastors should keep in view when “building up” the church. To be the church, her identity must not be derived externally from the “other,” but ultimately from her own Scriptures as her “identity papers.” The contrast in 2 Corinthians 5:17cd between “the old things” (τὰ ἀρχαῖα; *ta archaia*) that have passed away and the “new things” (καινά; *kaina*) that now exist derives not from the culture at large, but from a widely attested and often recognized Isaianic theme, the link to which is found most directly in the τὰ ἀρχαῖα/καινά (*ta archaia/kaina*) contrast of Isaiah 43:18–19.<sup>4</sup> The common referent of this contrast in Isaiah is to the “old/former things” of God’s prior acts of redemptive history (cf. Is 41:21–29; 43:9; 44:6–8; 45:20–21; 46:9–11) over against the “new things” of God’s eschatological deliverance and restoration of both Israel and the creation (42:5, 9; 43:1, 15–21; 48:3–16; 65:17–18; 66:22).<sup>5</sup> In 2 Corinthians 5:17 too, and with Isaiah as its generative source, the contrast between “the old things” and the “new” is best taken to refer to the historical-eschatological contrast between the old way of knowing others “according to the flesh,” which is constitutive of this created order under the old covenant, and the

implied new way of knowing others according to the new creation of the new covenant.

Once this is recognized, 2 Corinthians 5:17 represents the same historical-eschatological contrast found in the three structurally and conceptually related passages of Galatians 5:6, 6:15, and 1 Corinthians 7:19. Furthermore, the explicit reference to the “new creation” in Galatians 6:15 forges a conceptual link between the related negative sides of the contrasts in Galatians 5:6, 6:15, and 1 Corinthians 7:19 and the contrast in 2 Corinthians 5:16–17. For as their interrelationships demonstrate, each of these contrasts pivots on a radical repudiation of the identity-determining, *old-covenant, this age*-distinction between Jew and non-Jew now that the Messiah has brought about the new covenant of the age to come:

Ga 5:6a οὔτε περιτομή τι ἰσχύει (*oute peritomē ti ischyei*)  
οὔτε ἀκροβυστία (*oute akrobystia*)  
Ga 6:15a οὔτε περιτομή τί ἐστιν (*oute peritomē ti estin*)  
οὔτε ἀκροβυστία (*oute akrobystia*)  
1 Co 7:19a ἡ περιτομή οὐδέν ἐστιν (*hē peritomē ouden estin*)  
ἡ ἀκροβυστία οὐδέν ἐστιν (*hē akrobystia ouden estin*).

Ga 5:6b ἀλλὰ πίστις δι’ ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη  
(*alla pistis di’ agapēs energoumenē*)  
Ga 6:15b ἀλλὰ καινὴ κτίσις (*alla kainē ktisis*)  
1 Co 7:19b ἀλλὰ τήρησις ἐντολῶν θεοῦ (*alla tērēsis entolōn theou*).<sup>6</sup>

Ga 5:6a Neither circumcision accomplishes something,  
nor uncircumcision,  
Ga 6:15a Neither circumcision is anything,  
nor uncircumcision,  
1 Co 7:19a Circumcision is nothing.  
Uncircumcision is nothing.

Ga 5:6b but faith working out, with regard to itself, through love.  
Ga 6:15b but a new creation [is something].  
1 Co 7:19b But keeping the commandments of God [is everything].

J. Louis Martyn is therefore right to emphasize that from our distance we often miss the radical, “apocalyptic” shock of this twofold rejection. For Paul, as *the* Pharisee among Pharisees (Ga 1:14; cf. Php 3:5–6; 2 Co 11:22), the distinction between Jew and Gentile, determined by divine election and demarcated in the Abrahamic-Sinai covenant, had been the most fundamental reality of life (cf. Gal 2:15!). In fact, maintaining this distinction was often more important than life itself (cf., e.g., the stories of

<sup>6</sup> The interpretive parallel between these contrasts was first set forth simply in my *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 196, though without regard to the development of Paul’s thinking from Galatians to the Corinthian epistles.

<sup>3</sup> For this approach, see Troy A. Miller, “Dogs, Adulterers, and the Way of Balaam: The Forms and Socio-Rhetorical Function of the Polemical Rhetoric in 2 Peter (Part ii),” *Irish Biblical Studies* 22 (2000): 182–191; quotes from 183 and 184, with the citation from Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 9.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to Is 43:18–19, Moyer V. Hubbard, *New Creation in Paul’s Letters and Thought*, SNTSMS, 119 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12, 12n.4, 15n.17, 17, points to the contrast between “first/former things” vs. “new things” and related concepts in Is 41:22–29; 42:9; 48:3–6; 43:9, 18; 44:6–8; 45:11, 20–21; 46:9–11; 48:3, 12–16; 51:9; 65:17–18; 66:22. In LXX: τὰ πρῶτα/πρότερα (*ta prōta/protera*) in 43:18; 48:3; 46:9; τὰ ἀρχαῖα (*ta archaia*) in 43:19 and ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς (*ap’ archēs*) in 42:9; 43:9; 45:21; τὰ καινά (*ta kaina*) in 42:9; 43:19; 48:6. However, Hubbard’s emphasis, 16–17, on the difference between its application in Is 40–55, where the focus is on the transformation of God’s people, with “creation” in a supportive role (cf. 43:18), and in Is 65–66, where the focus is on cosmic new creation, with God’s people “swept up into the new creation,” should not be pressed for Paul. Both Is 43:18–19 and 65:17 inform 2 Co 5:17.

<sup>5</sup> Here too following Hubbard, *New Creation*, 15–17, 182, who in turn follows von Rad, Beale, and Webb. But, contra Hubbard, 183, I do not think that Paul is filling Isaiah with his own, distinctive content in which the “old things” now refer to “boasting in appearances (5:12), living for self (5:14–15), and judging others κατὰ σάρκα [*kata sarka*] (5:16).” Rather than being the “old things” themselves, these vices are all manifestations of the attempt to go back to the former things now that the new act of redemption has arrived.

the martyrs recounted in 1 Macc 1:41–64; 2:15–38, 49–64; 2 Macc 6:10–31; 7:1–42). Yet now, in the eschatological reality in which God’s people live “in the Messiah” (ἐν Χριστῷ [*en Christō*]; Gal 5:6a), neither being a Jew nor a Gentile is an essential identity-marker of being a member of God’s people.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to point out, however, that although being a Jew or Gentile no longer determines one identity “in Christ,” this does not mean, for Paul, that one’s new identity is no longer expressed ontologically in regard to being Jewish or Gentile, any more than being male and female, married or single, disappears into an androgynous “person” or “human” (Ga 3:28; 1 Co 7:1–40), even in worship (1 Co 11:2–16!). Moreover, being slave or free, though abolished at a soteriological and ecclesiastical level, can still be significant as the divinely-determined social and history-of-salvation context for expressing one’s new identity (cf., e.g., Paul’s dealing with the slave-master relationship in Philemon). Eschatological realities are still only inaugurated and must be lived out in the midst of the present, evil age.

The stark antithesis in these passages between what is denied and what is affirmed thereby establishes a threefold set of *eschatological* contrasts. Moreover, the mutually interpretive parallels between the three statements of what *does* count in the new eschatological age indicate that Paul’s statement concerning the “new creation” in Galatians 6:15b occupies the same position rhetorically as the parallel expressions in Galatians 5:6b and 1 Corinthians 7:19b regarding “faith” and “the commandments of God” respectively. Paul therefore equates conceptually the reality of the “new creation” with “faith/trust working out, with regard to itself, through love” (Ga 5:6),<sup>8</sup> which in turn can be framed in terms of “keeping the commandments of God” (1 Co 7:19), and vice versa.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This is one of the central themes running throughout his work; see J. Louis Maryn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997). The radical nature of Paul’s disavowal of both circumcision and uncircumcision can be seen when compared with the main point of *Joseph and Aseneth*, in which the conversion of Aseneth is also portrayed in terms of a new creation that lasts into the ages to come (*JosAsen* 8:3, 9; 15:5; 16:14; 19:5; 21:4, 21; 27:10; and compare 8:3, 9; 12:1 with 20:7). But now this conversion as new creation leads not to the disavowal, but to the strengthening of the divide between Jew and Gentile. For a detailed analysis of the key text, *JosAsen* 8:9, within the writing, see Hubbard, *New Creation*, 57–58, 63–65, 68, 72, 74; for an analysis of the contrasts between *Joseph and Aseneth* and Paul, see my *Paul: Servant of the New Covenant*, 304n.11.

<sup>8</sup> This awkward translation reflects the fact that the middle voice of ἐνεργέω (*energeō*; “to work out”) is difficult to render in English, since the faith which works is also impacted by its activity, being “directly and personally involved in the process”; for this description of the force of the middle, see Bernard A. Taylor, “Deponency and Greek Lexicography,” in *Biblical Greek Language and Lexicography*, FS Frederick W. Danker, ed. Bernard A. Taylor, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 167–76, at 174. On the necessary embodiment of dispositions such as “faith” in one’s way of life, individually and communally, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 19–61, and its application to the Pauline doctrine of “justification by faith,” 347–54.

<sup>9</sup> For the conviction that “a comparison of the second members in the three passages is instructive,” see already Ernest De Witt Burton, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1977 [1920]), 356. Burton, 356, sees πίστις (*pistis*; “faith/trust”) and ἀγάπη (*agapē*; “love”) in Gal 5:6 as “purely ethical terms, descriptive of the fundamental moral

## 2. ESCHATOLOGICAL SOCIAL IDENTITY

Within this semantic-theological field, knowing someone “according to the flesh” in 2 Corinthians 5:16 corresponds to considering a person’s identity to be determined by the distinction between circumcision and uncircumcision that is inherent in this age/world, i.e., by “the old things” of the old covenant that have now passed away eschatologically. Conversely, the “new things” of the new covenant that now exist correspond to the way of knowing Christ and others that results from being a “new creation” (2 Co 5:17).

If this conceptual link between Galatians 5:6, 6:15, 1 Corinthians 7:19, and 2 Corinthians 5:16–17 holds, then what is the relationship, if any, between the ethical contrasts in Galatians 5:6 and 1 Corinthians 7:19 and Paul’s declaration in 2 Corinthians 5:17? Is there a related emphasis in the context of 2 Corinthians 5:17 to the fact that Paul defined the “new creation” (Ga 6:15) in terms of the believer’s ethical life of love as the eschatological fulfillment of the law (Ga 5:6, 13–14), which corresponds to an obedience to the commandments of God as determined by life in the “overlapping of the ages” (1 Co 7:19)? In the “new creation” passage of Galatians 6:15 in particular, what is the significance of the fact that this love, as comprising an essential element of the believer’s essential “social identity,” *brought about by Paul’s boasting in the cross of Christ*, was in stark contrast to the behavior of those boasting in the “old age” identity of their circumcision (Ga 6:11–14)?

The answers to these questions derive from the observation that the same emphasis on love as the expression of the new creation in Galatians 5 and 6 is found in the near context of 5:17. Here too, Paul again offers himself in 5:14, as he did in Galatians 6:14, as the example of one who is ethically “impelled” (συνέχω; *synechō*) by “Christ’s love” (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ; *hē agapē tou Christou*) as manifest in Christ’s death for all.<sup>10</sup> Picking up the theme of Galatians 6:13, Paul’s life stands in stark contrast to those described in 5:12 as those who boast “in face,” i.e., in the old-age identity as determined by one’s identity-revealing appearance, and not “in heart,” i.e., in the new-age identity as demonstrated by the character of life that

attitude of the Christian,” while “keeping the commandments” in 1 Co 7:19 is “a more external characterization of the Christian life and more formal.” Over against both, “new creation” in Ga 6:15 is “less definite as to the moral character of the new life than either of the other expressions,” though it “directs attention to the radical change involved rather than to the external expression or the moral quality of the life thus produced.” The deposit of these contrasts in 2 Co 5:7 will demonstrate that such contrasts are only apparent.

<sup>10</sup> For the meaning of συνέχω (*synechō*) as “impelled” via a “compulsion from within” and of ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ (*hē agapē tou Christou*; “the love of Christ”) as a subjective genitive, i.e., “Christ’s love,” that is then explained in 5:14b–15 (cf. Ro 5:8; 8:32–35; Ga 2:20), see Hubbard, *New Creation*, 171, emphasis his. In my view, Paul’s statement in 5:14–15 that Christ’s love, manifest in Christ’s death, impels Paul to live for Christ parallels Paul’s assertion in Ga 2:20, so that in the phrase ἐν πίστει ζῶ τῆ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ (*en pistei zō tē tou huiou tou theou*; “I am living by [the] faith of the son of God”), τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ (*tou huiou tou theou*; “of the son of God”) should also be understood as a subjective genitive: Paul lives to God by the Son of God’s faithfulness in loving and dying for Paul.

results from the cross and the Spirit, emblematic of the new covenant (cf. 5:12–14 with 2 Co 1:22; 3:2–6; 4:6; cf. Ro 2:15, 29; 6:17; Ga 4:6). Hence, in 2 Corinthians 5:17 the “new things” of a cross-produced love are set forth as a fulfillment of the Isaianic hope for a second-exodus act of deliverance that will be paramount to a new creation. Indeed, in Isaiah 65:17–25 the new heavens and new earth are a place of newly created, Eden-like joy, in which, in God’s presence, his transformed people never again do wrong. Against the backdrop of the link in Jeremiah 31:31–34 between forgiveness and obedience to the Torah as the central promise of the new covenant, Beale’s argument in view of Isaiah 43:18–19 (cf. 65:17) that “it is plausible to suggest that ‘reconciliation’ in Christ is Paul’s way of explaining that Isaiah’s promises of ‘restoration’ from the alienation of exile have begun to be fulfilled by the atonement and forgiveness of sins in Christ” gains additional strength (cf. 2 Co 3:6 with the backdrop to 5:17, which are cemented together by the imagery of conversion as new creation in 2 Co 4:6).<sup>11</sup> For Paul, then, the portrayal in 5:17 of the believer as a “new creation,” exemplified in Paul himself, underscores that this conversion into a new identity, a new manner of evaluating others, and a new way of life is the beginning of the eschatological age of redemption (cf. 2 Co 4:5–6). Just as the Lord created Israel at the exodus as part of the “old things” (Is 43:1–2), so too he has created his people anew at the “second exodus” redemption brought about by the Messiah as part of “the new things” promised by God (Is 43:18–19).

### 3. COVENANT SOCIAL IDENTITY

At this point it should be emphasized again that the theological context for the confluence of new creation and conversion, of eschatology and ethics, is thus the new covenant. Paul makes it clear that according to the early Jesus-tradition the Corinthians are to understand the Lord’s Supper in terms of the “new covenant” established in eschatological fulfillment of the Passover, which now “proclaims the Lord’s death” as “our paschal lamb” (1 Co 5:7) until he returns (1 Co 11:23–26). The inauguration of the “new creation” is thereby inextricably linked to the establishment of the “new covenant,” in which, *based on the forgiveness of sins*, the Spirit creates and empowers the life of faith in anticipation of the resurrection to come (cf.

<sup>11</sup> G. K. Beale, “The Old Testament Background of Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5–7 and Its Bearing on the Literary Problem of 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1,” *NTS* 35 (1989): 556. Thus, though Beale stresses cosmic renewal in his reading of new creation in 5:17, the anthropological consequence of God’s act of new creation actually seems to be the import of his programmatic essay; cf. 551–557. See too now Ryan T. Jackson, *New Creation in Paul’s Letters: A Study of the Historical and Social Setting of a Pauline Concept*. WUNT, 2/272 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 123–124, who follows Beale in arguing that the theme of reconciliation in 2 Co 5:18–21 reflects the Isaianic “second exodus” restoration of Israel from exile (Isa 43:1, 5–7, 15), which is also spoken of in “new creation” imagery (Is 43:1, 15, 19–21). The link between Israel’s restoration and new creation imagery is common in Is 40–55 (see 40:28–31; 41:17–20; 42:5–9; 44:21–23, 24–28; 45:1–8, 9–13, 18–20; 49:8–13; 51:1–3, 9–11, 12–16; 54:1–10; 55:6–13).

1:20–22; 2 Co 3:3–18; 4:10, 13–18; 5:4–5). Hence, despite their differences on whether for Paul the new creation is exclusively anthropological or not, both Jackson and Hubbard agree that in reading Paul’s twofold emphasis on the eschatological “now” in 2 Corinthians 5:16 (cf. the ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν... ἀλλὰ νῦν...; *apo tou nyn... alla nyn*) we must not separate the eschatological “now” (cf. Rom 3:21; 16:26) from the soteriological “now” (cf. Ro 5:9, 11; 7:6; 8:1; Ga 2:20), especially as these are interwoven in 2 Corinthians 6:2.<sup>12</sup>

### 4. NEW CREATION AS THE CROSS-SHAPED LIFE

Paul’s declaration of the eschatological-soteriological significance of the new creation-transformation of individuals “in Christ” in 5:17 is confirmed and explicated by the parallel between Paul’s statement concerning the implication of the cross in 5:14–15 and its restatement in 5:20–21. By means of these parallels, Paul has re-applied his previous eschatological contrasts in Galatians 5–6 and 1 Corinthians 7, which likewise focused on the new-age transformation of those in Christ, to his present argument. The parallels within 2 Corinthians 5:14–21 may be outlined as follows:

- |     |  |     |  |
|-----|--|-----|--|
| 14a | the love of Christ compels us  | 20a | we are being ambassadors in Christ’s place (ὕπερ Χριστοῦ; <i>hyper Christou</i> ), |
|     |  | 20b | just as (ὡς; <i>hōs</i> ) God is appealing through us.                             |
|     |  | 20c | Hence, we are begging in Christ’s place, “Be reconciled to God.”                   |
| 14b | because (adv. πτερ.) we judge this, that one died in the place of all, (ὕπερ πάντων; <i>hyper pantōn</i> ) | 21a | For he made the one who knew not sin to be sin                                     |
| 14c | therefore (ἀρα; <i>ara</i> ) all (οἱ πάντες;   |     |  |

<sup>12</sup> See Jackson, *New Creation*, 133, who in stressing the “broader soteriology” inherent in the “new creation” also recognizes the “clear anthropological application of 2 Co 5:16–17,” and yet critiques Hubbard for nevertheless opting for a “stringently anthropological understanding” of 5:16. For his part, Hubbard, *New Creation*, 174, rightly points out that ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν (*apo tou nyn*) in 5:16 explicates κρίναντας (*krinantas*; “having judged”) in 5:14, so that “from [the] now” refers to the time when Paul formed the judgment in the preceding verses, i.e., from his conversion. Moreover, given the content parallel between the two ὥστε (*hōste*)-clauses in vv. 16a and 17a, “from now” parallels being “in Christ,” so that a reference to “conversion” is “beyond dispute” in view of Paul’s statement in v. 16b concerning his pre-conversion perception of Christ (174). By framing conversion in terms of a “new creation” Paul indicates that he views the former as an event of eschatological and cosmological significance. So Hubbard’s conclusion that 2 Co 5:17 “is not essentially about the presence of the new age, but the presence of a renewed image and a new humanity” (185) is overdrawn, since the newly created humanity “in Christ” is an expression of the new age and could not come about without it. The purpose of the new creation statement is more than a rhetorical way “to portray conversion as a complete and irrevocable break with one’s former way of life” (contra Hubbard, *New Creation*, 186).

*hoi pantes*), died,

- |     |  |   |
|-----|--|---|
| 15a | and (καί; <i>kai</i> ) he died<br>in the place of all (ὑπὲρ πάντων;<br><i>hyper pantōn</i> ) | in our place (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν; <i>hyper hēmōn</i> ),        |
| 15b | in order that (ἵνα [ <i>hina</i> ]+subj.)<br>those who are living                            | 21b in order that (ἵνα [ <i>hina</i> ] + subj.)<br>we |
| 15c | might no longer live for themselves,<br>but (ἀλλά; <i>alla</i> ) for him                     | might become the righteousness<br>of God              |
|     | who died and was raised in<br>their place<br>(ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν; <i>hyper autōn</i> ).              | by means of him (ἐν αὐτῷ; <i>en autō</i> ).           |

Paul's apostolic appeal as an ambassador "in Christ's place as his representative" for the reconciliation of the world (v. 20) is the consequence of his being compelled by Christ's love (v. 14a). More specifically, Paul's apostolic ministry, as the embodiment of his love for the Corinthians (cf. 2 Co 2:4; 11:11; 12:15), is based on Christ's own love as embodied in his death "in the place of all he represents" (vv. 14b; 15a: ὑπὲρ πάντων; *hyper pantōn* and v. 15c: ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν; *hyper autōn*). The ὑπὲρ [*hyper*]-formula in vv. 14–15 is then explicated in v. 21, so that the ὑπὲρ [*hyper*]-formula in these verses is best interpreted to mean the same thing that it signifies in v. 20, where, by way of analogy, the role of the ambassador is to take the place of the one he represents.<sup>13</sup> In view of these parallels, v. 21a refers in covenant-cultic terms to the death of the Messiah as a sinless, atoning sacrifice for sin (cf. "the one not having known sin ... he made sin") offered in the place of all believers, who are represented by the Messiah (cf. ὑπὲρ πάντων [*hyper*

<sup>13</sup> Following Sung-Ho Park, *Stellvertretung Jesu Christi im Gericht: Studien zum Verhältnis von Stellvertretung und Kreuzestod Jesu bei Paulus*. WMANT, 143 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2015) and my review of his work, BBR 27 (2017) 443–444. Park develops the Tübingen perspective on the meaning of "representation" in Paul as set forth by Gese, Janowski, Hofius and Frey et al., in which in a judicial context acting (*handeln*) or entering in or standing up (*eintreten*) in the place of another (*anstelle eines anderen*), though often atoning in function, must not be equated with substitution (*Austausch* or *Ersatz*) or assumed always to be cultic in nature (cf. 2, 4nn. 11–12, 6, 6n. 20, 33). Park's own work makes clear, however, that the distinction between representation and substitution is not always easy to maintain. Indeed, for Park, one can distinguish conceptually, but never isolate, "inclusive" and "exclusive representation," thereby avoiding viewing representation either solely as a matter of "solidarity" or as a simple "substitution" (7–8). Park's own focus is on the two Pauline letters where Christ's representative death on earth and his ongoing intercession in God's presence are explicitly interrelated both to one another and to divine judgment, above all at the Parousia: 1 Thessalonians (1:9–10; 4:14; 5:9–10) and Romans (5:8–10; 8:1–4; 8:31–34).

*pantōn*] in vv. 14b and 15a with ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν [*hyper hēmōn*] in v. 21a).<sup>14</sup> Once again, now implied in the cultic backdrop to Paul's argument, forgiveness is thus the assumed foundation of his ethic of love.

The key parallel for our purposes consequently becomes that between vv. 15bc and 21b, where both texts indicate the purpose in the life of the believer to be accomplished by Christ's death. That Paul is focusing on the life of the believer in 5:21, however, is not immediately evident. Though a matter of current debate, the parallels between vv. 11–14a and vv. 18–20 confirm that the first person plurals in vv. 18–20 are best construed not as references to the calling of the church, but as "apostolic" plurals referring to Paul's own ministry.<sup>15</sup> It may seem natural, therefore, that the first person plural pronouns in v. 21 also refer to Paul in his apostolic ministry. But by virtue of the same argument the parallels between vv. 14b–15c and v. 21ab indicate that in v. 21 Paul now includes his readers – exemplars of all believers – as the beneficiaries of Christ's death and as those who, by means of Christ's death (cf. the parallel to 5:15c), are to "become the righteousness of God." Furthermore, the threefold use of "all" (πᾶς [*pas*]) in vv. 14b–15a and the switch to the third person in v. 15c clearly refer to referents including and outside of Paul, which signals an inclusive reading of v. 21 as well. That Paul can move abruptly from talking about his own ministry in the first person plurals of vv. 18–20 to including his readers in that same pronoun in v. 21 is evidenced by the identical move in 2 Corinthians 3:18 within its larger context, again indicated by the use of πᾶς (*pas*).<sup>16</sup>

To restate Paul's point again, the purpose of Christ's atoning death (v. 21a) is that "we," i.e., "those who are living" as new creations "in the

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Lv 4:13–14, 20–21, 24–25, 32, 34; 5:6–8, 10–12; 6:18; 9:7; 14:19; 16:15, where "sin" can be used as a short-hand description for the atoning sacrifice of the sinless animal offered on behalf of Israel. "To be made sin on someone's behalf" (cf. 2 Co 5:21) is thus to be made a sacrifice for sin. Reconciliation is possible because the sinless Christ dies to atone for God's people, a motif then picked up in Is 52:13–53:12 (cf. Is 53:10 LXX: περὶ ἁμαρτίας [*peri hamartias*; "concerning sin"], and Ro 3:25–26; 4:25; 5:8; 1 Co 6:11; 11:23–26; 15:3–6; Col 1:19–20). For the corresponding lexical evidence and its application to the parallel περὶ ἁμαρτίας [*peri hamartias*; "concerning sin"] in Rom 8:3, see N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 221–222. For ἁρτία (*h'it*) as a "sin-offering" for the purpose of the forgiveness of intentional sins, as well as a "purification offering" for the sanctuary, see John Dennis, "The Function of the ἁρτία (*h'it*) Sacrifice in the Priestly Literature: An Evaluation of the View of Jacob Milgrom," ETL 78 (2002): 108–129, esp. 111–115, 118–119, 125–126.

<sup>15</sup> For corollary support that the first person plurals in this passage, except for the general statement in v. 21, refer to Paul in his apostolic office, see Seyoon Kim, "2 Cor 5:11–21 and the Origin of Paul's Concept of 'Reconciliation,'" NovT 39 (1997): 360–384, 368–371.

<sup>16</sup> See Victor P. Furnish, *II Corinthians*. AB, 32A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 326, following Dinkler: though 5:14 refers to Paul and his colleagues, "it is almost inevitable... that the *us* in this initial affirmation of v. 14 should begin to expand under the sheer weight of the affirmation itself, so that what Paul has applied in the first instance to apostles is seen immediately to be applicable to all believers." For the contrary view that 5:21 is a continuing reference to Paul in his apostolic ministry, see N. T. Wright, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Cor 5:21," in *Pauline Theology, Vol. II*, ed. David M. Hay (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993): 200–208.

Messiah" (5:15b, 17), might become the righteousness of God "by means of him" (*ἐν αὐτῷ* [*en autō*]; v. 21b). Though also a matter of much debate, the parallels between 5:15, 17, and 21 support those who argue that "the righteousness of God" in 5:21 is a possessive or subjective genitive (i.e., "God's righteousness" or "the righteousness that God exhibits"), depending on the degree to which *δικαιοσύνη* ("righteousness") is rendered a verbal noun in relationship to the transitive uses of *δικαιόω* ("to justify"). Either way, it refers to the forensic estimation of God's character as a result of evaluating the faithfulness of God's actions against his own covenant commitments. The specific divine actions in view vary from context to context. Here the demonstration of God's righteousness is seen in the establishment of the new creation by means of the reconciling cross of Christ as it accomplishes, through the Spirit, the transformation of God's people in accord with the promises of the new covenant (cf. the reference to the fact that "all things are from God" in 5:18a against the backdrop of Is 43:18–19; 65:17–23; 66:22–23; Is 52:6–10; 53:5 and 2 Co 3:3, 6 against the backdrop of Ez 36:26 and Je 31:31–34).

#### CONCLUSION

Concretely, and as a concluding development of the eschatological contrasts in Galatians 5:6 and 6:15, this transformation under the new covenant is framed in terms of God's people no longer living for themselves, but for the Christ who gave his life for them (5:15c). Here too the new creation of the new covenant is unpacked by a typical Pauline description of love for others as love for Christ, since love for others embodies God's righteousness as now revealed eschatologically in and through Christ's death (cf. Ro 5:8; 8:35, 38; 14:15; 1 Co 13:4–7; Php 2:3–5; 1 Th 1:3; cf. Eph 5:2, 25; Php 2:1–4 in view of 3:10–11; 2 Ti 1:13; Ti 2:11–14).<sup>17</sup> Here too the church must confront and be confronted by the Scriptural truth by which she is to be known. As Hays puts it, "where the church embodies in its life together the world-reconciling love of Jesus Christ, the new creation is manifest. The church incarnates the righteousness of God."<sup>18</sup> Not to love one another, regardless of its confession, is to be a "deviant" from the righteousness of God revealed in the cross. For Paul's point in 2 Corinthians 5:17 is that those swept up into the inauguration of the eschatological "new creation" are already becoming identified by God's righteous character as revealed in Christ (2 Co 3:9; 4:4–6; see 9:8–10). This point is corroborated

<sup>17</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 31, in regard to Php 3:10–11: "The twin themes of conformity to Christ's death and the imitation of Christ are foundational elements of Paul's vision of the moral life...Obedience to God is defined paradigmatically...by Jesus' death on the cross" (pointing to Ro 6:1–14; 8:17, 29–30; 15:1–7; 1 Co 10:23–11:1; 2 Co 4:7–15; 12:9–10; Ga 2:19–20; 5:24; 6:14).

<sup>18</sup> Hays, *Moral Vision*, 24, stressing Paul's use of the verb *γίνωμαι* (*ginomai*; "to become") in 2 Co 5:21: "Thus, Paul's defense of his own apostolic ministry turns out to be inextricably fused with the proclamation that the church community is a sneak preview of God's ultimate redemption of the world."

by the "mutually illuminating" structural and conceptual parallels between 5:17ab and 5:21b as presented by Hubbard.<sup>19</sup>

<i>ὥστε</i>	<i>εἰ τις</i>	<i>ἐν Χριστῷ</i>	-----	<i>καινὴ κτίσις</i>
<i>hōste</i>	<i>ei tis</i>	<i>en Christō</i>		<i>kainē ktisis</i>
<i>ἵνα</i>	<i>ἡμεῖς</i>	<i>ἐν αὐτῷ</i>	<i>γενώμεθα</i>	<i>δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ</i>
<i>hina</i>	<i>hēmeis</i>	<i>en auto</i>	<i>genōmetha</i>	<i>dikaiousynē theou</i>

The fact that Christ's love for all impels *Paul* to live for Christ by loving the Corinthians thus undergirds Paul's conviction that *all believers*, by means of what Jesus accomplishes on the cross, become an embodiment of God's own righteousness through their love for others. In this regard too the Corinthians are to imitate Paul, who imitates Christ (1 Co 4:15–16; 11:1; cf. 1 Th 1:6; 2 Th 3:7, 9). For like Christ, Paul the apostle's identity is formed by the reality that his life is governed, eschatologically, by the "rule of love" (cf. 2 Co 5:14 with 5:21).<sup>20</sup> Paul's pastoral wisdom in this regard then leads him to apply this rule in two very "practical" ways. Concerning the repentant majority of the Corinthians (cf. 2:6), this rule of love will entail completing the collection for others (2 Co 7; 8:7–10, 24; 9:13; see esp. 9:9: as an expression of God's provisions to them, the righteousness of the saints is seen in their giving to the poor). On the other hand, for the minority of the Corinthians, who are still in rebellion against Paul (cf. chs. 10–13), God's righteousness entails giving them yet another opportunity to repent before Paul returns a third time to judge them as the final "proof" that Christ is indeed speaking powerfully through his ministry (cf. 2 Co 13:1–5 with 5:19–20). And in both cases, their identity as Christians is on the line.

<sup>19</sup> Hubbard, *New Creation*, 178. Commentators such as Kümmel, Wendland, Bultmann, Lang, Wolff, Breytenback, and Souza also point out a relationship between 5:17 and 5:21 (178nn.253–254). Kümmel even draws the equation, "Neuschöpfung = Gerechwerdung" (quoted by Hubbard, 178). Based on these parallels, on a similar parallel between 2 Co 3:16 and 5:17, and on the "mutually illuminating character of the 'in Christ' formulas in 2 Co 3:14–16, 5:17, and 5:21" (178, 178n.251), Hubbard concludes that "transformation – so important in the argument of Ga 3 and 4 – surfaces again in 5:17 and, as elsewhere in this letter, it is an anthropological-soteriological motif (τις [*tis*])" (179).

<sup>20</sup> Following Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 325–326, 328–329, who uses the image of the "rule of love" to describe the point of 5:14, emphasizing that, for Paul, to live for Christ means, concretely, to live for others, and pointing to 1 Co 8:12 (for the point put negatively) and to Ro 15:1–3 in view of Ro 14:18 (for the point put positively). Here too Furnish turns to Ga 5:6 as a parallel (328), though without a reference to the motif of new creation in Galatians as the link between the texts.

PARADOX OF THE PASTORATE IN THE AGE  
OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

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

“And, apart from other things, there is daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches”

2 Corinthians 11:28

Forgiveness resides at the center of the Christian experience. Forgiveness is our core spiritual encounter, which defines our relationship with God and each other. This forgiveness-relationship between God and his reconciled children is reinforced by the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, “forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Mt 6:12). Giving and receiving forgiveness is the bedrock of Christian relationships, as Jesus made clear to Peter (Mt 18:21–22). It’s no wonder then that preaching on forgiveness in its various forms is critical to remaining faithful to the historic gospel and in practicing essential discipleship. It is certainly a worthy topic for this year’s *Center for Pastor Theologians* symposium.<sup>2</sup>

However, the ability for people to actually receive and extend forgiveness is much more complicated than one might think.<sup>3</sup> For some, effectively extending forgiveness is not a matter of “want to,” nor is it a matter of truly understanding God’s forgiveness, nor is it a matter of obedience, but rather it is a matter of emotional and psychological well-being. Research from City University in Hong Kong suggests that the capacity someone has to extend forgiveness depends greatly on whether or not that person is suffering from depression and anxiety.<sup>4</sup> Simply put: someone who is anxious and/or depressed is far less likely to be able to extend forgiveness to others. Hence, in this paper, I will explore the cultural and experiential reality of

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<sup>2</sup> This essay was originally presented during the Center of Pastor Theologians Fall Symposium (Sept 30–Oct 1st 2019), which focused on themes of forgiveness. While much of the following research is pre-pandemic I have subsequently updated research to reflect COVID-19 realities.

<sup>3</sup> See the work of Evertt L. Worthington esp. *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2003) and *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Application* (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Man Chui Tse and Sheung-Tak Cheng, “Depression Reduces Forgiveness Selectively as a Function of Relationship Closeness and Transgression,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 40, no. 6 (April 2006): 1133–41.

depression and anxiety, especially as it relates to the pastor-theologian. My aim is to equip pastor-theologians with a better understanding of depression and anxiety so they have a greater grasp of its causes and possible treatments. The above goals will help them shepherd their flocks more skillfully and will help them personally battle depression and anxiety when the symptoms emerge in their own lives. The latter of these two goals is particularly important in our current cultural moment in which depression and anxiety appears to have free range in both Christian and secular communities. If pastor-theologians are able to experience more emotional and psychological health, they will have more energy to extend forgiveness for deep wounds suffered in the trenches of ministry. In this way, they can experience forgiveness that “surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:19).

### I. UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY<sup>5</sup>

Anxiety is the most diagnosed mental illness in America impacting roughly 1 in 5 adults (40 million) each year.<sup>6</sup> Pastors are twice as likely to experience anxiety than the general public.<sup>7</sup> Someone experiencing anxiety is, “introspective” and “turned-inward.”<sup>8</sup> This introspection is not positive self-examination but rather a constant, “brooding on his thoughts, actions, and abilities and too frequently finding them lacking in the qualities he believes should be there.”<sup>9</sup> Someone in chronic anxiety is stuck in patterns of self-orientation, which leads to self-pre-occupation, negative self-talk and potential relational dysfunction. Rapee and Barlow define anxiety as a “loose cognitive-affective structure. This construct is composed primarily of high negative affect, associated with a sense of uncontrollability, and a shift in attention to a focus primarily on the self or a state of self-preoccupation. The sense of uncontrollability is focused on future threat, danger, or other negative events...characterized roughly as a state of ‘helplessness.’”<sup>10</sup>

It is not difficult to see how continual dealing with congregational drama could lead a pastor into frequent emotions of self-doubt, which in turn could easily mutate into self-oriented brooding.<sup>11</sup> In a poll conducted

by The American Psychiatric Association in 2017, it was discovered that nearly two-thirds of those interviewed in the general public were “extremely or somewhat anxious about health and safety for themselves and their families and more than a third are more anxious overall than last year.”<sup>12</sup> If that is the case for the general public then pastors, whose job it is to bear the burdens of their congregations, are in the epicenter of anxiety.<sup>13</sup> While it appears true that the spike of anxiety is a Western phenomenon,<sup>14</sup> for those pastoring in the West it is a reality that must be addressed.

Depression is different than anxiety, but its diagnosis is closely linked to anxiety. Depression is the second leading mental health diagnosis in America. According to the Journal of Primary Prevention, more than 7% of pastors “simultaneously experienced depression and anxiety.”<sup>15</sup> While anxiety is characterized as a seemingly helpless state of fixation on the self, depression is a loss of energy and motivation often needed to change one’s situation. J. I. Packer defines depression as a “downward pressure squeezing out and draining away whatever modes of energy and eagerness were there before.”<sup>16</sup> While anxiety implies an “effort to cope,” depression is characterized by “behavioral retardation and an associated lack of arousal...motor retardation and loss of pleasurable engagement, which are characteristics unique to depression.”<sup>17</sup> While anxiety refers to a kind of fixation, depression refers to a mood.<sup>18</sup>

### A. CAUSES OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN THE PASTORATE

Since Paul confessed his own anxieties for his churches (2 Co 11:28), depression and anxiety have persisted for two millennia as an occupational

9–23.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Newman “Anxiety in the West: Is it on the Rise?” Medical News Today (Wed. Sept 5: 2018) <<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322877>>.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Cuss, *Managing Leadership Anxiety* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> “[T]here are signs that it may be less common in the underdeveloped countries, the implication being that anxiety is related to such factors as affluence, complexity of life-style, and the social stresses imposed by our western culture.” Cronin, *Anxiety*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Rugani, *Duke Today* (2013).

<sup>16</sup> J. I. Packer and Michael Lundy, *Depression, Anxiety and the Christian Life*. (Wheaton, Crossway: 2018), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Rapee and Barlow, *Chronic Anxiety*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> “Depression refers first and foremost to mood. This may vary from feelings of slight sadness to utter misery and dejection. Secondly, it is used to bring together a variety of physical and psychological symptoms which together constitute a syndrome (the technical term for any collection of recognizable and repeatable symptoms). Finally, depression is used to indicate an illness which prevents the sufferer from functioning and requires active treatment to restore the body and mind to a state of health.” Jack Dominian, *Depression: What Is It? How Do We Cope?* (New York: Fontana, 1976), 9.

<sup>5</sup> I’d like to thank Eric Bloom, Emily Stam, Larry Philips-Thomas, Saada Hilts, and Rashide Russell for their research and engagement with me on this topic.

<sup>6</sup> One can find the latest data from *Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)*. <<https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>>

<sup>7</sup> Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, Andrew Miles, Matthew Toth, Christopher Adams, Bruce W. Smith and David Toole, “Using Effort-Reward Imbalance Theory to Understand High Rates of Depression and Anxiety Among Clergy,” *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 34 (2013): 439–453. Also see Kate Rugani “Clergy More Likely to Suffer from Depression and Anxiety: Demands put Pastors at far Greater Risk for Depression than People in other Occupations” *Duke Today* (2013) <<https://today.duke.edu/2013/08/clergydepressionnewsrelease>>.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Cronin, *Anxiety, Depression, and Phobias* (London: Granada, 1982), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Cronin, *Anxiety*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Rapee and David Barlow, *Chronic Anxiety* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech, *The Leader’s Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020),

hazard for the pastorate.<sup>19</sup> Luminaries such as Augustine,<sup>20</sup> Ignatius,<sup>21</sup> Luther,<sup>22</sup> Spurgeon<sup>23</sup> and Packer<sup>24</sup> have all felt its weight. Anxiety is contagious,<sup>25</sup> and pastors meet with anxious people at a disproportionately high rate. Hence, with the “exposure rate” being so high, that they themselves would become “carriers” is a virtual inevitability.

Also the role of pastor is filled with countless unrealistic expectations. Its job requirements are literally written in Scripture and has 2000 years of interpretation attached to it.<sup>26</sup> On any given day a pastor may be expected to be a CEO, a personal counselor, a custodian, a crisis management professional, scholar, mystic, family oriented and available to the flock at the same time.<sup>27</sup> Because of unrealistic expectations, pastors fail in someone’s eyes every week, perhaps even every day. The repeated experience of failing, which is inevitable, is bound to lead to moments of discouragement and likely entire seasons of self-doubt. From there, it is easy to see “moral injury” not far behind.<sup>28</sup> If a pastor is already being criticized unfairly, one can begin to justify sinful practices such as plagiarizing sermons due to a relentless weekly deadline. Also overuse of alcohol, engaging in harmful sexual practices or financial wrongdoing becomes a temptation in order to “take the edge off” the constant low-grade feelings of disappointment.

The role of social media magnifies and sharpens these unrealistic expectations. People in congregations are equipped with multiple criticisms on either side of any decision a pastor might make. Social media’s barrage of messages telling what pastors “ought” to do and who they “ought” to be and all the ways they are doing their job wrong contributes to a feeling of helplessness.<sup>29</sup> These online critics are, of course, divorced from the actual

<sup>19</sup> Before Paul, Jesus openly recruited those who were sick and suffered from anxiety (see Mt 6:25, 11:28 and Mk 2:17).

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 8:12.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Clancy, “Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits” AASJS Vol. XI (January, 1979), 1-25.

<sup>22</sup> Ryan Griffith, “Martin Luther’s Shelter Amid the Flood of Depression” (TGC: July, 2017) < <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/martin-luthers-shelter-amid-flood-of-depression/> >

<sup>23</sup> Zach Eswine, *Spurgeon’s Sorrows: Realistic Hope for Those who Suffer from Depression* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Packer and Lunde, *Depression*, 9-13.

<sup>25</sup> Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Unless a pastor structures his/her life in a disciplined manner, it will be nearly impossible to get into the “flow” of any part of their job without other aspects of the job crashing in.

<sup>28</sup> Anna Harwood-Gross, “Threatening ‘Moral’ Injuries” in *Scientific American* (March 24, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> See Scot McKnight’s recent series on the relationship between pastoral ministry and narcissistic behavior, “Help!, My Pastor Grooms Power with Fear: Many Pastors Groom Others for a Power Culture Shaped by Fear” (August 17, 2020). While it is certainly true that some power-hungry, abusive individuals find their way into the pastorate, violating the baseline qualifications of pastoral ministry in the process, I fear the *actual* impact of these

place and unique locations of the real pastoral ministries about which they are describing. Yet the effect is still felt and it is a contributing factor to declining mental health.<sup>30</sup> Research shows that cortisol levels (i.e. stress hormones) are highest in people whose job status and responsibility are constantly changing and/or being readjusted. Pastors almost certainly have disproportionately high cortisol levels due to the aforementioned stress.

Another reason for depression and anxiety is the counterintuitive explanation that a pastor’s life is jammed packed with meaning and consequence. In *The Upside of Stress*, Kelly McGonigal argues that a meaningful life is a stressful life.<sup>31</sup> Pastors are the spiritual head for the local church – what could be more purposeful and beautiful than that? But with that sacred and honored duty comes a huge weight of responsibility. The joy of having meaningful work carries with it a significant burden of responsibility for that congregation. If that weight isn’t carried in a sustainable way, then it can contribute to or be an actual cause of depression and anxiety. James, who knew full well the dangers of pastoral ministry, warned, “not many of you should become teachers.”

#### B. THE RISE, CAUSES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN THE WEST

As depression and anxiety remain steady in the pastorate, we must acknowledge that the experience of depression and anxiety is accelerating at an alarming speed in the general public. Depression rates are 10x’s higher than they were in 1960.<sup>32</sup> Fifty years ago the average onset age of depression was 29.5, today it is 14.5 years old. Only 30% of Americans would classify themselves as “happy.”<sup>33</sup> Since the Covid-19 Pandemic, these numbers have only gotten worse. While the data is still shifting, a mental health “tsunami” is coming.<sup>34</sup> According to COVID Response Tracking Study, Americans are the unhappiest they’ve been in 50 years.<sup>35</sup>

The burning question is, of course, why is depression and anxiety on the rise in the West? The answer to that question, I believe, brings with it an incredible opportunity for gospel advancement in our communities that we haven’t seen in a generation. Truly, the fields are white for harvest.

So what is causing the rise in depression and anxiety? Besides the obvious circumstantial cause of the pandemic, three other distinct but

titillating articles fosters an environment of heightened criticism and imbalanced scrutiny of normal pastors.

<sup>30</sup> Consider amending social media practices if not eliminating them altogether. Cf. Matt Ward “Pastor, Your Church Needs a Social Media Policy” <<https://www.pastortheologians.com/articles/2020/8/28/pastor-your-church-needs-a-social-media-policy>>.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly McGonigal, *The Upside of Stress* (New York: Random House, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Shawn Achor, *The Happiness Advantage* (New York: Currency, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> See *The World Happiness Report*. < <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2020/#read> >

<sup>34</sup> Lydia Denworth, “The Biggest Psychological Experiment in History” *Scientific American* (May, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Tamara Lush, “Poll: Americans are the Unhappiest They’ve Been in 50 Years” APNews (June 16, 2020).

interrelated themes emerge as the culprits. The first cause is that the story of progress, critical to the secular enlightenment project, is not working. The narrative, which is baked into the consciousness of the West, that with enough time and technology enlightened human society can achieve utopia, is showing itself to be a thin, untrustworthy framework. The once popular idea held mostly in the majority culture that racism and its effects is mostly a thing of the past is now giving way to a bleak reality: the divides between rich and poor and the powers of racist society are not going away, indeed, they are growing.<sup>36</sup> As communities come to terms with these disappointments, an uneasiness and anxiety about the future spreads like a contagion. Mark Sayers states it this way:

It is not just at the macro level that the secular myth of progress is being challenged. Our private worlds are in crisis too. We see the rise of anxiety and mental health disorders, falling IQ levels, epidemic loneliness and social disconnection...In the West, poor mental health is now normative among emerging generations... With all these factors in play, we can see how many are having their moment of doubt.<sup>37</sup>

The role of social media only serves to spread and intensify this anxiety. For those already prone to anxiety and depression, the new reality of a future in doubt, is a relentless trigger for emotional and psychological distress.<sup>38</sup>

The second cause is the psychological incapacity to create lasting meaning for oneself. It has been commonplace to teach what Mihaly Scikszentmihalyi advocated in his influential book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, on how to achieve happiness; namely, that there is actually no such thing as meaning, so we must make it up for ourselves. This belief in created meaning was a rejection of discovered meaning or meaning that could be “given” or “found” upon a quest for truth.<sup>39</sup> It was a rejection that traditional institutions of faith and family could confer meaning. Thirty years after preaching this message in multiple venues, it’s clear that “creating” meaning causes psychological instability resulting in nihilism and/or extended periods of profound emptiness and lethargy. Despite its good intentions, creating meaning doesn’t work the way it was promised.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Pew Research Center’s *Race in America 2019*. Several popular level and academic projects can be consulted such as Richard Rothstein’s *Color of the Law* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), Jemar Tisby’s *Color of Compromise* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019) and Frank Baumgartner, Derek Epp, and Kelsey Shoub’s *Suspect Citizens: What 20 Million Traffic Stops Tell Us about Policing and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Also see Sheila Rowe, *Healing Racial Trauma* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> *Reappearing Church: The Hope for Renewal in the Rise of Our Post-Christian Culture* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 30.

<sup>38</sup> Current research on this is vast. See “Online Social Media Fatigue and Psychological Wellbeing” *International Journal of Information Management* 40 (2018): 141–152.

<sup>39</sup> Scikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 214–240.

<sup>40</sup> See Victor Frankl’s classic *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), which is an exploration of what happens when people have meaning in life and the energy

The third reason for the rise of depression and anxiety is an inflated belief in and reliance on the individual self. In his incredibly insightful work, *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and The Unexpected Solutions*, Johann Hari, a confessed atheist, admits that the doctrine of secular humanism as it is manifested in the autonomy of the self is a virtual generator of depression and anxiety. He states colorfully, “But what I was being taught is—if you want to stop being depressed, don’t be you. Don’t be yourself. Don’t fixate on how you’re worth it. It’s thinking about you, you, you that’s helped to make you feel so lousy. Don’t be you.”<sup>41</sup> The remedy he states is a community that truly loves each other sacrificially. A community that has a purpose beyond its own personal well-being and in which an individual could truly be known and loved.<sup>42</sup> In other words, he is convinced that the answer to the crisis of depression and anxiety in the West is something that looks and feels like the Body of Christ.

## II. PARADOX OF THE PASTORATE

It was the observation by Hari about what ails the West and his suggested remedy that led me to the current paradox of the pastorate. What our broader communities are aching for is precisely what the church is really good at. We help people discover meaning and purpose. The teaching of Jesus to deny the self and join a movement greater than the individual is the perfect antidote for an entire generation that is realizing the toxicity of and preoccupation with the self. But the paradox is this, culture is realizing it needs what the church is really good at, and, at the same time, pastors, who lead these churches, are themselves struggling with depression and anxiety. Pastors suffer from the symptoms that the gospel and the church can and has healed in the lives of their congregants and can offer as a tonic to the world.

Because the fields are white for harvest, my hope for pastors is to come to terms with their own experience of depression and anxiety and to make strides towards effective treatment. This paradox doesn’t have to be negative. Indeed, what might have been a shameful underbelly of pastoral ministry can be a powerful tool to connect with broader society in a meaningful way. Because pastors suffer from depression and anxiety, we have a built-in empathy for broader society and an opportunity to provide insight needed by society. But to do this with skill and integrity, pastors first must come to terms with their own experience of depression and anxiety. We can take our cues from Baxter,<sup>43</sup> Lloyd-Jones,<sup>44</sup> and Piper<sup>45</sup> that fighting for our own

and resilience it provides and what happens to the soul when meaning dissolves. Also see Tim Keller’s *Making Sense of God* (New York: Viking, 2016), 57–76.

<sup>41</sup> Hari, *Lost Connections*, 218–240.

<sup>42</sup> Hari, *Lost Connections*, 164–178, 256.

<sup>43</sup> Lundy and Packer, *Depression*, 17–33.

<sup>44</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

<sup>45</sup> John Piper, *When the Darkness Will Not Lift* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

personal joy is important for our pastoral witness and personal refreshment of the gospel. This starts with understanding the symptoms and patterns of depression and anxiety and developing a game plan for treatment when they emerge.

#### A. HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M EXPERIENCING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY?

Many pastors have dealt with depression and anxiety since childhood, but others have symptoms emerge in the thick of pastoral ministry. On the CPT blog I shared a glimpse of my experience:

My text that Sunday morning was Romans 3:9–18, an exploration of human depravity, and I remember my goal was to get the hearts of my hearers “ready” and “needy” for a clear explanation of the gospel, which would come the following Sunday. I prepared well for my message; I was genuinely excited for our congregation and positive that we’d see lives changed as a result. The only problem was that, as I walked on stage to preach, I didn’t believe any of it. Not in God, not in the Gospel, not in the spiritual reality of the church. In a flash I was a stone cold atheist.

As I preached Romans 3 that morning, my faith returned mid sermon just as a swimmer comes up for air. That afternoon, I talked with my wife about my experience and we agreed to monitor it. It happened a few more times in different context for the next several months. At the suggestion of a dear friend, I saw a skilled counselor who listened to me and who walked me through my own life story. Through therapy I discovered I wasn’t having a crisis of faith as much as I was experiencing depression. My body was rebelling and giving me extreme anxiety around what I cherished most was its way of getting my attention.<sup>46</sup>

If depression and anxiety is new to you or an “old friend,” it is paramount to have a game plan ready. I’ve learned through experience and research that depression is more than just an occasional case of the blues. Anxiety is more than occasional “stuck in my head” moments. Rather it is a condition that generally has 3 elements:

- a) Frequency: how often does this happen?
- b) Severity: how bad is it when it happens?
- c) Duration: how long does it last when it happens?

<sup>46</sup> David Morlan, “Conversion is Complicated – Faith, Doubt, and the Changeableness of the Human Heart” < <https://www.pastortheologians.com/articles/2019/8/25/conversion-is-complicated>>.

As Gregory Jantz states, “The more it happens, the worse it is, and the longer it lasts, the more likely you’re not just having a bad day – you’re dealing with depression”<sup>47</sup>

To be clear an actual diagnosis of depression and anxiety needs to be done under the care of a competent mental health professional.<sup>48</sup> Individually, the causes are usually one or a combination of psychological, biological, environmental, and/or spiritual issues. Each of these components is complicated and need to be evaluated under the care of wise counsel.<sup>49</sup> However, the following system of green, yellow, and red lights is a useful tool many mental health professionals use in the diagnosis process. Following the stoplight color code, check off how many of these following descriptions are true of your life.

#### GREEN, YELLOW AND RED LIGHTS OF DEPRESSION

##### GREEN LIGHT

- Take medicines as ordered
- Do fun and interesting activities
- No trouble sleeping
- Good appetite
- Keep regular sleep habits
- Keep all doctor appointments

<sup>47</sup> Gregory Jantz, *Five Keys to Dealing with Depression*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Of course, finding a competent professional is not always easily done. This may require a measure of research and vetting to find a good fit, which, if you are depressed, is especially hard to do! Perhaps asking a trusted friend might be a best first step.

<sup>49</sup> Often a sticky question about medication comes up in this journey: “Is it ok for a pastor to be on antidepressants?” Two books have been extremely helpful for me in processing the pros and cons of antidepressants. The first is J. P. Moreland’s *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and the Practices that Brought Peace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019). In this work he shows the practical benefits of various antidepressants and, always the apologist, offers several arguments for why using medicine in that way is thoroughly biblical and need not be a source of shame for anyone (especially pastors) in the church. The second book is Harri’s *Lost Connections*, mentioned above. In this book he shows how antidepressants, while, at times, helpful (he himself has been on antidepressants for most of his life) also can function to cover up other issues of loss and disconnection that are not caused by chemical imbalance but rather by various possible relational and environmental problems. Thus, depression like this is actually a form of grief from “lost connections” and he argues it is to be treated primarily by recovering deeper connections with community, family and meaning. On the whole, I find Lundy’s advice helpful “in the domains of both body and soul, ‘the right medications’ are often absolutely essential but are as often only partially effective. Indeed, there may be several valid and effective permutations of the ‘right medication’, as well. Thus, medications are regularly necessary but not as often sufficient to restore or maintain well-being, and it seems, even counterproductive if not combined with the other necessary, ‘ingredients.’” Packer and Lundy, *Depression*, 48.

If you check off the greens, congratulations, you're an emotionally healthy pastor!

#### YELLOW LIGHT

- A loss of enjoyment in established activities
- Feeling restless, tired, or unmotivated at work
- An increase in irritability or impatience
- Feeling either wound up or weighed down
- Feeling overburdened with life and its activities
- A lack of spiritual peace or well-being
- A constant anxiety or vague fear about the future
- A fear of expressing strong emotions
- Finding relief by controlling aspects of your personal behavior, including what you eat or drink
- Feeling unappreciated by others
- Feeling a sense of martyrdom, as if you are constantly asked to do the work of others
- Exercising a pattern of impulsive thinking of rash judgments
- Apathetic when you wake up in the morning about how the day will turn out
- A sense of enjoyment at seeing the discomfort of others
- Anger at God for how you feel
- A recurrent pattern of headaches, muscle aches, and/or body pains
- Feeling left out of life
- Feeling trapped during your day by what you have to do
- Experiencing recurring gastrointestinal difficulties
- Feeling like your best days are behind you and the future doesn't hold much promise
- Displaying a pattern of pessimistic or critical comments and/or behaviors
- Binging on high-calorie foods to feel better
- Feeling social isolation and distancing from family or friends
- Feeling that it's easier to just do things yourself instead of wanting to work with others

- Feeling old, discarded, or without value
- Feeling trapped inside your body
- Dreading the thought of family get-togethers or social gatherings
- Feeling overweight, unattractive, or unlovable
- Sexual difficulties or a loss of interest in sexual activities
- Unmotivated to try new activities, contemplate new ideas, or enter into new relationships

If you checked off several yellows that means you are living in the yellow zone. Many people in the yellow zone “get by” as best they can. But any combination of yellow symptoms can lead quickly to the red zone.

#### RED LIGHT

- Overwhelmed by anxious, irritable, angry, or empty feelings
- Hopeless or helpless feelings
- Inability to concentrate, focus or make decisions.
- Increased agitation or complete inability to relax
- Thoughts to hurt self or others
- Unable to get out of bed
- Can't make doctors appointment

If you are in the red zone, that means you are in danger and that life adjustments are needed to bring your emotional life back into functional balance.

#### B. PRACTICAL WAYS PASTORS FIGHT DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

What follows is a theology-from-below approach to fighting depression and anxiety. It is a summary of proven practices and steps that help address and respond to depression and anxiety. After I lead us through these practical steps, I will then explore some important theological resources pastors are equipped with that can be valuable in the battle against depression and anxiety.

##### 1. Reach Out and Be Honest

The first practical step pastors can take is to reach out and be honest. Pastors can feign authenticity and can appear spiritually healthy when in fact they are not.<sup>50</sup> For many pastors, and other health care providers, reaching out can be very difficult to do. Pastors are accustomed to be the person others go to in time of need. They are the ones who others “reach out” to for help. Many pastors already know the right things to do. This knowledge

<sup>50</sup> Herrington, *Leader's Journey*, 40–41.

can be used negatively in that they can say the right things to get others “off their trail” that something might be wrong. Pastors, perhaps like no other profession, can become excellent maskers. They can give people the impression, with just the right amount of earnestness, that things might be “hard” but that they are “good.”<sup>51</sup> For example, the beloved pastor, Darren Patrick, was interviewed by a fellow pastor, Matt Patrick (no relation) on April 24th 2020 about the enneagram and the healing power of honesty. I listened to this interview live and I was moved, encouraged and convicted by his apparent honesty and clarity. Darren died of a self-inflicted gun wound on April 30th 2020. If you are experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety you must be honest and reach out.

There is another barrier to reaching out. Reaching out with honesty for a pastor is more difficult than other professions. When I told my wife, Renee, after church that Sunday that I wasn't sure I believed in God, she listened, gave me a reassuring hug and instructed me not to tell a soul! My entire educational background, experience and income all depended on me believing in God. The pressure on her and my family if I “lost my faith” would be extreme and massively unfair to them. So, just saying, “reach out” actually isn't very helpful or doable for many pastors. In their great work, Resilient Ministry, Burns, Chapman and Guthrie make a critical distinction between “allies” and “confidants.”<sup>52</sup> Allies refer to individuals in the church and confidants are trusted persons with no connection to the particular church someone pastors. When a pastor “reaches out” to someone in the church, that individual is immediately put in an awkward situation in which their loyalty to the pastor is now in tension with their loyalty to the church and its potential instability. This is a situation that actually leads to pastors leaving ministry altogether. Community in the church is helpful to many but, in many ways, not to pastors themselves. Instead of reaching out to an “ally” in the church, the writers advocate reaching out to a “confidant” who has no immediate connection to a pastor's own church. This creates an environment for extreme honesty without potentially putting the pastor's job in jeopardy as a result.

When I was going through depression, reaching out to a skilled counselor not connected to my church was what I needed to unpack my struggles without worrying about the content of those meetings coming up in a church personnel committee meeting. Having a confidant provided a safe environment for me to continue pastoring while also processing personal life issues. Having a confidant is also important in doing the next step.

<sup>51</sup> E.M. Bounds challenged pastors to be honest with themselves about their own earnestness and its ability to mimic real spiritual energy but in reality be fleshy and dangerous. E. M. Bounds, *Power through Prayer* (Christian Classics, 1910).

<sup>52</sup> Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told US About Surviving and Thriving*. (Downers Grove, IVP: 2013).

## 2. Do Your Work

The second major step is a willingness to do your own work. By work, I mean a resolve to journey through the various potential causes, both seen and unseen, felt and unfelt, that may be at the root of experiencing depression and anxiety. According to Gregory Jantz and his work at “The Center: A Place of Hope,” five interconnected parts of the self need to be appraised: the emotional, intellectual, relational, physical, and spiritual. I will briefly address four of them before unpacking spiritual resources in the final section of this essay.

### A. EMOTIONAL

Jantz highlights that when emotions of fear, anger, and guilt are experienced out of proportion to their emotional counterparts (optimism, hope, and joy) then depression follows. Each negative emotion can be good, normal, and biblical but when someone is dominated by one of them to the point it is all one feels then depression ensues. Jantz suggests that if you are being dominated by one of these negative emotion, it is vital to maintain a sense of personal agency. He says, “if you are emotionally out of sync, you can't rely on how you are feeling to determine what you do.”<sup>53</sup> The key is choosing the right attitude. He continues, “mood and attitude are linked – they are interrelated but separate. Mood is how we are feeling; attitude is how we respond to the mood” (Jantz, 26). Hence, acknowledging one's emotions is vital in the process but also remembering how to respond to those emotions is just as critical.

This is also why it is critical to do this work with the help of someone else. If one does emotional work alone, then it can easily drift from self-understanding exercise to reinforcing patterns of self-fixation. Someone else can help spark personal agency and appropriate challenge whereas self-analysis can lead to more anxiety and sinking feelings of helplessness. The enneagram, when used as a means of self-understanding, has been helpful to some in this space; however, I have also seen it simply re-enforce someone's orientation around oneself (“I am made this way and people need to cater to who I am”) and inoculate one against having personal agency and meaningful emotional transformation.

### B. INTELLECTUAL

When emotions are out of balance the intellect will also be distorted. Strong emotions alter perspective and negatively impact how we think and what we think about. When this happens we can become stuck in an intellectual rut and have great difficulty seeing other perspectives rightly. Research by psychologists Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris show that when people become locked into a particular viewpoint, they can totally miss other huge and obvious realities that are right in front of them. They

<sup>53</sup> Jantz, *Depression*, 26.

call it “in-intentional blindness.”<sup>54</sup> So along with doing emotional work, you need to do intellectual work as well. Of course, pastor-theologians are eager for this sort of work but “intellectual” in this sense doesn’t mean research and writing. Rather it is coming to terms with what is actually true objectively compared to how one might feel about reality at any given point. We see David grappling with this sort of dynamic in Psalm 42:5 (also v. 11 and 43:5), when he writes, “Why are you down cast, O my soul? Why are you at turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” Strong negative emotions alter our perspective so that we can become fixated intellectually on life, perhaps honestly believing our thoughts are realistic assessments, when in fact our thoughts are distortions of reality.<sup>55</sup>

#### C. RELATIONAL

Dysfunctional relationships are also factors in depression and anxiety. While the assumption of this essay is that depression and anxiety get in the way of forgiveness. It could be that for many, it is actually the other way around. One might be depressed and anxious because there is refusal to forgive others. Refusal to forgive others can cause a multitude of emotional and physical issues. Of course, it is also indicative of spiritual problems as well.<sup>56</sup> The Lord’s Prayer is hugely helpful in addressing relational issues. Daily praying for forgiveness as you forgive others is a habit of obedience to Jesus that creates a pathway to joy and is an antidote to relational causes of depression. As a pastor I’m often shocked how often wrongs against me build up in my soul. Like layers of soot, one baked up top of another, past wrongs can create darkness and numbness in the heart. So, admitting wrongs that have been committed against you and creating space to acknowledge those wrongs and the normative emotions that go with them is important. Then letting them go in a selfless act of forgiveness prevents those wrongs from having disproportionate (or hidden) influence on your life. It could be that deep forgiveness is key to experiencing any relational well-being and may well be key to overcoming bouts of depression and anxiety.

Relational dynamics can also trigger unhealthy adaptations that we can carry around in ourselves without really knowing it. They can be manifested in at least three ways: learned invisibility, learned helplessness, and learned worthlessness.<sup>57</sup> Learned invisibility says, “If I don’t want to be hurt, I shouldn’t stand out.” Here pastors learn to shrink back in difficult conversations to avoid getting damaged by the words of others. In other

words, we’ve adapted to stay out of the way as a means of self-protection. Learned helplessness says, “Bad things happen, but they’re never my fault.” This is an unhealthy form of victimization, which robs one of agency for change and is ultimately disempowering within relationships. Learned worthlessness says, “I’m never good enough.” This is when you are in a pattern of saying “sorry” all the time and believe your thoughts and perspectives have no value in conversations.<sup>58</sup>

#### D. PHYSICAL

Another aspect of doing your work is taking account of your physical activity. Stephen Ilardi advocates that taking a physical activity inventory can help foster what he calls an “antidepressant lifestyle.”<sup>59</sup> Many pastors are rarely encouraged to be physically active. Our schedules and job requirements and expectations, if left unchallenged, will leave very little room for physical activities. If we’re experiencing anxiety and there are no regular patterns or habits of physical activities to get us out of our heads, we can reinforce a rut of hopelessness. Often when we’re anxious, we are ruminating; that is, thinking of the same things over and over again. The idea here is to include activities to not think, but do. Ilardi says to turn away from the inner world of thoughts and memories to the outer world of other people and activities. Simple things like adjusting one’s schedule to ride your bike to work instead of your car can pay big dividends. Any activity you enjoy or have a purpose with, seriously consider making that a part of your life. For example, my doctor encouraged me to start playing basketball again (the only sport I truly love to play). Even though there were obstacles (I didn’t know of any leagues that a 40-something out of shape theologian could join), I recruited some players and before long created my own three-times-a-week pickup game. This has been incredibly enjoyable for me, great for my mental and physical health and has been one of the great losses in my personal life since the pandemic shut it down.

#### C. THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES IN THE FIGHT

When I presented this material during the 2019 Symposium, a question I received was what spiritual resources exist for pastors that are unique to the Christian gospel? What is different between secular approaches to treatment and the gospel? What does the gospel provide that secular treatments can’t? Granted that much of the advice above is overlapping secular best practices and broad biblical wisdom, what follows are four

<sup>54</sup> Christopher Chabis and Daniel Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla* (New York: Crown, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> This sort of blindness “is our frequent inability to see what is right in front of us if we’re not focusing directly on it.” Shawn Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, 95.

<sup>56</sup> See Timothy Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013). In this monograph Jennings shows how one’s perspective of God, and the emotions that prospective produces (i.e. fear or acceptance), shapes one’s own brain function, which then impacts other keys relationships in life.

<sup>57</sup> Jantz, *Depression*, 29.

<sup>58</sup> The countermeasure to this is to develop a small community around yourself with people you like and who give you energy. Also learning to say no to people, appropriately, who drain you disproportionately. The annual CPT symposium has become, over the years, just as meaningful as a group therapy community among people who understanding each other, as it is a context for intellectual advancements.

<sup>59</sup> Stephen Ilardi, *The Depression Cure: The 6-step program to Beat Depression without Drugs* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2009).

(not exhaustive) spiritual resources uniquely available for any Christian, including pastor-theologians.

### 1. The "Ex-Centric" Life in Christ

The power and agency of the Spirit of Jesus in the life of the pastor-theologian is a uniquely effective resource in the fight against depression. Believers have the Spirit's power and agency as unique products of New Creation. This act of grace itself provides a source of power outside of the "self" of the believer. This is how Paul could affirm confidently, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."<sup>60</sup> We have actual access to the personal power and agency of the living Christ through the Holy Spirit, such that Paul could say that it was no longer he who was living but Christ living in him. Yielding to this personal power and agency of Jesus is a critical spiritual resource in the fight against depression and anxiety. John Barclay describes this dynamic as living the "ex-centric" life in Christ.<sup>61</sup> That is, a power that doesn't derive from within us, but rather comes from outside of us. One doesn't "dig deep" to find this power, but rather yields to this power that comes from outside the center. Barclay describes it this way:

Because this new life is sourced elsewhere, outside of human resources and in the life of the risen Christ, Paul does not figure salvation as a reformation of the human person, like some newly discovered technique in self-mastery. Believers live a life derived from elsewhere, in a kind of "ex-centric" existence (an existence whose center is outside of oneself) that draws of Jesus' life from the dead. They are, as it were, walking miracles, all the more evidently miraculous because this new creation life begins while they still inhabit bodies destined for an earthly death. In Romans 6–8, Paul repeatedly emphasizes the mortality of the body: "Let not sin reign in your mortal bodies" (6:2); what you inhabit presently is "a body of death" (7:24); the Spirit will finally vivify "your mortal bodies" (8:11). Whereas Christ has finished with death (6:9), believers have a state of permanent ontological incongruity: in one respect they are heading toward death (8:10), but in another they are alive, in a "newness of life" (6:4) that in source and character is the life of Christ.<sup>62</sup>

### 2. Scripture and the Power of Change.

Scripture itself, as God-breathed text is powerful enough to help bring real change. Because of the damage done by sticking bible verses on issues, it can be easy to dismiss too quickly the actual power and change that can

<sup>60</sup> Ga 2:20.

<sup>61</sup> John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 91.

<sup>62</sup> Barclay, *Grace*, 92.

come from meaningful bible reading. Part of the dangers of simply looking to personal habits, as key to life changes and getting out of depression, is that it leans too heavily on one's own energy. But scripture itself is powerful. Peter Leithart reminds us that power resides, not just in the kernel, but actually in the husk of Scripture.<sup>63</sup> Allowing oneself to get caught up in the flow of Scripture, like being caught up in a rapturous symphony, ministers to our soul in deeply profound and mysterious ways.

Of course, Scripture does have to be read, and reading regularly (for personal benefit not just read-hunting for sermon preparation) is a habit to be developed; yet reading just any book regularly doesn't derive the same power, but instead there is unique power in the Scripture. A key reformational concept is the perspicuity of Scripture. It can unfold for us in powerful ways and provide joy and energy in times of depression and anxiety. If anxiety is the fixation on the self, then meditation on Scripture can redirect that obsessive behavior off the self.

### 3. Grace for the Present.

God's grace has the ability to sustain us when we don't see any progress. Paul found great relief when he learned to exult in his weakness rather than lean into his own strength.<sup>64</sup> His own strength, both physical and psychological was limited and unreliable. Thus, Paul learned to trust in grace as a sustaining power when his own psychological health failed him. This is also what's remarkable about the prison ministry of Paul. He literally couldn't do anything but learned to trust in God's power apart from his (Paul's) own ability. Paul's battle with the "thorn in the flesh" taught him that God's grace was enough for him in the midst of struggle and suffering.<sup>65</sup> God's grace could sustain him when he, in his own power and ability, couldn't sustain himself.

### 4. Mission of God

The gospel compels you to double-down on the mission of God in your life. Freedom comes from a total abandonment of your will for the will of God. Doing this enables "self forgetfulness," which is a key to breaking patterns of self-absorption.<sup>66</sup> Freedom of denying self, picking up a cross and following Jesus is significant.<sup>67</sup> A major characteristic of the disciples in the gospels is that they are both, strugglers on the way and enlisted into the mission of Jesus nevertheless. Nouwen put it this way, "The great

<sup>63</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 1–34.

<sup>64</sup> 2 Co 2:1–5.

<sup>65</sup> 2 Co 12:9.

<sup>66</sup> Tim Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (Leyland: 10Publishing, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Mark Leary, *The Curse of the Self: Self-Awareness, Egotism, and the Quality of Human Life* (Oxford: University Press, 2004).

illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.”<sup>68</sup>

#### CONCLUSION<sup>69</sup>

Life lived between the two advents of Jesus, means that depression and anxiety will never fully leave us. But I also believe that pastors can experience a measure of freedom from these oppressive states as well. Indeed, it is imperative that we do. With such increasing unhappiness in our world, the pastor-theologian needs to fight the good fight for joy. Our joy may be key to missional advancement for the next generation.

Dealing with our depression and anxiety may also be key to our ability to receive and extend forgiveness to others in our ministries. Pastoral ministry is beautiful work but it is also a warzone and in a warzone there is real damage. Pastors often are collateral damage if not the outright targets of attack. In order to showcase the gospel we have to give and receive forgiveness to those who have hurt us and to those whom we have hurt. If we can't seem to do that, perhaps there are deeper emotional instabilities at work in our soul that need to be addressed and taking some of the direction in this essay may be an important step forward in that journey.

#### THE ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS IN JOHN WESLEY'S EXPERIENCE AND PREACHING: DEATH ANXIETY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

MATT O'REILLY<sup>1</sup>

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah 31:34, NRSV

God's desire to forgive is a great consolation to all who feel the depth of their iniquity. Even more comforting is the prominence of this theme in both Old Testament and New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Scripture consistently reveals a God who forgives the sin of repentant believers, and faithful preachers will amplify this aspect of God's character as we call those under our pastoral care to turn from sin and seek God's gracious forgiveness. We want our people to be reconciled to God. We want them to be free from guilt and shame. We want them to experience eternal life in God's coming new creation. And so, we bid them come to Christ, in whom there is no condemnation (Ro 8:1). Now when it comes to preaching the benefits of divine forgiveness, the saving and eternal importance of receiving God's pardon will be rightly in focus, but we do well to consider the importance of divine forgiveness for the present-day psychological welfare and flourishing of those under our care. For, as we shall see, an experience of being forgiven by God has potential to increase a person's sense of well-being. Notably, however, the experience of divine forgiveness as a topic of interest has not figured prominently in recent studies on forgiveness, though the topics of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others are now well-established in the field of positive psychology.<sup>3</sup> Despite this neglect, a few researchers have

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Nu 30:5, 8, 12; Dt 21:8; Ps 32:1; Is 33:24; Je 5:1; 33:8; 36:3; 50:20; Ez 16:63; Mt 6:14; 12:31; Lk 1:77; 24:47; Acts 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Ro 4:7, 8; 11:27; Ja 5:15.

<sup>3</sup> Research on the forgiveness of others has developed more quickly than research on self-forgiveness; the study of self-forgiveness has even been called “The stepchild of forgiveness research” by Julie H. Hall and Frank D. Fincham, “Self-Forgiveness: The Stepchild of

<sup>68</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

<sup>69</sup> Two other spiritual resources to be explored are consolation/desolation and hope. In the Psalms the writers experience consolation and desolation. Consolation is when God responds to times on need with relief and comfort. Desolation is when those prayers of comfort are left unanswered. The idea though is that it is in the times of desolation when real growth and spiritual maturity occurs. The gospel also gives us vision for the future. The gospel gives real hope. Eschatological realities of the Kingdom of God coming in full, complete with the undoing of evil and the ultimate victory over death itself, gives hope. Hope is energy for today based on this reality of the future. As the writer of Hebrews wrote about Jesus “for the joy set before him...he endured the shame.”

sought to fill the gap. To illustrate, recent research indicates that those who experience divine forgiveness tend to have less anxiety with regard to death.<sup>4</sup> Further, those who feel forgiven by God tend not only to forgive themselves more easily but are more likely to offer forgiveness unconditionally without requiring acts of contrition from those who offend them.<sup>5</sup> A 2019 study found that persons with low self-forgiveness tend to have fewer depressive symptoms when they have a perception of being forgiven by God.<sup>6</sup> While much work remains to be done on the psychological impact of experiencing God's forgiveness, these recent studies suggest that such an experience can be important for human flourishing and general happiness. Given the findings of these studies, I would suggest that pastors consider not only the eternal consequences of divine forgiveness but also the dynamics of a present experience of knowing God's forgiveness. Can we be assured of God's forgiveness? How can we know whether such an experience is authentic? How do we shepherd those entrusted to our pastoral care as they seek such an experience?

I suggest that John Wesley stands as one who can help us as we think about these questions. The doctrine of assurance was a distinctive of Wesley's preaching. More than that, Wesley's own experience of assurance of divine forgiveness is well-documented and well-known. By considering his preaching in the context of his experience, we will be in a better position to appreciate his emphasis on the assurance of God's forgiveness. This essay, then, begins with Wesley's ministry prior to his experience of forgiveness. In particular, we'll find that his journey to the Americas and his time in Georgia was crucial in highlighting to Wesley his need for God's forgiveness. This specific need became particularly apparent in the fear of death he experienced in that period. That will enable us to consider the way in which Wesley's account of his experience may resonate with recent studies on death anxiety and divine forgiveness. From there, we turn to Wesley's well-known Aldersgate experience where he received for the first time the assurance of God's forgiveness. Our extended reflection on Wesley's movement from fear to assurance provides essential context for a look at his preaching on assurance which involves what he called (1) the direct witness of the Spirit and (2) the indirect witness of the Spirit. We'll conclude with

Forgiveness Research.," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 5 (2005): 621. Cf. Jesse Couenhoven, "Forgiveness and Restoration: A Theological Exploration," *The Journal of Religion* 90, no. 2 (2010): 166; Frank D. Fincham and Ross W. May, "Self-Forgiveness and Well-Being: Does Divine Forgiveness Matter?" *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 14, no. 6 (2019): 854.

<sup>4</sup> Neal Krause, "Trust in God, Forgiveness by God, and Death Anxiety," *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying* 72, no. 1 (2015): 20–41.

<sup>5</sup> Neal Krause and Christopher G. Ellison, "Forgiveness by God, Forgiveness of Others, and Psychological Well-Being in Late Life," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 1 (2003): 77–94; Neal Krause, "Religious Involvement and Self-Forgiveness," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 20, no. 2 (2017): 128–42.

<sup>6</sup> Fincham and May, "Self-Forgiveness," 857.

a series of pastoral reflections and strategies on how we might fruitfully shepherd people as they seek an experience of God's unmerited forgiveness.

One distinction should be made before proceeding, and that is the distinction between a doctrine of forgiveness and a doctrine of the assurance of forgiveness. I take the former to involve the objective dynamics of how God justifies a sinner and pardons sin — what it means for God *himself* to forgive.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the latter turns on the believer's reception and subjective *experience* of forgiveness. Given our interest in the believer's experience of forgiveness and its implications for human well-being, this essay will focus primarily on the question of subjective assurance rather than on the objective character of God's forgiveness itself.

### I. THE FEAR OF DEATH AND THE QUESTION OF FAITH

Wesley's later assurance of God's forgiveness will be all the more punctuated if we consider it in light of his earlier experience of the fear of death. The dreadful reality of that fear came all too clear aboard a ship called the *Simmonds* on Wesley's journey from England to Georgia in late 1735 and early 1736. During the journey, the ship weathered several storms that brought Wesley face-to-face with the possibility of his death. That experience produced a deep fear, which he interpreted as a deficiency of his faith. Reflecting on a storm that arose on the evening of January 23, Wesley wrote, "I could not but say to myself, 'How is it that thou hast no faith?' being still unwilling to die."<sup>8</sup> An even more violent storm arose two days later. Wesley remarked in his journal that,

The winds roared round about us... The ship not only rocked to and fro with the utmost violence, but shook and jarred with so unequal, grating a motion, that one could not but with great difficulty keep one's hold of anything, nor stand a moment without it. Every ten minutes came a shock against the stern or side of the ship, which one would think would dash the planks in pieces.<sup>9</sup>

Seven hours into the storm, Wesley went to visit a group of German Moravians who were also passengers on the *Simmonds*. He had already noticed their mature faith, but their peaceful posture during that storm stood out to him as an indicator of a robust Christianity. As the wind howled and the sea tossed, Wesley found the Moravians singing psalms. He described it this way,

In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main-sail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already

<sup>7</sup> For Wesley and the relationship between pardon and assurance, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 177–78.

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 1:21.

<sup>9</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 1:21.

swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Was you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied, mildly, "No our women and children are not afraid to die."<sup>10</sup>

While Wesley did not consider the fear of death to be universally indicative of a spiritual condition, he did in these and other instances interpret his own fear of dying to suggest that he had not yet received divine forgiveness and, consequently, was not ready to stand before God for judgment.<sup>11</sup>

Recent research has shown that Wesley's experience with regard to unforgiveness in relation to anxiety about death is not exclusive to him. A study published in 2015 found that people who trust God tend to have lower death anxiety because their trust in God means they are more likely to feel forgiven by God.<sup>12</sup> It's not difficult to see why a sense of divine forgiveness may result in lower death anxiety. Those who do not believe they have received God's forgiveness are more likely to expect punishment from God in the afterlife. The belief that punishment awaits after death results in increased death anxiety.<sup>13</sup> Further, many people deal with tension created by the need to live up to the teaching of their religion and frequent failure to do so. That failure often produces an increased sense of guilt and a lower sense of self-worth. A sense of divine forgiveness resolves the tension by boosting the individual's sense of self-worth which, in turn, lowers death anxiety.<sup>14</sup> While we are not in a position to offer a psychological analysis of Wesley's experience, we note that Wesley's account of his own experience resonates with this research. And it could be helpful to consider that his death anxiety, which resulted from a sense of unforgiveness, may be similar to the experience of some who are under our pastoral care. The question then becomes how we shepherd them through that experience with a view to seeking the assurance that God has reconciled them to him. For Wesley, a sense of divine forgiveness was still more than two years away, though an important initial step in the right direction would come sooner rather than later.

Wesley set foot in Georgia on February 6, 1736, barely two weeks after the harrowing storm described above. Being so impressed with the faith of the Germans, Wesley went the next day to visit August Spangenberg, one of

<sup>10</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 1:22.

<sup>11</sup> For other instances where Wesley associated fear of death with lack of faith, see Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 58. For Wesley's consideration that the fear of death need not necessarily signal a lack of faith, see Collins, *John Wesley*, 59. Cf. Heitzenrater, "The stark reality of death staring him in the face exposed the frailty of Wesley's sense of assurance; the question of salvation now took on a new sense of immediacy and urgency. He was afraid to die, he was unwilling to die, and he was ashamed to admit it" (*Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 65).

<sup>12</sup> Krause, "Trust in God, Forgiveness by God, and Death Anxiety," 38.

<sup>13</sup> Krause, "Trust in God, Forgiveness by God, and Death Anxiety," 26.

<sup>14</sup> Krause, "Trust in God, Forgiveness by God, and Death Anxiety," 27.

the Moravian pastors, and "asked his advice regarding my own conduct."<sup>15</sup> Rather than give advice, Spangenberg asked Wesley two questions: "Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?" Wesley confessed in his journal that these questions surprised him such that he knew not how to reply. Noticing Wesley's hesitance, Spangenberg continued, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" This time, after a pause, Wesley managed an answer, "I know he is the Saviour of the world." But the Moravian pastor was not deterred by Wesley's attempt to dodge the question. He responded, "True...but do you know he has saved you?" Wesley answered saying, "I hope he has died to save me." Undeterred, Spangenberg asked again, "Do you know yourself?" This time Wesley managed to answer, "I do." But his journal entry that day closed with this confession, "I fear they were vain words."

Wesley's time on the *Simmonds* and in Georgia was deeply formative and provides essential context for his later experience of divine forgiveness and the way he would come to articulate his doctrine of assurance.<sup>16</sup> While in America, Wesley found that he lacked the assurance of God's forgiveness through the testimony of the Holy Spirit that he was indeed a child of God. He recognized the way his experience stood in contrast to Spangenberg's sense of assurance individually and to that of the Moravian community more broadly as he observed them on their voyage from England to Georgia.<sup>17</sup>

## II. WESLEY'S INITIAL EXPERIENCE OF ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

Wesley set sail for England in December 1737 aboard a ship called the *Samuel*. That trip afforded him time to reflect on his time in Georgia, and on January 8, 1738, he wrote these words in his journal: "By the most infallible proofs, inward feeling, I am convinced...Of unbelief; having no such faith in Christ as will prevent my heart from being troubled; which it could not be, if I believed in God, and rightly believed also in him."<sup>18</sup> He further reflected on the extent of his own pride and the way he called on God only in storms and never in calm. And like before, he still connected his death anxiety with his unbelief. Near the end of January, he wrote:

I went to America to convert the Indians; but O! who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near: But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, "To die is gain!"<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The encounter is recorded in Wesley's journal on Saturday, February 7, 1736; see Wesley, *Works*, 1:23.

<sup>16</sup> Collins, *John Wesley*, 58.

<sup>17</sup> Collins, *John Wesley*, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 1:72.

<sup>19</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 1:74.

As Collins notes, Wesley's time in Georgia was marked by an earnest zeal to be fully devoted to the work of God.<sup>20</sup> He eagerly sought to live a model Christian life. He was a priest and a missionary. Nevertheless, something essential was missing.

The turning point for Wesley came later that year on May 24. His Aldersgate experience is well-known and has been the topic of extensive research and reflection.<sup>21</sup> Wesley described what happened to him this way:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.<sup>22</sup>

At least three features of this account are particularly relevant to our interests.<sup>23</sup> First, Wesley employs the specific language of "assurance." This is a gift that Wesley associates with the forgiveness of sin. His sins have been "taken away."<sup>24</sup> But it isn't simply knowledge of God's objective act of forgiveness; it is a deep subjective experience. We'll consider more carefully the way Wesley thinks of this assurance below. For now, it's worth noting how this relates to his earlier experience, not least to the relationship between unforgiveness and death anxiety.<sup>25</sup> Wesley feared death because he did not have a sense of being reconciled to God. When Spangenberg pressed the question, Wesley had to admit, at least to himself, that he did not know his sin to be forgiven. That has now changed. Wesley not only knows objectively that his sin is forgiven, he has also *experienced* the forgiveness of sin. Second, Wesley's emphatic use of first-person pronouns stands in stark contrast to the way he answered Spangenberg's questions in their first meeting. At that meeting, when the Moravian pastor asked Wesley whether Christ had saved him, Wesley shifted the question from his own salvation to that of the world. Now he enjoys the reality of knowing Christ as *his* savior in a personal way. Jesus is not just the savior of the world; he is the

<sup>20</sup> Collins, *John Wesley*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Randy Maddox, ed., *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1990); cf. Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson, *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 1:103, emphasis original.

<sup>23</sup> There is much to be said about Wesley's Aldersgate experience that would take us beyond the focus of this essay; for a detailed discussion of Aldersgate, see Collins, *John Wesley*, 77–104.

<sup>24</sup> Collins suggests that regeneration is also in view with the language of being "redeemed 'from the law of sin and death,'" (*John Wesley*, 90).

<sup>25</sup> For the lengthy history of debate over whether Wesley's Aldersgate experience should be interpreted as a conversion experience or as a step in the process of sanctification post-conversion, see Mark K. Olson, *Wesley and Aldersgate: Interpreting Conversion Narratives* (London: Routledge, 2018), 10–23.

savior of John Wesley. He has "saved *me*," Wesley emphatically declares. Third, Wesley now qualifies his trust in Christ as trust in "Christ *alone*" (emphasis mine). Now before Aldersgate, Wesley would have certainly said that he trusted Christ. The new element seems to be the development that he now trusts Christ *alone*.<sup>26</sup> Prior to this point, Wesley "steered the course of his spiritual life by rule and resolution."<sup>27</sup> Before Aldersgate, his was "a works based gospel of moral rectitude."<sup>28</sup> Put another way, as Heitzenrater recognizes about the pre-Aldersgate period, "Wesley's hope for salvation was grounded in a reliance upon the sincerity of his own desire to lead the Christian life and a trust in God's promises as he understood them."<sup>29</sup> That is not to say Wesley did not trust Christ in any sense up to this point. It is to say that his trust in Christ was mixed – or diluted, perhaps – with reliance on his own resolve. Yet this left him in a state of ongoing spiritual defeat.<sup>30</sup> He now no longer relied on Christ *and* his own effort; Wesley trusted in Christ *alone*.

### III. THE ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS IN WESLEY'S PREACHING

Wesley's doctrine of assurance would become a distinctive mark of his preaching in particular and the early Methodist movement in general. And while his views on assurance would certainly undergo development and clarification, the basic shape of his teaching can be found in several sermons: "The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse 1" (Sermon 10), "The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse II" (Sermon 11), and "The Witness of our Own Spirit" (Sermon 12).<sup>31</sup> The broad contours of Wesley's doctrine can be framed in two major categories: the direct witness of the Spirit and the indirect witness of the Spirit.

#### A. THE DIRECT WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

Wesley's understanding of the witness of the Spirit as a ground for assurance of God's forgiveness depended heavily on Romans 8:16, "It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of

<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to Isaac Hopper for this insight. See further, Isaac Hopper, "Christ Alone for Salvation: The Role of Christ and His Work" (PhD Diss., Manchester, England: University of Manchester, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Collins, *John Wesley*, 81. Hopper makes the point that Wesley's own approach was manifest in his preaching which focused largely on resisting sin and pursuing virtue; he did preach righteousness as a divine gift, but "the weight of his emphasis rested on the shoulders of the individual, who was expected to strive after holiness in order to make one's election sure" ("Christ Alone for Salvation," 68).

<sup>28</sup> Hopper, "Christ Alone for Salvation," 67.

<sup>29</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 48.

<sup>30</sup> For Wesley's practices in striving after holiness before 1738 and the way it undermined any sense of assurance by amplifying his shortcomings, see Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 58–59.

<sup>31</sup> For the development of Wesley's doctrine of assurance, see Collins, *John Wesley*, 130–33, 176–77.

God" (NRSV).<sup>32</sup> For Wesley, this verse indicates that there is a beautiful and deep interaction between the Holy Spirit and the believer's spirit. It was crucial for Wesley that the Holy Spirit initiated this interaction. The believer's spirit cannot instigate this experience; it can only respond to God's initiative.<sup>33</sup> But what is the witness of the Holy Spirit? How does the Spirit of God bear witness with our spirits that we are forgiven and reconciled children of God? Wesley answered those questions this way in "The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse 1":

The testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.<sup>34</sup>

The internal nature of the witness is crucial. This is what distinguishes the direct witness of the Spirit from the indirect witness. The direct witness is unmediated communication from God's Spirit to the believer. Wesley saw this interaction as one of "the deep things of God."<sup>35</sup> And he freely admitted that it was a matter of mystery; words were not adequate to articulate the experience of God's children in this matter. Wesley compared the witness to the sweet calm after a storm at sea subsides. He likened it to "resting in the arms of Jesus."<sup>36</sup> It is a satisfaction that God is reconciled and sin covered.<sup>37</sup> The thing to see is that the direct witness of the Spirit communicates a robust sense of God's love for us, that we are God's children, and that we have received God's forgiveness. When the believer comes into this experience, Wesley believed there could be no doubt in their mind that they were indeed a child of God.

We shouldn't forget that the internal witness is two-directional. Not only does God's Spirit communicate to us, our spirit witnesses in response. Again, here is Wesley in his own words:

...as to the witness of our own spirit: The soul as intimately and evidently perceives when it loves, and delights, and rejoices in God, as when it loves, and delights in anything on earth. And it can no more doubt, whether it loves, delights, and rejoices or no, than whether it exists or no. If, therefore, this be just reasoning, He that now loves God, that delights and rejoices in him with an humble joy, and holy delight, and an obedient love, is a child of God.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> For the sake of clarity, Wesley's doctrine of assurance relates to present pardon not final perseverance (see Wesley, *Works*, 1:160).

<sup>33</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 5:115–16.

<sup>34</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 5:115.

<sup>35</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 5:115.

<sup>36</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 5:125.

<sup>37</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 5:125.

<sup>38</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 5:116.

To put it differently, we all know when we love someone or something, and if asked what or in whom we delight, we would be able to answer. When the Holy Spirit graciously and beautifully communicates directly and internally to us that we are children of God, that calls forth a delight in God that we cannot muster apart from the gracious working of the Spirit. For Wesley, that delight is the way our spirit witnesses in response to the witness of the Holy Spirit. And the one who has this witness can be confident in the reality that he or she is a child of God, and that his or her sins are most assuredly pardoned.

The value of this experience for our sense of well-being is easy to see. To feel ourselves loved by God and addressed by his Spirit lends a sense of dignity to our experience. To know God's love despite the fact that we have sinned carries the potential to free believers from the frustration that comes from not meeting God's standards. While we should never neglect to preach the eternal benefits of divine forgiveness, we should also consider the deep value of the doctrine of assurance of forgiveness for flourishing in the present.

#### B. THE INDIRECT WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

Along with the internal and direct witness of the Spirit, Wesley also articulated what he called the indirect witness, which he took to be a matter of broad Christian agreement.<sup>39</sup> The indirect witness is indirect because it is mediated through scripture which defines the sort of fruit that will emerge in the lives of children of God. The fruit of the Spirit functions as an external and objective standard that can be perceived by our conscience. If we perceive ourselves to have the fruit of the Spirit, then it indicates that the Spirit is at work in us. Here's Wesley: "The word of god says, every one who has the fruit of the Spirit is a child of God; experience, or inward consciousness tells me, that I have the fruit of the Spirit; and hence I rationally conclude, 'Therefore I am a child of God.'"<sup>40</sup>

Wesley considered both the direct witness and the indirect witness to be crucial for true assurance of forgiveness. If only one of the two is present in a person's experience, the potential for error arises. If a person claims to have the direct witness of the Spirit but does not have the indirect witness evidenced by an increasingly fruitful life, then that person could mistake the witness of the Spirit for their own preferences or sensibilities. Wesley insisted that the internal witness would be immediately followed by the fruit of the Spirit. If the fruit is not there, then the person should not presume to have the internal witness. Conversely, if a person can identify some fruit of the Spirit but has no experience of the direct witness of the Spirit, Wesley entertained the possibility that he or she might be deluded. It is possible, he thought, that a person may have a degree of love or peace or self-control

<sup>39</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 5:125.

<sup>40</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 5:125.

prior to their justification, but they should not presume on this.<sup>41</sup> Instead, Wesley commended crying out to God as Father until the direct witness is received. This unmediated communion with the Spirit of God, Wesley insisted, “is the privilege of all the children of God, and without this we can never be assured that we are his children.”<sup>42</sup>

### III. PASTORAL REFLECTIONS AND STRATEGIES

To this point, we’ve seen how Wesley’s fear of death brought his lack of faith into sharp relief. He was not prepared to stand before God, and this discovery produced significant anxiety for the English clergyman. This anxiety was relieved, however, when Wesley came to that now famous meeting on Aldersgate street and, for the first time, experienced forgiveness for sin and an assured sense of God’s love for him. And it is certainly true that this extended journey from fear to forgiveness shaped Wesley’s preaching with regard to the doctrine of assurance. We also saw that Wesley’s experience in the eighteenth century is not all that different from many in the twenty-first century. A sense of divine forgiveness tends to decrease death anxiety and raise our general sense of well-being. Drawing on the way Wesley’s experience and preaching might illumine our own ministries, we conclude with a series of reflections and strategies that might prove helpful to pastors in shepherding people seeking assurance of divine forgiveness.

#### A. SHEPHERD DON’T PRESUME

A crucial point to be made in terms of pastoral strategy is that the direct witness of the Spirit that assures the believer of God’s forgiveness is not something that can be coaxed, manipulated, or manufactured. It is a gift of God’s grace received through faith. We should never presume that there is some formula for assurance. We can preach assurance. We can exhort people to seek assurance. We describe the experience of people like Wesley. We can invite congregants to testify to their experience for the benefit of the larger congregation. But the experience of knowing one’s sins are forgiven cannot be forced. As we saw above, Wesley sought assurance of divine forgiveness for years before his Aldersgate experience. And that could very well be the case in the present day. The timing of the experience should be a matter of God’s wise and providential care, not of pastoral persuasion.

#### B. ASK QUESTIONS TO PROMPT INTROSPECTION

Given that the gift of assurance is a matter of divine providence and not a pastoral capacity, pastors may still consider ways to shepherd those who experience anxiety with regard to their status before God and the

<sup>41</sup> Maddox notes that Wesley saw the fruit of the Spirit as real *fruit*, and that, for Wesley, love, joy, and peace are not inherent human dispositions but they emerge through the work of the Holy Spirit. See, Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 132.

<sup>42</sup> Wesley, *Works*, 5:134.

question of his forgiveness. One point that emerges from Wesley’s story is the usefulness of wise pastoral questions. Before Wesley ever experienced the assurance of God’s love or made the doctrine of assurance a distinctive of his preaching, he was prompted by a wise pastor to engage in a process of introspection. Spangenberg’s questions for Wesley during their time together in Georgia were certainly used by God to bring Wesley along in the process of discovering the futility of his own efforts to make certain his salvation. Likewise, pastors will do well to consider what sort of questions would be appropriate for those presently under their care. Such questions will likely be introspective in nature and will encourage self-examination regarding the individual’s relationship to Christ and experience (or inexperience) of divine forgiveness.

#### C. ANXIETY CAN BE INSTRUMENTAL

It’s also worth noting that, while we don’t want people to be saddled with long-term anxiety, the experience of some anxiety can function instrumentally in a person’s life to produce positive results. Wesley’s experience of death anxiety aboard the *Simmonds* in contrast with the peace displayed among the Moravians provoked him to pursue Spangenberg’s counsel, which then prompted Wesley to evaluate more carefully his own spiritual condition. The anxiety wasn’t a positive experience for Wesley, but it was instrumental in moving him forward toward an experience of knowing himself forgiven, even if that experience didn’t come till a later time. As pastors, we will certainly have the impulse to offer comfort to anxious souls, and that is sometimes appropriate. But wise pastors will also be discerning enough to ensure they do not waste a good crisis. Consider if Spangenberg has attempted to soothe Wesley’s desolate soul that day in Georgia. Wesley’s experience and preaching might have come out rather differently. Instead, however, Spangenberg took the opportunity to amplify Wesley’s discomfort in the short term with a view to maximizing his spiritual health in the long term. There is much to be learned there.

### IV. A CONCLUDING EXHORTATION

Allow me to conclude with an exhortation to pastors. Preach the doctrine of assurance. Preach it with a view to your congregation’s health — both eternal and temporal. The triune God is concerned both with our eternal salvation and with our temporal well-being. That concern is expressed in direct, unmediated, and mysterious testimony to the hearts and minds of the children of God. When this is taken together with the objective and indirect testimony evident in a fruitful life, it carries potential to heighten a believer’s sense of well-being and earnestness for Christ and his Church. The benefits of that for the ministry of the local church are manifold. So, let us not in our preaching ignore that gracious work in which God’s Spirit speaks in deep ways to his people for his glory and their good.

## BOOK REVIEWS

James Eglinton: *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020. 480 pp. Hardback, \$32.99

Rarely can a critical biography make a significant contribution to an academic field of study and appeal to a broad audience. James Eglinton's *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* is one of these rare gems as it examines the life and work of the Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921). For Bavinck scholars, Eglinton's long-awaited biography proves that it was worth the wait. This is not only because the depth, detail, and thoroughness of Eglinton's research brings new light to Bavinck's life, but also due to the way it continues to challenge a long-held assumption in Bavinck studies, namely 'the two Bavincks' hypothesis. In his previous work, Eglinton significantly challenged this hermeneutical approach, which bifurcates Bavinck into a dipolar thinker who had an 'orthodox' side and a 'modern' side, and proposed a new reading of *one* Bavinck, orthodox and modern, who sought to articulate the historic faith in and for his modern context. This biography continues that project, as Eglinton claims: "My biography has a particular aim: to tell the story of a man whose theologically laced personal narrative explored the possibility of an orthodox life in a changing world" (xx). However, while Bavinck scholars will relish examining and exploring Eglinton's work, especially against the backdrop of previous biographies in Dutch and English, those outside the realm of Bavinck studies will also find much to enjoy in Eglinton's work. He weaves together the elements of Bavinck's life into a thought-provoking narrative about what it means to embody a tradition in the midst of a world that 'continues to shift beneath one's feet'(4).

The biography itself is divided into five parts: Roots (Part 1), Student (Part 2), Pastor (Part 3), Professor in Kampen (Part 4), Professor in Amsterdam (Part 5). In each section, Eglinton situates Bavinck's life within the broader historical context of the seismic changes taking place in the Netherlands in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This contextualization is intentional and a crucial aspect of the biography's approach. Eglinton seeks to tell a story of a man who was engaged and attentive to the changing currents of his day. In Eglinton's biography, Bavinck's context does not just form a backdrop from which to build a portrait of a detached theologian who could exist within any historical era. Rather, it is the context within which Bavinck's narrative and contributions come to life.

This approach begins in Part 1: Roots. Highlighting the political, social, ecclesial upheaval that marked Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, Eglinton identifies the major events that shaped Bavinck's life prior to his birth: the secession of a number of churches from the Dutch National Church in 1834 (*Afscheiding*), his family (originally from Bentheim a German town in lower Saxony) joining the seceders, and the Spring of Nations in 1848. The Spring of Nations offered a qualified degree of religious freedom in the Netherlands. Prior to 1848, the

*Afgescheidenen* (“seceders”) lived a clandestine existence and faced state persecution. Post-1848, however, the churches of the secession no longer struggled to simply exist. However, they faced a new question: “how orthodox Reformed Christians should inhabit a late-modern society that (because of religious pluralism) tolerated them while rendering some of the original ideals obsolete and unachievable” (16). According to Eglinton, there was diversity among the seceders as to how to respond to this challenge, and one significant figure in discussions concerning how to live within the new, post-1848 reality was Bavinck’s father and seceder pastor, Jan Bavinck. Contrasting earlier biographies, Eglinton presents a picture of Bavinck’s father and family as part of the seceders who sought and promoted active engagement with the modern world. The implication of this assessment is significant. Rather than presenting Herman Bavinck as a rare abnormality standing against an isolated and walled-off seceder community, it situates him within a stream of seceders that were seeking ‘to find [their] place in the modern world’ (39).

Moving into Bavinck’s life and work in Part 2: Student, the impact of Eglinton’s contextualization of Bavinck comes to the fore when he challenges one of the most commonly held assumptions about Bavinck’s life: that he shocked his community by switching from the seceder’s Theological School in Kampen to the modern, enlightenment influenced University of Leiden to complete his schooling. Eglinton goes in depth to complexify this picture and demonstrate that while some opposed Bavinck’s shift, there were many who supported his choice. Eglinton also shows that Bavinck’s ties to Kampen were not severed during this period but continued throughout his time in Leiden. Furthermore, Eglinton also argues that Bavinck’s move to Leiden was indicative of a broader trend that after the Spring of Nations the seceder community moved horizontally from a clandestine denomination into the center of Dutch life and vertically from a lower-class existence into the upper echelons of Dutch society. For Eglinton, Bavinck was not only a part of this movement but one of its key representatives.

Eglinton continues to paint this picture of Bavinck moving inward and upward in the Netherlands as he moves into Parts 4 and 5 and explores Bavinck’s professorships the Theological School in Kampen and the Vrije Universiteit (VU) in Amsterdam as well as his increasing involvement in political and social life of the Netherlands as a part of the Anti-Revolutionary party lead by Abraham Kuyper. Part 3, however, examines Bavinck’s two-year pastorate in Franeker. Still involved in ecclesial and social life in the Netherlands, Part 3 offers an intimate and intricate look at Bavinck as a pastor whose life was filled with the duties and joys of pastoral work but also loneliness and struggle.

Part 3’s exploration of Bavinck’s life is indicative of another key feature of Eglinton’s biography: it moves beyond his writings and public life to explore his friendships, love and family life, and personal responses to public successes and failures. It is within these elements that it is clear that this is no hagiography. Bavinck is presented as a real human being whose life was extraordinary in many ways but ordinary in others. He experienced major

heartbreak both in love and in his continued but futile attempts to unify the Theological School in Kampen and the theological faculty of the VU into one institution. His relationship with Kuyper, who is often mentioned in the same breath as Bavinck as leaders of the neo-Calvinist movement, which transitioned from one of adulation and praise to one of respect but also disagreement. He did not rise above his context and life events to exemplify an another-worldly spirituality and non-engaged saint. Eglinton presents him as a man of his time, who had faults and failures alongside of his success as a theologian and leader within the Netherlands.

In sum, Eglinton’s *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* is a masterful work, situating Bavinck’s life within broader cultural currents in order to demonstrate how Bavinck’s life and work is worth contemporary attention not due to his detachment with the world but because of his thorough engagement with it. It paints an intimate picture of Bavinck, integrating Bavinck’s life and theological vision. Not all readers of the biography will agree with every interpretation Eglinton makes of Bavinck’s life—especially those who affirm previous accounts of Bavinck’s life. But all readers will be enriched by the extensive scholarship, well-written prose, and fascinating portrayal of Bavinck, who as Eglinton claims, was “an orthodox Calvinist, a modern European, and a man of science” (291).

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Harold L. Senkbeil. *Christ and Calamity: Grace & Gratitude in the Darkest Valley*. Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2020. 184 pp. \$9.99

Harold Senkbeil has written a helpful resource for the pastor’s toolkit. In this slim, beautifully published volume, Senkbeil weaves together reflections on what it means to face suffering as a Christian. Writing in an humble, earthy tone, Senkbeil taps into salient scriptural passages, offering sage pastoral advice, often using illustrations from his own life and ministry to make a point. This book is not written for an academic audience but rather is accessible to anyone who is wanting a gentle entry-point into thinking on persevering with Christ through life’s difficult patches.

After a brief invitation to the reader, the book moves to an introductory chapter that tells the story of its conception in the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, while Senkbeil was at his home in Wisconsin prayerfully observing all that was taking place. He makes clear that this is not a book about COVID-19, however, but writes instead that, “This is a book about you. Rather, it’s about you and God—and how you relate to him

in times of calamity. To be exact, this is a book about God's faithfulness in the face of uncertainty" (pp. 3-4). Speaking in a voice directed to the reader, Senkbeil then moves through the next ten chapters with brief meditations on difficult situations and Christ's presence within them. These includes, "When You Are Faithless, Christ Is Your Faithfulness", "When You Are Weak, Christ Is Your Strength", and "When You Are Dying, Christ Is Your Life." There is a perceptible Lutheran vibe throughout the whole text.

The volume is physically small (4x7) and so while each chapter is about ten pages long, each is quite short, and has the feel of mini homily. Besides this, Senkbeil liberally quotes Scripture, which makes up a significant portion of the content of the book.

The last 25 pages or so of the book feature a few orders of prayer (for morning, anytime, and evening) as well as the words to the hymn "Jesus, Priceless Treasure" printed in full. The prayers are drawn from a variety of source but will feel familiar to anyone used to praying with the Book of Common Prayer.

Each chapter carries a distinct theme, but they begin to bleed into one another, often coming back to several motifs such as the way Christ is present in suffering, how lament is acceptable to God, how God reveals his glory amidst suffering, and how ultimately, he will redeem it in the world to come. For example, though Senkbeil writes specifically about Christ's nearness to those suffering (in the chapter "When You Are Alone, Christ is With You"), this idea has already been treated in the chapter "When You Are Weak, Christ Is Your Strength" in which, after quoting Lamentations 3:32-33, he notes, "That's the awe-filled secret concealed within affliction: God is right there in the middle of it" (60).

This was not by any means a meaty book and I would have been disappointed if I were expecting a thorough and nuanced treatment on suffering with Christ. Even within the genre of popular books that touch on life's losses, Tish Harrison Warren's *Prayer in the Night* or Kate Bowler's *Everything Happens for a Reason* are just as accessible and far more compelling.

Still, the book is affordable and is an easy sell for a parish study, especially during a penitential season such as Lent or Advent. Based on the reviews, I decided to purchase this for use over the course of Lent with my parish before having a copy myself. A context like this is perhaps the only place the book shines. It was an important springboard for our small group that included people with no postsecondary education to those with graduate degrees. There is not enough substance in the book to use it over more than three or four session (four felt like a stretch for us) only because so many themes repeat themselves throughout the text. It would be an even better study companion if Senkbeil had included a few discussion questions at the end of each chapter, and I think this would have helped him sharpen the contribution he was wanting to make in each.

Overall, given the price, I would recommend this book for a small group or congregational study. Because of the occasional nature of the

work (with frequent mentions of the pandemic) it will date itself quickly. Plan to use it this year or next.

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Michael Eric Dyson. *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 2017. 228pp. \$ 14.89.

Michael Eric Dyson's *Tears We Cannot Stop* promises to be "a sermon to White America"—a promise on which Dyson over-delivers. *Tears* is not merely a sermon; it is an entire liturgy. Whether or not it is truly for White America is, for the time being, an open question. Dyson's tone and rhetoric often leaves him "preaching to the choir." But even preaching to the choir has its place in the august history of homiletics. Dyson intentionally locates himself within the great American tradition of jeremiad. Thus, we are not surprised to find Dyson prodding and pleading his readers to return to the path of American holiness.

*Tears* is a worship service shaped around a sermonic exploration of Black existence in White America. The first part of the book includes chapters titled "Call to Worship," "Hymns of Praise," "Invocation," and "Scripture Reading." Dyson calls his audience to worship in the wake of the 2016 national election, with its subsequent racial strife. He is an evangelist for a better America. Like all great jeremiad preachers, Dyson points us backwards to draw us forwards. He tries to help us see where America went wrong to call us back to the straight and narrow. Quite simply, America went wrong when, in James Baldwin's words, we insisted on thinking of ourselves as a "white nation". Thus, the Call to Worship begins with the admonition to acknowledge the effects of America's original racial sin and to repent.

Having been called to worship, the reader is now invited to meditate on the hymns of praise of the Black community. Dyson—who later admits that his "joyful embrace of the secular dimensions of black culture has landed [him] in trouble" (p. 69)—points the reader to "Sound of Da Police" by KRS-One and "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar as examples of music videos that remind us of the historically antagonistic relationship between police forces and the Black community. KRS-One sings about slave overseers while his music plays over video footage from *Selma*. Kendrick Lamar joyfully sings, "We gonna be alright" while dancing over the cityscape of Los Angeles, before he is felled by a policer's bullet. The Fugees's Lauren Hill sings fearfully of the police as "the Beast" who roams the streets looking for her, and Beyonce sings about her childhood formation on a New Orleans police cruiser that is sinking in the waters of Hurricane Katrina while spray paint on a wind-damaged wall reads "Stop Shooting Us." These

are hymns that express Black suffering and Black hope in the same breath. They are sung by a people who refuse to be erased.

Next, Dyson invokes the presence of the Almighty God as a witness to the humanity of Black people over and against the many experiences that suggest otherwise. God is called to act in the face of stories about Dyson's 6 year old daughter being called a "n\*\*\*\*r" at a skating rink, or Dyson's adult son, a medical doctor, fearing for his life during a traffic stop in Harlem, or most concerning, white friends and allies who wring their hands and lament while remaining largely inert. Dyson pleads with God to convict this nation and to continue to give Black people the courage to continue to tell the truth.

In perhaps his most provocative attempt to blend sacred language and secular Black culture, Dyson appeals to the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. as "Scripture Reading" for America. King, Dyson reasons, is the "most quoted black man on the planet" (p. 37). He is "the greatest American prophet" and his words are "civic Holy Writ" and "political scripture" (p. 38). But like scripture itself, King is proof-texted and whitewashed. The words he spoke to white audiences are read without consideration of the words he spoke to black audiences; his comments on race are extricated from his words about the Vietnam War or the economy. America has not outlived the relevance of King's words; he still has many important things to say for those who have ears to hear.

The central section of the book is the "Sermon", a six-chapter exhortation to White Americans to seek repentance buttressed by personal testimonies of Blackness. The sermon begins with Dyson's proclamation that whiteness is a fantasy. It only exists because we say it exists. But its continued existence threatens the very existence of America itself. For America to live, whiteness must die. The good news is that if whiteness is something we made up, we can unmake it. Unmaking whiteness, however, is hard, and it will require us to undergo a deep grieving of our attachment to the status quo. White people will have to move through the five stages of white grief: ignorance, denial, appropriation, revision, and dilution. Only after white people come to terms with the manifold ways they seek to evade blackness, will they be able to confront the problems facing America head-on.

The examples of white evasion are particularly pernicious and deny the testimonies of Black Americans. The first is the way white people police the use of the N-word, alternating between preventing Black people from using it and/or arguing that if Black people use it then white people ought to be able to use it also. A second type of evasion involves appeals to "black-on-black" crime to mitigate Black protests of systemic racism in American police forces. The final evasion involves the police themselves. White America's presumption that police officers are always right makes it almost impossible to hold police officers accountable when they are wrong. Giving police officers the benefit of the doubt discounts the historical experience of pro-slavery and pro-Jim Crow police tactics.

The third part of the book includes sections titled, "Benediction," "Offering Plate," "Prelude to Service," and "Closing Prayer," the most

substantial of which is the Benediction. Here, Dyson offers his white congregants a series of practical steps they can take to repent of the negative effects of the sins of whiteness. These include suggestions like taking steps towards individual acts of reparation, like paying Black workers above their quoted price or sponsoring tuition for Black students or summer campers. White readers should further educate themselves about the experience of Black Americans through reading classics in Black literature and American history. Then, they should seek to educate their friends and families. Making friends with Black people and visiting Black churches, schools, and jails are other important steps white people can take to effect real reconciliation between White and Black Americans. Finally, white people can choose to be present at protest events to change the optics that the issues being protested are not just "Black" issues, but American issues.

My initial concerns regarding Dyson's "sermon" are theological in nature. I'm worried that he is more invested in the project of America than a Christian ought to be. He wants to save America by surgically removing the cancer of white nationalism from the body politic. Theologically, I'm more interested in asking whether American Christians need to be saved from the idea of America itself. In that regard, I am disappointed to see that Dyson—a Baptist preacher by training—does not spend time addressing White Christians specifically, or even Christianity more broadly. The use of jeremiad operates uncritically to reinforce the basic assumptions of American exceptionalism even as Dyson tries to recast Black Americans within the scope of that exception. And that worries me.

Yet, I find that criticism to be underwhelming even as I write it because I know that it is a criticism that can only be made from the position of one who is privileged enough to both benefit from American exceptionalism and call it into question. And that is, at least partially, Dyson's point. We white Christians have all sorts of ways of obfuscating when we should be listening. What I hear most clearly at the heart of Dyson's sermon is a call for white repentance. And repentance cannot begin in earnest if we listen to Black testimonies with a critical ear. For those who have ears, let them hear.

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Gilbert Meilaender. *Thy Will Be Done: The Ten Commandments and the Christian Life*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020. 131pp.  
\$ 17.49.

Gilbert Meilaender's *Thy Will Be Done* is a creative attempt to think about the Christian life in dialogue with the Decalogue, or, the Ten Commandments. Meilaender's treatment of the commandments is prefaced

by a chapter on “The Law of Christ” wherein he situates the Decalogue within the larger context of the gospel, describing it as “instructional prophecy” (15). In this regard, he follows more closely with Karl Barth’s Law-Gospel reversal and Calvin’s third use of the law than he does with his own Lutheran tradition.

For this reason, the first chapter reads as an apologetic for so doing. For instance, Meilaender engages in a succinct exegesis of Galatians to demonstrate that Paul is not against the law itself, but against “works of law.” Then, he follows this argument with an engagement of Martin Luther, arguing that although Luther’s theology tends to oppose the law to Christian freedom, his pastoral and catechetical works emphasize the importance of the Decalogue for moral instruction. These are two examples of “the Law of Christ”, namely, that Christians ought to pursue God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.

The commandments themselves are treated over the course of five chapters titled, “The Marriage Bond,” “The Family Bond,” “The Life Bond,” “The Possessions Bond,” and “The Speech Bond.” This reflects Meilaender’s decision to treat the commandments as “an invitation to reflect upon the importance of five different bonds that unite human beings in community” (xi). Each chapter examines a specific communal bond from “three angles of vision”: creation, reconciliation, and redemption. This, again, reflects Meilaender’s partial dependence on Barth.

The Marriage Bond (chapter two) describes the relationship that is inferred by the commandment against adultery. Marriage, itself, is an expression of God’s intention that humans should be communal beings. Created male and female, humans are tasked with developing community in the midst of difference. From the angle of creation, Meilaender addresses traditional moral questions related to marriage: homosexuality, childbearing, and contraception. From the angle of reconciliation, he explores how the command to practice lifelong monogamous fidelity within the bonds of marriage frees us to nurture our love to maturity and to turn it outward towards others. Finally, from the angle of redemption, he considers how marriage might be a “school for virtue” by which we pursue holiness through fidelity. Redemption also provides Meilaender with the context to discuss the role that singleness plays in the Christian life.

Chapter three, The Family Bond, reflects solely on the commandment to honor parents. Seen from each angle, Meilaender argues that family: (1) is a created good that requires our gratitude, (2) a challenge to our ability to love others who are more distant, and (3) a school for virtue wherein we learn what it means to honor our heavenly Father. From the second angle, Meilaender considers questions related to abortion, orphans and adoption.

The fourth chapter, The Life Bond, is the longest chapter in the book, warranting more attention. In it, Meilaender considers the prohibition against killing from the three angles of vision he claims to have borrowed from Barth. We begin to see, however, that Meilaender’s second angle departs significantly from Barth’s dogmatics. For Barth, the doctrine of reconciliation, and subsequently, the ethics of reconciliation, are explored

from the perspective of the reconciliation that is accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the objective reality that drives Barth’s doctrine. Here, we begin to see more clearly that Meilaender’s second angle is not from the perspective of reconciliation accomplished. Instead, it is from the perspective of a broken world that requires “healing”.

In this chapter, we read that from the angle of creation, the life bond reminds us that we share a common humanity because we are created in the image of God. Even though humans are the only creatures that bear God’s image, life itself requires that we treat plants and animals with dignity. Meilaender suggests that to fail to do so threatens to blaspheme God’s name because it undermines our place as image-bearers. Regarding human life, Meilaender focuses specifically on suicide, emphasizing that the Life Bond means that our lives are always connected with others. We ought not to be deceived into believing that such killing can be harmless or even “good” (i.e. euthanasia).

From the second angle, Meilaender emphasizes “preservation” more so than reconciliation. On these terms, he lays out traditional Lutheran arguments for capital punishment, military and police service, and violence in the defense of others. Comparing Pacifism and Just War, Meilaender commends the Christian pacifist’s emphasis on trusting God to care for his creation. At the same time, he warns that Christian pacifists will appear to be indifferent to calls for justice. He then summarizes the basic tenets of Just War before expanding the argument to warrant capital punishment.

Finally, from the angle of redemption, Meilaender focuses on aging and dying. Specifically, he considers Christian funerals, arguing that they ought to be opportunities to emphasize the pilgrimage that is the Christian life. Christians ought to point to baptism and burial as signs of the reality of death and the hope of the resurrection.

Chapter five on the Possessions Bond is perhaps the most creative chapter, grouping the commandments against stealing, coveting and keeping sabbath together. Possessions are good gifts from God and we are to enjoy them as such; however, their purpose is to point us beyond themselves to the God from whom we receive them. The Christian life is lived between enjoyment and renunciation. Where the Life Bond chapter emphasizes the human need for reconciliation, the Possessions Bond chapter moves more closely towards a Barthian view of reconciliation. Meilaender argues here that the Christian life is lived in the dialectic between enjoyment and renunciation. Christians will be called to renounce possessions when they threaten to replace God as our security. Christians are called to trust God to provide instead of hoarding possessions. From the perspective of redemption, Meilaender argues that keeping sabbath is how we learn to proclaim God’s provision and to live it.

The Speech Bond, chapter six, is the final bond that Meilaender considers, pairing together the commandments against false witness and profaning God’s name. From the perspective of creation, Meilaender reflects on the relationship between speaking truthfully and justice, emphasizing that communities require trust. From the perspective of healing, he

highlights the calling we must speak up in defense of others. Finally, from the perspective of redemption, he considers the prohibition against oath-taking in Jesus' sermon on the mount. Here again, we find that Meilaender pushes back against the so-called over-realized eschatologies of some Christian traditions by remanding Jesus's seemingly impossible teachings to an unrealized future.

The final chapter of the book treats the first commandment as the culmination of the Decalogue; all other commandments have their end in this one commandment. In terms of creation, this means that our love for other people and things must always be relativized by our love for God. If our love for others does not direct us beyond them to God, then our love is improper or flawed. Meilaender appeals to natural law to explain how creation intends to point us to Creator. In terms of our need for healing, "the Decalogue outlines the shape of lives set free from bondage" (119). Christians are "set free" and yet still require healing. The command for us to love our neighbor is a command that requires us to take small incremental steps towards living into the life shaped by the Decalogue. This happens within the context of a new bond: the bond of the church. Finally, in term of redemption, the call to obey the commandments is one that we continue to strive for because we follow a path that is made possible by Jesus. His obedience to the commandments means that we need not despair of our own disobedience. Indeed, the 10 commandments arrive to us, from the perspective of redemption, as 10 promises. There will be a time when we *will* freely obey God. We confess this promise to be true every time we pray, "Thy will be done."

*Thy Will Be Done* is a creative and meaningful contribution to the question regarding how Christians read and live out the Decalogue. Meilaender's recommendations fall somewhere on a spectrum between a traditional Lutheran theological ethics and a more Reformed and/or Barthian ethics. Anyone who is familiar with Meilaender's work will not be surprised by this. The important contribution this book makes is to frame the decalogue in such a manner that it does not merely convict us as sinners but that it also beckons us to holiness even as we are still being made reconciled. While Meilaender sometimes emphasizes the enduring problem of sin in the Christian life, he invites us to consider what it might mean to live as if these ten words are promises, not merely commands.

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