Journal of Dispensational Theology

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EDITORIAL

“The Down-Grade Controversy of 1887-88 was the most dramatic and the most disastrous episode in [Charles] Spurgeon’s career.”¹ In March 1887, Spurgeon published the first of two articles entitled “The Down Grade” in his monthly magazine, The Sword and the Trowel. The articles were first published anonymously. The author was Robert Shindler, who was a close friend of Spurgeon and fellow Baptist pastor. Spurgeon granted Shindler a definite endorsement with the following words: “Earnest attention is requested for this paper. There is need of such a warning as this history affords. We are going down hill at breakneck speed.”²

The Down Grade controversy began when Spurgeon discerned an aggressive promotion of a “new theology,” which involved blatant denials of biblical truths. Moreover, the theology of both Baptists and Congregationalists with regard to the sovereignty of God in salvation remained in the confessional statements and within the trust deeds of many local churches, yet such doctrine was not within the hearts and minds of the church leadership or the congregations. Biblical truths were not being attacked; rather, they were simply ignored because the primary emphasis among the local churches was upon evangelism, missions, and practical social work. Doctrine was assumed and its importance was minimized.³

Shindler summarized the condition of evangelicalism from Puritanism to his current time by observing that every true revival will be assaulted by a compromise of doctrinal truth and will eventually denigrate into general apostasy. He compared this to a downward spiral, or “the downgrade.” Shindler wrote, “The Presbyterians were the first to get on the down line. They paid more attention to classical attainments and other branches of learning in their ministry. . . . It would be an easy step in the wrong direction to pay increased attention to academical attainments in their ministers, and less to spiritual qualifications; and to set a higher value on scholarship and oratory, than on evangelical zeal and ability to rightly divide the word of truth.”⁴ He did not believe that comprehensive apostasy

² “The Down Grade” (from the March 1887 Sword and Trowel) [article online] (The Spurgeon Archive, accessed 31 July 2012) available from http://www.spurgeon.org/s_and_t/dg01.htm.
⁴ “The Down Grade” (from the March 1887 Sword and Trowel) [article online].
was the intent of all “on the down line.” Some, of course, concealed their heresy but others who did not intend to deny “the proper deity of the Son of God, renouncing faith in his atoning death and justifying righteousness, and denouncing the doctrine of human depravity, the need of Divine renewal, and the necessity for the Holy Spirit’s gracious work, in order that men might become new creatures” eventually did by not recognizing “that it is easier to get on [the down grade] than to get off.”

Spurgeon warned Non-conformists (Protestant dissenters such as Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians) with regard to their abandonment of biblical orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

In April 1887, Spurgeon published the second of the two articles entitled “The Down Grade” in *The Sword and the Trowel*. Spurgeon gave another unqualified endorsement of the second article. He wrote, “Again we call special attention to this most important theme. The growing evil demands the attention of all who desire the prosperity of the church of God.”

Shindler again documented the decline of Puritanism. He believed the problem was that even orthodox preachers were not contending for the faith. One example was Dr. Philip Doddridge of whom he wrote, “He sometimes mingled in a fraternal manner, even exchanging pulpits, with men whose orthodoxy was called in question.”

Doddridge’s tolerance eventually caused his pupils to surrender to Socinianism. There were even several Baptist congregations in the county of Kent that embraced Socinian teachings, such as Deal, Dover, Wingham, and Yalding.

Although not his original intent, Spurgeon eventually left the Baptist Union because “complicity with error will take from the best of men the power to enter any successful protest against it.” The Controversy was a continual burden to Spurgeon emotionally and physically until his death in 1892. Spurgeon was astonished that even close friends and pastors would not defend biblical truth with him.

The final years of Spurgeon’s life had such difficulty in the foreground that it was challenging for his contemporaries to fully

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5 Ibid.
6 “The Down Grade” (second article from the April 1887 *Sword and Trowel*) [article online] (The Spurgeon Archive, accessed 31 July 2012) available from http://spurgeon.org/s_and_t/dg02.htm.
7 Ibid.
comprehend his unrelenting commitment to biblical truth. Of course, the Down Grade has been present since the days of the early church. For this reason the Apostle Paul admonished the church, “the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2). The text refers to doctrine taught “in the presence of many witnesses” that is to be entrusted to other “faithful men” who will be qualified “to teach others also.” Certainly the admonition of 2 Timothy would be an impossible task if the church were not able to understand the doctrines taught “in the presence of many witnesses” and then entrusted to other faithful men to teach others. Nevertheless, false teachers fearlessly enter churches as wolves in sheep’s clothing and boldly teach that the Bible should not be regarded as authoritative or infallible; such a mentality is evident in the prevalent methodology of an image-compelled message as opposed to a Word-compelled message. Of course, such practices will only contribute to a great lack of discernment in the church, and acceptance of counterfeit gospels resulting in unsanctified churches that do not edify and equip the saints for the work of ministry. Indeed, a new Down Grade is present within the church. May “faithful men” (as the Apostles, Reformers, Spurgeon, and others did in their days) labor to call the church to return to the essential truths of Scripture!

One of those essential truths would be a commitment to entire obedience to the Great Commission. No Christian can claim obedience to the Great Commission until disciples have been made through proclaiming the Gospel, baptizing converts in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and indoctrinating converts in the whole counsel of God’s Word. Certainly, it is not binding upon every Christian to accomplish all components of the Great Commission in their own personal ministry. God has given various gifts, ministries, and offices among His people. However, it is certainly the will of God for each Christian to support actively and prayerfully that group of Christians which is wholly dedicated to this task.

Unfortunately, there is sometimes a tendency on the part of Christians to be disobedient toward all components of the Great Commission by ignoring the truth that Christ and His apostles gave utmost emphasis upon indoctrination of converts in “the whole counsel of God’s Word.” For instance, in the New Testament, one reads that the Apostles won converts, baptized them, and organized them into local churches for the purpose of doctrinal and practical edification and observance of all biblical commands. Although evangelism and communicating to a lost

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person the reality of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone are vitally important components of the total responsibility of the local church, the church must continually remind herself that the New Testament places the utmost emphasis upon the feeding (teaching) of those who are already Christians! Indeed, it may be said that the indoctrination of converts in the whole counsel of God’s Word is the basic New Testament pattern for world evangelization. Apart from this emphasis, Christian evangelism will soon become ineffective and superficial.

It is important to understand that deep, tender, feelings of affection in the Christian life are not more important than doctrine. Indeed, the New Testament never emphasizes such feelings as greater than doctrine and truth. To be very direct in communication, the greatest impact of biblical love is upon obedience to all of God’s Word. In the Old Testament, love is inextricably related to covenant and obedience (Exod 20:6; Deut 7:6-8; 10:12; 11:13, 22; 19:9; 30:19-20; Josh 22:5; 1 Sam 18:1-3; etc.). In the New Testament, love is most frequently related to discipleship and obedience (John 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:9-10; 1 John 2:4-6; 5:1-3; 2 John 6a; etc.). The standard of biblical love is doctrine. As a Christian virtue, love is more important than faith and hope (1 Cor 13:13), but it is not more important than doctrine and truth. Indeed, true Christian love cannot increase apart from an atmosphere of Christian truth. Of course, liberals have denied this important of doctrine and truth for years, and if Christians endure this false separation, it will constitute one of the greatest victories of Satan against the church in modern times. Therefore, it is essential that the church indoctrinate converts in the whole counsel of God’s Word as the basic New Testament pattern for world evangelization. Not only will Christian evangelism become ineffective and superficial without this emphasis, but a Christian life that is glorifying and pleasing to the Lord will also suffer.

Understanding and applying the Bible is not an option. Doctrine without practice is dead, and practice without doctrine is blind. The problem with the professing church (“churchianity”) is not primarily in its practice, but in its doctrine. Christians do not know, and many do not care to know, the doctrines of Scripture. Doctrine is viewed as intellectual, and many Christians are generally anti-intellectual. Doctrine is regarded as “ivory tower” philosophy, and most Christians view “ivory towers” with contempt. However, it is the “ivory tower” that is the control tower of a civilization. It is a fundamental, theoretical sin of the “practical” Christian to deny that every practice belongs to some doctrine.

The relationship between doctrine and practice is the same as that between cause and effect. If a person believes correct doctrine, their
practice will tend to be correct. The healthy practice/lifestyle of many contemporary Christians is immoral because it is the practice of false doctrines. It is a serious doctrinal error of so-called “practical” church members to think that they can ignore the “ivory towers” of the philosophers and theologians as irrelevant to their lives. Every action that “practical” church members adopt is governed by the thinking that has occurred in some ivory tower.

The first duty of the Christian is to understand sound doctrine—sound theory—and thereby implement sound (biblical) practice. The order of doctrine first, then practice, is both biblical and logical. For example, the Book of Romans first contains eleven chapters expounding doctrine, and only the last five discuss practice. Failure to instruct in sound doctrine is the reason for misconduct and cultural impotence of Christians. Lack of power in the life of the church is the lack of sound doctrinal truth. The success and survival of the church is based upon her increased acceptance of the Bible as the sole authority of Truth and the supreme importance of sound doctrine, and their logical implications as the result of emphasis upon the primacy of the intellect and recognition of the necessity for systematic and logical thinking.

The church will be catapulted into the future only as she is carefully governed and powerfully driven by the Word of God. Quite simply, the Word of God builds the church. It is crucial to teach the church that God’s chosen method to bring new life is to use His Word. God’s method for building the church determines the means of discipleship and evangelism. The Holy Spirit creates and sustains the church by the Word of God (2 Kgs 22—23; Neh 8—9; Isa 55:10-11; Ezek 37:1-14; Matt 4:4; John 1:1, 4, 14; Acts 19:20; 20:32; Rom 1:16; 10:17; 1 Thess 2:13; Heb 4:12; Jas 1:18, 21; 1 Pet 1:23, 25). The church grows quantitatively and qualitatively through the proclaiming of the Gospel and the systematic teaching of God’s Word. If God’s chosen method for building and sustaining His church is replaced with human thoughts and will, it will inevitably ensure the eternal futility of such work.

In concluding this editorial, it is with great thankfulness to introduce the articles in this issue of the Journal of Dispensational Theology. Shaun Lewis is a fellow colleague in the ministry of Capitol Commission, which is dedicated to reaching Capitol communities for Christ. Lewis is, therefore, intensely concerned with helping believers understand the restoration that occurs through belief in the Gospel. Brian Wagner’s doctoral research at Piedmont Baptist Graduate School is again shared with readers of the Journal. Wagner is passionate to have Christians understand the doctrine of Scripture’s perspicuity, which is appreciated for
fulfilling the Great Commission. Kenneth Dowlen’s article is appreciated for its emphasis upon the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, and how this great truth relates to church confession, soul competency, and biblical authority. A new friend Samuel Bâlc wrote the final article, which is an explanation of the importance of understanding the doctrine of the church. The book reviews conclude this issue of the *Journal*, and readers will certainly benefit from understanding popular notions that are being communicated today, in addition to a book recommendation to aid one’s pulpit ministry. The publisher trusts these articles and reviews will be beneficial to God’s saints, the church, and that discernment and edification leading to greater maturity in Christ and the fulfillment of the Great Commission will be the result, which, of course, would be by God’s sovereign grace.

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What is Man? or, The Image of God

Shaun Lewis

The Portland Vase was an exquisite discovery near Rome in the late sixteenth century. A master artisan had crafted the vase painstakingly during the reign of Tiberius Caesar (AD 14-37). After passing many generations, it eventually passed from memory. Rome fell, the Dark Ages came, and it was followed by the Renaissance and Reformation periods. Despite so many centuries of upheaval and change, this vase somehow remained in mint condition until 7 February 1845. While on display at the British Museum, an inebriated visitor threw a sculpture on the vase, and in that act, it shattered. One could still see what the shards once formed, but they were only shards. The vase lay in ruin. Though the Portland Vase was restored, the process was slow and arduous, not completed for another 144 years until 1989.

What happened to this vase is similar to the story of mankind. God created man in His own image, and gave him a glory not surpassed by even the angels. Nevertheless, with one seemingly small act, that image shattered and man became a ruin of his former glory. Man’s body began to die, his heart no longer desired God, his mind became darkened, and in that instant, his spirit died. Though the imago Dei still bore some resemblance to its creator, it was thoroughly marred and perverted to the point that it no longer clearly reflected Him.

Redemption is the beginning of man’s restoration process. All that sin did begins to be undone at salvation. Man’s spirit becomes alive again, his heart begins to love God, and his mind is renewed. Man, the image of God, is gradually conformed to the image of Christ until the consummation of redemption when he is fully restored. The biblical concept of the imago Dei truly is “crucial for understanding the flow of redemptive history.”¹

Indeed, this concept is foundational for understanding nearly every conceivable doctrine in the Bible. Charles Feinberg wrote:

The concept of the image of God, implied or expressed, underlies all revelation. Thus, it is not too much to maintain that a correct understanding of the image of God in man can hardly be

* Shaun Lewis, M.Div., state director, Capitol Commission, Springfield, Illinois

overemphasized. The position taken here determines every area of
doctrinal declaration. Not only is theology involved, but reason,
law, and civilization as a whole, whether it views regenerate or
unsaved humanity from its origin to eternity.2

The image of God explains how God can communicate with man.3 What one
believes about it will affect his understanding of God and the angels as well
as the doctrines of sin, salvation, and the church to name a few more.4 The
article herein will begin with a historical survey of the major views on the
imago Dei. Discussion of the views will follow in working towards a biblical
understanding.

A SURVEY OF THE THREE MAJOR VIEWS

Explanations of the imago Dei span the second century to the present and
they are legion. Some have slight variations, while others are more
significant. Nonetheless, all views can be grouped within three categories.5
Substantive views teach that the imago consists of certain parts or
characteristics of man, such as his rationale or spirit. Relational views
concern man’s relationship with God or others as the divine image. Functional views maintain that God’s image in man is some action he does,
such as rule or take dominion over creation.

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3 Carl F. H. Henry stated, “By dependence upon and fidelity to divine
revelation, the surviving imago assures the human intelligibility of divine
disclosure. . . . It qualifies man not only as a carrier of objective metaphysical truth
about God’s nature and ways, but more particularly as a receiver of the special
revelational truth of redemption” (God, Revelation and Authority, 6 vols. [Waco, TX: Word, 1976] 2:130). Jack Barentsen also wrote regarding this issue. “Although
man is certainly different from God (he is a sinner, he is finite, he is time-and-space
bound), his possession of the image of God seems to ensure that God and man
share enough crucial attributes (the ability to reason, the capacity for relationship,
etc.) to make a shared language possible. Thus, not only is general revelation
possible, but also a special revelation involving language that is intelligible to man”
(“The Validity of Human Language: A Vehicle for Divine Truth,” Grace Theological
5 Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983;
reprint, 2007) 520; Stanley Grenz, “Jesus as the Imago Dei: Image-of-God
Christology and the Non-Linear Linearity of Theology,” Journal of the Evangelical
Theological Society 47 (December 2004): 621.
The Substantive View

Viewing the *imago* substantively has been predominant throughout church history. Adherents maintain it is a quality or capacity inherent to man. Some suggest the Fall damaged or destroyed the image of God, while others teach that nothing happened at all.

In Genesis 1:26, God says, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.” Irenaeus is among the beginning of those who made a distinction between “image” (*tselēm*) and “likeness” (*demuth*). For him, the “image” encompassed physical characteristics including man’s mind and volition while the “likeness” was spiritual. Tertullian held to similar views. According to Irenaeus, the Fall had little or no effect upon the *imago Dei*; it endured while man’s God-likeness was destroyed. Man only lost his “robe of sanctity,” a gift originally bestowed by the Spirit. Therefore, he could no longer commune with the Lord.

Clement of Alexandria and Origen also held to an image-likeness distinction. For them, the *imago* includes the mind and volition along with man’s physical body. They believed it is basically anything essential to humanity—what makes man “man.” Whereas Irenaeus distinguished between image and likeness as physical/spiritual, Clement and Origen saw the distinction as qualities essential/unnecessary. In other words, man is still “man” with or without original holiness and righteousness. With these qualities he becomes God-like. Athanasius, Hilary, Ambrose, Augustine, and John of Damascus all agreed in various ways.

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6 Ibid. 521.
12 Berkhof, *Theology*, 202. For an overview of Augustine’s views, see Stephen Duffy’s “Anthropology” in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 27-28. Augustine reasoned that if man images God, and God is triune, then the *imago* must refer to vestiges of tri-unity inherent to man. John Calvin appreciated Augustine but wrote in his *Commentary on Genesis* that Augustine “speculates with excessive refinement” on the *imago*. Pelagius also agreed with Clement and Origen. He argued that if man’s will and rationale were unscathed by sin, both are wholly good. Therefore, man
Medieval theologians continued to distinguish between the terms “image” and “likeness,” all viewing the image of God as man’s mind and will.\textsuperscript{13} If the Fall had no effect upon the mind or will (as they contended), the \textit{imago} was unaffected by sin, which means the Fall only destroyed man’s likeness to God—qualities unessential to man’s being. Man was originally gifted with them (\textit{donum superadditum}).\textsuperscript{14} At the Fall, he merely lost a divine gift, a something unessential to his humanity.

Reformers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, viewed “image” and “likeness” as synonyms. Luther identified the \textit{imago} as man’s original righteousness and, since man is dead in sin, the \textit{imago} must be entirely lost.\textsuperscript{15} Calvin agreed but had a more expansive view saying that the \textit{imago} is anything that distinguishes man from the animals;\textsuperscript{16} it was original righteousness plus certain natural endowments. In Calvin’s understanding, when man fell, sin permeated the \textit{imago}; it was not destroyed, but horribly marred, leaving the spiritual part of it dead.\textsuperscript{17}

Many of these nuances are subtle but all substantive views teach that the \textit{imago} is an ontological part of man.\textsuperscript{18} Relational and functional views do not. Furthermore, this is the only view of the three that distinguishes between the terms “image” and “likeness.”

\hspace{1cm} has the ability to know God and can please Him unaided by grace (see Berkoff, \textit{Theology}, 202).

\textsuperscript{13} Hoekema, \textit{Image}, 36. Thomas Aquinas was one of the first to view “image” and “likeness” as synonyms.

\textsuperscript{14} Erickson, \textit{Theology}, 522-23. If spiritual qualities are unessential to man being man, then the Fall had no effect upon the \textit{imago} or upon man himself. Contrary to Calvinism, the Fall did not leave man wholly depraved, but specifically deprived. Furthermore, since medieval theologians viewed God-likeness (\textit{demuth}) as destroyed, they considered the mind and will left unscathed by the Fall. Therefore, man remains able to know what is good and can choose to do it. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, believed grace was necessary for salvation but he also taught that man’s good works could incline God to bestow more grace (see Thomas Aquinas’ \textit{Summa Theologica}, I.95.4; Hoekema, \textit{Image}, 41). How one views the \textit{imago} radically affects anthropology, harmartology, and soteriology.

\textsuperscript{15} Berkof, \textit{Theology}, 202.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.; John Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, I.15.3. Calvin wrote, “. . . the likeness of God extends to the whole excellence by which man’s nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures.”

\textsuperscript{17} Calvin stated, “. . . though we grant that God’s image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity” (see Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, I.15.4).

\textsuperscript{18} Ontology is the study in philosophy that relates to “being.”
**The Relational View**

A new concept of the *imago Dei* arose in the twentieth century. Genesis 1:26 opens with Trinitarian plurality and is followed by verse 27 which says, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” In the immediate context of the *imago* lies a plurality within the Godhead and a plurality within mankind. Advocates of relational views say this plurality should be taken seriously. Therefore, a dynamic relationship is the essence of how man is like God.

Karl Barth believed the *imago* is not a relationship *per se*; it is an experience within an active relationship. Emil Brunner illustrated the concept saying that a mirror is not a source of light nor does it have an imprint of light; it only reflects the light according to its placement. Likewise, when man is turned towards God, he fully experiences or expresses the *imago.*

Plurality in the *imago* is a newer exegetical observation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “The likeness, the *analogia,* of humankind to God is not *analogia entis* but *analogia relationis.*” In other words, the *imago* is not a static entity given at creation but ebbs and flows in the dynamic flux of relationship. Whether between human beings or with God, relationships are said to have the likeness of inter-Trinitarian relationships.

Many relational views of the *imago* are held by Dialectic theologians. However, G. C. Berkouwer held to a relational view and was a Reformed theologian. He believed the *imago* was lost at the Fall and was unessential to man as man. The image of God comes back into existence by the Holy Spirit at regeneration. As the believer progresses in sanctification, the *imago* becomes all the more visible, restored, and God-like.

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19 Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* III.1.195. On Genesis 1:27, Karl Barth wrote, “Could anything be more obvious than to conclude from this clear indication that the image and likeness of the being created by God signifies existence in confrontation?” For a helpful overview of Barth on this subject, see D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 60-61.

20 Erickson, *Theology,* 524, 527.


23 Ibid. 112.
Unlike Bonhoeffer, Berkouwer considered the image of God to be an *anologia amoris*;²⁴ it exists in the believer but cannot grow in isolation. Love must be expressed for God and others. Therefore, the *imago* is always present in a believer, but it is dynamic and changing depending upon a right relationship with God and man.²⁵

With varying degrees, all relational views are existential.²⁶ Pannenberg taught a relational view of the *imago*. More recently, the Catholic theologian Hans Küng and evangelical scholar John Sailhamer have as well.²⁷ Relational views may be relatively new, but they have a broad spectrum of support. Indeed, these views dominated systematic theologies during the latter half of the twentieth century.²⁸

**The Functional View**

Like the relational views, functional views are also existential. Both suggest the *imago* is not an ontological part of man but something God-like that comes to expression.²⁹ Genesis 1:26 states:

> Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

God created mankind in His own image and commanded him to rule over creation. Adherents of a functional view see more than a close connection between these concepts. To them, the *imago* is the activity of ruling over creation. The image is something man does.

In extra-biblical literature, kings placed images of themselves throughout a kingdom to represent their rule and authority.³⁰ Indeed, at the heart of the Hebrew term “image” (*tselem*) is the idea of

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²⁴ Ibid. 116.
²⁶ Erickson, *Theology*, 527. An existential view does not make one an existentialist. Dialectic theologians are existentialists in the line of Kierkegaard. Berkouwer was not.
“representation.” Functional views believe man represents God by taking dominion and ruling. The image is seen when this activity is done.

Adherents also look to Psalm 8:5-6 for support. The psalmist says that man was crowned with glory and honor and given dominion over the earth. The language is clearly reminiscent of Genesis 1:26.

Whereas relational views are relatively new, functional views are older and have even seen resurgence as of late. A large number of Old Testament scholars today favor some kind of functional view. Calvinists in the tradition of Kuyper, alongside Theonomists and Reconstructionists also view the imago in this way. Many Reformed theologians agree and call this the cultural mandate. By equating God’s image with taking dominion, the imago means all who desire to be God’s image must take dominion; it means believers today are called to make disciples and reform culture.

EVALUATION OF THE THREE MAJOR VIEWS

Each of the major categories has strengths and weaknesses. The substantive view is straightforward and has by far the most advocates. Despite this, substantive views fragment man in ways unsupported by Scripture. One theologian said this is part of God’s image and that is not. The imago has been equated with man’s physical body, essential qualities, intellect, original righteous state, or any part distinctly human. The problem is that none of these distinctions have exegetical support in the creation account. Few have exegetical support anywhere in Scripture.

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31 Ibid. 621.
33 Erickson, Theology, 527. The Socinians were one of the first groups to propose a functional view in their Racovian Catechism (see The Racovian Catechism, trans. Thomas Rees [London: William Field, 1652; reprint, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818] 21). Socinianism is known for its non-trinitarian theology; its modern-day descendants are the Unitarians.
35 Ibid. 5.
36 Erickson, “Theology,” 529. For an influential example, see Nancy Pearcey, Total Truth (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).
37 To Luther’s credit, Ephesians 4:24 does refer to the “likeness of God” as righteousness and holiness. His view had exegetical support though not from Genesis 1:26-27. Man’s original righteousness and holiness are part of the imago.
When the *imago* is narrowed to any one feature, significant theological problems arise. For instance, some have equated man’s intellect with the *imago*. If they are right, members of Mensa greatly bear the image of God, while the mentally disabled hardly bear it at all. Others have said that the image is man’s original righteousness, something lost at the fall. However, Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 teach that man, after the Fall, still has the *imago*.

Calvin had a more expansive view of the image of God, teaching it is all the qualities that distinguish man from the animal kingdom, which is without biblical support and is theologically problematic as well. For instance, if man’s physical body is not part of the *imago*, why does Genesis 9:6 condemn murder on the basis of it? The text implies that murder is wrong because the human body is somehow linked to God’s image. To harm the body is to harm the *imago*.

Relational and functional views at least have some exegetical support in the creation account. Genesis 1:27 and 5:2 both state that God created man and woman in His own image. Genesis 1:26 makes a link between humanity and dominion taking. Therefore, it must be affirmed there is male/female plurality within the *imago* and some link between it and taking dominion. This is a good start for these views, but the real question is whether Genesis actually defines the *imago* in these ways or not.

Most relational views find more support in religious existentialism than in Scripture. “Existence precedes essence” is the cry of the existentialist, which would mean the task is to find where or if the *imago* exists, not define its content (if it even has any). To the Dialectic theologians, when relationship is present, there the *imago* comes into being by degrees. The *imago* is not relationship itself but something that comes into existence when relationship occurs. However, it must be asked

and the believer’s *imago* is being renewed. However, the creation account indicates the *imago* entails more.

38 Genesis 9:6 states, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image.” James 3:9 says, “With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.” Both indicate that man after the Fall—saved or not—is still God’s image.

how can form exist without content? Something must exist that God called the *imago*. Views such as these beg the question: What is it?

Though Berkouwer suggested a different path, his *analogia amoris* is equally existential. Other theologians have removed much of the existentialism by equating the *imago* with relationships. However, the idea is foreign to the creation account. Theologically, how can a reprobate who wants no relationship with God still be the image of God? According to this view, some people become God’s image in varying degrees while others do not at all.

Functional views equate the *imago* with man taking dominion over the earth. Erickson examined the volitional “Let Us” which appears twice in Genesis 1:26: “Let Us make man in Our image . . . and let them rule. . . .” He believes image-bearing and dominion-making are related though entirely separate. Clines countered that two volitional verbs separated by the waw-conjunction make the second a consequence of the first. In other words, “Let us make man in our own image . . . so that they may take dominion.” Clines’ argument is stronger.

The creation account teaches that taking dominion is one consequence of the *imago*; it is not the *imago* itself. Stated differently, the image of God is innately part of man; the act of ruling is a result. At creation, God’s image displayed itself primarily by ruling the earth. Man still rules the earth today and always has, but it raises an important question: Was dominion-making meant to be the primary display of God’s image for all time? Functional views emphasize continuity throughout the canon and read dominion into the New Testament.

Theologically, it is unclear how a man who refuses to take dominion of the earth could still be the image of God under this view. Philosophically, being is necessary for doing, which means the *imago*

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40 Erickson, *Theology*, 530.
41 Ibid. 531.
42 Clines, “Image,” 96. Clines added, “In [Genesis] 1:6 “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters” we have two commands (in form apparently co-ordinate jussives linked by simple waw), yet two acts of creation are not referred to; the firmament, in being a firmament in the midst of the waters, in fact is already separating waters above from waters below.” He is correct in this statement.
43 Clines read a functional view into the passage by saying: “If the second member of the sentence were not true, the first could hardly be so.” Whether man takes dominion or not, he is ever and always the image of God. Genesis 1:26 does not say man must rule or he is not the image. Lemke noted Clines’ inconsistency here as well, see “Meaning of the *Imago*,” 7. His discussion of the Hebrew syntax is more in depth as well.
cannot be an action alone. The *imago* must, at least, have some substantive part that allows man to actually take dominion.44

To define the *imago*, the simplest view that best accounts for all the biblical data should be chosen. In other words, apply Ockham’s Razor. The *imago* cannot be various parts of man, either relational or functional. Each of these fail in ways to explain relevant verses and are often speculative. The simplest explanation is this: The image of God is man.

**RESPONSE TO THE THREE MAJOR VIEWS**

When God gave the Ten Commandments, He forbid that man should ever make an image in His likeness (Exod 20:4). What man was not allowed to do was something God had already done. God did make an image of Himself, and that image was man.45 Herman Bavinck wrote:

> Man does not simply *bear or have* the image of God; he *is* the image of God. From the doctrine that man has been created in the image of God flows the clear implication that that image extends to man in his entirety. Nothing in man is excluded from the image of God.46

Genesis 1:27 says, “God created man in His own image.” The text does not say that parts of man were created in God’s image; it does not state that the image is relational or an action. Scripture simply says that man was created in God’s image. Therefore, the totality of a human being is what should be understood as the *imago*.47

“Image” or the Hebrew *tselem* ordinarily refers to a three-dimensional model.48 Outside the creation account, it is used in reference to an idolatrous statue, a shadow, or a painted image.49 The central idea is

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44 Ibid. 6.
46 See ibid. 65. Bavinck, like Anthony Hoekema, held to a substantive/functional view of the *imago*, a hybrid view. Therefore, man’s being is the image of God but that image also includes man representing God on earth. In this way, the *imago* is static and dynamic, both a noun and a verb.
47 Clines, “Image,” 80. “Thus, we may say that according to Genesis 1 man does not have the image of God, nor is he made in the image of God, but is himself the image of God.”
49 The word is used 17 times in 15 verses. See Gardoski, “Culture,” 5.
conformity or imitation. As used in Genesis, tselem indicates that man was created with some degree of conformity to God. He was modeled after God.\textsuperscript{50}

The opening chapter of Ezekiel uses the word “likeness” (demuth) six times with earthly analogies of heavenly things. For instance, from the midst of a fiery cloud came four beings that bore a “likeness” to four living creatures (1:5). In the sky was something with the “likeness” of a throne and seated upon it was someone with the “likeness” of a man (1:26). The Hebrew demuth carries a wide range of meaning from an actual likeness to a weakened resemblance.\textsuperscript{51} Demuth underscores and supports the meaning of tselem in the Genesis account.\textsuperscript{52} The Hebrew words lead to the conclusion that man is a God-like representative of God.\textsuperscript{53} Anthony Hoekema wrote:

Man, then, was created in God’s image so that he or she might represent God, like an ambassador from a foreign country. As an ambassador represents his country’s authority, so man (both male and female) must represent the authority of God. As an ambassador is concerned to advance the best interests of his country, so man must seek to advance God’s program for this world. As God’s representatives, we should support and defend what God stands for, and should promote what God promotes. As God’s representatives, we must not do what we like, but what God desires.\textsuperscript{54}

Originally, God created man to represent Him by taking dominion over the uninhabited earth and ruling over it. Consequently, it has been demonstrated that taking dominion is a consequence of the imago, not an

\textsuperscript{50} Van Leeuwen, “Form, Image,” 644.


\textsuperscript{52} Clines, “Image,” 70.

\textsuperscript{53} Women are God’s image as well. The creation account indicates that man and woman are equally God’s image (cf. Gen 1:27). Henry Lazenby wrongly concluded, “To affirm that both sexes are equal before God is to admit that each has equal rights and obligations no matter what the differences in physiology between the two. Such differences should not necessitate differences in social roles or ecclesiastical offices” (see Henry F. Lazenby, “The Image of God: Masculine, Feminine, or Neuter,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 30 [March 1987]: 70). Lazenby failed to see that Genesis teaches role differences (cf. Gen 2:20-25). The New Testament does as well (cf. Col 3:18-19; 1 Tim 2:12).

\textsuperscript{54} Hoekema, Image, 67-68.
action to be equated with it. Henceforth, there is no permanency to this action and no need to read it into the New Testament.

At creation, God commanded His image to display itself by taking dominion or ruling on His behalf. At redemption, He has commanded His image to declare a message on His behalf. Believers today are God’s ambassadors, representatives of the King calling the world to surrender before the King comes (2 Cor 5:20).

The emphasis of the church is not upon man as ruler but upon man as messenger. In the words of Kevin DeYoung, “God does not send out His church to conquer. He sends us out in the name of the One who has already conquered. We go only because He reigns.”

Making disciples is the church’s mission (Matt 28:18-20); taking dominion is not. Striving for continuity, functional views are unable to account for this change.

Man is the image of God, and the Lord has commanded His image to represent Him today by proclaiming a message. However, whether ruling or proclaiming, it must be remembered that no action is the imago. Man is God’s image not because of what he does but simply because he is, which means all parts of man enable him to bear a likeness to God and accurately represent Him.

The mind enables man to think God’s thoughts after Him (Ps 119:66), to reason, and to apply wisdom in a way similar to his creator. Emotions enable him to feel a God-like sorrow for the lost (Ezek 33:11; Rom 9:1-3), to delight in those who love God (Phil 1:8), to yearn to please God (Ps 119:4-5), and to long to be with Him (Phil 1:21-23; Heb 11:10, 14-16). The ability to make choices and execute plans is a glimpse of the God who commands and directs all things according to His purpose (Isa 46:10). The capacity for fellowship enables man to fellowship with God and others in a way that resembles the harmony of the Trinity (John 17:23). If God is spirit, what is the purpose of the body? The body enables man to bear the image and represent Him in a physical world.

Man was created thoroughly God-like, the physical analogy of God Himself. Man’s creation gives him a dignity and position exceedingly

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56 Again, notice the importance of the question: Is taking dominion a consequence of the imago or is it equated with the imago in Genesis 1:27-28?
57 When the religious leaders confronted Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar, He held a coin bearing the Caesar’s image and said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (cf. Luke 20:21-25). In other words, what has Caesar’s image belongs to him, and what has God’s image
higher than even the angels, and this is also what makes his Fall into sin incomparably tragic. For a God-like being to do hell-bent things is the most damnable perversion. It is God seeing a reflection of Himself doing what He would never do.

When man fell, the imago was distorted; and if all of man is the imago, then all of man was distorted in the fall. Man became thoroughly perverted. The physical body ceased to be immortal and the spirit within man died (Rom 5:12; 6:23; 1 Cor 15:53-54). Man’s desires turned from God (Isa 64:6; Jer 17:9). His actions became wicked and his speech vile (Rom 3:13-16). The mind became futile, the heart hard, and man’s understanding of things above grew dark (Eph 4:17-18).58

Man is still the image of God but to look upon him today is to see a gross perversion of the God who created him. The amazing fact is that God actually allowed this distortion of Himself to live. Man’s fall was more personal and uniquely offensive when compared to the fall of the angels who were not created in God’s image. However, in His grace and mercy, the Lord did not destroy but chose to restore.

To dwell in glory forever with God is the destiny of His people (John 17:24; Rev 21:3), but this necessitates a change; it means that redemption is more than penal substitution.59 Man needs forgiveness, but he also needs a miraculous transformation in order to dwell with God. The imago must be restored and, fortunately, God has ordained that those He foreknew would be “predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29). The destiny of the fallen imago Dei is to be conformed to the imago Christi. Redeemed men and women will become Christ-like.

All who are in Christ have been raised to spiritual life (Eph 2:5). However, between now and the eschatological future they are a work in progress. The hearts and minds of the redeemed are not perfected (Rom 12:2; Col 3:10). They still sin and sometimes represent God in ways appalling to Him. However, they are growing and learning to bear His image more faithfully. The Christian should consider himself a genuinely new creation though he is not yet a totally new one (2 Cor 5:17).

In this life, the believer is being transformed “from one degree of glory to another” (3:18). When the goal of salvation is complete, all that was marred by the Fall will be restored. In redemption, the effects of sin

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58 See also, Gardoski, “Culture,” 14.
59 Redemption includes penal substitution but it does not end there. God’s goal is not merely to remove sin but to conform the sinner back to His image (cf. Rom 8:29). Therefore, sanctification always follows true conversion.
begin to be undone until the day they are entirely eradicated. However, redemption is more than even this. In Christ, man will exceed his former glory. Adam originally was “able not to sin and die” (posse peccare et mori). In Christ, man will “not be able to sin and die” (non posse peccare et mori). Man was and always will be a finite reflection of the infinite God. However, in future glory, he will be like God in His inability to sin and His inability to die (1 Cor 15:54; Rev 21:4).\footnote{Ibid. 92. See also, Jay Adams, \textit{Theology of Christian Counseling} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).}

A more-than-restored image is the ultimate goal of salvation. God performed so great a work “so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:7). That God would take a vile distortion of His image, restore it, and make it more beautiful than ever before speaks volumes about Him. Man in the coming ages will forever be a trophy of God’s grace and kindness along with His patience, compassion, mercy, grace, power, wisdom, faithfulness, and love. Man was created to be a God-like representative of God and, as surely as the Lord keeps His promises, the redeemed will be more than restored to this.

**CONCLUSION**

What does it mean that man was created in the image of God? The doctrine means that man is a God-like representative, the physical analogy of God Himself. Theologians have long debated this question, and a consensus hardly exists. However, one’s view of the \textit{imago Dei} affects more than a minor point of anthropology; it is foundational for some of the most important doctrines in Scripture and has some of the most exciting practical implications.

\footnote{1 Cor 15:54; Rev 21:4.}
LEVELS OF PERSPICUITY
IN THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES

Brian H. Wagner

It can be demonstrated that the New Testament recognizes three levels of doctrinal importance, which it also connects, at least indirectly, to defined levels of perspicuity. However, one will understandably question whether the same can be demonstrated in the Old Testament. The New Testament teaches that the gospel is “that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4, NKJV); it also teaches that a young child is able to express personal faith in Christ and thereby enter into His kingdom (Matt 18:2-6; Col 1:13). The truths of the gospel, therefore, “according to the Scriptures” must be at the highest level of perspicuity (i.e. simple enough for a child to understand), and are at the highest level of importance (i.e. an incorruptible seed, producing everlasting life, as indicated in 1 Pet 1:23).

The New Testament also teaches that God-ordained pastoral leadership can be recognized by the laity by the clear scriptural standards that are set for such leadership in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5. Included in those standards is the requirement of “holding fast to the faithful word,” which is also identified as “sound doctrine” (Tit 1:9). Whatever is to be included in this category of “sound doctrine” must be clear enough for all those who are not called to pastoral ministry, and this is because they, as a congregation, are involved in the ordination of such pastors by their own consenting voice (cf. Acts 14:23, χειροτονησωντες, “raising the hand,” “voting”). Moreover, as individuals, they are called to submit to such pastoral leadership (Heb 13:17). Therefore, sound doctrine cannot be obscure to the layman’s mind for he is the one who must compare what his pastor may say is essential for spiritual health and growth (i.e. “soundness,” with what he reads for himself in the Scriptures, utilizing his own normal education and literacy). Sound doctrine is at a secondary level of importance because it concerns truths that, though clear to a layman’s mind, are not necessary for salvation, but are essential for Christian maturity.

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The final level of doctrinal importance that is delineated in the New Testament, which also relates doctrine to clarity, is identified in Romans 14:1 as “doubtful things” (διακρίσεις διαλογισμών, or arguments about inferences). The examples for such “doubtful things” given in the context of this chapter are eating “only vegetables” and “esteeming one day above another.” The issues are not those of which the Scripture has nothing to say; rather, Paul indicated that God has not given to him, or any other apostles, any clear revelatory prescription or prohibition in these areas for the New Testament believer. What is clear, and thus is also “sound doctrine,” is the command for the loving acceptance of one another in the Christian faith, in spite of personal choices that may be made, and even should be made in these areas (14:5); this lowest level of doctrinal clarity, as it relates to Scripture, is still an important one. The lack of Scriptural clarity on this level is intended to lead the disciple, by his own meditation on what Scripture does say on each subject, into more prayerful dialog with his Master about what the Scripture does not say. From this he develops a deeper and more personal walk with his Lord.

However, the question still remains: Is there a confirming witness to these same levels of scriptural perspicuity to be found in the Old Testament? Are the essential teachings for everlasting life clear enough for a child to understand in the Old Testament Law and Prophets? Are the necessary doctrines for spiritual health and growth written in layman’s terms in the pages of the Old Covenant? Furthermore, is there some indication in the Old Testament itself that the written Word is incomplete, and hence unclear on some things, providing the impetus to seek through prayerful meditation the personal presence of God?

To answer these questions, the testimonies of Christ, Moses, David, and Ezra will be surveyed concerning their view of Scripture’s perspicuity in the Old Testament. Through these surveys it will be shown that the three levels of doctrinal importance based on clarity that are found in the New Testament are, at least, inferred in the teaching of the Old Testament.

CHRIST’S SUPPORT OF OLD TESTAMENT CLARITY

Though the words and works of Christ are recorded in the New Testament, He was living under the Old Testament divine economy, utilizing exclusively the Old Testament in His ministry to the people of Israel, the people who were still under obligation to Old Testament Law. As the Godman, Christ’s view of the Old Testament’s clarity becomes the ultimate teaching and example of how the Old Testament perspicuity was to be viewed during those times. One primary example from Christ’s teaching in
support of Old Testament clarity is in His unapologetic reference to Old Testament history.

The Old Testament is over one-half historic narrative in composition. Evangelical theologian, Charles Ryrie indicated how Christ’s teaching corroborated the historicity of the narrative portions of the Old Testament.

Our Lord used historical incidents in the Old Testament in a manner which evidenced His total confidence in their factual historicity.

He acknowledged that Adam and Eve were created by God, that they were two living human beings, not merely symbols of mankind and womankind, and that they acted in specific ways (Matt. 19:3-5; Mark 10:6-8).

He verified events connected with the flood of Noah’s day; namely, that there was an ark and that the Flood destroyed everyone who was not in that ark (Matt. 24:38-39; Luke 17:26-27). On two different occasions, He authenticated God’s destruction of Sodom, and the historicity of Lot and his wife (Matt. 10:15; Luke 17:28-29).

He accepted as true the story of Jonah and the great fish (Matt. 12:40) and acknowledged the historicity of Isaiah (12:17), Elijah (17:11-12), Daniel (24:15), Abel (23:35), Zechariah (23:35), Abiathar (Mark 2:26), David (Matt. 22:45), Moses and his writings (8:4; John 5:46), Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt. 8:11; John 8:39).

Christ did not merely allude to these stories, but He authenticated the events in them as factual history to be completely trusted.¹

Christ did not even once call into question the reality of any historical event recorded in the Old Testament.

Whereas history writing is by its very nature intended to be clear and taken literally, the Old Testament is also composed of other genres of literature (i.e. instructional and prophetic).² Instructional material can be


² The discussion of how Old Testament historical literature has been traditionally taken to include a typical meaning by some or an allegorical meaning by others would require additional time and research that would not aid developing further the subject of this article. It is sufficient to recognize that the New Testament record of Christ’s use of the Old Testament historical passages never included a typical or allegorical interpretation.
basically identified by verses with imperatives, which are primarily found in the Law and the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament; it also can be identified as including verses with any divinely revealed declarative statements of fact about the nature of God, sin, salvation, and sanctification. One expects instructional material, which is written for mass consumption,\(^3\) to also be perspicacious, like historical material. Commands are written to be obeyed, and declarative statements are written to be believed. Being written in an oblique fashion would defeat the purpose of such instruction.

Some of the first recorded uses by Christ of Old Testament instructional material are from His disputation with Satan in the wilderness. To each of the three temptations posed to Him by Satan, Jesus responded with Old Testament quotes introduced similarly by the phrase “it is written” (γεγραπται, or it stands as written authority). Each of the quotations is given without further explanation. From Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus quoted, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God.” From Deuteronomy 6:16, Jesus quoted, “You shall not tempt the LORD your God.” From Deuteronomy 6:13, Jesus quoted, \(^4\) “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.” Jesus expected the devil to understand the plain meaning and truth of each text quoted. The super intelligent archangel and archenemy of Christ did not present any argumentation against the plain meaning that Jesus presented in these Old Testament commands.\(^5\) The few examples

\(^3\) Unlike the New Testament, which has three epistles written initially for pastoral leadership (i.e. 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus), all the books of the Old Testament appear to be entirely addressed to the general population of Israel. Even Leviticus, which seems to be a handbook of public worship for the priests of Israel, is addressed to “the children of Israel” (Lev 1:2). It is possible that the book of Ecclesiastes was written to include the Gentiles since it has very little reference to Jewish religious life, and the book of Esther may have also been first published for Gentile consumption, providing a logical reason for its obvious exclusion of the divine name in its text.

\(^4\) The last quotation is not a literal translation from the Hebrew Text or even the Septuagint available in Jesus’ day; it contains two specific paraphrased elements. Jesus substituted the word “worship” for the original Old Testament word “fear,” and He added the word “only” no doubt to emphasize that the Old Testament knows of no shared religious “service” (λατρεύεις was used in Matthew).

\(^5\) It is interesting to note that Satan used the Scripture himself in a perspicacious way during his second temptation of Christ. Like Jesus, he also said, “It is written” and then he quoted, without explanation, the promises from Psalm 91:11 and 12, “He shall give His angels charge over you,” and, “In their hands they
from Deuteronomy are persuasive indicators that the premiere Old Testament prophet, who is also the Son of God, interpreted the instructional material as being of a perspicacious character.

However, Jesus demonstrated in His Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5—7) that the plain interpretation of the Mosaic Law was not intended for just a limited application of each of its prescriptions and prohibitions. Those limitations were being offered with presumptuous authority in the tradition of Jewish theologians before Him (e.g. “you have heard it said” in 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). That traditional interpretation that they gave, Jesus said later, actually “transgresses” and makes “of no effect” the plain meaning of God’s law (15:1-9). Australian theologian and academic dean of Moore Theological College in Sydney, Mark D. Thompson, concurred.

With regard to the laws quoted by Jesus at this point, the coming of the Messiah calls for a righteousness that takes seriously the ‘direction’ of the Torah as well as its letter. Jesus’ intends to show how the greater righteousness he is talking about, the righteousness that ‘exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees’, surpasses the demands of the Torah without contradicting or overthrowing it. In other words, he both exposes and opposes a casuistic or legalistic approach to the teaching of the Old Testament. In this way the antitheses lead up to their conclusion in verse 48: ‘You therefore must be perfect, as you heavenly Father is perfect.’ It is evident that Jesus’ use of the Old Testament texts in this connection relies upon an understanding and indeed a basic agreement with them.6

Thompson did not recognize that Jesus is only indirectly dealing with the Old Testament Law as interpreted by Jewish tradition, but Thompson did recognize that Jesus’ interpretation of any Old Testament Law is based upon how it plainly relates to the whole purpose of the Old Testament Law, which is a normal principle of perspicuity within all human understanding

shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.” The temptation was for Christ to cast Himself from the heights of the pinnacle of the temple, relying on the literal truth of these promises for the preservation of His life. Jesus did not rebuke Satan for any supposed misunderstanding of the plain meaning of these Old Testament written promises, but He did rebuke him for the presumption that any initiative based on belief in a clear promise can supersede obedience to a clear command. Jesus also quoted Scripture when confronting the moneychangers in the Temple (Matt 12:13 from Isa 56:7).

6 Mark D. Thompson, A Clear and Present Word (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006) 85.
of literature (i.e. that the clarity of an isolated text is subject to the clarity of its context). Even a modern reader of the whole Old Testament Law would quickly come to the same crossroads of decision that every member of the Old Testament covenant community must have faced when they felt the Law's call for a "perfection" they could never meet. Does one just trust in God's mercy for one's continually falling short of such a divine demand for holiness? Or, should trust be placed in a relative obedience to a majority of God's individual commands, hoping that such obedience will somehow outweigh the disobedience and earn an everlasting home in paradise? Of course, Jesus was using the proper interpretation of Old Testament Law to draw His fellow countrymen to see that He was the mercy of God in which they should place their trust. They should stop trusting in their incomplete obedience to God's righteous demands; demands that they could clearly read for themselves in His Law.

The Old Testament not only consists of history and instruction, but also of major sections of prophecy. It is these prophetic sections of the Old Testament that find the reader often perplexed and in search of understanding, especially because they include many figures of speech, have a sparse amount of concrete details, and are sometimes structured as apocalyptic prose. These portions are by their very nature obscure and not perspicacious. The New Testament confirms this clearly.

Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow . . . —things which angels desire to look into (1 Pet 1:10-12).

If the prophets themselves and even the realm of angels were left without full understanding of Old Testament messianic prophecies, how should the ordinary layman reader clearly comprehend their meaning? Even Jesus, when instructing His disciples concerning the abomination of desolation predicted by Daniel, interjected the admonition, "Whoever reads, let him understand" (Matt 24:15; cf. Mark 13:14).\footnote{The current New King James Version, in addition to many commentaries, indicates that this interjection was an editorial comment by Matthew or Mark, and not as part of the quotation by Christ. However, since it is also found in Mark's Gospel, it would be easier to believe that the words are original to Jesus instead of trying to discern if Matthew quoted Mark, or whether Mark quoted Matthew. It also is more reasonable, and less convoluted, to believe that Jesus exhorted the disciples to read Daniel more carefully, then it is to believe that the evangelist}
The prophecy of Daniel, concerning the abomination of desolation, still today finds itself as a source of contention between many theologians, especially for those with a preterist view of Matthew 24 against those with a futurist view of that chapter. However, this passage is, at the least, a good example of Christ’s view as to how some prophetic Scriptures could easily be misinterpreted. Mark Thompson, who is probably of the preterist persuasion, agreed that Christ was pointing out the apparent difficulty of this prophecy, though Thompson believes such difficulty is not irresolvable.

Jesus appears to operate on the assumption that when the words of Scripture are read or heard, they will be understood, at least well enough understood to warrant an acknowledgment that he is who he says he is and that his words are true. Yet this overarching confidence does not exclude the possibility that an individual passage might prove difficult, such that the exhortation ‘let the reader understand’ is appropriate. He is not suggesting that every text is transparent, that understanding is always and in every case automatic or simple.\(^6\)

Jesus also pointed to specific Old Testament prophecies, which were being personally fulfilled, during His first advent. He pointed to John the Baptist as a fulfillment of the Messiah’s forerunner, predicted in Malachi (Luke 7:27 from Mal 3:1). He also noted that His rejection by the authorities of Israel, the scattering of His disciples at His arrest, and His being accounted a criminal were all Old Testament Messianic prophecies being fulfilled (Matt 21:42 from Ps 118:22; Matt 26:31 from Zech 13:7; Luke 22:37 from Isa 53:12).

Luke 4:17-21 is a favorite fulfillment-passage among dispensational theologians because it illustrates Christ’s own interpretation of Old Testament prophecy when it contains a reference both to the Messiah’s first and to His second comings in the same passage (from Isa 61:1-2). Jesus stops in mid-sentence in His quotation of Isaiah’s prophecy, leaving unsaid the portion concerning His second advent. Dispensational theologian John A. Martin remarked:

The portion of Scripture Jesus read was Isaiah 61:1-2, a messianic passage. He concluded His reading with the words, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor—stopping in the middle of the verse

exhorted his readers, without clarifying for them whether it is his gospel or Daniel’s prophecy that they should read with understanding.

\(^6\) Thompson, *Clear and Present Word*, 87.
without reading the next line in Isaiah 61:2 about God’s vengeance. When Jesus added, **Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing**, the implication was clear. Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah who could bring the kingdom of God which had been promised for so long—but His First Advent was not His time for judgment.9

However, this passage, like the other examples previously mentioned, also serve to show that Old Testament prophecy seems to require special revelation to confirm with certainty the understanding of its fulfillment. To its original readership, these portions of the Old Testament sometimes gave some recognizable details (e.g. the Messiah’s birth in Bethlehem, from Micah 5:2, which was understood by the scribes in Herod’s palace [cf. Matt 2:6] and understood by some of the crowd in Jerusalem [cf. John 7:42]). However, most Old Testament prophetic material seems to have afforded the Jewish people only a general understanding concerning its fulfillment. The main intention of prophecy seems to be to inspire confident anticipation and urgency of service, rather than to provide a detailed glimpse into the future.

Jesus expected the people of His day to gain understanding through their own personal reading of the Scripture. The Gospels record six different times that Jesus pointed to the clarity of meaning in the Old Testament when He introduced certain passages. He did this by questioning the crowds with the phrase, “Have you never read. . .?” (cf. Matt 12:3, 12:5, 19:4, 21:16, 21:42, 22:31). He also expected the Jews of His day to search the Old Testament Scriptures. He knew that such an honest search would lead them to come to Him for salvation (John 5:39-40). However, many were rejecting Jesus and His teaching because they did not have the desire to do God’s will (cf. John 7:17) nor did they believe the clear teaching of Moses (5:46-47). As far as what is necessary to know for salvation, Jesus indicated that the Old Testament Scriptures were a more clear and convincing testimony on their own than even the testimony of someone rising from the dead (cf. Luke 16:29-31).

**MOSES’ SUPPORT OF OLD TESTAMENT CLARITY**

One may well ask the question, “What did the Old Testament authors themselves recognize and understand about the perspicacious quality of

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their own writings and the writings of other Old Testament prophets?” Did God have them teach anything about the clarity of their own writings, or the clarity of the revelation that was divinely preserved in them? Moses was the first author of inspired Scripture. Indeed, the first five books of the Bible, for which Moses is the primary author, make up almost one quarter of the Old Testament Scriptures, and over one sixth of the entire Bible. The Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are known to biblical scholars as the Pentateuch and to the Jewish people as the Torah.

There are two main passages written by Moses—from God’s revelation to him—that speak directly to the issue of that revelation’s clarity and the perspicuity of the Scriptures that would preserve that revelation. Those passages are Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and 30:11-14.

Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the LORD your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess, that you may fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged. Therefore hear, O Israel, and be careful to observe it, that it may be well with you, and that you may multiply greatly as the LORD God of your fathers has promised you—‘a land flowing with milk and honey.’ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.

10 These are only approximate estimates based on the number of pages the Pentateuch has in the personal Bible of this writer.
Moses was speaking specifically in these passages about the divine laws he had received from God on Mount Horeb, almost forty years earlier, and which he was now repeating to Israel before they crossed the Jordan River into the land of Canaan without him.

One notices in the passage from Deuteronomy 6 that the audience being addressed is the whole congregation of Israel, that they were to be literate, so that they could copy portions of these commands for themselves and their children, and that obedience to this law was not predicated upon any special instruction by the priests. Theologian Wayne Grudem agreed with this understanding of Moses’ words here.

All the people of Israel were expected to be able to understand the words of Scripture well enough to be able to “teach them diligently” to their children. This teaching would not have consisted merely of rote memorization devoid of understanding, for the people of Israel were to discuss the words of Scripture during their activities of sitting in the house or walking or going to bed or getting up in the morning. God expected that all of his people would know and be able to talk about his Word, with proper application to ordinary situations in life.\(^{11}\)

Someone may argue that this passage provides an example of how Scripture can be unclear, even in its instructional portions. Modern Judaism of the Hasidic variety have taken the words “You shall bind them as a sign upon your hands, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” in a literalistic fashion. Thus they wear phylacteries with portions of Scriptures folded inside and then tied around their arms and their foreheads. However, there is no historical confirmation in Scripture or in Jewish history that these words were understood that way in ancient times. Indeed, because of the repetition of the word “as” (from Heb ętr) and the comparisons that can be made with parallel passages which use similar wording (cf. Exod 13:9, 16; Deut 11:18; Prov 3:3; 6:21; 7:3), there is support for the understanding that these words are idiomatic for the idea of making God’s will the constant focus of one’s attention, and not to be taken ritualistically.

It is interesting that the next command – “You shall write them upon the door posts of your house and upon your gates,” is not followed literally by that Hasidim. According to commentator Albert Barnes:

On De 6:9; 11:20 is based the Jewish usage of the mezuzah. This word denotes properly a door-post, as it is rendered here and in Ex 12:7, Ex 12:22; 21:6 etc. Among the Jews however, it is the name given to the square piece of parchment, inscribed with De 6:4-9; 11:13-21, which is rolled up in a small cylinder of wood or metal, and affixed to the right-hand post of every door in a Jewish house. The pious Jew touches the mezuzah on each occasion of passing, or kisses his finger, and speaks Ps 121:8 in the Hebrew language.12

When compared with other commands given by Moses for the copying of these laws (Deut 17:18; 27:8), it is more believable that the actual imprinting of these commands upon all the doorframes of each home and on all city gates was truly meant.

In the second passage listed (30:11-14), Moses spoke directly about the clarity of the revelation that he reiterated for Israel, and this revelation is not “mysterious” (נקיון), which is a word used by Moses for matters too “hard” for laymen to judge for themselves (cf. 17:8). So life may afford difficulties to human understanding, but Moses said here that the understanding of God’s commands is not one of those difficulties. He also said that God’s law is not “far off” (שדה), which is terminology that infers the need for foreign aid to interpret the meaning (i.e. from “heaven” or from “beyond the sea”). Moses indicated that God’s Word means what the reader or hearer would be inclined to think it means (i.e. “very near” the meaning that the language spoken with their own “mouth” and believed in their own “heart” would understand). Of this passage, Mark Thompson wrote:

As one contemporary Jewish commentator puts it, ‘God’s instruction is not unintelligible or esoteric (v. 11), nor is it inaccessible and unknown (vv. 12-14). It has already been imparted to Israel by Moses, permitting Israel to learn it, meditate on it, and carry it out.’ In choosing obedience and life the Israelites were not wandering into an uncertain future with little sure knowledge of the demands of God. Nor were they committing themselves to a set of commands they were physically incapable of keeping (whether they were morally capable of keeping them is another matter). God had made his mind known, not concealed his will from them; and he had made it known in a way that could be grasped.13

13 Thompson, Clear and Present Word, 94-95.
Moses also emphasized that the public reading of God’s law, on its own, would be sufficient for the understanding necessary for even a child’s personal relationship with God (i.e. to “fear” and to “obey” Him).

At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess (31:10-13).

Finally, Moses recorded an interesting example of Scripture’s understanding of Scripture. The example concerns a passage that modern commentators have tried to obscure in its plain meaning because of modern scientific theory. The passage is the very first chapter of the first book of the Scripture, which Moses wrote (i.e. the account of creation in Gen 1). Modern commentators, enamored by evolutionary theory, have postulated all sorts of exegetical and literary reasons for not taking the seven days of creation of Genesis 1 as literal. Moreover, there are some who do not think the issue is important, as evident in the notes of the popular Life Application Study Bible.

How long did it take God to create the world? There are two basic views about the days of creation: (1) Each day was a literal 24-hour period; (2) each day represents an indefinite period of time (even millions of years).

The Bible does not say how long these time periods were. The real question, however, is not how long God took, but how he did it. God created the earth in an orderly fashion (he did not make plants before light), and he created men and women as unique beings capable of communication with him. No other part of creation can claim that remarkable privilege. It is not important how long it took God to create the world, whether a few days or a few billion years, but that he created it just the way he wanted it.14

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However, such an approach to the very first chapter of Scripture undermines the reader’s confidence in the Scripture’s perspicuity. God confirmed through Moses that the creation was indeed accomplished in six literal days. He gave that confirmation when He gave His instructions concerning the Jewish Sabbath. He said, “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (Exod 20:11). No priest or laymen, no child, not even Moses, himself, would have understood Genesis 1 as teaching other than a literal six-day creation. Bible commentator Allen P. Ross commented with regard to this issue.

Regarding the word day (yôm) several interpretations have been suggested. (1) The days of Creation refer to extended geological ages prior to man’s presence on earth. (2) The days are 24-hour periods in which God revealed His creative acts. (3) They are literal 24-hour days of divine activity. In favor of the third view is the fact that the term yôm with an ordinal (first, second, etc.) adjective means 24-hour days wherever this construction occurs in the Old Testament. Also the normal understanding of the fourth commandment (Ex. 20:11) would suggest this interpretation.\(^{15}\)

Added to Ross’ reasons in support of literal 24-hour days is the normal understanding of the repeated phrase in Genesis 1: “evening and morning” (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31).

**DAVID’S SUPPORT OF OLD TESTAMENT CLARITY**

David was an old man and about to die. He called for his son Solomon, who was to reign as king of Israel in his place after he was gone. He looked Solomon in the eye and said:

> I go the way of all the earth; be strong, therefore, and prove yourself a man. And keep the charge of the LORD your God: to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His judgments, and His testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn; that the LORD may fulfill His word which He spoke concerning me, saying, ‘If your sons take heed to their way, to walk before Me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul,’ He said, ‘you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel’ (1 Kgs 2:2-4).

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The charge by David occurred before Solomon received his gift of wisdom from God on how to lead the nation of Israel (cf. 1 Kgs 3:5ff.). David was reminding Solomon that his prospering will be dependent upon his following what is “written in the law of Moses,” assuming that Solomon would not need special interpretive tools or a reliance on scholars to help him understand the ways, statutes, commandments, judgments, and testimonies that are written there. However, as David himself wrote in Psalm 1:2-3, a man needs only to delight in and meditate on the law of the Lord to prosper from its truth.

David’s writings, of course, are now a part of the Old Testament canon of Scripture, and they provide a good example of how he viewed the writings of another prophet (i.e. those of Moses). There are two main passages attributed to David where he addressed the subject of the clarity of the writings of Moses, which he called “the law of the LORD.” The passages are found in Psalm 19 and in Psalm 119. In Psalm 19, one reads David’s words.

The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;
The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes;
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
   More to be desired are they than gold,
   Yea, than much fine gold;
   Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
   Moreover by them Your servant is warned,
   And in keeping them there is great reward (Ps 19:7-11).

Teaching concerning the perspicuity of Scripture is especially seen in the sentence, “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.” Wayne Grudem commented regarding this verse.

Here the “simple” person (Heb. peti) is not merely one who lacks intellectual ability, but one who lacks sound judgment, who is prone to making mistakes, and who is easily led astray. God’s word is so understandable, so clear, that even this kind of person is made wise by it. This should be a great comfort to all believers: no believer should think of himself or herself too foolish to read Scripture and understand it sufficiently to be made wise by it.16

16 Grudem, Systematic Theology, 106.
The term “testimonies” naturally would point towards the historical sections found in the writings of Moses, and perhaps also to those historical writings added after Moses time by Joshua and Samuel, which may also have been available to David. The dealings of God with His people provide, even for the simple minded and illiterate, real examples of wisdom for life that need no further explanation. What the simple-minded needs is just personal, prayerful meditation of how the historical situation finds for them a present application. They also need a willful determination to please the same God who is presently dealing with them as He did with His people of long ago, in the biblical story they heard read to them.

The passage also includes the sentence, “The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.” The verse, too, speaks to the concept of the general clarity that is in God’s Word, especially for those teaching passages which tell God’s people of His will for their lives. However, more so, this verse also intimates that a deepening of perspicuity, or the increasing of one’s understanding, comes through obedience to those commands that one reads in God’s Word. Spurgeon said this about the connection that exists between obedience and further enlightenment.

“Enlightening the eyes,” purging away by its own purity the earthly grossness which mars the intellectual discernment; whether the eye be dim with sorrow or with sin, the Scripture is a skilful oculist, and makes the eye clear and bright. Look at the sun and it puts out your eyes, look at the more than sunlight of Revelation and it enlightens them; the purity of snow causes snow-blindness to the Alpine traveller, but the purity of God’s truth has the contrary effect, and cures the natural blindness of the soul. It is well again to observe the gradation; the convert became a disciple and next a rejoicing soul, he now obtains a discerning eye, and as a spiritual man discerneth all things, though he himself is discerned of no man.17

The Scriptural commands of God are not only clear in and of themselves, but obedience to them brings further clarity to one’s life and presumably to other portions of God’s Word.

David also used the figure of “light” when speaking about God’s Word in the second major passage where he taught concerning Scriptural clarity. The passage is in Psalm 119, the longest psalm or chapter of

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Scripture. In that psalm, where every verse is a prayerful reflection upon some aspect of God’s Word in David’s life, David taught again concerning Scripture’s perspicuity: “The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple” (119:130). The theme of God’s Word as “light” is seen in another familiar verse of this psalm (i.e. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,” Ps 119:105). Mark Thompson said of this theme:

The import of the metaphor seems straightforward enough. God’s word enables the faithful pilgrim to see clearly. It dispels the darkness so characteristic of life on this side of the fall and so keeps the faithful one from stumbling. It gives guidance. It sets direction.

How would this be possible, that Scripture should, of its own nature, cause clarity in the thinking of others if, of its own nature, it were not clear to the reader by a normal use of literacy and general education? Those who doubt the natural perspicuity of Scripture need to provide an alternative answer.

William Whitaker, a Reformation theologian, in countering the Romanist theologian Bellarmino, who rejected this teaching of perspicuity from this psalm, said:

[T]he Jesuit says, that, if these places be understood of the whole scripture, then the scripture is called clear and a lamp, not because it is easy to be understood, but because it illuminates men when it is understood. I answer, and affirm, that it is therefore called a lamp, because it hath in itself a light and a brightness wherewith it illuminates others, unless they be absolutely blind, or willfully turn away their eyes from this light. A candle is not kindled that it should be set under a bushel, but that it should shine on all who are in the house. The same is the case of the word of God. . . . A lamp hath light in itself, whether men look upon that light or not: so also

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18 Some have questioned whether David was the author of this psalm. Certainly, it is lacking the normal title, “A psalm of David,” and it is within the fifth book of compiled psalms, presumably compiled after David’s time. However, there are many internal similarities with the wording and message of Psalm 19, just discussed previously. Baptist theologian, John Gill, in the eighteenth century, said of the authorship of this psalm: “This psalm is generally thought to be written by David, but when is uncertain; very probably towards the decline of life; and, as some think, for the sake or his son Solomon” (John Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible [St Louis: Sword Searcher Software, 1995-2006, v. 4.8]).

19 Thompson, Clear and Present Word, 96
scripture is clear and perspicuous, whether men be illuminated by
it, or receive from it no light whatever.\(^2^0\)

Whitaker basically said that there in no need for an ecclesiastical
magisterium to “turn the light on” for any layperson to come to a normal
understanding of what Scripture says.

However, Wayne Grudem rightly indicated from Psalm 119 that the
psalmist also prayed for a fuller understanding\(^2^1\) of God’s Word (119:27,
34, 73, 125, 144, 169), which cannot negate that there is some basic level
understanding that is natural to the Scriptures. As previously mentioned,
David said that God’s Word gives understanding to the simple (119:130).
Furthermore, he also said, that, because of his own personal meditation
and obedience of God’s Word, he had more understanding than “all” his
teachers and even than the “ancients” (119:99-100). However, these
prayers for understanding, as well as others for divine instruction (119:12,
26, 64, 66, 68, 108, 124, 135),\(^2^2\) indicate that David recognized that there
were some things that were harder to understand, which required further
study and experience to aid in their understanding. However, in both
Psalm 19 and Psalm 119, David taught that the Word of the Lord, of its own
clarity and power, can covert the soul, giving it salvation. “The law of L ORD
is perfect, converting the soul” (19:7). “Let Your mercies come also to me, O
L ORD – Your salvation according to Your word” (119:41).

**EZRA’S SUPPORT OF OLD TESTAMENT CLARITY**

A major concession to be made in this article is that there is a paucity of
direct quotations within the Old Testament made by one prophetic writer
of another’s writing which also mention the name of the previous author
being quoted. There is a large section of quoted material, presumably
original with Isaiah and copied almost word for word by Jeremiah and Ezra

\(^2^0\) William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture Against the Papists*,

\(^2^1\) Wayne Grudem, “The Perspicuity of Scripture” (paper presented at

\(^2^2\) Most of these prayers for personal instruction by God are phrased,
“Teach me your statutes.” A study of this word, statutes (Heb. *choq*), may well
indicate a desire for wisdom on how to personally apply the laws of Moses to the
situation in which he presently found his own life. However, what is very obvious
to David is that the understanding of such applications of God’s Word can be
derived directly from God’s personal instruction without a necessity of human
instruction (cf. 1 John 2:27).
(i.e. from Isa 36—37 to 2 Kgs 18—19 and 2 Chron 32:1-23). However, neither Jeremiah nor Ezra mention the Book of Isaiah as the origin for this story from the life of Isaiah and King Hezekiah.

Furthermore, there are other smaller such “borrowings” of material, especially by Ezra from 2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings for his writing of 1-2 Chronicles. All these are historic narrative selections, where perspicuity is naturally assumed. Ezra did identify generally that there is confirmation for what he wrote in 1 Chronicles to be found also “in the book of Samuel the seer, in the book of Nathan the prophet and in the book of Gad the seer” (1 Chron 29:29). The note by Ezra gives a strong inference that he recognized the inspiration of the books now called 1-2 Samuel. He also referred to what was “written in the book of the kings of Israel and of Judah” (2 Chron 35:27), which may be his recognition of 1-2 Kings. However, the scarcity of direct quotations and of direct identifications of other divinely inspired authors makes the task more difficult for the identifying of how clear these inspired books were to people of Old Testament times.24

It is not within the scope of this article to identify all the possible direct quotations or allusions made by one writing Old Testament prophet of another’s. Appendix A provides an interesting example of what may be one such quotation, made by the prophet Jonah, both in his prayer and in his inspired journal of that prayer, taken from the Book of Joel. Furthermore, this quote from Joel 2:13 seems itself to be an allusion to the revelation given to Moses that had been written in the book of Exodus. If Jonah’s words were such a quotation from Joel, one can plainly see that he clearly understood and applied Joel’s words literally to his situation, having interpreted them literally, though his personal application of that plain meaning was self-serving.

Ezra may be used by some to promote the notion that Scripture’s perspicuity is dependent upon some understanding that is provided through a divinely ordained teaching ministry. They point specifically to a passage in Nehemiah 8.

Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the

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23 According to Jewish tradition, the author of First and Second Kings was Jeremiah, and of First and Second Chronicles was Ezra.

24 An easily identifiable example would be 2 Chronicles 25:4 quoting from Deuteronomy 24:16.
assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose . . . . And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground . . . and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading (Neh 8:1-8).

They say it is obvious from this passage that the Levites were a necessary component to the people understanding what they heard being read. However, the passage specifically says that those who assembled were those “who could hear with understanding” (8:2) and “those who could understand” (8:3). So what the Levites seem to have provided was further understanding, perhaps of Hebrew idiomatic expressions, of historical information, or of liturgical terms. These things would have been foreign to the ears of these returnees from exile in Babylon, where the Chaldean culture and language had become more familiar to them.

Commentator Adam Clarke said of this reasonable meaning for what kind of understanding the Levites were providing: “The Israelites, having been lately brought out of the Babylonish captivity, in which they had continued seventy years, according to the prediction of Jeremiah, Jer 25:11, were not only extremely corrupt, but it appears that they had in general lost the knowledge of the ancient Hebrew to such a degree, that when the book of the law was read, they did not understand it: but certain Levites stood by, and gave the sense, i.e., translated into the Chaldee dialect.” 25 Mark Thompson said of the two different types of “understanding” (וָּכָּל):

The context seems to suggest that the people did not know this text well. It is uncertain what access these returnees might have had to it during the years in exile in Babylon. Yet it is read publicly, before

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25 Adam Clarke, Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible (St Louis: Sword Searcher Software, 1995-2006, v. 4.8).
'all who could understand what they heard'. In this case the Levites have a special role in facilitating that understanding. Later Jewish tradition saw this activity as the origin of the scriptural Targum. More recent studies have not been so sure. That Levites may have translated from Hebrew to Aramaic, ensured exact pronunciation, intonation and phrasing, or have gone beyond all these to instruct the people on the basis of what had been read to them. That help was provided and that it resulted in all the people understanding what was read is certain. What form that help took remains a matter of debate.26

Obviously a teaching about Scripture’s perspicuity should be looked for primarily in teaching passages of Scripture, as was done from the teaching of Moses and David, and only secondarily, as confirmation, from inferences that can be taken from historical passages of Scripture. The passage emphasizes that the people already have understanding before the reading begins; it also emphasizes the importance of publicly reading God’s Word, which makes auxiliary, and not especially necessary, any further understanding which may have been produced by Levitical instruction.

The Old Testament concludes with the writings of a man of God called “a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given” (Ezra 7:6). He “had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances to Israel” (7:10). More than any other Old Testament writer, Ezra did draw attention in his writings to previously inspired writings of the Old Testament, using phrases such as “the Law of Moses” (2 Chron 23:18; 30:16; Ezra 3:2; 7:6; Neh 8:1), “the Law of the LORD” (1 Chron 16:40; 22:12; 2 Chron 12:1; 17:9; 31:3-4; 34:14; 35:26; Ezra 7:10; Neh 9:3), and “The Word of the LORD” (11:3 “by Samuel;” 2 Chron 34:21; 35:6; Ezra 1:1 “by the mouth of Jeremiah”).27 He also alluded to the writings of Moses in 2 Chronicles 33:8 and Nehemiah 9:14, and to the writings of David in 2 Chronicles 23:18. In all these references by Ezra, one sees his expectation that the reader of his works will naturally understand that there is an assumed clarity in these other Scriptures that he was identifying.

The clearest example that Ezra recorded of Scripture’s perspicacious nature is seen in the pericope of King Josiah’s reaction upon hearing the words read to him from a copy of the Book of the Law, which

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27 Ezra used this phrase more widely, but not as obviously related to the written Word of the LORD (e.g. 1 Chron 10:13; 11:3,10; 12:23; 15:15; 22:8; 2 Chron 11:2; 12:7; 18:4,18; 30:12; 34:21; 35:6; 36:21-22; Ezra 1:1).
was recently recovered from the walls of the temple (2 Chron 34:8-28; cf. 2 Kgs 2:3-20). Ezra recorded Josiah’s immediate reaction upon having just heard the reading without any added explanation (i.e. “. . . he tore his clothes”). As Mark Thompson explained:

He needed no scholars to make this plain to him. As he tells the working group he gathers soon after hearing these words read, ‘great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us’ (v. 13). Whatever may have changed since the time of Moses (and much had changed in political and social terms at least), this much was clear: the nation of Judah had broken its covenant with the living God. In such a context, the mission to Huldah the prophetess was not an attempt to seek an explanation of the text, but rather to ask when the expected judgment would fall (vv. 14-20).28

One final note concerning Ezra’s support for Scripture’s clarity is noticed in his response to the prophecy of Jeremiah concerning the terminus of the exile after seventy years. As difficult as the understanding of prophecies are because of their lack of detail, their many symbolic expressions, and their use of conditional elements, Ezra had no difficulty in taking a clear detail literally, such as a length of time, when found in a prophetic message. Jeremiah predicted that the Babylonian rule over Israel would last seventy years (Jer 25:11-12). Ezra wrote concerning the literal fulfillment of this prophecy (2 Chron 36:20-21; Ezra 1:1). Such is an example, along with all other prophesies in Scripture that contain detailed lengths of time that have already been fulfilled literally; for example, Israel in Egypt 400 years (Gen 15:13), the coming of the Messiah in 483 years (Dan 9:25-26), and even the Christ’s resurrection on the third day (Matt 16:21). They all provide support for a clear hermeneutic to use for prophecies still to be fulfilled which also contain time elements, for example, the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth (Rev 20:1-6).

CONCLUSION

The survey herein from the teachings of Jesus, Moses, David, and Ezra has demonstrated that all of these major figures from Old Testament history held to the perspicuity of the Old Testament Scriptures especially in its presentation of history and the essential divine instructions for a personal

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relationship with God. They recognized that personal obedience and personal meditation will lead to greater understanding of Scripture’s teaching, especially for the sake of the needed personal application of its truth. Though very helpful for greater understanding, all human teaching ministry is not ultimately necessary to, or responsible for, an individual’s maturing into greater understanding of Scriptural truth.

It is interesting how very little is taught or even mentioned concerning the perspicuity of Scripture in the major evangelical systematic theologies used today. The older standard, Systematic Theology29 by Louis Berkhof, widely used in the last century, does not even have a section on bibliology. Archibald Alexander Hodge, in his Outlines of Theology, did provide an adequate, though relatively short, presentation of the doctrine of Scripture’s clarity, listing without discussion many relevant Scripture references, and providing some rational arguments for its importance.30

J. Oliver Buswell31 and Charles Ryrie32 did not deal with the subject directly, though they each hinted at it when discussing the rules of logic that must be used when interpreting the Scripture. Paul Enns, in The Moody Handbook of Theology, also did not mention the doctrine of Scripture’s perspicuity except in a brief comment concerning the Reformation theologian, Ulrich Zwingli.33 Millard Erickson seemed to propose that any natural clarity the Scripture may possess does not matter, since ultimately what is necessary for understanding “is an internal working of the Holy Spirit, illuminating the understanding of the hearer or reader of the Bible, bringing about comprehension of its meaning, and creating certainty concerning its truth and divine origin.”34

The only modern systematic theology, surveyed by this writer, to deal more extensively with the subject of perspicuity is by Wayne

29 Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981) 7-16. Although Berkhof did well in trying to link all the major doctrines which he was presenting to references in Scripture, it is obvious that he neglected establishing the authority for doing so from the teachings of Christ and His Apostles concerning the Scriptures themselves.

30 Archibald Alexander Hodge, Outlines in Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 85-86.


32 Ryrie, Basic Theology, 125-34.


Grudem. He devoted an entire chapter to it. More teaching of this doctrine is needed in the major textbooks that are used to train future Christian workers. Furthermore, greater debate must be offered concerning the issue that Erickson raised, that is, the relationship of the Holy Spirit’s illumination of Scripture to the Scripture’s own innate perspicuity when the unregenerate mind reads God’s Word, or has it read to him or her. However, one thing seems “clear” from the scriptural evidence presented in this article. The testimonies of Christ, Moses, David, and Ezra are united in saying that the Old Testament Scriptures are presented to an indiscriminate popular readership with the assumption that they are responsible to believe, to obey and, as individuals, to seek to understand them more fully.

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35 Grudem, Systematic Theology, 105-15.
APPENDIX A

“Slow of Anger and Abundant in Lovingkindness” (חֶסֶד-אֲדָמָה (רַב))

Exodus 34:6

Numbers 14:18

Psalm 86:15

Psalm 103:8

Psalm 145:8

Joel 2:13 (written perhaps ca. 790 BC)

Jonah 4:2 (prayed perhaps ca. 785 BC)

Nehemiah 9:17

One may note the identical phrasing that was used in these verses. All of them have the phrase “slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness.” A comparison of Jonah 4:2 with Joel 2:13 provides good evidence that Jonah may have read the scroll of this prophet of Judah, written perhaps less than a decade before Jonah’s use of this quotation from it in his prayer (4:2). The initial background of the main phrase “slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness” is obviously from the encounter of the glory of God by Moses in the cleft of the rock (Exod 34). One can see how this central phrase of self-revelation, “slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness,” given from God Himself to Israel’s covenant mediating prophet, could have easily become a credal expression for the people of God. Moses, David, Joel, Jonah, and Nehemiah were all certainly familiar with it. Hebrew scholar, Robert B. Chisholm, even called it “a traditional credal [sic] statement,” although he did not provide any non-biblical historical referencing to support this conclusion.36

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CHALLENGES TO BIBLICAL AUTHORITY IN BAPTIST LIFE

Kenneth Dowlen

The early church affirmed and practiced the authority of the Scripture. “Even church tradition and its own authority played a ministerial role, being a servant to Scripture itself to weed out heresies and to maintain the unity of the church.”¹ The Bible was the inerrant and sole divine authority, as noted by Robert Preus, “and was the conviction held by all Christians and Christian teachers through the first 1,700 years of church history.”² He further stated, “the doctrine of verbal inspiration and the inerrancy and the authority of Scripture has been the consistent teaching of the Christian Church from the time of the apostles through the early church and Middle ages to the Reformation.”³ The slogan of the Reformation was Sola Gratia, Solo Christo, Sola Fide, and Sola Scriptura (i.e. salvation is by grace alone, in Christ alone, by faith alone, and all that is necessary for salvation is taught in Scripture alone). White defined Sola Scriptura as follows:

“Sola Scriptura” is saying that Scripture is utterly unique in its nature as God-breathed revelation (nothing else is God-breathed); it is unparalleled and absolute in its authority; and it is the sole infallible rule of faith for the church. It is both a positive statement, asserting the supremacy and uniqueness of the Word, and a negative one, denying the existence of any other rule of authority on the same level.⁴

The Roman Catholic Church permitted other sources to displace the Scriptures as the only source of biblical authority: the church’s own authority, tradition, decisions of church councils, creeds, the teaching office of the church, and the authority of the pope. “In this authority of churches

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³ Ibid. 356.
and bishops, however, the guardian of the Roman see [the Church of Rome] rightly claims for himself the highest authority and the most fruitful faith.”

Therefore, the Roman Catholic Church put itself above and superior to the authority of Scripture. This dimming of the light of the Reformation continues today as is seen in the life of the Protestant church. The greatest area of deterioration is in the area of biblical authority. “In practice, the church is guided far too often, by the culture. Therapeutic technique, marketing strategies, and the beat of the entertainment world often have more to say about what the church wants, how it functions and what it offers, than does the Word of God.”

James Packer also sees an erosion of the authority of the Bible: “The anti-authority syndrome now current in the West, leading as it does to lives of haphazard hedonism in which my feelings of like and dislike are the only authority I recognize, is a major tragedy.” Of all the doctrines of the Christian life, none is more foundational than biblical authority. Within the evangelical community, nonetheless, there are those who oppose, and challenge the full authority of the Bible, which has been the case in Baptist life. Henceforth, this article will address the issues of confessions, soul competency, and the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message in the light of biblical authority.

**WHAT IS AUTHORITY?**

The dictionary defines authority as “the power or right to give commands, enforce obedience, take action, or make final decisions; jurisdiction.” The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* lists many words for authority.

Old Testament:

1. *Memshâlāh*—dominion, rule, or kingdom;
2. *Shallit*—refers primarily to the ruler and the authority attached to him;
3. *Shâlat*—verbal form of shallit. With some variation, it means to rule; and,

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6 White, *Scripture Alone*, 41-42.

New Testament:
1. *Exousia*—predominant sense of “authority” or “right,” or “power.” Authority constitutes the inherent “right” and principle foundation of power; and the exercise of power is evidence of a duly grounded authority.
2. *Epitagē*—command, commandment;
3. *Exousiazō*—have power, authority over;
4. *Kataxousiazō*—exercise power or wield power over; and,
5. *Authenteō*—to have authority over. By and large a negative connotation of self-rule, or domineering.9

Authority is a relational word that signifies the right to rule. The general concept of authority has a relational idea. For the Christian, this means that God, as the Creator, relates to His creation and has communication with humanity. Therefore, any approach to biblical authority must begin with God himself. He is the eternal God and is the sovereign and universal ruler over the entire universe. Dockery said, “He establishes His purposes in time and does all things according to His will (see Dan. 4:34-35; Eph. 1:11). All authority on earth and in heaven comes from God alone.”10

Dockery communicated an important truth when he wrote, “God’s authority is the authority of who and what God is.”11 God has made himself known to mankind through his self-revelation. Consequently, the meaning of life is found in God and humanity’s relationship to Him. God communicates to humanity through His Word, and that Word is the sacred Scripture. “This is revealed authority precisely because it has been given to us, finally and completely, in the Word of God.”12

Christianity has a built-in principle of authority because it is the communication of God to His people. As a revealed religion, God has made known His mind and will, and therefore, has authority for the believer’s life. White said, “Scripture’s authority is inherent in its nature as the very

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11 Ibid.
speech of God. Given the ultimacy of the author, the Scriptures can boast of no higher authority attesting to their truth than that which they themselves give.”

The Word of God is authoritative precisely because it is God’s veraled communication to His rational thinking creatures. Geisler provided the extent of divine authority in Scripture.

1. All that is written—2 Tim. 3:16.
2. Even the very words—Mt. 22:43; 1 Cor. 2:13.
3. And the tenses of verbs—Mt. 22:32; Gal. 3:16.
4. Even the smallest parts of words—Mt. 5:17-18.

According to Lightner, “Since the written revelation from God has been recorded under the Spirit’s superintendence and is ‘the very breathe of God,’ it is therefore authoritative-just authoritative as the One who gave it. The Savior’s own teaching concerning the scriptures included not only its origination from God and its verbal inspiration but also, therefore, its absolute authority.”

EROSION OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

With the development of biblical higher criticism, many scholars began to doubt the authority of Scripture. Allison indicated that with the tragic result of attacks against the divine inspiration and truthfulness of Scripture also came the demise of biblical authority. Ever since the nineteenth century, the attacks upon the authority of Scripture have escalated. Philosophy, especially European philosophy joined with Asian philosophy, promoted the idea that truth is no longer an absolute concept. Evolution promoted the idea that science, not revelation, is the standard of truth. Psychology, along with human reason, looked to personal experience and the emotional nature of man. German higher criticism also questioned the truth of Scripture.

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13 White, Scripture Alone, 29.
17 Allison, Historical Theology, 94.
The twentieth century has also been detrimental to the authority of Scripture. John Hammett listed seven things that have had a negative effect upon biblical authority.

1. Growth at any cost—anything that threatens growth or size must be rejected and eliminated.
2. Compromising convictions—a philosophy to enhance church growth.
3. Influx of theological pluralism—tolerance for the sake of unity.
4. Liberalism.
5. Neoorthodoxy—The Bible becomes the Word of God when the individual encounters God’s presence through its message.
6. Syncretism—a harmful blending of Christian truth with other teachings.
7. Accommodation—the call to be responsive to the culture rather than a call to be faithful to Scripture.\(^{18}\)

There are scholars who have listed ways in which biblical authority is being challenged. First, there is René Pache. With reason autonomous, science atheistic, morality unregulated, politics wholly pagan, these currents which run counter to the sovereignty of the Word of God all have their source in that same resistance of man to his Creator’s will. There is atheism, subjectivity, human reason, science-with no possibility of the supernatural, and the inner light, or experience of the individual.\(^{19}\)

The second scholar is James Draper. He cited four modern developments antagonistic to the Bible: (1) historical-critical approach to the Scripture; (2) the rise of existential philosophy; (3) the impact of naturalistic and uniformitarian science; and, (4) the presumed contributions of major world religions.\(^{20}\) The third scholar is Don Kistler who believes that there at least five things competing against the authority of the word of God: (1) limiting the nature and scope of inspiration and authority; (2) the restriction of the application of scriptural authority; (3) human philosophy opposing the authority of Scripture; (4) modern versions of “word and faith teaching” attacking the authority of Scripture;


and, (5) seriously distorted interpretations challenging the authority of Scripture.\textsuperscript{21}

**BAPTISTS**

Baptists have had their battles with regard to the authority of the Bible. The battle over the doctrine of biblical authority has been, and still is, a major battle. In their beginning, Baptists were unswervingly dedicated to the belief that the Bible is the authoritative, written revelation of God to the church. They gave prominent place to the Bible for their faith and practice.\textsuperscript{22}

Frost wrote, “as Baptists, we have from our beginning believed that both the Old Testament and New Testament are the inspired and inerrant written revelation of the living God. The Scriptures are the ultimate authority for all matters of faith and practice.”\textsuperscript{23} Another quote from the 1940s reflects this same idea: “For Baptists the authority of scripture is always supreme, and it is this fact more than any other that determines our belief and practices as well as shapes our judgments and consciences.”\textsuperscript{24} However, by the time Cook wrote those words, a definite and growing diversity was gaining ground within the ranks of Baptists. This was true before the decade of the forties in the twentieth century. However Baptists viewed the Bible in their beginning, their position changed over time. In their *Baptists and the Bible*, Bush and Nettles gave several examples.

1. C. H. Toy—He said that Genesis 1—2 are two conflicting stories. The Bible is in error at this point. He was professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and resigned in 1879.
2. A. H. Strong—He accepted evolutionary development in the Genesis account of creation, and higher critical theories of the Pentateuch. He was a professor at Rochester Seminary, 1872.
3. Walter Rauschenbusch—He saw scripture only as a record of religious history. He believed in a social gospel. He was a professor at Rochester Seminary, 1897.

\textsuperscript{21} Kistler, *Sola Scriptura*, 277.
4. Shailer Matthews—He denied the very concept of biblical authority except in the matter of experience. Religious experience is recorded in the Scripture and is produced by Scripture, but the words are not binding beyond that. He was a professor at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. He taught until 1933.

5. William Newton Clarke—In the *Use of Scripture*, he clearly and unambiguously denied that the Bible taught infallible truth, even about God. He was professor at Baptist Theological School in Toronto, 1883.\(^{25}\)

6. Harry Emerson Fosdick\(^{26}\)—He positively opposed any concept of biblical inerrancy. He had a problem with the supernaturalistic worldview of Scripture. He also failed to acknowledge Jesus as God. He taught at Union Theological Seminary from 1908 till 1946.\(^{27}\)

**SOUTHERN BAPTISTS**

There are those within the ranks of Southern Baptists who denied the full inspiration and authority of the Bible, as evident in the representative list of Southern Baptists, which follows.

1. Ralph Elliott—He published a commentary entitled *The Message of Genesis* in which he questioned the Mosaic authorship of the book. He taught that the view of biblical inerrancy placed Scripture above Christ, and that was blatant


\(^{26}\) To avoid any confusion concerning Harry Emerson Fosdick, it may help to explain that he was a Baptist, although he was called to a Presbyterian pulpit. Fosdick “was ordained to the Baptist ministry in 1903. From 1904-1915 he was pastor at Montclair, N.J., and from 1908 also taught homiletics at the Union Theological Seminary, New York. In 1918 he was called to a Presbyterian pulpit, but owing to fundamentalist pressure requiring his acceptance of traditional Presbyterian standards of Doctrine he withdrew in 1925. From 1926 to 1946 he was minister of the Baptist Riverside Church, New York. In his later years his approach to dogma was more positive. He wrote many books from the evangelistic liberal point of view. . . .” (Cross and Livingstone, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 525). Hopefully this explanation resolves any misunderstanding concerning Fosdick. He was a Baptist regardless of any non-Baptist ministerial work he performed.

\(^{27}\) Bush and Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, 305-10.

2. Clifton J. Allen—He was the general editor of the *Broadman Bible Commentary* that espoused the documentary hypothesis. He claimed that various passages, directly or indirectly, attributed to God acts and attitudes out of harmony with his nature as holy love and clearly in conflict with the example and teaching of Jesus. He was the editorial secretary of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, 1969.²⁸

3. James Leo Garrett Jr.—In his own *Systematic Theology*, Garrett argued that there are other sources of religious authority: church tradition, divine-human encounter, a specific human culture or civilization. Therefore, the Scriptures are *Suprema Scriptura* rather than *Sola Scriptura*. He was professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1949-59.²⁹

Bush and Nettles also referred to a tactic known as “doublespeak” of neoorthodoxy, which means to say something that sounds “conservative” and “traditional” while actually meaning to convey a different message to those affirming modern biblical criticism and interpretation. They gave the example of Adam doing something, without meaning that he was an historical person, which unnecessarily complicates meaning. With this approach to the Bible, neoorthodoxy ultimately diminishes one’s confidence that the text of Scripture itself presents any real truth from God.³⁰

**BAPTISTS AND CONFESSIONS OF FAITH**

From the beginning, the church found it necessary to define what it meant to be a Christian by formulating statements of Christian belief that could be recited publicly.³¹ Those who are in relationship with God have the joy and responsibility of publicly acknowledging that relationship and the beliefs that are part of it.³² A confession is a word that denotes a summary of what

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²⁸ Ibid. 329.
³² Ibid. 111.
Christians believe. Likewise, a creed is a concise, formal, and authorized statement of the points of Christian doctrine.

McBeth reported that throughout their history, Baptists have claimed to a confessional but not a creedal people. While the words mean much the same thing, they can be used and have been used to mean different things. A confession designates what people do believe; a creed what they must believe. A confession is voluntary and serves to inform, educate, and inspire; a creed is required and serves to discipline and exclude. A confession offers guidelines under the authority of Scripture; a creed tends to become binding authority, in subtle ways displacing the Bible. According to Garrett, a committee composed of E. Y. Mullins, W. J. McGlothlin, and E. C. Dargan stated the Baptist conception of the nature and functions of a confession of faith:

First, confessions “constitute a consensus of opinion of some Baptist body . . . for the general instruction and guidance of our own people and others” concerning our beliefs. Second, they are not “complete,” final, or infallible and are capable of being revised. Third, the right to frame and publish confessions belongs to “any group of Baptists, large or small.” Fourth, the Scriptures are “the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists,” and confessions are “guides in interpretation” with “no authority over the conscience.” Fifth, they are “statements of religious convictions” and should not “be used to hamper freedom of thought and investigation in other realms of life.”

In the words of Walter Shurden, “It is a near unanimous opinion among Baptist historians that Baptists have historically been anti-creedal people. They shunned the adoption of creeds as theologically restrictive statements designed to curtail freedom of inquiry.” In describing Baptist confessions, there is concern about them being only descriptive and not prescriptive. There seems to be a fear of anything that tends to be binding, and this puts a question upon their claim of biblical authority. Fisher Humphreys argued that Baptists have used confessions only as descriptive

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of faith and not as prescriptive. For Humphreys, the use of creeds or confessions only as descriptive is wrong.36

SOUL COMPETENCY OF THE BELIEVER

Mullins believed that the distinctive contribution of Baptists to Christianity was the soul competency of the believer. Herschel Hobbs described Mullins as one who believed this to be a New Testament principle; it is rooted in the nature of both God and man. God is the infinite, supreme Person. He created man in His likeness. Therefore, man is a person endowed with understanding and the privilege of choice. He is a person, not a puppet. God does not coerce man against his will. He is free to choose, but is responsible for his choices.37

The idea of soul competency was taken by those not committed to biblical inerrancy and the sole authority of Scripture to mean that every man shall be free to decide for himself in matters of religion, which has become a tool for doctrinal diversity and the result has been to trivialize distinctives and the loss of identity. Bush and Nettles documented the fact that because Baptists have traditionally emphasized the liberty of conscience and the right of every individual to interpret the Bible for himself, some Baptist scholars began claiming that this principle allowed them to surrender traditional doctrines and yet remain Baptist.38

Needless to say, this has created confusion of theological beliefs, which creates an unnecessary division in matters of choice. Is it religious freedom, or biblical authority? This should never be. Norman also saw theological confusion with this principle of soul competency. He made the following statements:

[1.] Soul Competency addresses matters of conscience, while the priesthood of all believers is primarily a matter of mission and service. Although related, they are not the same.

[2.] This view makes the priesthood idea a highly private, individualistic matter... oblivious to the other priests and the attendant responsibilities....

[3.] Freedom of conscience cannot not be used as a license to supplant orthodox doctrine....


38 Bush and Nettles, Baptists and the Bible, 293.
[4.] The concept cannot be fully independent of the effect of sin upon the individual.39

THE 1963 BAPTIST FAITH AND MESSAGE

Things that led to this confession included many things that were already mentioned: Ralph Elliott’s Message of Genesis, Clifton Allen’s editorship of the Broadman Bible Commentary, denial of verbal inspiration, the tactic of doublespeak, and Mullin’s principle of soul competency. Article 1 of The Baptist Faith and Message deals with the Scriptures.

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is the record of God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. It reveals the principles by which God judges us; and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.40

Modernists used (or misused) this confession to affirm their doctrinal position. The phrase that describes the Bible as the record of God’s revelation has been one of the concerns of scholars. Some have suggested that a human “record” is one step removed from the divine revelation itself. Therefore, the Bible “is likely to be characterized by human error just so long as it provides a generally trustworthy account of the theological matter that was revealed.”41

Woodell declared that while the Bible records God’s revelation to man, it is more than a mere record of that revelation; it is itself revelation.42 According to Draper and Keathley: “Neo-orthodox professors interpreted the phrase the record of God’s revelation of Himself to man to mean that the Bible itself is not the revelation of God, but that it contains the revelation of God. Therefore in their view, the Bible is a human book, replete with all the frailties and foibles of a human work, but nonetheless

41 Bush and Nettles, Baptists and the Bible, 354.
42 Blount and Woodell, Baptist Faith and Message, 4.
possesses the revelation of God somewhere inside.”\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, revelation, according to human opinion, refers only to God’s acts in salvation, and this means that revelation is found primarily in one’s own personal experience with Christ and not with words, which also implies that Scripture contains errors and should not be considered itself as revelation.

Garrett acknowledged D. A. Moody’s comment with regard to Mullins, which was that for Mullins the Bible was not to be equated with revelation, but is the record of revelation. Then, on page 451 of Garrett’s book he reported that W. T. Conner, following in Mullin’s footsteps, clearly differentiated revelation and the Bible, the latter being the product and record of unique and historic divine revelation and a book of religion.\textsuperscript{44} One should agree with Woodell in that this establishes a false dichotomy between personal experience and propositional truths of Scripture. "Not only does this imply that revelation is personal and not propositional, but it also divorces personal experience from propositional truths.\textsuperscript{45}

The word \textit{matter} is also ambiguous. Does it refer only to theological content as opposed to all the historical affirmations? If this is the case, then there is no infallibility in the traditional sense. \textit{Matter} is only referring to “religious truthfulness” and not “total truthfulness.” On the other hand, when this word \textit{matter} is taken to mean the properly interpreted meaning of the text, then it would affirm the doctrine of infallibility. As it stands, the article is worded in such a way as to be acceptable to all scholars, and does not exclude either orthodox, moderate, or liberal groups.

A third issue with the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message has to do with the last sentence of the article, which states, “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.” With the words of this sentence employed in such a manner, it has become known as the “criterion loophole.” The wording ignores several things. \textit{First}, the Bible is where one learns about Christ. Therefore, the revelation of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the Bible because it is located in the Bible. \textit{Second}, proponents of the loophole claim that Jesus is the criterion by which one interprets the Bible, but then ignores what Jesus actually says about the Bible. Jesus never considered His teaching to be at variance with the rest of the Scripture. He certainly did not have a low view of Scripture. In His priestly prayer for the disciples, Jesus asked the Father to sanctify them with truth, and then He said Your word is truth.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Draper and Keathley, \textit{Biblical Authority}, 67.
\textsuperscript{44} Garrett, \textit{Baptist Theology}, 420, 451.
\textsuperscript{45} Blount and Woodell, \textit{Baptist Faith and Message}, 5.
\textsuperscript{46} Draper and Keathley, \textit{Biblical Authority}, 67.
There appears to be a neoorthodox tactic used here that places the revelation of Jesus Christ against the rest of the Bible. If one focuses on the living Christ rather than on the words of Scripture, then one is forced to make an unrealistic choice. Traditionally, the statement, “Jesus Christ is the criterion by which we interpret the Bible,” has been understood to mean that one should ask how any given passage points to Jesus or how a passage relates to what the Bible teaches about Jesus.

Biblical authority has brought to light another problem: Do believers follow the regulative principle in the interpretation of a text, or do believers follow the normative principle? The regulative principle has to do with what is taught or implied in Scripture. The normative principle says that whatever is not prohibited in Scripture is allowable.

The 1963 Baptist Faith and Message has caused much controversy within the convention. Moreover, the famous “criterion loophole” has been used in ways that only gives insincere respect to the Bible’s inspiration and its authority, while, at the same time denying its divine authority. Therefore, it was for this reason that the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message changed the wording of Article 1 entitled “The Scriptures.”

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.47

Baptists need to reaffirm the great Reformation doctrine of Sola Scriptura: Scripture only as the believer’s final, ultimate foundation of authority and truth.

The Church: Visible or Invisible in a Fallen World?

Samuel Bâlc

One of the most debated, ecclesiological topics is with regard to the visible or invisible character of the church. In this sense, understanding ecclesiology can provide edification and enthusiasm to believers, thereby encouraging spiritual life and ministry within the church, while ignorance of ecclesiology is a primary reason why many theologians claim false or bad practice. For the careful researcher, the study of church doctrine provides an opportunity to understand the body of believers and their thinking in a dynamic perspective. Today, when the testimony of the church is so compromised as a result of fragmentation and Christians are accused of mutual intolerance, the church’s involvement in a fallen world is hardly ever seen, and a genuine knowledge of the doctrine of the church is more necessary.

Church concepts can contribute to an understanding of the relationship of the believer with God—through Christ and the Holy Spirit—and the understanding of believers. As Hristu Andrutsos noted, "The doctrine of Church concentrates all dogmatic differences between churches and in the same time it is developing and growing from a single principle, the dogmatic systems of the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church and Protestantism."¹

The main thesis of the Protestant Reformers was that the true church is really invisible. What one sees is not the true church. Only those who have suffered an effective action of the divine Word in their soul, who truly believe, are members of the church. Only that faith which God created in the soul integrates someone in the church. Therefore, as they do not know each other, but only God knows them, the true church is invisible. The problem with regard to this church related concept is that, wishing to strengthen the churches founded by them and defend them in all sorts of sects dissolution, the Reformed had to establish some external criteria (as a means to be able to know the invisible church). In this way, however, the invisible church became visible, and the Reformer’s writings were marked

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*Samuel Bâlc, Ph.D., pastor, Sibiu, Romania; and, professor, Baptist Theological Institute, Bucharest.

¹ Hristu Andrutsos, Simbolica (Craiova: Centrului Mitropolitan al Olteniei, 1955) 61.
by oscillation between the tendency to separate completely the invisible church from the visible church, or to bring it closer in order to identify it.

Although, in the beginning, Calvin also saw the church as all the elect of God (known only to God, so invisible), later he said, "We have to assume as elected and members of the Church those who professed Christian faith, provide examples of Christian life and share the sacraments, because these are signs of election as Holy Scripture says."  

Once it is given the opportunity to distinguish the elect from those which he had not elected, one may notice a slight tendency at Calvin to establish a relationship between the visible church and invisible church. Calvin stressed that where the Word is preached and were sacraments are administered, there is no doubt that there is a church. Calvin later progressed to the concept of the visible church when he wrote, in the 1539 edition of his Institutes, that the invisible church is an object of faith, but stressed that through them God leads man to salvation, for in this body, everyone is made to participate in what has been received from God. The notion of church's motherhood appears.

Therefore, the invisible church is not only the result of the Word, but also by its action, one enters and continues in communion with God. The fact that unbelievers are imperfect and in a perfection process, Calvin concluded that the holiness of the church is evident in perseverance, which allows believers to fellowship as an imperfect group, but to be concerned with regard to progress in perfection. Speaking about the true church, Calvin indicated that the Bible talks about the invisible church and the visible church. Therefore, Calvin said, "If we must believe in the invisible Church, we ought to remain in the visible communion."

The invisible church can be present anywhere on earth, Reformers said, but only where there the gospel is truly preached and the sacraments are properly administered. Therefore, one cannot belong to the invisible church, unless it belongs to the visible church, where one hears the divine Word. As Heinrich Rendtorff noted:

Church exists through the Word and for the Word. Word has constitutive power. Community cannot exist without the Word because ontologically it is brought together for the Word. In the

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3 Ibid. 2:816.
Word divine enters in time, in that Word it is God’s power that makes the Church, Church. . . . It is the working Word’s Church . . . .

However, Calvin stated, the concept of Church represent all those people scattered all over the earth who declares that they worship the same God and Christ. . . . In this Church are mixed many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ except the name and appearance. There are many ambitious, greedy, envious and slanderous persons and those who have an unclean life. Such people are tolerated for a while either because they cannot be accused of a competent court, or because there isn’t always, as it should be, a strict discipline. Therefore, as we must believe that the previous Church, invisible to us is only visible to the eyes of God, so we are commanded to respect and maintain communion with the second one, which is called the Church in relation to people.

The only true church is, as Barth understood it, the invisible church, which is acknowledged as follows:

Obviously the Church cannot exist in today’s world, in today’s society. . . . Church is invisible, free. It is without rights, functions and accurate confession; it is free of all these human elements. What we see is a set of objects, a phenomenon which, under various titles he claims to be Church.

Presenting the concept of the church, according to Barth’s understanding, Meheșnutu highlighted the following:

Church is nothing but the expression and the embodiment of its member’s opportunities to show in a framework their religiosity, it is a history produce in which we want to understand the Revelation and to organize. In the visible Church, salvation seems unattainable because in it does not work a higher power toward us. As religion, the visible Church signs up in the same effort with our helpless efforts to overcome ourselves.

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4 Heinrich Rendtorff, *Die Kirche des wirkenden Wartes* (Berlin: Verlag, 1930) 47.
7 Viorel Meheșnutu, „Conceptia eclesiologică a lui Karl Barth privită din punct de vedere ortodox“ (O nr. 4/1964) 567.
Church will not communicate the salvation, Barth stated. What the church can do is to provide the way to move towards this goal. Church is not the extension, representation, incorporation, or visible manifestation of Christ’s revelation and reconciliation. Church does not have to repeat the sacrifice of Christ; her main mission is to receive the Word of God and give it further.

The visible Church and the invisible Church are one and the same Church; there are not two species of the same kind, but two predicates of the same subject. Flock of the elect, the invisible Church of the elect, it’s not a Platonic city located at the top of the visible Church, but she identifies with it.8

Consequently, one can discern Barth’s tendency for the recognition of the character of the visible church.

Church wasn’t founded by men, but by immortal God. . . . The church is God’s grace and instrument. . . . The church is located midway between Jesus Christ and the pardoned sinner. Thus the Church is a divine institution but also it is a communion of saints.9

Since there is a Church it is necessarily visible. It is presented as a driven community, with a tradition, history, organization, a profession of faith,10 of divine nature through his Head, but is a manifestation of human nature, so an element of created reality.11

The report, in which those two churches (visible and invisible) are, for Barth, has a hesitant character.

Faith is a gift of God by which He shows the invisibility of Church only for those who considers as elected. This does not imply that the true Church became visible.12 The human aspect of Church still needs renewing. Only the living can defend the Holy Church, renew it, and reform it.13

Where the church does not participate in the phenomenon of renewal, there is no church, no people of God. One cannot speak about the

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8 Barth, L’Eglise, 42.
9 Ibid. 50-51.
10 Ibid. 16-17.
11 Ibid. 85.
12 Mehedintu, „Conceptia eclesiologică, 568.
13 Barth, L’Eglise, 94.
church as a body. Only the faith can open the access to the true church, the invisible one.

If we, Christians, can see the true Church, it will be in faith and will be only in faith. . . Without faith, the picture that appears is not more than a religious society in which we see ordinary people and things: members, authorities, buildings, church history, the Bible, dogma, worship and believers who attend church, etc.\(^\text{14}\)

Barth understood the church as

The place and instrument of divine grace, it exists where Baptism and Holy Supper people gather under Christ’s sovereignty. The Church does not mean an institution, the existence and persistence of a society. However, it is not a visible entity. But the true Church is visible only through the Holy Spirit, come out and shine in institutions and religious traditions. Thus, there is a visible Church manifested in a discontinuous prophetic pragmatic manner. It is not about an essential visibility, constituent and organic.\(^\text{15}\) Church is a real and visible place where people meet.\(^\text{16}\)

According to Barth’s understanding, divine election is the limit of the church in which one knows the visible church. Adherence to the community must be recognized and accepted by God. The true church is \textit{societas electorum}. God will not exclusively know those chosen by Him. The church seen as "civitas platonica" is called to become "societas electorum."\(^\text{17}\)

The church is not, therefore, an imaginary society, said Barth. Consequently, one should not apply the concept of invisibility to the church, because such a concept would represent for all the drift toward the platonic city. Apostolic confession does not talk about an invisible society, but a completely visible assembly, starting with the twelve Apostles. The first group was a visible community, Barth noted, so "it is absurd to leave the concrete community, under the pretext of seeking the true one."\(^\text{18}\)

The word "ekklesia" should not be translated by the word “church,” Brunner said, because of the mistranslation of the term \textit{ἐκκλησία} designating a true spiritual brotherhood, a visible one. "Being in the

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid. 59.
\(^\text{15}\) Ioan Bria, \textit{Aspecte dogmatice ale unirii Bisericiilor creștine} (teză de doctorat, Studii Teologice, nr. 1-2/1968) 43.
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid. 187.
Church through faith and being in the fellowship is the same thing. Ekklesia is the new humanity that God reconciled with God, where each is in communion with his brother."  
Brunner mentioned communion or fellowship with Jesus Christ and through Him with others, but did not explain how this occurs. Brunner resumed all of this in three classic definitions of the church.

- assembly of the elect, because the foundation of the church is in an election from eternity (predestination)
- Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12) where Paul presented ἐκκλησία as a "body led by Christ, the Head"
- communion of saints, understood as the communion of the believers

Brunner demonstrated then the three pillars of the church, namely, transcendent, spiritual history, objective and subjective, saying that only three points in unity can produce ecclesial reality.

If taken into account only one, notwithstanding the other results: either a spiritual abstract intellectualism or a sacramental hierarchism or emotional individualism-pietism. Comunio sanctorum means fellowship, relationship, not spiritual collectivism. Ecclesia is visible only by faith, not with natural eyes.  
Brunner's dual concept of the church (visible church and invisible church, developed by Augustine) is foreign to the New Testament.

There is only one Ecclesia, which is both spiritual and invisible (intelligible only by faith) and the community that can be recognized by all. Social form of the Church was a necessary consequence of faith…. There is a fundamental difference between Ecclesia, spiritual brotherhood and the institutional Church. They are really incompatible.

Brunner, however, rejected the term "association" for the church, because (the church) is a fellowship, that is, a brotherhood. One can observe a growing inclination of Bruner upon a Christ to church

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20 Ibid. 3:23.
21 Ibid. 3:29-30.
relationship. "It is fair to say that the Ecclesia can be understood only through Christ and in Him, Christology is Ecclesiology,"22 Brunner affirmed that the New Testament does not provide a consistent doctrine of the church because in the early church there are different types of congregations. A true ἐκκλησία never existed; rather, Paul described only a mental image of the church. Brunner thus argued, "Throughout history there has been a disastrous setback whose final product is the Church. The reason of Ekklesia transformation into Church it is the sacred-ism or the sacramentalism of understanding Christ."23

Speaking with regard to the true church, Brunner said that it remains invisible. Brunner, however, did perceive trends for the recognition of the visible church.

The Church lives in spoken and written Word of God came to us through preaching and Scripture, receiving the sacrament and in a visible and special form. Church origin stands in historical, visible fact, the holy community being a historical reality that shows into a community of worship, community life, moral practice and church organization.24

All the affirmations are contrary to the conception of the New Testament ἐκκλησία. Regarding the causes that led to the overturning of the church, Brunner believed that a significant step in the transformation of ecclesiology in the institutional church is moving from confessional and persecuted church to the state church. Brunner was not addressing the real presence of Christ in the church through the Holy Spirit (the pneumatological Christ) but only about God’s Spirit as present through faith and Word. As Brunner stressed, "The relationship with God is now possible by the presence of the Holy Spirit’s work in hearts, in faith and in Christian community."25 When asked, "How can someone become a member of the church," Brunner answered, "Only through faith alone, springing from the heart to the Word of God and through infinite obedience."26 Therefore, the mission of the church is to proclaim the Word. The church is the power that proclaims the Bible throughout the torrent of ages.

22 Ibid. 3:35.
23 Ibid. 3:50.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid. 3:87.
According to the Baptist conception, expressed by Augustus Strong, the church of Christ, as a whole, is the meeting of born again people, from all times, in heaven and on earth (Matt 16:18; Efes 1:22-23; 3:10, 5:24-25; Col. 1:18; Evr. 12:23). The church is synonymous with God’s spiritual kingdom, representing humanity redeemed by Christ in the midst of which God exercises authority. Church, on the other hand, is nothing but the body of Christ, that is, the body which gives spiritual life, which expresses the fullness of his power and grace. Talking about the concept of church, Mullins said:

There are two main meanings of the word “Church” used by New Testament. In a number of passages it refers either to all believers who are on earth, or on earth and in heaven at a time or the assemblage in the future life of all the redeemed.\(^ {20} \)

Some understand the New Testament teaching about the universal church in an ultimate meaning only, Mullins noted. They claim that the universal church is not currently on the earth in any sense, and that the local church in the next life will cease to exist, and the church universal will come into existence then. There are still passages that forbid this view, Mullins said. For example, one can discern this in Ephesians 5:25-27.

In this passage, highlight Mullins, the Church is depicted as an existence in time and eternity and the continuity of Church that exists in eternity, is shown as clearly as possible. While there is a stained and spotted Church in eternity it is without blemish and without spot. In time was necessary that the Church would be cleansed with water, being an impure Church, so still not totally free from sin. In eternity, the same Church stands in front of Christ as holy and blameless. And now, if the Church which is here, while referring to the local church, then it is the same thing and it becomes holy and blameless in eternity, and so we are in front of a local church with pastors, deacons and rituals, carried over, in eternity. I don’t know anyone who supports this view.\(^ {29} \)

The generic sense, in which Paul used the word church, sometimes refers to the church understood as an institution, without reference to any particular church, Mullins believed. Therefore, in Ephesians 5:25-27, Paul referred to all believers, both in time and in eternity.

\(^ {28} \) E. Y. Mullins, apud *Teologie Sistematică*, de Prof. Dr. Ioan Bunciu (Curs pentru învățătorii de școli biblice pentru copii, 1998) 75.

\(^ {29} \) Ibid. 75.
The universal church is in no way an outside organization and cannot be identical with ecclesiastical bodies scattered throughout the world, consisting of organized parts and branches. It has no terrestrial functions or ecclesiastical powers, but it is a reality that includes all true believers in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is actually the spiritual reality behind the life of all local churches. . . . What is visible and tangible in the Christian religion is worthless without what is invisible and spiritual. Spiritual Church is as real as the kingdom of God, in fact it is virtually identical. We are not however entitled to refuse to use the word “church” in this general sense. The New Testament, by using it very clearly, gives us the biggest endorsement of the use word “Church” in an universal sense defined by the above observations.\textsuperscript{30}

Therefore, the church cannot be defined only in human terms, as an assembly of individuals gathered for social or spiritual reasons. There is a transcendent element in the church. Church is the assemblage of people that Christ has saved, in which He lives, in which and through which He presents God.

The One who is the believer’s life and humanity’s life is fully shown in the assembly of those who made a covenant with Him by faith. Union with Christ is what transforms the sinner into a Christian and only this way is vital and spiritual fellowship possible (i.e. that fellowship that represents the principals of church organization). The same faithful Christian life, which ensures perseverance, unites the believer with others. Christ, who lives in the church, makes this more important than all humanitarian organizations for the latter will perish but because Christ lives, the church will live. Without a correct understanding of this sublime relationship between Christ and the church, one cannot appreciate the dignity of the Christian church member, or the higher calling as “shepherds of the flock.”  

As regards to the invisible or universal church, and to the local or individual church, Strong noted that Scripture makes a clear distinction between those two. "The universal Church takes a local and temporal shape, while the Church as a whole is exposed in a concrete way."\textsuperscript{31}

\begin{quote}
Individual churches, also Strong stressed, can be defined as a small gathering of people brought to new life, and in every community they come together voluntarily, in accordance with the law of
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\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

The Church

Christ, in order to fully bring God’s kingdom in themselves and in the world [cf. Matt 18:17; Fapte 14:23; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 1:2; 4:17; 1 Tes 2:14].

The initial use of the word ἐκκλησία, which denotes a common gathering, was undoubtedly, according to Strong’s statement, a hint about the derivation of ἐκ and καλέω, which means to shout or to call, hence the idea that members of the church of Christ are called out, elected, called by God.

In common language, the term ἐκκλησία has lost its etymological sense meaning only an assembly. The individual, local church definition, according to Strong’s conception, thus implies two features, as follows:

church, like family, is a divine institution. Such a conception is consistent with the relationship to the universal church, that is, from the fact that its necessity have their basis in the social and religious nature of man and the Bible (e.g. Christ’s command in Matt 18:17, and the designation applied to the local church of God in 1 Cor 1:2).

Local churches are conscious landmarks and activities embedded in the universal Church and are not by itself a combination of ecclesiastical organizations. They are sides, not parts of the only Church.

From a city or a house, the church is therefore only a local manifestation of the universal church. Church, unlike the family and state, is a voluntary society, which follows from the fact that the local church is the outward expression of rational and free life in Christ which fully characterizes the church, which is also evident from the fact that the church is an extension of a new life. In the same way in which this fundamental spiritual change is not mediated by external factors, but by conscience and obedience to Christ and receiving His truth, the church is a voluntary association of those born again under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As the body of Christ, the church participates in Christ’s life as a living organism with special duties and powers. “The Church foundation of human nature, as a reflection of Church’s divine basis stands in the unity nature and the plurality of persons remaining in this unity,” said St.

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32 Ibid. 6.
33 Ibid. 887-980.
34 This differs from other organizations in which membership is optional. Membership in church is neither hereditary nor mandatory.
Maximus the Confessor. Therefore, world history is the history of the church, which is the mystical foundation of the world. “If the idea of the Church - the environment in which man commits union with God - is already involved in the idea of cosmos, this does not mean that the cosmos itself is the Church,” highlighted Lossky, and he continued as follows:

The Church is the natural and the supernatural encounter, the divine humanity. Its being is divine. From Pentecost, the limited and created universe will take a new body, possessing an uncreated and unlimited fullness, which the world cannot contain. This new body is the Church, which contains the fullness of the grace, depth of divine energies, by whom and for whom the world was created. . . . The entire universe is called to enter in the Church, to become the Church of Christ, to be transformed, by the end of time, into the eternal kingdom of God. Created out of nothing, the world finds its perfection in the Church.

Therefore, the church is not hidden from sight of men, but she is visible, even if not everything is seen in the church. Consequently, the Orthodox assert that the invisible element is united, as the soul with the body, in an indissoluble way with the visible element. Terms like visible and invisible have their reference to the church, in a more complex meaning. For unbelievers, which is presented as a church is not something special to any other society, while for the believers the invisible things of the church become visible. They are seen now, but with spiritual eyes, not natural eyes, they are seen, but different than physical or natural things, so in a sense all of the church is visible, though not in all their depth.

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36 Vladimir Lossky, Essoi, 107, as cited in Chîtescu et al., Teologie Dogmatică, 2:775.
37 Ibid.
BOOK REVIEWS


The basic concern of author Clark Whitten is that legalistic, performance-based “religion” has eclipsed grace-based Christianity in the lives of countless believers. He calls for a return to what he terms “pure grace” and claimed to see evidence of a “grace reformation” forming that will far exceed anything during the time of Luther and Calvin (pp. 23, 143-58).

There is much to commend in *Pure Grace*. For example, within its pages one will find the following correct teachings.

- Legalism is devastating, not only for salvation but also for sanctification (p. 18).
- Christians are not under the Old Testament Mosaic Law (pp. 21, 55-62).
- Church age believers have been given a new nature, such that they are now fundamentally saints not sinners. This does not mean they no longer sin, but that they have been transformed so that they are saints who sin, not sinners who sin (pp. 26-27).
- Jesus did not die to modify behavior but to radically change it (p. 29).
- Positional truth is rightly and clearly taught throughout the book (p. 31). It is very important for saints to know who they are in Christ, that is, people who have been given the righteousness of Christ (pp. 47-54).
- Christians are now the temple of God in contrast to the Old Testament Temple of stone (pp. 79-86).
- True repentance addresses the foundation of the sin problem in contrast with merely dealing with the behavioral symptoms (p. 101).
- The purpose of the Law for the church age (pp. 113-27).
- Teaches clearly the eternal security of the saint (pp. 125-41). One who rejects Christ, or denies His deity, was never saved (p. 130).
- Describes well the holiness of God (pp. 164-65).

However, there are a number of concerns in *Pure Grace*, for example:

- The author used unnecessary, inflammatory and harsh words to describe those with whom he differs. Words such as lies, nonsense,
prideful, insane, and demonic are not uncommon. In addition he described some motives as controlling, judgmental, and using certain teachings as weapons. When he said these things, he was not speaking of heretics or false prophets but of those who do not agree with his understanding of grace. This is inappropriate at best (e.g. pp. 30, 36, 42, 65, 73, 92, 106).

- He misunderstands and overemphasizes positional truth to the exclusion of practical application. This was (is) the error of the Keswick, or Higher Life Movement, which began in the late 1800s and taught that if only believers knew who they were in Christ they would live victoriously. Its slogan was “Let go and let God” and while Whitten never actually used that phrase in the book, its echo permeates throughout it. Some examples include: Roy Hessian, a leading Higher Life promoter, is quoted positively (p. 36); the three tenses of sanctification as found in the New Testament are ignored and the positional sense given as if it is the only one legitimate (pp. 23, 29-30); and, promotion of the idea that it is wrong to work to please Christ (pp. 40-41), despite Paul’s clear statement to the contrary (2 Cor 5:9; Phil 2:12).

- Christians are not required to confess their sins to God to be forgiven (p. 20). The author believes 1 John 1:9 is the most misunderstood and abused verse in the Bible—and even used demonically by many (pp. 91-92). Contrary to the vast majority of interpreters, and neglecting context, Whitten believes the verse is about how one is saved, not how one deals with sin following salvation (p. 94). Confession, he claimed, is for healing not forgiveness (p. 95). The author was so fixated on positional truth that he found it most difficult to admit the practical necessities of Christian growth.

- Similarly, repentance is reworked. Although Whitten gave a good description of what repentance is (as previously mentioned), he claimed that teaching on repentance is often a tool used by Christian leaders to promote conformity (p. 97). In order to make the biblical word “repentance” fit his theology, the author inexplicably turned to an English dictionary to define it as “to rethink your position in light of truth” (p. 98). While repentance does mean to change one’s mind about something, in the Greek lexicons, and in every use of the word when found in a spiritual
connotation in Scripture, it is in the context of turning from sin. When trying to illustrate his understanding of repentance, the author turned to the story of the prodigal son and yet, sadly, totally skipped both the son’s confession and repentance of his sin (pp. 102-14).

• *Pure Grace* teaches that the church is on the verge of a new reformation that will have an impact on the world beyond what the Protestant Reformation accomplished (pp. 23, 143-58). He believes that millions will be brought into the kingdom as a result (p. 150). Of course, nothing explicit in Scripture promises this, but Whitten believes that such a prophecy is found in the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles (pp. 148-58).

• In order to come to such a conclusion, the author resorted to liberal use of typology, or allegorizing. This is a major flaw in Whitten’s understanding of Scripture. For example, in one context he even stated that the pitch used on Noah’s ark is symbolic of the “blood of Christ” (p. 135), which is, of course, pure fabrication.

• There are a number of less significant theological errors scattered throughout as well: people do not love themselves but should (p. 43); Jesus did not die to make life on earth harder and more complicated (p. 46) (even though Jesus implied otherwise in Matt 5:11-12); the new covenant was enacted and completed between the Father and Son (p. 72) (but Heb 8:8 says it was enacted with Israel); at the cross, God “moved out of the Son” (p. 84) (this is dangerous teaching at best); promises that the Holy Spirit will guide believers (all) into truth (p. 107) even though Jesus was speaking to the Apostles in John 16:13 when He made this statement; he believes the Pharisees’ problem was that they were law-keepers, rather than what Jesus actually said in Matthew 15:1-8 that they were adding to the Law (p. 22); he seems to undermine the importance of the fear of the Lord (p. 152); and claimed that God does not demand that believers love Him, even though Jesus said this was the greatest of all commands (Matt 22:37).

While Whitten attempted to correct a serious error—works/performance-based Christianity—and while he did an excellent job of this in places, his exegetical work is seriously lacking. He did not prove his more controversial ideas through careful examination of Scripture nor through
interaction with other views. His style is confrontational—that is, he stated his position, often with little biblical support, and then defamed those who disagree (this, along with several unbiblical positions previously mentioned, seriously taints the book). If the helpful sections of Pure Grace could be extracted from the book and made into a smaller volume, Pure Grace would prove quite useful. However, with these numerous flaws its value is greatly limited.

In addition, it should be mentioned that Pure Grace is published by Destiny Image Publications, which is a publishing house founded to promote the views of the Latter Rain Movement. The Latter Rain is an extreme division of the Pentecostal Movement that was started after World War II to promote the view that the church will overcome the world, which, in turn, will usher in the reign of Christ. Such accomplishments would mainly come through the restoration of all miraculous spiritual gifts and the offices of apostle and prophet. Much of this theology is based on a topological understanding of the Feast of Tabernacles and from Old Testament passages such as Joel 2:23. Whitten’s teaching on a new reformation found in the Feast of Tabernacles is based on Latter Rain theology, not his own insights or observations.

Gary E. Gilley, senior pastor, Southern View Chapel


The Harbinger is one of the most popular selling books today; it is a quasi-fictional story reminiscent of novels such as The Da Vinci Code or The Shack. Each of these books involves mystery and intrigue, and has a serious message that the authors want to convey. Dan Brown, in The Da Vinci Code, wanted to cast doubt on the Christian message and interject the teaching of ancient Gnosticism. The Shack portrays a New Age, unconditionally accepting view of God that promotes universalism. The Harbinger is warning America that God’s judgment is imminent unless the country repents and turns to the Lord (and that very soon). Most Christians do not doubt the need for repentance and true dedication to Christ in our society. America, as a whole, has rejected the Lord, ignored His ways, and rebelled against His sovereign rule (that we ultimately reap what we sow is a biblical concept that is not going to be repealed for the United States, and Cahn’s basic theme is well worth considering). If the book is read merely as a novel warning our country to awaken spiritually it has value, but the
author made immediately clear that "what is contained within the story is real" (p. 7). In other words, Cahn believes that God pronounced exacting judgment on America and that judgment is found in Scripture.

Isaiah 9:10-11 is the specific text of Scripture that frames The Harbinger. In context, Isaiah 9:1-7 is one of the clearest prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the coming of the Messiah, both His first and second comings. Verses 1-7 are followed by a warning of coming judgment on Israel because of her arrogance and rebelliousness (9:8-21). One can know from subsequent revelation and from history that God’s judgment did fall on Israel just as the prophecy promised. Cain is okay at this point, but then he determined that Isaiah 9:10-11 contains a hidden second prophecy directed not to ancient Israel but to modern America. At this point, the author distorts Scripture and current events in an attempt to prove that God’s judgment on the United States has been hiding in these verses from the day they were given by Isaiah, but have now been made known by the careful investigation of Cahn. Nothing could be further from the truth, and, even more importantly, once someone decides they can select verses at will, change the meaning of these texts to fit their theories and use random hermeneutical methods, anything can be “proven.”

The primary thing to know is that The Harbinger is a semi-interesting novel that exposes the pride and sinfulness of America and God’s distain for such rebelliousness. However, the novel does not, in reality, discover a mysterious Old Testament prophecy about America. Read as fiction with an important point, and the book has value. Read as a prophecy, and it is dangerous.

Gary E. Gilley, senior pastor, Southern View Chapel


A book of the type written by Ann Voskamp might be unusual to review in a theological journal, but multitudes of women who are part of Christian congregations are reading it and pastors and church leaders need to know what they are being taught. Voskamp wrote this bestselling book from an educational background in psychology, and as a mother of six and farmer’s wife. However, her life has been shaped largely by the accidental death of her sister when the author was four (pp. 10-13). Whether this tragedy was the main cause for Voskamp’s other emotional and spiritual problems
cannot be determined, but one witnesses throughout One Thousand Gifts the tortured soul of one trying to find her way in life. She admitted to periods of cutting herself, taking medication for depression, fear, anxiety attacks, and agoraphobia (pp. 144-49). As is often the case, such emotional struggles led her to explore psychological theories, which are manifested in her belief that she has rejected herself (p. 205), and in numerous statements such as, “The only way to fight a feeling is with a feeling” (p. 136), and “It’s impossible to give thanks and simultaneously feel fear” (p. 203).

Voskamp did not find what she was seeking in psychology and medication. She knows what she ultimately needs is found only in God but how does she reach God in the midst of the mundane and the everyday issues and struggles that she faces (pp. 124-25, 168, 174)? As she examined her life more closely she determined that what she lacked is the experience of joy, which she described as her holy grail (p. 32). Joy is experienced, she decides, through learning to be thankful (p. 35). Toward this end, Voskamp resolved to find joy, and overcome her sorrows, by becoming a grateful person through the means of a list containing 1000 things for which she is thankful (pp. 44-45, hence the title of the book).

On the positive side, Voskamp is on target in her recognition of the ingratitude that resides in the hearts of all humanity; it is not the natural tendency to be appreciative, although, of course, some are more sanguine than others. The overall theme of the book—that one should learn to be more thankful—should be welcomed by all. One Thousand Gifts offers several helpful insights, for example: “The rent in the canvas of our life backdrop, the losses that puncture our world, our own emptiness, might actually become places to see. To see through to God” (p. 22); “Without God’s Word as a lens, the world warps” (p. 91); “Every time I surrender to stress, aren’t I advertising the unreliability of God?” (p. 151); and, “All God makes is good. Can it be that that which seems to oppose the will of God actually is used of Him to accomplish the will of God?” (p. 88). These thoughts are worth careful reflection.

However, Voskamp goes astray early in the book by redefining original sin as that of ingratitude (p. 15) rather than willful rebelliousness against the will of God as taught in Scripture. As a result, salvation is obtained not by faith alone, as the Bible states (Eph 2:8-9), but by faith plus thanksgiving. “Jesus,” the reader is assured, “counts thanksgiving as integral in a faith that saves” (p. 39). The book virtually ends on this note. The author wrote, “What that first and catastrophic sin of ingratitude ruptured . . . union . . . can be repaired by exact inverse of the Garden: lifestyle gratitude” (p. 220). In the last quote, Voskamp was not only
speaking of salvation but mystical union as well, which is a subject to address in a moment.

The tragedy is that by missing the biblical truth concerning both original sin and personal sin, Voskamp is askew on much of her approach to the Christian life. She sees the Christian life as chasing after joy through the means of thanksgiving. However, the Christian life is that of following Christ, joy and thanksgiving are both byproducts and steps of obedience. Whenever and whatever one center his/her life around besides Christ will lead one astray. Thanking and joy are not big enough to sustain one. In addition, when they become ultimate in one’s life they actually become idols in one’s hearts. Only Christ is to have that central place. Because Voskamp does not understand this she wraps her life around thanksgiving instead of Christ. Not only does she misunderstand the fall of man and salvation but she also sees thanksgiving as having the power to raise the dead (p. 35), as the key to unlocking the mystery of life (p. 47), as giving the ability to shut the mouth of lions (pp. 60-61), as the means of overcoming sin (pp. 126, 136), as the way one can “enter into God” (p. 134), as the core of the faith (p. 153), and as the producer of trust (p. 153). She goes so far as to say several times that “eucharisteo [or thanksgiving] always, always precedes the miracle” (pp. 72-73).

Biblically, all of these gifts flow from Christ or the Holy Spirit, not from an act of gratefulness. Thanksgiving is a response to what Christ has done, not a means to the “Christ-life.” Having missed the centrality of Christ, having replaced Him with the pursuit of joy through thanksgiving, Voskamp must next find an instrument capable of guiding her toward her goal. Scripture should be that instrument but while the author occasionally references the Bible she seldom exegetes it properly (e.g. pp. 76, 138, 196). Instead her guides are liberal theologians, such as Albert Schweitzer (pp. 33-34), Roman Catholic scholars, such as Thomas Aquinas (p. 99), G. K. Chesterton (p. 31), Erasmus (p. 49), and Alexander Schmemann (pp. 35, 39, 53), Jewish rabbis (p. 225), and C. S. Lewis (p. 55). However, primarily she turns to Catholic and Orthodox mystics. She quotes a number of these individuals.

Simone Weil (p. 9), Julian of Norwich (pp. 60-61, 89), John of Avila (p. 79), Teresa of Avila (pp. 98, 218), Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (p. 102), Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (pp. 122, 125), Brennan Manning (p. 153), Mother Teresa (p. 194), Rabindranath Tagore (p. 200), Henri Nouwen (p. 205), Brother Lawrence (p. 210), and Francis de Sales (p. 220).
It is obvious throughout the book that she has been influenced by the mystics as she references “thin places” (p. 22), which supposedly are localities where God is nearer than others, simplicity (pp. 67-69, 74, 77, 127), and smelling the scent of God (pp. 215, 219). Most disturbing of all is adopting the erotic/romantic language of the ancient mystics (pp. 119, 161, 201, 206, 211, 213, 216-18, 227). Some examples include: making love to God (pp. 201, 216) and consummation with God (p. 211).

This is what His love means. I want it: union . . . I want to touch the paint [referring to the painting "Supper at Emmaus" while visiting Paris]. I want to run my fingertips across oils, let the colors saturate my skin, let them run into my blood. I want to be in the painting . . . the painting to be in me. I want to be in God and God to be in me, to exchange love and blessings and caresses . . . I raise my hand slightly, finger imperceptibly the air before the canvas and this is intercourse disrobed of its connotations, pure and unadulterated: a passing between, a connection, a communicating, an exchange, between tender Bridegroom and His bride” (pp. 217-18).

The last line of the book is “I feel His caress” (p. 227). Reading about making love to God and feeling His caresses is inappropriate, even blasphemous. However, for those familiar with ancient mystical literature this is commonplace. Voskamp is steeped in the mystics and it shows throughout the book.

It is not until the last chapter that she actually revealed where her misunderstanding of thanksgiving has taken her. She wrote, “Endless thanksgiving, eucharisteo, had opened me to this, the way of the fullest life” (p. 210). What is the life of which she speaks? It is Catholic mysticism complete with its three standard steps of purgation, illumination, and union (pp. 208-10). It is this “mystical love union” (p. 213) that Voskamp seeks, and she believes the mystics have paved the way for her. One Thousand Gifts is an invitation for others to follow her into this world of mysticism.

It is sad and amazing how small errors can lead to catastrophic consequences. Voskamp began with a misunderstanding of joy, seeking a childlike experience of happiness (p. 166), even an admiration for a Peter Pan existence (p. 165), twisting sin, salvation and Christian living around the wrong thing (thanksgiving instead of Christ), turning to false teachers (mystics and psychology) to learn the way forward and what one has is a bestseller that will lead its readers away from Christ and biblical Christianity. The reviewer here does feel compassion for Voskamp,
because she truly wants to be right before God, but she is searching for answers in the wrong places. Additionally, she is making herself a teacher of others and that carries further repercussions (Jas 3:1).

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Constantine R. Campbell has produced an excellent introductory work on a very involved area of biblical Greek: the verbal aspect. As a pastor, this reviews finds himself constantly wishing that his language preparation was a bit deeper than it is, but this book provides a helpful remedy for much of this particular weakness. Verbal aspect was, until this book, essentially a highly theoretical area in the study of one of the languages, in which, the Lord chose to reveal Himself, and as a result almost entirely out of the grasp of the average pastor. However, this book manages to avoid the extraordinarily technical prose of the grammars and provide an excellent summary of the topic into a text of remarkable use. Campbell’s work is helpful in several areas. First, it shows the basics of the nature of verbal aspect and demonstrates how understanding a verb’s aspect impacts exegesis of the Bible. Secondly, it shows how and why the scholars have become divided over several important issues in the study of verbal aspect; and, finally, it gives some extraordinarily helpful examples for understanding the issues and for making an educated choice of which side of the debate the truth can be identified.

The opening chapter of the book is one of the most valuable portions of the work. Campbell took time to define and explain what verbal aspect is and some of the debates about it. He did so in a clear way that not only allows easy access into the usage of aspect by non-specialists, but also gave a history of the debate while explaining the basic differences in the positions of primary individuals (like Fanning and Porter). He also explained his position so the reader does not have to wonder later in the book where the author’s commitments are resting. This section gives a general outline of the basic types of aspect in language (for Campbell the two are the “perfective” and “imperfective” aspects). Campbell also explained one of the central theses of his book, that the “stative” verbal aspect is a misnomer. According to Campbell, stativity is not an aspect, but rather a function of the type of action described (or aktionsart). Since this
is an active choice of the writer of Scripture, it is something that every person concerned with original intent should be aware of and take into account.

Campbell clearly explained that the writer of Scripture made choices about what sort of viewpoint he was going to give on a description, and this can be a tremendous aid in one’s exegesis of Scripture. The introduction of the book makes a strong case for being able to recognize how aspect can give one a much clearer picture of what a specific author or speaker in Scripture is saying so one can avoid errors in presentations concerning Scripture. In this reviewer’s experience this is true, and as a result of studying this book, his own preaching has become more accurate as well as his ability to communicate what Scripture is actually saying. When a preacher can see the viewpoint the author is providing to his readers, it becomes a simple matter to transfer that viewpoint to the hearers of one’s sermons.

Another useful feature of this book is how Campbell took difficult and long academic debates and gave simple and easy to use summaries. Because of Campbell’s explanation of the positions of the major theorists, use of their material has become very accessible to non-specialists. This is important because Campbell’s work is not, nor is it intended to be, a detailed and complete look at all of the nuances of aspect. Campbell, however, gave a good introduction to the other theorists to get someone started looking more deeply into verbal aspect. That person can know what they will be getting with each new book, and easily decide which theorists to follow based on a general knowledge of what they have said. This is a very valuable trait for a pastor with a limited budget who wants to know what he will receive in a new book.

Related to this last point, Campbell gave enough information to make an educated choice about where one needs to be in the debate, and he did so while announcing where he stands. Since most pastors do not have the time to follow long involved debates among language specialists, this condensation of the material allows one to make an educated decision about where to stand in the whole debate, and hence how to expand one’s library for continuing study. The reader will have already seen one use of this in the purchasing of books earlier, but Campbell’s book is also of aid when reading an article or modern exegetical commentary. When a statement is made about the aspect of a verb, the reader can more easily know why it is that the writer made such a statement and evaluate it based on more than just knowledge of one’s own theological presuppositions.

Although this is an excellent book, there are weaknesses. For example, while there is enough information to get a start in the study of
this area of the Greek verbal system, it requires more information needed to receive a complete understanding of aspect. However, the book never pretends that it is a complete treatment, only a start to learn the basic information to begin a more full study. This book would be an excellent addition to the library of any pastor.

Cliff Allcorn, pastor, Rim of the World Community Church


_The Prodigal God_ has received much notice and praise in the evangelical community. The editors of World Magazine even proclaimed it their “Book of the Year.” The accolades are understandable given Timothy Keller’s helpful apologetic approach (see his _Reason for God_), his winsome evangelism methods and his ability to turn a phrase, causing some to compare him favorably to C. S. Lewis. Keller is on the mark throughout much of the book. He is correct, for instance, that the story of the prodigal son is about two boys who are lost, not one. Both the rebellious, obviously sinful younger brother and the self-righteous, legalistic older brother were disobedient to their father and needed to repent and “come home” (pp. 10-11, 18, 36). Both brothers wanted their father’s possessions but sadly not their father (pp. 18, 36). Keller rightly points out that everyone is dedicated to a project of self-salvation (p. 44), but just takes different approaches. The author understands the gospel message is that of Jesus Christ paying for one’s sin-debt on the cross (p. 87) to deliver one from evil and death (p. 101), that one is saved by faith alone (p. 123), and that saving faith will either change the way one lives or is not genuine (pp. 123-24). Concerning sanctification, Keller is deeply afraid of legalism (as will be detailed in following) and he is correct when he wrote, “Religion operates on the principle of ‘I obey—therefore I am accepted by God’” (p. 114). Keller is also a strong supporter of the local church and believes a Christian cannot live the spiritual life well without being part of the church (p. 125). And finally, this reviewer believes Keller did a good job exposing the heart of the father (who obviously is a picture of God) in the story. His love and willingness to forgive his sons comes across clearly in _The Prodigal God_.

At best, however, Keller is a very careless exegete of Scripture. While (rightly) claiming one cannot press every detail of the parable (p. 76), he not only presses far too hard but also invented and incorporated many details into the story, providing explanations that have no basis in
the scriptural account. In short, Keller is simply wrong in many ways. He is especially wrong about:

- **Calling God “prodigal.”** By Keller’s own definition, prodigal means “recklessly spendthrift . . . to spend until you have nothing left” (p. xiv). Never mind that the word “prodigal” always carries a negative connotation, even using Keller’s definition there is no sense in which God is prodigal. He is not reckless, and, while He gave His best (His Son) to save sinners, He did not spend His all nor did the father in the parable. Entitling the book *The Prodigal God* is an attempt to shock and gain attention to the volume; in this Keller succeeded. However, the trade-off is maligning the person of God and bordering on blasphemy.

- **The Pharisees.** Like many others who have addressed the error of legalism, Keller used the Pharisees as “Exhibit A” and like many others he misunderstands their true problem. Keller views the Pharisees as “religious people who do everything the Bible requires” (p. 10) and religious people who were “Bible-believing” (p. 15), who thought salvation came “through strict obedience to the Bible” (p. 30, cf. pp. 37, 76). To see the Pharisees in this light is to misrepresent Jesus’ clear teaching concerning this religious sect. Jesus did not condemn the Pharisees for keeping the law or following the Bible, but for adding their own traditions to God’s Word and thus invalidating the Word of God (Matt 15:1-9). Keller missed this vital point and then characterized the elder brother as a self-righteous Pharisee, thus missing not only the central truth found in the parable but also evading the true dangers of legalism.

- **Use of psychobabble.** Keller spent much of the book engaged in various forms of pop-psychology in his attempt to explain the behavior of the sons, especially the eldest. He stereotyped older siblings, as if all first-borns behave alike (p. 11). He stated two arbitrary ways people try to find happiness (pp. 29-30) and then attempted to implant them into the story. He claimed the elder brother’s “spiritual problem is the radical insecurity that comes from basing his self-image on achievements and performances, so that he must endlessly prop up his sense of
righteousness by putting others down and finding fault” (p. 77). There is no basis for any of this in the parable.

- **Reading too much into the elder brother** (pp. 48-72). Keller believes that churches are full of elder brothers and he wanted to expose them. While he made some good points he moved far beyond the text by claiming that elder brothers have a dry prayer life (p. 64) and the reason the younger brother wants to leave home in the first place is partly because of the attitude of the elder brother (p. 66), just as many are leaving the church today (pp. 67-69). He almost dismissed the prodigal’s sin of defiance, blaming it on his brother; it is the “elder brothers [who] turned them into younger brothers” (p. 69). Elder brothers are even responsible for social injustice, war, and violence in the world (p. 67). What Keller seems to miss most of the time (there are exceptions, see p. 70) is that neither boy in the parable is originally depicted as believers. Therefore, the elder brother is not a hard-hearted, legalistic Christian; he is a self-righteous true Pharisee who has invented his own gospel and was not saved. This was the point Jesus was making concerning the older sibling.

- **Adding to the story.** Keller informed his readers that Jesus deliberately left someone out of the parable. Inexplicably, Keller is not only going to add a character to the story, he is going to wax eloquent about him. This character is the “true elder brother” (pp. 72-89). First, it is obvious even to the beginning reader of Scripture that Keller is no longer explaining the parable, he is adding to it. This is both dangerous and condemned by the Lord (Rev 22:18). If Jesus wanted another actor in His story He would have supplied one, but He obviously did not. In Keller’s imagination, the true elder brother (Jesus) would go looking for the prodigal and bring him home (pp. 81, 84-85). The truth is that Jesus is neither brother. He came to earth to seek and save the lost and that included both the outwardly rebellious and the self-righteous.

- **Distorting Scripture.** In the vein of adding to the Scripture, Keller informed the reader that God told Cain he was his brother’s keeper (p. 81). This fits well with the “social gospel” that will be addressed next, but God said no such thing to Cain.
In Genesis 4:9, Cain asked this question and God did not respond.

- *The social gospel agenda.* Since Keller teaches that Jesus was bringing in the kingdom of God (p. 100) (rather than that the kingdom was at hand, as Jesus stated in Mark 1:15), he also believes that part of the Christian mandate is solving social problems (pp. 110-113): “The ultimate purpose of Jesus is not only individual salvation and pardon for sins but also the renewal of this world, the end of disease, poverty, injustice, violence, suffering and death” (p. 110). While Keller is strictly correct in this statement, Jesus Himself will accomplish all of this through creation of a new heaven and earth, not through social programs. Keller goes so far as to say, “The inevitable sign that you know you are a sinner saved by sheer, costly grace is a sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to the poor” (p. 112). Not only is this whole discussion completely foreign to the parable, being implanted by Keller, but also nowhere in Scripture are the people of God, either Old Testament Israel or the New Testament church, given a mandate to attempt to solve the social problems of the entire planet. As the citizens of earth we are to be responsible caretakers of God’s creation, but nowhere in Scripture, including Matthew 25 which Keller uses out of context (pp. 111-12), are Christians specifically given the assignment of serving the poor.

- *The gospel.* Keller is not so much wrong about the gospel as confused. As previously mentioned, Keller does give the gospel clearly, however, he confused it in two ways. He wrote, “The difference between a Pharisee and a believer is inner-heart motivation” (p. 86). Throughout most of the book, Keller depicted Pharisees as legalistic Christians but here he rightly demonstrated that the Pharisees were not saved. However, the author teaches that it is inner-heart motivation that distinguishes the believer from the non-believer. Scripture says it is faith, not inner-heart motivation, which is the mark of a true Christian (Eph 2:8-9). While motivation is important, if one must discern motives to have certainty of salvation, one’s assurance of redemption is unattainable. Even Paul said he was not always sure of his motives (1 Cor 4:1-4) and the same is
true of all. The second area of concern has to do with his use of Roman Catholics as examples of believers. Flannery O’Conner is an implied believer (p. 37) and G. K. Chesterton is explicit (p. 46). As staunch Catholics, both of these authors rejected the gospel of Christ. In fact, both would be accurate examples of Pharisees who added their own message to God’s Word, yet Keller used them as those who understand and teach the gospel. This is surely a problem.

As can be discerned, this reviewer views The Prodigal God as a mess. There are, to be sure, portions that are helpful, but overall Keller misses the point of the parable at almost every turn. If the reader wants a good book on this great parable, the suggestion is to avoid this one and read John MacArthur’s excellent work, The Tale of Two Sons.

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