

Number 26 / 2013-2014

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES



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# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

## SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

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A PUBLICATION OF THE FACULTY OF AUSTIN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Volume 26 / 2013-2014

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*Christian Studies* (ISSN-4125) is a publication of the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology. *Christian Studies* is funded by gifts from readers and friends of the graduate school. Subscription is free upon request. Back issues are available for \$3.00 each, plus postage. Correspondence should be addressed to M. Todd Hall, Austin Graduate School of Theology, 7640 Guadalupe Street, Austin, Texas 78752. *Christian Studies* is indexed in ATLA Religion Database. Copyright Institute for Christian Studies. FAX: (512) 476-3919. Web Site: [www.austingrad.edu](http://www.austingrad.edu). Email: [christianstudiespress@austingrad.edu](mailto:christianstudiespress@austingrad.edu).



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Volume 26

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From its beginnings under founding editor Michael R. Weed, *Christian Studies* has sought to offer “Scholarship for the Church,” as stated in the journal’s motto since 2008. We are pleased with this volume to introduce to our readers two new Austin Graduate School of Theology faculty members, Keith Stanglin and Daniel Napier, and we look forward to their years of service to the church with us.

Christians in America face new challenges today. We are living in what David Bentley Hart has called a post-Christian world. Churches must consider how to adjust to new realities and a cultural environment that appears in some respects less hospitable to the open proclamation and practice of historic Christian faith, while in other respects offering unprecedented opportunities for authentic and powerful Christian witness. How do we communicate the gospel by word and deed to a culture that believes it has already heard and rejected it, but which may never have seen faith working through love? How do we foster authentic transformation into the image of Christ, both in ourselves and in others?

One vital function of scholarship for the church is to raise questions and promote discussion that allows churches to evaluate options for ministry and service. This aim ties together the essays on various topics contributed to this issue by AGST faculty and emeriti. Building on the analysis of Max Scheler, Michael Weed explores the phenomena of *ressentiment*, the toxic engagement of apostates with the traditions in which they were formed. Keith Stanglin asks what use followers of Thomas Campbell have for church history, and how those impressed by Campbell’s vision might need to refine the terms in which it was originally expressed. Jeffrey Peterson explores how the liturgical calendar of the ancient church might help Christians and churches live through the year in the power of the resurrected Christ. Daniel Napier considers how revivalist approaches to conversion may actually thwart true conformity to the image of Christ and reflects on what contemporary churches might learn from ancient catechetical practices. Mark Shipp discusses the challenges of appropriating especially difficult Psalms for use in the church of Jesus Christ. Allan McNicol offers a substantive review of a recent book

on the difficult question of eschatological violence and its implications for our understanding of God's nature.

While each author speaks for himself, the reader of this issue is invited to join the ongoing discussion—and the occasional charitable argument—pursued at the faculty lunch table. We offer this collection to our readers in hopes of spurring productive discussion toward the growth of faith, understanding, and discipleship.

Finally, some changes are coming soon to *Christian Studies*, and we want our readers to be a part. Please go, right now, to your computer, type **[austingrad.edu/survey](http://austingrad.edu/survey)** in the browser window and take our *Reader Survey*! Make your wishes for the journal known!

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## *Ressentiment*

Michael R. Weed

The apostate ... is engaged in a continuous chain  
of acts of revenge against his own spiritual past.

Max Scheler

People leave regions, professions, religions, and even marriages on a fairly common basis today. Most readers will have had acquaintances who have made such major adjustments in their lives. It is not uncommon for such persons retrospectively to view the negative aspects of their pasts as difficult, but perhaps necessary episodes in their personal—even spiritual—development. Sociologically, although technically “apostates” (Greek *apostasis*, to “stand away”), such persons are commonly referred to as “leave-takers.”<sup>1</sup>

Some readers will also have acquaintances who, after having made such departures, remain negatively engaged—even preoccupied—with their pasts (professions, religions, former spouses, etc.), decades after having left them. The latter, to distinguish them from “leave-takers,” are referred to as “apostates.” Unlike the leave-taker, the apostate figuratively “backs away,” in that he or she continues to remain negatively engaged with the past.

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<sup>1</sup> “Leave takers” commonly refer to their former experiences as having been “learning experiences,” an “important phase in their lives,” etc. Cf. Stuart A. Wright, “Exploring Factors that Shape the Apostate Role,” in *The Politics of Religious Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (Westport: Praeger, 1998), 96.

In addition to the above, some will have acquaintances who feel trapped within circumstances that cause resentment. Physically, psychologically, and economically, societies often sustain traditions—values and assumptions—which underlie negative practices from which persons find themselves unable to “take their leave.” Obviously, such circumstances may evoke a deep embitterment, which philosopher Max Scheler designated *ressentiment*.

### **Christian Ministry as a Dangerous Calling**

This article will primarily examine the phenomenon of apostasy, especially as it is associated with the role of ministers. While both Christian life and Christian ministry are honorable and difficult callings, neither is without considerable and unique risks.

Regarding Christian ministry, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned:

Whoever takes the office [of ministry] seriously must cry out under the burden.... We have to recognize that there are mortal dangers to the office and for those who exercise it.<sup>2</sup>

American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr similarly observed:

At all times human frailty and sin make the ministry, whose business it is to point to the highest reality and the profoundest faith, a morally perilous vocation.... Special temptations abound for men in this calling....<sup>3</sup>

More recently, Stanley Hauerwas has commented that Christian ministry may threaten to destroy anyone who attempts to fulfill its varied and often incompatible demands.<sup>4</sup>

The following reflections will examine a particular risk, one which fits well under Bonhoeffer’s warning of “mortal dangers.” It is suggested, however, that this particular risk is not only a temptation to ministers; it is also a risk for other Christians and non-Christians as well. To introduce the discussion we will turn to the seminal work of German philosopher Max Scheler (1874–1928), on whose insights we will draw heavily.

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 67.

<sup>3</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 54f.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “Clerical Character: Reflecting on Ministerial Morality,” *Word & World* 6, no. 2, (1986): 184.

### *Ressentiment*

In 1915 Max Scheler published a study of the role of repressed hostility in the development of human moral consciousness.<sup>5</sup> In this study Scheler employed the French word *ressentiment* to identify what he called a “creeping poison.” Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) had earlier used the word as a technical term for what he perceived to be an all-pervasive and destructive state of mind and outlook.

*Ressentiment* is a self-poisoning of the mind which results from suppressing negative and hostile emotions which, working subconsciously, may come to dominate a person’s entire outlook.<sup>6</sup> But whereas Nietzsche had viewed *ressentiment* as the origin of what he considered Christianity’s “slave morality,” Scheler was able to make causative connections between *ressentiment* and certain social structures and conditions in which persons find themselves.<sup>7</sup> More precisely, Scheler observed that restrictive and inhibiting conditions surrounding specific social roles, characterized by certain types of recurring situations, predispose their occupants toward the development of *ressentiment* regardless of their prior experiences or individual character strengths. Scheler further suggested that certain roles and contexts within society may be “charged with the danger of *ressentiment*.”<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, Scheler observed that restrictive traditions which are experienced as irreversible—one’s “fate” or “destiny”—are likely to transform frustration and anger into *ressentiment*.<sup>9</sup> By way of illustration, Scheler cited the manner in which social conventions and role expectations placed heavy restraints upon women in late 19<sup>th</sup> century European society. In this setting women were expected to be passive, reserved, modest, and not to admit, express, or act out feelings of distaste or anger.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (New York: The Free Press, 1961), 67.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Scheler sharply differs from Nietzsche regarding Christian morality: “We believe that Christian values can very easily be perverted into *ressentiment* values and have often been thus conceived. But the core of Christian ethics has not grown on the soil of *ressentiment*” (82).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

*Ressentiment*, which may arise in such restrictive circumstances, is to be distinguished from openly hostile attitudes (hatred, anger, envy, or revenge) that “act out,” or even attitudes of which one is conscious although not “acting out.” By contrast, *ressentiment* emerges when such emotions become separated from their original object and circumstances. For Scheler, this occurs when persons are forced to systematically repress such emotions to the extent that they are not only concealed from others but camouflaged from the self as well.<sup>11</sup> Scheler contends that such repressed emotions, detached from their original source and working subconsciously, may become a “venomous mass” which embitters one’s total view of life itself.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the *ressentiment* outlook becomes predisposed to access only those aspects of experience which reinforce its negatively tinted view of “reality.”<sup>13</sup> This distorted worldview eventually leads to a falsification of all basic values.<sup>14</sup> At this point, the *ressentiment* self does not merely deprecate unattainable goals as in the old fable of the fox rationalizing that the unattainable grapes must really be sour. Rather, from the poisoned outlook of *ressentiment*, all of life is affected to the extent that, figuratively speaking, not merely are the grapes sour, but sweetness itself becomes sour.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, this “transvaluation of values” may also become embodied in ideologies (political, philosophical, and religious) which sustain and promote the construal of “reality” in terms of *ressentiment*’s embittered false consciousness. And while such ideologies may appear to provide “reformatory criticism,” Scheler cautions that *ressentiment* criticism is characterized by the fact that improvements in the conditions criticized bring “no satisfaction—they merely cause discontent, for they destroy the growing pleasure afforded by invective and negation.”<sup>16</sup> Such criticism, as an expression of

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. Nonetheless, in spite of being concealed from the self and from others, the poison of *ressentiment* may manifest itself in countless subtle and insidious ways such as a general uncooperativeness, caustic or sarcastic comments, and a tendency toward cynical humor.

<sup>12</sup> In this regard, Scheler states: “Regardless of what he observes, his world has a peculiar structure of emotional stress.... [H]e involuntarily ‘slanders’ life and the world in order to justify his inner pattern of value experience” (75).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 76, 77. Scheler here closely follows Nietzsche.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 73–4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

*ressentiment*, in reality provides no cure or solution for the real or imagined evil it criticizes. Rather, “the evil is merely a pretext for the criticism.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, for Scheler, *ressentiment* is related to society, social organization, and political theory in a highly complicated manner. On the one hand, moral systems and political philosophes may give rise to social arrangements, customs, and practices that evoke *ressentiment*. For example, Scheler argues that democracy (“democratism”) inevitably arouses *ressentiment*. By promoting freedom and equality, democracy inevitably incites “boundless aspirations,” unrealistic expectations, and hopes which remain unfulfilled.<sup>18</sup> Scheler even suggests that the very freedom to pursue happiness produces numerous social differences and inequalities, as those who are wiser and more industrious become successful.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, *ressentiment*, driven by repressed frustration and hostility, gives rise to its own political theories, social philosophies, and moral systems.<sup>20</sup> These, however, as subconscious expressions of *ressentiment*, promote causes and espouse positive values only as a foil or mask. In essence, they are rooted in embitterment—suppressed hostility, protest, and rejection. Consequently, *ressentiment*-driven interpretations of reality, by fostering and sustaining a false consciousness, inevitably transmit the embitterment of *ressentiment*.<sup>21</sup>

Scheler’s study thus provides a vision of cultures (and sub-cultures) wherein *ressentiment*-evoking philosophies and *ressentiment*-transmitting ideologies co-exist—the latter in a parasitical dependency upon the former. Further, as social and political philosophies directly and indirectly convey

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Scheler observes that “democratism” is charged with *ressentiment*. For Scheler, democracy destroys communal values in that it detaches individuals from a sense of solidarity in which they participate, to which they contribute, and from which they draw their meaning (165).

<sup>19</sup> Thus democratic societies cast off the inequalities of traditional aristocracies only to introduce inequalities of merit. These inequalities evoke envy and inspire countless envy-driven egalitarian leveling processes.

<sup>20</sup> Scheler viewed 19<sup>th</sup> century humanism as expressive of *ressentiment* (121f).

<sup>21</sup> “When the reversal of values comes to dominate accepted morality and is invested with the power of the ruling ethos, it is transmitted by tradition, suggestion, and education to those who are endowed with the seemingly devaluated qualities” (77–78).

visions of reality, it is inevitable that *ressentiment*-fostered ideologies may transmit repressed feelings of hostility toward ultimate reality, or repressed hatred of the Creator.<sup>22</sup> This insight enables Scheler to recognize the possibility of different modes and expressions of *ressentiment*.

### **Spiritual *Ressentiment***

In this context, Scheler makes the enlightening observation that the role expectations of the Roman Catholic priesthood, reflective of Catholic theology, place priests at risk to a “spiritual” version of *ressentiment*.<sup>23</sup> Following Nietzsche, Scheler contends that more than any other profession, the expectations of the priesthood render priests especially vulnerable to the “creeping poison of *ressentiment*.”<sup>24</sup> The priest is required to control—repress or even deny—his emotions at all times in order to present an image of selflessness and peacefulness. Performing his role in the midst of an hierarchical and political community, he is at all times expected to conduct himself in a subservient and apolitical manner. His professional role is one of submission and acquiescence. The priest, Scheler contends, is in effect called to martyrdom as a policy.

Scheler further observes that the rigorous demands of the priestly role may give rise to feelings of anger, hostility, and envy. These, repressed by the priestly policy of martyrdom, may mutate into a form of spiritual *ressentiment* which Scheler designates that of “the apostate.”<sup>25</sup> Here Scheler suggests the distinction of three types of the apostate phenomenon: the “convert,” the “true apostate,” and the *ressentiment*—or “covert apostate.”

First, there is the technical “apostate” who literally “stands away,” defects from, or renounces his or her former beliefs and deepest convictions—religious, political, legal, or philosophical—and makes new commitments. This person, although technically an apostate from the perspective of those sharing his or her former allegiances, is more aptly described as a “leave-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 66.

taker” or “convert.”<sup>26</sup> Having broken with his or her past, the convert leads a post-conversion life shaped and guided by new beliefs and commitments.<sup>27</sup>

Second, there is the overt or “true apostate” who, although openly renouncing the commitments entailed by his or her ostensibly rejected beliefs, nonetheless remains negatively engaged with his or her former beliefs and associations. This person does not so much “turn away” as “back away.”

The true apostate, although seemingly having broken with his or her past and easily mistaken for the convert, is driven more by animus toward his or her former beliefs and commitments than drawn by new loyalties. Not uncommonly, the positive value of the true apostate’s new beliefs and commitments is that they provide a basis from which to continue to criticize, mock, and ridicule former beliefs. In this regard, Scheler observes that

[T]he true “apostate” is not primarily committed to the positive contents of his new belief and lives only for its negation. The apostate does not affirm his new convictions for their own sake....<sup>28</sup>

Not surprisingly, the true apostate continues to criticize, mock, and ridicule his or her past beliefs. According to Scheler, the true apostate remains “engaged in a continuous chain of acts of revenge against his or her own spiritual past.”<sup>29</sup>

Scheler concludes that, unlike leave-takers or converts, who break with their pasts, the overt or true apostate tragically remains trapped as a “captive

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<sup>26</sup> For the sake of accuracy one may distinguish between the convert and the defector, the latter simply drifting away to no particular alternative belief or affiliation. Unlike the convert or the apostate, the defector is neither attracted to a new belief nor repelled by old beliefs; the defector is indifferent. Cf. Ross P. Scherer, “Apostasy and Defection,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, ed. William H. Swatos, Jr. (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>27</sup> Some studies suggest a relationship between apostasy and both personality structure and the religious atmosphere in which one is socialized (e.g., those experiencing religious conflict in their families are most likely to leave later). Cf. Andrew M. Greeley, *The Denominational Society* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Co, 1972), 237–244.

<sup>28</sup> Scheler, 66–7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

of his or her past.” Again, any new “faith” merely provides a frame of reference for assaulting and rejecting the old.<sup>30</sup>

The third type of the apostate is perhaps the most interesting (and damaging). It is the covert, or *ressentiment* form of the apostate role. Distinct from the convert and in contrast to the true or overt apostate, the covert *ressentiment* apostate remains in the party, movement, or church which is the source of his or her embittered animus. With the *ressentiment* apostate, no clear or even conscious break is made with the beliefs and associations of the movement or group from which his or her *ressentiment* is derived. Rather, the *ressentiment* apostate represses or sublimates his or her dissatisfaction with an “inner defection” from the church’s or movement’s beliefs and practices while remaining, to all appearances, fully committed to it.<sup>31</sup>

Of crucial importance is the spiritual dimension of religious *ressentiment*. While political theories deal with reality, religious views involve ultimate reality in an immediate and personal manner. Reacting to restrictive social practices, however long established, is not the same as reacting to restrictive religious structures. While Scheler suggests that “priestly policy” forces the priest to repress his dissatisfaction, the true nature of the problem lies much deeper. Roman Catholic ecclesiastical policy is believed ultimately to be grounded in the divine authority of the church. Accordingly, a priest’s dissatisfaction or quarrel is not merely with priestly policy; it is with ultimate reality—it is with the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. As an expression of *ressentiment*, however, this deeper anger and its shocking implications remains concealed from consciousness in the true *ressentiment* apostate while the energy of sublimated anger manifests itself in numerous ways.

Like the overt apostate, the *ressentiment* apostate engages in acts of revenge against his own spiritual past. Unlike the overt apostate, however, the *ressentiment* apostate engages in subtle acts of sabotage against the religious tradition of which he or she remains a part. Importantly, the true nature and purpose of these acts as expressions of *ressentiment* are disguised from the covert apostate himself as much as from others. Not infrequently, the *ressentiment* apostate’s preoccupation with supposed faults and foibles of his or her

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

religious tradition are often masked with humor and presented as manifestations of sensitivity; they may even be portrayed as efforts to reform the religious tradition.

Nonetheless, however masked, the voice of *ressentiment* is primarily characterized—and disclosed—by its embittered and occasionally cynical and sarcastic tone. As an expression of *ressentiment* criticism (“the perceived evil is merely a pretext for the criticism”), the apostate’s critique is driven by hostility, revenge, and envy. The goal of such criticism is not reform but the satisfaction of ridiculing, maligning, and undermining the religious tradition to which fate (or God) has bound him or her.

### **The Minister and *Ressentiment***

Returning to our initial concern regarding dangers and risks of Christian ministry, we would suggest that *ressentiment* (and its spiritual form as described in above) is a risk for all ministers and perhaps to a lesser degree all Christians—especially for those in traditions committed to passing on distinctive beliefs and practices of the historic Christian faith. Before looking more directly at that issue, however, we return to Scheler’s vision of a culture which both evokes and transmits *ressentiment*.

Since the Enlightenment, which was spawned in reaction to Western culture’s spiritual past as much as it was drawn by the vision of unrestricted reason,<sup>32</sup> modernity has gravitated toward a *ressentiment* culture.<sup>33</sup> One might observe that *ressentiment* is a particular temptation for Christians who are intellectuals and whose self-confidence (and perhaps pride) may provide them with more capacity both for criticism and for self-deception than the average believer. Today, in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, we find ourselves living among powerful social and intellectual forces which convey

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Crane Brinton, “Enlightenment,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 519f. Brinton argues that both the Enlightenment and the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment repudiated much Christian belief and were powerful dissolvents of Europe’s Christian culture.

<sup>33</sup> William Mallard, “Apostasy,” in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 51. From the perspective of pastoral care, Mallard raises the issue of whether the culture of modernity, constitutes a “vast unfocused apostasy.”

heavy deposits of anti-Christian animus.<sup>34</sup> The destructive effects of these forces are well known: loneliness and social alienation, secularism, moral relativism, suspicion of authority, and widespread confusion.

It is in this social and intellectual climate that contemporary Christian communities endeavor to exist and in which Christian lives must be shaped by churches which model and convey substantive Christian faith—a faith that exposes and illuminates the spiritual dearth of the surrounding moral, intellectual, and spiritual confusion. It is in this climate that ministerial identities are being defined. Thus it should not be surprising that many ministers are as confused and frustrated as are their congregations. Nearly two decades ago George Barna’s research found that ministers “are the single, most occupationally frustrated professionals in America.”<sup>35</sup> No doubt many factors contribute to this situation, but drawing on Stanley Hauerwas (and others), two factors stand out as contributing to an environment in which ministers are at risk to a variety of spiritual ailments, including *ressentiment*.

First, Hauerwas suggests that ministers face the disparity between the theological ideal and the sociological realities of the ministry.<sup>36</sup> Theologically, the church is a community devoted to passing on an authoritative tradition—an ancient body of teachings and practices. Most ministers are called to convey this tradition through a life of godliness, gentleness, and patient trust in the Father’s presence and action among his people.

Sociologically, however, many churches are considerably different from the theological ideal. In an egalitarian, democratized, anti-authoritarian, technological, progress-oriented, therapeutic, entertainment-saturated, secular society, the traditional “theological ideal” of the ministry is increasingly difficult to sustain. Congregational expectations placed on ministers reflect contemporary sociological realities more than the theological ideal. Rather than his knowledge of scripture or theology, the minister is more apt to be evaluated by his congregants according to how well he succeeds at being “part social worker, part counselor, good with young people, an engaging

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<sup>34</sup> Brinton, “Enlightenment,” points out that most contemporary views that reject Christianity for some secular faith have their origin in the Enlightenment (521).

<sup>35</sup> George Barna, *Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Dallas: Word, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> Hauerwas, “Clerical Character,” 183.

speaker, fair administrator, moral exemplar, and a host of other functions.”<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, ministers responding to the conflicting claims of the theological ideal and the socio-political realities may find themselves frustrated, confused, unappreciated, possibly angry, and having “authority problems.”<sup>38</sup>

An additional risk in the minister’s situation is the response which he has made to the first factor. That is, for several decades, a dominant trend in ministerial education has been to shape the minister’s self-understanding after the professions of law and medicine. This move has been motivated by two concerns: recovering prestige for the ministry and increasing ministers’ competence in modern churches. Unfortunately, as Hauerwas, Dennis Campbell, Brooks Holifield, Edward Farley, William Willimon, and others have pointed out, the minister-as-professional movement, however well-intended, has created a number of problems.<sup>39</sup>

Contemporary ministers are increasingly assessed in terms of their mastery of managerial, administrative, and organizational techniques and their ability to produce visible, quantifiable results, or “successful—numerically growing—churches.” Hauerwas has gone so far as to criticize preoccupations with redefining ministry and ministerial competence by shifting to methods and techniques as “implicitly atheistic.”<sup>40</sup> Further, Hauerwas and Willimon have argued that widespread adoption of such methods has resulted in both liberal and conservative ministers sliding into a “practical atheism.”<sup>41</sup> That is,

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>38</sup> Over forty years ago this writer worked for a religious publishing company that held retreats for ministers. The ministers were obviously under enormous pressures. They felt that they, and perhaps more significantly their wives and children, were held to higher standards than other congregants, such as required attendance at every church-related event (including, e.g., youth events, Ladies Bible classes, baby showers, etc.). Given such conditions, embitterment was not uncommon among ministers and their families. My impression is that these circumstances may have changed in large and/or urban congregations.

<sup>39</sup> Hauerwas, “Clerical Character,” (187), for example, notes that as the minister views himself as a professional, he may become even more frustrated at not receiving proper recognition. Further, Hauerwas suggests that there is every likelihood that the minister may even become resentful for being held accountable to those others who are not experts.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 192, fn. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, “Ministry as More than a Helping Profession,” *The Christian Century* (Mar 1989): 282.

biblical and theological realities are becoming subordinated to secular methods, goals, and assumptions; and when they conflict, the minister's theological preparation is subordinated to practical concerns (such as numbers in attendance). In David Wells' words, in most denominations in America the shift is being made "from truth to technique."<sup>42</sup>

When theology becomes resistant to being managed or manipulated according to modern secular tastes and techniques it becomes an irritant to popular versions of Christianity. To the degree that theology—reflection upon basic beliefs and practices of the historic Christian faith—becomes a deterrent to numerical and financial progress or success, it also becomes a source of aggravation. In such circumstances, ministers may become bitter and resent being restricted by their respective theological traditions.

Thus the minister's contemporary situation may make him especially subject to frustration, disillusionment, depression, authority problems, and cynicism. In other words, the ministry may make one more subject to *ressentiment* than many if not most other professions. Consequently, it is important to remind ourselves of five things.

First, *ressentiment*-criticism is not without valid insight. The problem is that any legitimate insight may become part of the broader perspective of a false and embittered consciousness and succumb to a distorted vision of reality.

Second, it is important to note that as repressed anger and hostility are transformed into *ressentiment*-criticism and *ressentiment* ideologies (e.g., Marxism), *ressentiment* may be transmitted or passed on separate from its original setting or circumstances. Others finding themselves in circumstances of deep frustration and dissatisfaction may be drawn to *ressentiment* interpretations as a way of contending with their own circumstances. To the extent that one can view the circumstances of his or her personal problems and frustrations as caused by sources other than one's own inabilities, mistakes, or faithlessness (traditionalism, Campbell's "Baconian rationalism," etc.), he or she will be attracted to perspectives and resources which enable him or her to do so. It is important to remember that we now know far more about a num-

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<sup>42</sup> David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 248.

ber of personal problems which may be repressed and fused into Scheler's "venomous mass" which poisons one's total outlook.<sup>43</sup>

Third, not only are intellectuals uniquely susceptible to constructing *ressentiment*-transmitting "envelopes," they are also vulnerable to the sins of intellectual pride, arrogance, and self-deception. What Paul Johnson says of writers is also true of intellectuals:

I have spent my entire working life among writers and I know very well that cast of mind which they habitually possess, and which harbors huge resentments of the world as it exists, is not necessarily motivated by selfless altruism. To praise God is not usually the writer's intention.... More likely it is to express a grievance or work off a resentment or articulate a personal longing or simply to rage.... Writers are sinful and fallen and unsatisfactory man writ large.<sup>44</sup>

Fourth, I would remind us that however it presents itself, *ressentiment*-criticism is not intended to correct or reform anything; it delights in destruction for its own sake. In its religious form, the underlying intent is to damage, undermine, or invalidate a religion or religious tradition. *Ressentiment*-criticism is indelibly marked by bitterness, refusal to entertain contrary evidence, and a distorting vision of reality. In the religious sphere, *ressentiment*-criticism frequently expresses a deep and insatiable need for revenge against one's own spiritual past.

Finally, I am suggesting that Christian ministry may be one of those social contexts which, in Scheler's words, is "charged with the danger of *ressentiment*." I am also suggesting that currently circulating are reconstructions of church history, analyses of contemporary Christianity, and proposals for the future which, whatever the merit of their individual insights, sound suspiciously like the rhetorical voices of *ressentiment*-driven ideologies.

See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness spring up and cause trouble, and by it many be defiled.

Hebrews 12:15

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<sup>43</sup> For example, unresolved conflicts with parents, resentment of certain childhood—and adulthood—authority figures, etc.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Johnson, *The Quest for God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 79–80.



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# Restorationism and Church History: Strange Bedfellows?

Keith D. Stanglin

Church history has suffered neglect in the Restoration tradition. The American Restoration Movement, or Stone-Campbell Movement, was motivated by the desire to unite all Christians on the basis of restoration founded on the Bible only. This is the genius of the movement, and it is articulated in Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* in 1809, which has been called "the founding document of the Campbell movement."<sup>1</sup> The ideal was to restore the New Testament church and be New Testament Christians. Those who

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<sup>1</sup> Lester G. McAllister, "Campbell, Thomas," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 140. On the intellectual and social contexts of the *Declaration and Address*, see the essays in *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address: Text and Studies*, ed. Thomas H. Olbricht and Hans Rollmann (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2000); and Clinton J. Holloway, "Essentially, Intentionally, and Constitutionally One: A Brief History of Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*," in *One Church: A Bicentennial Celebration of Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address*, ed. Glenn Thomas Carson, et al. (Abilene: Leafwood, 2008), 15–38. For the reception of this document among Disciples of Christ, see Paul M. Blowers, "Restoring the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church: The Appeal of the *Declaration and Address* as Interpreted by Frederick Doyle Kershner and William Robinson," in *Quest for Christian Unity*, 365–88; Mark Toulouse, "'A Holy Sameness': The *Declaration and Address*: Lingering Influences Afflicting Disciples," *Discipliana* 70/2 (2011): 5–18. For its reception history in Churches of Christ, see Douglas A. Foster, "The Understanding and Impact of the *Declaration and Address* among Churches of Christ," in *Quest for Christian Unity*, 389–409; Gary Holloway, "Restoration, Unity, and Freedom: How Churches of Christ (A Cappella) Have Interpreted the *Declaration and Address*," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 12 (2009): 163–75.

still belong to this movement generally acknowledge the return to New Testament Christianity as surely a noble ideal.

Emphasis on being the New Testament church, however, has its consequences. Two of these consequences are worth noting. First, in proposition 4 of *Declaration and Address*, Thomas Campbell writes,

That although the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are inseparably connected, making together but one perfect and entire revelation of the divine will, for the edification and salvation of the church, and therefore in that respect cannot be separated; yet as to what directly and properly belongs to their immediate object, the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline and government of the New Testament church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members; as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline and government of the Old Testament church, and the particular duties of its members.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, although the Old Testament is still Scripture, it is not directly relevant to the task of restoring the New Testament church. Here we see steps toward the marginalization of the Old Testament in the Stone-Campbell Movement, an idea that Thomas' son Alexander would amplify seven years later in his "Sermon on the Law" (1816), explicitly abrogating the regulative character of the Old Testament in the New Testament church.<sup>3</sup> Even if the marginalization of the Old Testament was not the intention of the

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, in *Quest for Christian Unity*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> See Alexander Campbell, "Sermon on the Law," *Millennial Harbinger* 3/9 (September 1846): 494–521. The main point of his sermon was to reject the distinction of moral, ceremonial, and civil laws in the Old Testament and to spell out the implications of abrogating the whole. Note two examples of claims that would prove to be influential in the movement: "The law or ten commandments is not a rule of life to Christians any further than it is enjoined by Christ; so that reading the precepts in Moses' words, or hearing him utter them, does not oblige us to observe them: it is only what Christ says we must observe" (510); "there is no necessity for preaching the law in order to prepare men for receiving the gospel" (513). Even if Alexander Campbell himself treasured and taught from the Old Testament, it is not difficult to understand how statements such as these led his followers to marginalize the Old Testament.

Campbells, the subsequent history of the movement reflects this interpretation, sometimes based directly on these documents.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the marginalization of the Old Testament, there has been another consequence of being the “New Testament church,” one which will be the focus of this article. Returning to *Declaration and Address*, in the very next proposition (prop. 5), after stating that only the commands and ordinances of the New Testament will be binding on the church, Thomas Campbell writes, “Nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the church; or be made a term of communion amongst Christians, that is not as old as the New Testament.”<sup>5</sup> Let us call this the “dictum.” Just as the emphasis on the New Testament church marginalizes the Old Testament on the more remote end of the story of God’s people, this same emphasis also marginalizes church history on the more proximate end of this same story. According to this rule, just as we should not consult Mosaic faith or tabernacle worship in the restoration project, neither should we consult Nicene faith or its liturgy.

Happily, for the Old Testament, even the radical discontinuity preached in the younger Campbell’s “Sermon on the Law” cannot de-canonize the Old Testament. As Thomas Campbell admits, it is, after all, still Scripture and worth the effort of our study, even if we are not exactly sure what to do with it. In most printings of the New Testament, the Old Testament comes along for the ride, and, everywhere one looks in the New Testament, the New Testament writers keep bringing up the Old Testament. As a corpus, the Old Testament is therefore hard to ignore completely or for very long. Regrettably, church history cannot similarly ride the coattails of the New Testament and is easily marginalized. Although there are notable exceptions, the study of church history in the Restoration Movement often means going back to 1809 and its antecedents; the rest is esoteric. The restorationist model of studying church history, which is simply an extension of the Protestant im-

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., see Foster, “Understanding and Impact,” 401, citing L. L. Brigance’s commentary on Proposition 4 that “the Old Testament was nailed to the cross, its authority ended.” Cf. M. Eugene Boring, *Disciples and the Bible: A History of Disciples Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997), 25, commenting on *Declaration and Address*: “The logic would seem to be that the Old Testament should no longer be cited as an authority for Christian doctrine.”

<sup>5</sup> T. Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, 19.

pulse, is to see when and where things went wrong, how bad things could really get, and what things should be avoided. All Protestants recognized apostasy at some point in the institutional church's history, though Restoration Movement leaders have tended to date that apostasy comparatively early. The result is that church history has been depicted as one long drama of apostasy that is best skipped.<sup>6</sup> It would seem, then, that restorationism and church history are strange bedfellows. The result is that, in the Restoration Movement, church history has often been regarded as a subject that can safely be ignored.

To the degree that the sentiment, if not the verbatim language, of Thomas Campbell's dictum has been influential in the Restoration Movement,<sup>7</sup> it has resulted in the demotion of church history as a beneficial theological discipline. Even if the Campbells had a certain respect for some aspects of early church tradition in general and the Apostles' Creed in particular, "for them, however, 'nothing not as old as the New Testament' had the final word."<sup>8</sup> In addition to its past influence, it is also hard to deny the dictum's rhetorical force, appeal, and apparent utility as an ecumenical starting point for the church today. For these reasons, it is appropriate to ask some critical questions about the dictum, "Nothing not as old as the New Testament." For the sake of the present discussion, let us grant that nothing should be positively *obligatory* in the church that is not as old as the New Testament. But Campbell also says, "Nothing ought to be *received* into the faith or worship of the Church...that is not as old as the New Testament" (emphasis added). In other words, there is apparently no place in the church for anything not as old as the New Testament.

This dictum is not without its problems. First, the dictum is self-referentially incoherent; that is, it is self-contradictory because it fails to

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., Alexander Campbell, "A Sin against Orthodoxy," *Millennial Harbinger* n.s. 4/12 (Dec. 1840): 530–31: "The history of the church is, indeed, little else but the history of reformations and apostacies [*sic*]—of the conflicting wars and tumults of rival tenets—always orthodox while in power, always heterodox while out of power."

<sup>7</sup> The importance of the sentiment of this dictum in Churches of Christ is evident in the survey by G. Holloway, "Restoration, Unity, and Freedom," and he points out the direct citation of this dictum by Raymond Kelsey (166).

<sup>8</sup> William Tabbernee, "Theology and Tradition," in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 47–48.

meet its own criterion. More familiar examples of self-referential incoherence abound in popular culture: The confident assertion that “there is no such thing as truth,” or, “You must only believe propositions that can be empirically proved”—these are instances of clichéd nonsense that suffer from self-referential incoherence. Each fails to meet its own criterion. Unfortunately, Campbell’s dictum suffers from the same ailment, for the dictum “nothing not as old as the New Testament” is itself, of course, not as old as the New Testament. It fails to meet its own criterion. This is a problem of logic.

Second, even if we were to grant that the spirit, if not the letter, of this dictum is contained in the New Testament—let’s say, on a generous interpretation, that Jesus’ reminder that people “should not live by bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” somehow means “nothing not as old as the New Testament”—there is yet another problem with the dictum. This is a problem of definition. What does Campbell mean when he says “the New Testament”? If the New Testament is defined as the codification of the list of 27 books, no more and no less, then the earliest we can date this is to Athanasius’ Easter letter of AD 367. In this case, Campbell means to say, “Nothing not as old as the fourth century.” If so, then we can at least “receive into the faith and worship of the church”—to name some things at random—the monepiscopacy, stand-alone church buildings, and the consubstantiality of the Son as articulated by Nicaea (second-, third-, and fourth-century developments, respectively), for these and other such things would be as old as the defined 27-book New Testament canon (per Athanasius).

One suspects, however, that this is not what Campbell meant. When he said, “Nothing not as old as the New Testament,” he meant when the books were actually written—that is, roughly, the extent of the first century. If this is his intention, and we can be sure that it is, let me offer this gloss of the dictum: “Nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the church that was not believed or practiced in the first century.” Now what is the problem with this? One glaring problem is that the idea of a 27-book New Testament canon, so central to our faith and to Campbell’s, was neither believed nor known at the end of the first century. Now, one may readily admit that the idea of authoritative apostolic writing is present in the first century, that the apostolic consciousness of recording the gospel for a wide audience is also present, and that there was probably a collection of Paul’s letters by the

turn of the second century. But there is simply no such thing as a 27-book New Testament or even an idea of a closed New Testament canon by the end of the first century. In other words, the New Testament canon is not as old as the New Testament (as defined above); ergo, on Campbell's rule, because it is not part of the faith or worship of the first-century church, the 27-book canon ought not to be received into the faith and worship of the church. According to the dictum, the Old Testament should suffice as the written canon. Not unlike the first problem, this is a problem of simple consistency for someone who would both hold to the dictum and retain a 66-book canon. It is for similar reasons that we also cannot give anything more than passing consideration to slogans such as, "No creed but Christ," and "No creed but the Bible." Whatever these slogans and the dictum possess in rhetorical force they lack in coherence and meaning.

What is the purpose in pointing this out? Without meaning to detract from the success of Campbell in articulating his bold and still inspiring vision, we cannot be reluctant in observing that there is a real problem with the dictum, which is an important and oft-quoted phrase in what is increasingly considered to be a foundational or at least representative document in Churches of Christ, particularly on this point.<sup>9</sup> Taking the dictum at face value, it is impossible to contend for or bind on the church the 27-book canon, which was defined and recognized by the church in the late fourth century. Most believers are probably not willing to toss the New Testament canon and the criteria for canonicity that helped shape it. So they make an exception to the dictum. But if this one exception is made, what prevents us from making other exceptions with regard to developments in the early church or in its subsequent history?

Here is the simple point: The present-day church should listen to the wisdom of the church through the ages. If we give the fourth-century, post-Nicene, post-Constantinian church a pass on its acceptance of the New Testament canon, why can't we also attend to its Christology and ecclesiology, its biblical interpretation and piety? The suggestion is not to "slavishly follow," but "attend to," "listen to." That means letting the church fathers and

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<sup>9</sup> In light of scholarly and popular publications in the last fifteen years on this document, the *Declaration and Address* is perhaps more widely read in Churches of Christ now than ever before, and therefore warrants a critical study.

mothers, the medieval scholastics and mystics, the reformers and restorers all have a seat at the table. It means hearing the voice of the past with discernment. It means having a “critical reverence” for the historic Christian tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Whether we mean to invite them to the table or not, we are inevitably influenced and shaped by the developments in church history in ways we often fail to acknowledge. We fail to acknowledge such developments mostly because we take them for granted. For instance, the New Testament table of contents page is taken for granted as an unquestionable truth, as if it comes from the first century. *Like* Campbell, we make an exception to his dictum. *Unlike* Campbell, I contend for making such exceptions with clear eyes and full awareness.

Consider briefly the many ways in which the tradition of the church, from the second-century church on, shapes our faith and worship in ways we often fail to acknowledge. In other words, here are practices not as old as the New Testament that are received usually without question. The separation of the Lord’s Supper from an actual meal took place probably in the second century. The language of Trinity came from the second century. To ponder the correct method of interpreting the Bible is to engage in an exercise first articulated in the third century. The confession of one God existing in three co-equal persons was ratified in the fourth century. The idea of translating the Old Testament from the original Hebrew instead of Greek came from the third, but mostly the fourth, century. Congregational singing in harmony and the use of unleavened bread in the Lord’s Supper only became the norm in the medieval period. These are all innovations not as old as the New Testament, yet, rather than jettison them, we take them for granted in our faith and worship.

And then there are the practices that *are* as old as the New Testament, but are currently not practiced because of the impact of tradition. It is unnecessary to rehearse all the commands that are commonly dismissed as “cultural.” Rather, in order to demonstrate our frequently unwitting deference to the

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<sup>10</sup> This is how Jaroslav Pelikan describes the attitude of Luther and his colleagues toward the patristic tradition. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 55.

tradition, let us limit our consideration to the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper.

First, to see how the historic tradition still shapes the theology and practice of baptism, consider the practice of baptism for the dead that Paul mentions in 1 Cor 15:29. Whatever this practice was, we do not practice or endorse it. Why don't we practice it? It is not because Paul expresses disapproval, because he does not. In fact, he raises the issue to show the Corinthians how, though they deny resurrection, their practices are undergirded by a belief in the resurrection. Far from being negative about baptism for the dead, Paul is neutral or perhaps positive. So why doesn't the church now baptize for the dead? The reason we do not baptize for the dead is because the historic church has not baptized for the dead.<sup>11</sup> Hypothetically, if the biblical evidence were to remain the same (that is, were we to have no more or no less than what we in fact have in 1 Corinthians 15), but if the historical record were different (that is, if there was a ritual attested and approved in the second and third centuries of baptizing for the dead), then we would

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<sup>11</sup> There is no scholarly consensus regarding baptism for the dead. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1240–49, alludes to more than forty different explanations. Most patristic interpreters (e.g., Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Ambrose) regarded it as vicarious or proxy baptism and assumed it was not to be practiced. Since Paul does not condemn the practice, however, others have thought the practice could not refer to proxy baptism. E.g., John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2, trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 34–38, supposes that Paul means those who delay baptism until their deathbeds. Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 1248–49, and a few modern interpreters advocate the phrase, baptism “for (the sake of) the dead,” as a description of motivation to please the dead or that the candidate wishes to be saved in order to be reunited with already dead loved ones. But if this minority position is correct, and if the church today regards this as a proper motivation for baptism, the fact remains that such a motivation, if biblically based at all, is based not on 1 Cor 15:29 but on passages about the redeemed eschatological community (e.g., 1 Thess 4:13–18; Heb 12:22–23). The historic church has never looked to 1 Corinthians 15 to ground the orthodox practice of baptism or its motivations. Moreover, the fact that scholars are uncertain about the nature of this practice also reflects how the subsequent tradition, not first-century Corinth, omitted the practice. Interpreters such as Calvin who reject that the reference is to proxy baptism are arguably less motivated by linguistic concerns than by the presupposition that proxy baptism cannot be an acceptable practice; and it is regarded as an aberrant practice because it has no support in the catholic tradition.

probably also practice it. Even if the reference is to proxy baptism for the dead, one could interpret the practice as consistent with other Scriptures on baptism and one could regard it as more biblical than infant baptism, for the souls of dead adults as well as their proxy at least can have personal, conscious faith, unlike infants. But, on the contrary, with the possible exception of some second-century Marcionites,<sup>12</sup> and the well-known exception of Latter-Day Saints, no one in the history of Christianity has practiced baptism for the dead. Consequently, we interpret the ritual mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15 as an aberrant practice, and we just know that if Paul had been writing a sacramental theology, he would have condemned the practice in no uncertain terms. Thus, Sunday school students have many questions when they study 1 Corinthians, but they never seriously entertain the thought of restoring this practice. Only Mormons, a restorationist sect with the greatest contempt for the historic catholic tradition, would make baptism for the dead an integral part of their faith. And so, analogous to our acceptance of the 27-book canon—an addition to first-century faith and practice—we take the omission of the biblically attested first-century practice of baptism for the dead for granted, all based on church history.

Let one more example drive the point home. As noted above, the current practice of the Lord's Supper, for better or for worse, bears the unmistakable marks of historical development in its separation from the evening table meal and the use of unleavened bread.<sup>13</sup> But there are other Lord's Supper practices mentioned in Scripture, some of which we omit and others of which we practice. Note the issue of time and space in the New Testament observance of the Supper. The relevant texts are few, but, with regard to timing, there is a mixed report. According to Acts 20:7, the church in Troas met on the first day of the week to break bread. With the exception of Luke 24:30–35—

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<sup>12</sup> See the comment by Didymus the Blind, cited in *1–2 Corinthians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament VII, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 166.

<sup>13</sup> The use of unleavened bread at the Last Supper was based on the requirements of the Passover meal. The absence of yeast in the bread was not regarded by the early church as prescriptive, for the same reason that the Lord's Supper need not include bitter herbs, lamb, and multiple cups of wine. One stated reason for the eleventh-century schism between the Eastern and Western Churches was that the Roman Church had broken apostolic tradition by introducing unleavened bread in the Eucharist.

which probably should be interpreted as the paradigmatic Lord's Supper, taking place on the first day of the week (Luke 24:1, 13)—there is no other mention of the Lord's Supper occurring on a Sunday. The Last Supper took place in the middle of the week, the Jerusalem disciples met daily and broke bread (Acts 2:46), and Paul implies only that it is a recurring practice in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:26). On the other hand, there is a more consistent witness regarding space or location. The Last Supper was eaten in an "upper room" (Mk. 14:15). The only New Testament narration of the early church's celebration of the Supper is set in an upper room (Acts 20:8).

Why then does the church regard the time but not the place as important in the celebration of the Supper? Based on the New Testament alone, it is not clear that the timing of the Lord's Supper is any more or less important than the location. If anything, there is more—and more consistent—testimony about the location than the time. If one is tempted to argue that location was important in the Old Testament but no longer in the New (based on John 4:21-24), the same argument could be made about timing (based on Gal 4:10). A theological case could also be made for upper room worship, given its symbolism of proximity to God above, confirmed by the approved examples that we find in Acts of the early disciples gathering in an upper room to pray and, in Peter's case, praying on the roof, where he received divine revelation (Acts 1:13; 10:9).

Therefore, limited to the evidence presented in the Bible alone, the case for communion in an elevated location can be just as powerful as the case for partaking on one special day each week. Why, then, do we dismiss the Lord's Supper's location (and any argument for it) as irrelevant, while searching long and hard in Scripture to validate the significance of the first day? Tradition—a tradition that extends unbroken back to the second century—repeatedly attests to the importance of the day, not the location. The historic tradition supports the theological case for the importance of resurrection day and, therefore, the possibility of celebrating other significant times and seasons. Celebrating the Supper in an upper room has always been, according to this same tradition, an indifferent matter, as it rightly is for us. But despite all the vast changes in the theology and practice of communion, a Lord's Day never passed in the first fifteen centuries without celebration of

the Lord's Supper. Whether we realize it or not, the church's history is a decisive factor that influences our faith and practice.

But if the church cannot escape its past, and if the church is influenced in negative as well as positive ways by its history, it seems prudent to examine and embrace this history. Therefore, besides the negative reasons for studying church history (namely, to avoid its negative examples, and so on), there are a number of positive reasons why even restorationists should engage in this study.

The study of church history gives the church identity, for knowing our past helps us know who we are. This study offers wisdom. The theological resources at our disposal from the church's history are more than one person could absorb in one lifetime. Yet, as a group, we ignore most of these resources. Most of the questions, debates, and problems faced in the church today have been handled or anticipated at some point in the church's history. Yet, as a group, we try to re-invent the wheel. Instead, we ought to engage in what many have called "retrieval theology." This is not a call to re-create or ape the faith and practice of a specific time or place from the past; not every thought or practice in church history is equally good or relevant for us. It means learning from the wisdom of our ancestors and appropriating the best that it has to offer for the sake of the church today.

In addition to wisdom, the student of church history may also gain perspective. The study of church history is a call for balance. First, we begin to recognize the swing of the pendulum over time. Then we begin to get a good idea of the pendulum's present position, direction, and momentum. And so we are better equipped to take the pendulum where it needs to go, or, more likely, to stand in its way and push back before it goes too far.

The study of church history can corroborate or challenge our interpretation of Scripture. For example, with many distinctive practices of Churches of Christ, it is not a slam-dunk biblical argument or a perspicuous Scripture that wins the day, despite what some of our forebears have claimed. Rather, it is the argument from history, the historic norm, what Everett Ferguson has

called “historical foreground,” that confirms practices such as frequent communion and a *cappella* worship.<sup>14</sup>

This study can help shape proper Christian attitudes as we learn from the positive examples of virtue, not to mention the negative examples of wrongdoing. Knowing what actually happened can also be useful for apologetics in a day when secularists view this history simplistically as a cover-up or as nothing but a detriment to culture. Finally, such a study can strengthen faith when one sees how God has preserved his people in the past and will continue to preserve them in the future.

Restorationism and church history need not be an odd couple, but can be more like the dynamic duo. I personally applaud and support the genius of Thomas Campbell’s restoration vision: The unity of all Christians by means of restoration based on Scripture. Thus articulated, I stand behind the restoration vision. But I must take leave of any interpretation and application of Scripture in the church that seeks to bypass nearly two millennia of church history, or that tries to read the Bible as if no one has read it before, or tries to do theology and worship as if they have not been done for the last 1,900 years. The “Bible only,” in this sense, has never worked. Just as none of us would seek to interpret and apply Scripture on our own, just as none of us would do theology and engage in moral discourse apart from our community, and just as we seek the wisdom of our community as we attempt, through God’s Spirit, to restore and unify his people, let us remember that the community of Christians includes those who are now dead. G. K. Chesterton said, “Tradition is only democracy extended through time ... an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Everett Ferguson, “Using Historical Foreground in New Testament Interpretation,” in *Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Practice*, ed. F. Furman Kearley, Edward P. Myers, and Timothy D. Hadley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 254–263.

<sup>15</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 205.

# Redeeming the Time: The Christian Year and Life in the Risen Christ

Jeffrey Peterson

The Christian Year—the liturgical calendar of feasts, fasts, and seasons observed with variations by Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and many Protestant churches—is largely foreign to Churches of Christ and other “free churches.” As Robert Webber observes, churches of the Restoration Movement “have historically avoided the Christian year as one of the unscriptural practices creating division between denominations.”<sup>1</sup> In this avoidance—indeed, rejection—of the liturgical calendar, Restorationist churches preserve an ethos that can be traced to the New England Puritans, who, as David Hackett Fisher notes, “[i]n place of the liturgical calendar, ... created their own annual rhythm of regional festivals, including Election Day, Commencement Day, Thanksgiving, and Training Day.”<sup>2</sup>

That Puritan calendar was the ancestor of the contemporary American civic calendar, from which most of the days regularly noted in the course of a year in Churches of Christ and other non-liturgical churches are drawn. In many congregations, the year begins with a sermon taking its theme from New Year’s Day, preached on the Sunday nearest. In recent years, a number of churches have taken some note of Palm Sunday, Easter Day, and Christmas Day (sometimes with a nod to their prominence “in the religious world at large”), but less controversial in many churches is Sunday recognition of Mother’s Day, Graduation Sunday, Father’s Day, Memorial Day, Independ-

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Webber, ed., *The Services of the Christian Year* (The Complete Library of Christian Worship, vol. 5; Nashville: Star Song, 1994), 18. The statement appears in the unsigned entry on “Christian Churches and Churches of Christ”; in my judgment it also accurately describes a *cappella* Churches of Christ.

<sup>2</sup> David Hackett Fisher, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York and Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1989), 164.

ence Day, Veterans Day, and Thanksgiving. Indeed, in some congregations, failure to observe some of these days—perhaps especially Mother’s Day—would result in considerable criticism of the leadership.

This development perhaps serves to invite a reconsideration of the Christian Year. If the reason for abandoning the ecclesiastical calendar that developed in its outlines in the first four centuries of the church’s history was the lack of apostolic precedent, much less can the *de facto* adoption of an American calendar developed in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries be justified. Further, there is a real danger that the keeping of “special days” chosen from the American civic calendar as the primary observances of the congregational year encourages in American Christians an identity more American than Christian.

The question of the Christian Year might be considered in comparison with that of church buildings. In the apostolic age—indeed, well into the second century—churches met in the homes of members (cf. Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2).<sup>3</sup> Buildings devoted to the church’s worship and fellowship arose only in the second and third centuries, as Christians renovated houses that members donated and willed to the church. Not until the fourth century and the imperial patronage of the church did buildings constructed for the purpose of accommodating the church’s worship become common.<sup>4</sup> Yet most Restorationist churches have not abandoned the purpose-built church building and restored the apostolic practice of meeting in homes, but have rather retained the post-apostolic development as an expedient facilitating the worship and life of the church.

On reflection a parallel case might be made for judicious use of the Christian Year as facilitating congregational and individual formation in the truths of the Gospel and the spiritual growth of church members.<sup>5</sup> This ex-

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<sup>3</sup> R. Alastair Campbell offers an informative, accessible survey of the church’s life in this era, with an emphasis on church leadership, in *The Elders: Seniority Within Earliest Christianity* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed study, see L. Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, vol. 1: *Building God’s House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Keith Stanglin’s essay in this volume, identifying some difficulties in a “strict construction” of Thomas Campbell’s restoration plea while retaining sympathy with its general aims, coheres with the approach taken in this proposal.

ploratory essay has the modest aim of identifying a few considerations, mainly historical and theological, relevant to such a case in hopes of fostering informed consideration of this question.

### **The Lord's Day as the Foundation of the Christian Year**

The history of Christian time-reckoning begins with the most consistent observance of Christians, that of Sunday as the “Lord’s Day” (Rev 1:10).<sup>6</sup> Scholars in recent decades have been reluctant to claim that Sunday observance originated as a commemoration of the day of Jesus’ resurrection or to trace its origins to the apostolic era.<sup>7</sup> In fact, however, a rather strong case can be made for this from familiar New Testament evidence. In the middle 50s of the first century, Paul appears to assume that the Corinthians met each first day of the week, making it an appropriate day for them to be laying aside contributions for the collection he is gathering for Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1–2). Presumably the first day is specified because Christians regularly met on that day and so could receive regular reminders in advance of Paul’s eventual visit.<sup>8</sup>

Luke suggests the same practice in recounting Paul’s seven-day sojourn in Troas, which concluded with a worship assembly “on the first day of the week” (Acts 20:7). In the context of Luke-Acts, this rare reference to a specific day of the week also implies an explanation why the first day was observed as a day of corporate Christian worship. Luke’s only other use of the

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard Bauckham, “The Lord’s Day,” in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 236–238.

<sup>7</sup> See Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts, and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: SPCK/Liturgical Press, 2011), 3–13. Bauckham traces Sunday observance to Palestinian Jewish churches and acknowledges that gathering on this day “was soon associated with the Resurrection, and that only this can really account for the fact that worship *on Sunday* acquired normative status throughout the Christian world” (“The Lord’s Day,” 240), but he hesitates to affirm commemoration of the resurrection as either the origin of the practice or as attested by the Gospels at the time of their composition (235). Such reticence appears to date to the publication of Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1321–1323.

phrase “the first day of the week” comes at the opening of the Empty Tomb passage (Luke 24:1), introducing the gospel’s concluding narrative of the discovery of Jesus’ empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Christ to his disciples. One feature of Luke’s panoramic view of the first generation of Jesus’ disciples is an economy of words; his statement that the risen Jesus was revealed to his disciples “in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35) prepares the reader to recognize the presence of the risen Lord when disciples break bread in Luke’s second volume (Acts 2:42,46; 20:7, 11; 27:35). In the same way, the mention in Acts of “the first day of the week” as the day on which Christians gathered “to break bread” recalls the first day of the week on which Jesus rose and was revealed to his disciples “in the breaking of the bread” at the conclusion of the Gospel.

Luke is joined by all the other Evangelists in dating the discovery of the empty tomb explicitly “on the first day of the week.” The persistence of this phrase in a Gospel narrative otherwise characterized by remarkable diversity of expression among the Evangelists, suggests that the phrase held special significance.<sup>9</sup> Matthew (28:9–10) and John (20:11–18, 19–23) also record appearances of the risen Christ to disciples on the same day, and John on the Sunday following (20:26–29).<sup>10</sup> Luke records as well that the first communities of Jesus’ post-resurrection followers in Jerusalem initially met “daily” in the temple and at home (Acts 2:46), and that they remained devoted to the practice of the Law of Moses throughout the apostolic era, with “many thousands ... among the Jews of those who believed ... all zealous for the law” (Acts 21:20 ESV). It is reasonable to conclude that these first Christians continued to keep Sabbath as other Jews did, while also gathering in memory and celebration of Christ’s resurrection after the close of Sabbath on the first day of the week, distinguishing themselves from other Jews by this ob-

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<sup>9</sup> Bauckham holds that the phrase may signify merely that Jesus rose “on the third day” (“The Lord’s Day,” 235). In that case one might expect some variation in the wording, with at least one Evangelist enumerating the days (e.g., “on the second day the disciples rested; on the third day, Mary came to the tomb” following John 19:42), or introducing the Empty Tomb narrative simply with “on the next day” (cf. John 1:29, 35, 43).

<sup>10</sup> For “after eight days” in John 20:26 as indicating by inclusive reckoning the first Sunday after Easter, see J. Ramsey Michaels, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 350

servance. The evidence of Paul and Luke suggests that Christian missionaries to the gentiles inculcated the latter practice in their converts.

Thus, the weekly Lord's Day is the most ancient and significant day in the Christian calendar, "the day Christ has claimed and hallowed by escaping from the dominion of death," in Laurence Hull Stookey's apt phrase.<sup>11</sup> As Stookey observes elsewhere, "the chief festival [of the Church] occurs weekly, and from it all else is derived, including those annual festivities that may be more visible and certainly are the more popular cultural occasions" (44). He also observes that contemporary American Christians "have been acculturated to regard Sunday as the last day of the weekend, not the first day of the week" (46) and encourages a recovery of the significance of Sunday, for example by beginning preparation for the Lord's Day gathering on the evening before (48). Whereas many churches now practice home meetings on Sunday evening, gathering for a meal and spiritual fellowship on Saturday evening in anticipation of our weekly corporate celebration of Christ's death and resurrection could well serve to prepare our hearts and minds for worship on Sunday morning.

### **Annual Observance in the Apostolic Church**

In addition to weekly Sunday observance, there is also good New Testament evidence for the annual apostolic observance of Easter, better designated "Pasch" or Passover, as in European languages other than English and German.<sup>12</sup> In the earliest Christian textual reference to Passover, Paul de-

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<sup>11</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 40. All parenthetical citations in the text refer to this volume, the best introduction to the theology and practice of the Christian Year with which I am familiar.

<sup>12</sup> As Stookey notes, "'Easter' is an unfortunate term because apart from popular associations it has no obvious Christian meaning, but may be a variation of 'Æstre' or 'Eastre,' a Teutonic goddess of springtime and hence of fertility. The word may relate well to those secondary indicators of the season: rise, eggs (obvious signs of fertility), and—in the north temperate zone—the tulips, daffodils, and hyacinths of early spring. But 'Easter' as a name fails to say anything about Jesus Christ and is possibly a remnant of a polytheistic nature cult. The best to be said (and this is an obvious rationalization) is that by the power of the resurrection Christ has fulfilled and displaced the longing for the life that goddess of springtime once represented" (53). "While English-speaking Christians will never abandon the term 'Easter,' the

clares that “Christ our paschal lamb has been slaughtered” (1 Cor 5:7) and urges that Christians “celebrate the festival” by purging the leaven of malice and evil from their midst and living lives of sincerity and truth (1 Cor 5:8). The passage presupposes that the Corinthians have received considerable prior instruction on the Jewish festival of Passover, including the removal of leaven from the home as an element of its observance, and on its eschatological fulfillment in Christ.<sup>13</sup> More to our point here, the most natural way to read Paul’s exhortation is as an appeal to practice community discipline and the shunning of evil in order to properly observe an approaching festival, rather than as a call to observe a purely metaphorical celebration; if Paul’s readers anticipate no literal paschal festival, his introduction of the image is likely only to confuse them in the discussion of the letter that presumably followed its reading (cf. 1 Cor 14:35).

This observation is not outweighed by the fact that v. 7 refers to the death of Christ as an event of the past, a quarter-century before Paul writes. It is in the nature of Jewish festal celebrations that they make the worshipers contemporaries of God’s saving deeds of the past. The classic Torah text, addressed to the children of the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness, reads, “Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today” (Deut 5:3). Paul reflects such an understanding of a specifically Christian rite in his treatment of the Lord’s Supper as an event in which his converts in Corinth as well as in Ephesus (where he writes the letter, 16:8) all partake of the “one loaf” (10:17) that Christ broke and gave thanks over “on the night in which he was handed over” (11:23–24). In the letter’s conclusion, Paul anticipates the Jewish festival of Pentecost as a somewhat distant date (16:8). This is consistent with his having dispatched the letter in the expectation that its initial reading to the Corinthians would come in the weeks preceding their annual celebration of the Christian Pasch and would awaken them to the moral implications of living in fellow-

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increased use of ‘Pasch’ and ‘Paschal’ needs to be encouraged ... to assert the unique Christian meaning of the observance” (54).

<sup>13</sup> See my essay, “Christ Our Pasch,” in *Renewing the Tradition: Studies in Honor of James W. Thompson* (ed. Mark W. Hamilton, Thomas H. Olbricht, and Jeffrey Peterson; Princeton Theological Monograph Series 65; Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 133–144.

ship with the crucified and resurrected Christ.<sup>14</sup> The annual celebration of “the Passover of the Lord” was firmly established by the middle of the second century, when Christians in Asia Minor and Rome first disagreed over the date on which it should be observed.<sup>15</sup>

### **Living in the Paschal Mystery**

Recognition that the apostolic church observed an annual Paschal celebration invites Christians who have inherited the Puritans’ suspicion of the liturgical calendar to reconsider whether an annual cycle of observance might prove a helpful aid in the attempt to live our lives in the power of Christ’s resurrection. This has in practice begun in many churches with the observance of Easter Day and the Sunday nearest Christmas Day.

The developed liturgical calendar is often explained as opening with the season of Advent, beginning four Sundays before Christmas Day, then proceeding through the season of Lent to Easter Day and Pentecost, followed by many weeks of “Ordinary Time” until Advent returns. Stookey makes a compelling case that the calendar is better approached as in the ancient church by beginning with the focal point of Easter, understood as the “great Sunday” of the year, an annual celebration of the victory over sin and death God has won for us through Christ’s death and resurrection (49). Considered from this point of view, the liturgical calendar thus invites Christians (and all people) to live out the year (and the whole of our life) in the transforming power of Christ’s resurrection and enter into God’s redemption of creation.

As early as the third century, Christians have prepared for the celebration of Easter by fasting and observances recalling the climax of Christ’s earthly ministry in crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>16</sup> This “Holy Week” or “Great Week,” beginning with the day traditionally celebrated as Palm Sunday but better observed as Passion Sunday (88–90), continuing in many churches with “Maundy Thursday” (in which Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet is reenacted), and culminating in the services of Good Friday and Easter consti-

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Carrington goes so far as to describe 1 Corinthians as “a Paschal letter” (*The Primitive Christian Calendar* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952], 42). For others who have seen the Passover season as suggesting themes in the letter, see Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 407–408.

<sup>15</sup> See Bradshaw and Johnson, *Origins*, 39–59.

<sup>16</sup> See Bradshaw and Johnson, *Origins*, 91.

tutes the high point of the Christian Year, the evangelical center of the proclamation and life of churches that observe it.

In the contemporary ecumenical lectionary, the result of more than a century of scholarship on the worship of the ancient Church, the eight Sundays following Easter are designated the first, second, third (etc.) Sunday “*of Easter*” rather than merely the Sundays numbered “after Easter.” This observance of the “Great Fifty Days” is attested from the end of the second century.<sup>17</sup> It has the effect of making Easter Day the beginning of “an extended season, whose essential character is shared by all of its parts” (56). The festival of Pentecost concludes the Easter season with a focus on the “community called together by the Spirit of the Risen One” in the history between Christ’s resurrection and his return, and “participation in the Body of Christ [as] inherent in being Christian” (76), from the day of Pentecost and the first preaching of Christ’s resurrection until now.

The season of Lent, forty weekdays of fasting plus the six Sundays preceding Easter, developed in the fourth century from a number of practices, including the Holy Week fast by which Christians prepared for the Paschal celebration, as well as the practice of preparing catechumens for baptism on Easter Day.<sup>18</sup> The period of forty days recalls the biblical accounts of Moses and Elijah fasting in connection with their encounters with God on Mount Horeb, and especially of Jesus fasting and being tested in the wilderness before his ministry (79). The practice of fasting to some degree during Lent represents a way to honor Jesus’ teaching that his disciples would fast following his departure (Matt 14:15//Mark 2:20; cf. “whenever you fast,” Matt 6:16 NRSV; Acts 13:2–3). Stookey describes Lenten observance as an ellipse with two foci of reflection: “our human condition, including sin and its deadly consequences for both individuals and society” and “the new possibilities offered to us in Jesus Christ and their implications for practical living” (80). Rather than a season whose meaning is exhausted by displaying the tokens of our mortality in the shape of a cross on Ash Wednesday (84–86), by “giving something up” (chocolate, movies, etc.) or by “taking something on” (visitation of the sick, increased contribution, etc.) for the duration of the

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<sup>17</sup> See Bradshaw and Johnson, *Origins*, 69–70.

<sup>18</sup> See Bradshaw and Johnson, *Origins*, 89–108, as well as Daniel Napier’s contribution to this volume.

seven weeks, Lent can be a season of “self-examination that seeks greater conformity to the mind of Christ, and more effective ministry on behalf of the world” (82–83).

With the 46 days of Lent preceding the annual Paschal celebration and the 50 days of the Easter season following it and culminating in Pentecost, the “Easter cycle” occupies more than a quarter of the Christian year. The other major cycle of the liturgical year is anchored by Christmas. The seasonal song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” serves as a reminder that Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are properly the beginning of a season celebrating the coming of God among us in the form of the Christ child. The Puritans objected to the revelry characteristic of Christmas and regarded the feast as redolent of Romanism, but Christmas observance has continually increased among American Protestants since the seventeenth century, when it was outlawed in Massachusetts from 1659 to 1681 (107).

Stookey’s reflections on the significance of the Christmas season are worth quoting in full:

The season’s familiarity and its immense popular appeal obscure the fact that Christmas is a mystery comparable to that of the Pasch and fully dependent on faith in the Paschal victory. The wonder of Christmas is not, as might be supposed, “How can a virgin bear a child?” The virginal conception of Jesus is not in itself the mystery but is rather one way of pointing to the mystery, of indicating that what occurred at Bethlehem is outside the bounds of both human experience and explanation. The marvel is that the creator of the cosmos comes as creature for the purpose of setting right all that has gone wrong on this tiny planet. The wonder is that the Eternal One who can be neither created nor destroyed willingly becomes subject both to birth and to death (105).

Christmas is the enfleshment of God, the humiliation of the Most High, and divine participation in all that is painful, ugly, frustrating, and limited. Divinity takes on humanity, to restore the image of God implanted at creation but sullied by sin. Here is the great exchange Christmas ponders, that God became like us so that we might become like God (106).

Manger and shepherds of course have a place in the symbolism of the season, warranted by Scripture, though the Christmas tree and Santa Claus in his popular guise are best reserved for domestic observance rather than brought to church. Traditionally, the conclusion of the Twelve Days is marked by observance of the “Epiphany” (the “appearance” or “manifestation” of Christ to the world) on January 6, historically focusing on the visit of the Magi in Western churches, though in recent years the Eastern focus on Christ’s baptism has also been celebrated in the Sundays following Christmas Day (111). The theme uniting Christmas Day, Epiphany, and the Baptism of the Lord is the identification of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God and Messiah, the emphasis falling not on the Child’s sweetness but on his divine nature and mission (112–114).

The four Lord’s Days before Christmas Day make up the season of Advent (“coming, arrival”), the traditional beginning of the liturgical year. Advent is often treated as the prelude to Christmas, an occasion to break into carols early. Historically and theologically, however, its focus is on Christ’s second coming rather than his first. The season is “the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God” (121). Isaiah’s visions of redemption, John the Baptist’s call to repentance, and the hymn “Come, thou long-expected Jesus, . . . now thy gracious kingdom bring” are more appropriate to the season than “Away in a Manger.” The light that is characteristic of Advent symbolizes the eschatological light shining on our world from the dawning day of the Lord (Romans 12:11–14; 1 Thess 5:2–8) and illuminating “the people who walked in darkness” (Isa 9:2 ESV; cf. Luke 1:79), ourselves among them. Christians can thus begin the liturgical year by looking forward in time to the “end” of all things, the purpose for which God has created all things and toward which he works through Christ for the redemption of creation (121).

There are two series of Lord’s Days that fall outside the Paschal cycle and the Christmas cycle: a shorter series between Epiphany and the beginning of Lent, and a longer one between Pentecost and the beginning of Advent. These Sundays are often referred to as “Ordinary Time.” This designation was not chosen to suggest that these days are “unexceptional” or “mundane”; after all, every Lord’s Day is a celebration of God’s extraordinary work of redemption in Christ’s death and resurrection. “Ordinary” was origi-

nally used rather in the sense of “ordinal,” as these Sundays are designated the first, second, third (etc.) Sunday “after Epiphany” or “after Pentecost.” As Stookey suggests, however, the more common meaning of “ordinary” may still inform worshipers on these Sundays, reminding us that even when our circumstances appear mundane to us, “Christ has sanctified all of time, bringing us and the whole of our experience into the orbit of resurrection. What we deem ordinary God has transformed into the extraordinary by the power of divine grace” (134).

### **The Christian Year in Restoration Churches?**

This essay represents not an attempt to mandate observance of the Christian Year in churches unaccustomed to it but rather an invitation to become familiar with it and an appeal to consider ways in which its judicious use might aid congregational worship and individual devotion. A Christian or congregation unprepared to embrace the Christian Year fully, in the manner encouraged by Stookey, might yet benefit from it in a variety of ways. Individual Christians might employ the *Revised Common Lectionary*, the Sunday lectionary most widely used in various forms by liturgical churches, as a guide to their prayer and meditation.<sup>19</sup>

Further, ministers might also find benefit in use of the lectionary. All preaching on Scripture must proceed according to some plan; the approaches most commonly taken in Churches of Christ and other free churches involve some combination of *lectio continua* (“continuous reading” of a biblical book or series of books) and selection of individual passages, often on a topical basis or to address perceived needs of the congregation. For each Sunday of the year, the lectionary appoints a Psalm, a passage from elsewhere in the Old Testament (“the prophet”), a passage from Acts through Revelation (“the epistle”), and a passage selected from a Gospel (“the Lord”). Ironically, use of the lectionary means that the members of liturgical churches typically hear more Scripture read in the course of a year’s Sundays than many who attend churches ostensibly devoted to the Bible. Minimally, one text could be selected from the four appointed for each week as the basis for the sermon or

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<sup>19</sup> *The Revised Common Lectionary: Includes Complete List of Lections for Years A, B, and C* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992; available online at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>).

the focus of the service, thus relieving the minister of the burden of weekly selection (or quarterly, for those who preach in series) and ensuring that the congregation hears at least one coherent paragraph, or “pericope,” of Scripture each Sunday. One might also employ the Psalm alongside the text chosen, or incorporate two or more of the texts into the service.

One might, however, make full use of the lectionary with three scriptural texts and a Psalm read to (or sung by) the congregation each week in the course of the worship service. Among other things, this could serve to strengthen the sense that the reading of Scripture is an important act of worship in its own right, and not merely a prelude to the sermon; after all, Paul urges Timothy, “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). Several commentaries by leading biblical scholars designed specifically to aid in preaching the lectionary are available, which will assist the preacher in identifying themes common to the texts for a given Sunday.<sup>20</sup>

Churches of the Restoration Movement have long lived in a dialectical relationship with other communions; while assuming a largely sectarian posture in relation to others for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we also found our communion enriched by contributions to congregational life offered by those outside our fellowship. This was notably the case in the songs our churches sang and the evangelistic methods our members and ministers employed, but also in other, less obvious respects, as the illustration of the church building with which we began suggests. Without abandoning any of the practices that have been foundational to the life of our churches or, more importantly, the

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<sup>20</sup> These include Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year* (3 vols., Nashville: Abingdon, 1984–7); Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, and James D. Newsome, Jr., *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993–5); David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (12 vols.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008–11); Roger E. Van Harn, ed., *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts* (3 vols.; New York: Continuum, 2001); Roger E. Van Harn, Brent A. Strawn, and Walter Brueggemann, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship: A Lectionary Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Reginald H. Fuller and Daniel Westberg, eds., *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* (3d ed.; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2006).

aim to recover what was most vital and central in the faith and devotion of the earliest Christians, it is my conviction that Churches of Christ can enhance our faith, devotion, and ministry by taking guidance from the liturgical calendar, as many churches are already doing piecemeal. I offer this essay for prayerful consideration in the hope that the Christian Year will be evaluated on the basis of an informed theological understanding of its structure and nature, and of the possibilities it offers for encouraging Christians to live the whole of our life in Christ, from one Easter to another.

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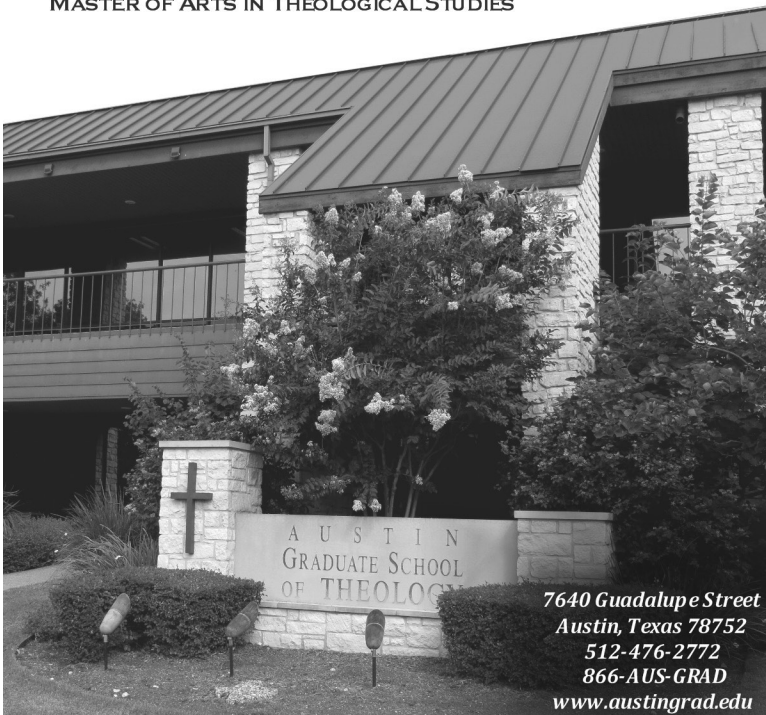


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# A Sound Beginning: Retrieving an Ancient Model of Christian Conversion<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Austin Napier

As members of the Churches of Christ, we have much for which we can be grateful. One such historical emphasis is the way Churches of Christ have vigilantly insisted on a full conversion process that culminates in a lasting commitment to Jesus as Lord. That is the point of our emphasis upon adult believer's baptism. It is worth reflecting theologically upon this emphasis for our own day.

With this concern in mind, we might ask a few questions. What makes for full conversion to Christ? What can we do to foster genuine conversion? What might we do that hinders it? Such are the questions I wish to address in this article, albeit through a reconsideration of a very ancient model of Christian formation.

My concern to understand conversion arises from twin widespread phenomena observable in churches today. The first phenomenon is the presence of many self-labeled Christians that may be described as "half-converted." By "half-converted" I mean the following. Positively, I refer to a person who self-identifies as Christian, participates to some degree in a congregation's corporate life, and hopes for some form of life with God in a world to come. Thus far he or she has turned toward Christ. However, the same person may lack any aspiration to become conformed to Christ's image in every aspect of life. Christian self-identification may predict political party affiliation more

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<sup>1</sup> See Keith Stanglin's discussion of "Retrieval Theology" on page 31 of this volume. Also see p. 61 of this article for further discussion.

reliably than marital faithfulness. Prayer, because one finds no basic sense in it, comes sparingly and with difficulty. Moral failures seem routine and unremarkable. Self-sacrifice for the sake of others is not so much a rejected ideal as a foreign concept. It has never appeared as a real option for life. This may not be the individual's fault. Perhaps one has never been told it is a possibility. With pastoral concern, one might diagnose this state as the "half-converted" life. Sadly, it is all too common.

Of course, not every member is content to remain "half-converted." A second phenomenon emerges here. Spiritual aspirations, by God's grace, stir within many. But spiritual seekers among the church's membership often pursue their primary spiritual guidance outside the local church. The current vogue of "spiritual formation" resources, conferences, gurus, and para-church organizations has risen to fill a real gap in the church's life. I am grateful for their existence. However, we must recognize that they represent attempts to complete what the church has left undone. Much of the "spiritual formation" movement today is attempting to provide ways to consummate conversion processes initially aborted by the local church.

What has gone wrong with our congregations to produce these twin phenomena of "half-converted" and "para-church nurtured" Christians? More importantly, how do we move forward in a corrective manner?

Here is my thesis: We don't mature well, because we don't begin well. In other words, we are not maturing normally in Christ, because we have cut short the initial conversion process by pressing for quick profession and immediate baptism before full loyalty to Jesus is established.

We are not alone in truncating the conversion process. Contemporary evangelicalism has institutionalized a type of Christian initiation, inherited from revivalism<sup>2</sup>, which typically aborts rather than completes conversion to

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<sup>2</sup> The salient features of a revivalist conversion theory each need to be questioned. First, the most basic indicator of a revivalist conversion theory is the assumed equivalence of "conversion" and "salvation"—i.e., they are the same event. A Christian, then, may allude to her conversion as being when she "got saved." Second, this singular event of conversion-salvation is punctiliar and thus easily dateable. One may be asked on a retreat registration form to supply this date as an indication of one's genuine Christian status. Of course, the question asked would be worded in a slightly different manner depending on ecclesial tradition. Mainstream evangelicals would ask the date of an internal event, namely, when one "accepted Jesus into your heart"

Christ. While laudably adding immersion, Churches of Christ have tended to mirror the revivalist pattern of aborted conversion. We have at times been clearer about baptism as the entry requirement than about loyalty to Jesus and Jesus' way as the substantive goal of conversion. When baptism itself, rather than loyalty to Jesus as Lord, becomes the goal, then baptism, in practice, becomes a damp altar call.

Theologically, confusions about the beginning and end of the Christian life have contributed to this widespread failure to mature. First, in our account of the beginnings of the Christian life (i.e., justification), we have confused profession with belief. Belief is a readiness to act as if something were true. As such, one can readily discern what I believe by observing my actions. Profession, on the other hand, is publically *claiming* to believe something. Of course, one may profess what one truly believes. Such is the ideal. However, the profession itself does not substantiate belief, rather action manifests genuine belief. Trust in Jesus becomes visible in fruits of repentance.

Since we have failed to distinguish profession from belief, we think God is primarily concerned to hear us publically voice certain utterances. So if I say publically that "I believe Jesus died for my sins," God will be happy and admit me to heaven when I die. Consequently, in our evangelistic strategies, we have often pressed for speedy profession rather than investing in the laborious teaching, mentoring, and spiritual direction of persons, which is needed to enable true belief and genuine commitment to Jesus as Lord.

Having built our membership with people who profess truths, which they are not in a position to truly believe, our secondary pastoral strategies almost

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or "received Jesus as Lord and Savior." Churches of Christ would ask for the date of one's baptism, certainly a properly dateable event. However, since baptism has customarily been administered immediately upon sign of interest, often without any substantial process of teaching, the punctiliar theory was at times still operative. So despite the local variations in the recipe for a valid conversion, the shared assumption has been that the product is instantly complete. "From 1996 through most of 2001" would not be a satisfactory response for the retreat coordinators. Third, the revivalist theory views conversion-salvation as an individual transaction with God, which may or may not result in church membership. The church is thus largely assumed to be a free association emerging as a social byproduct of individual conversions. For discussion of these and other elements, see Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion : Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

inevitably degenerate into forms of manipulation. Now we must “motivate” people to adopt behaviors, which they would automatically perform if they really believed what they claimed to believe. These represent the natural outworking of a revivalist account of the beginning of the Christian life.

Second, few congregations have anything approaching a developed account of the end or goal of the Christian life (i.e., sanctification). Even a cursory reading of Paul reveals that his evangelistic practice sought mature Christlikeness of persons as its intended goal.<sup>3</sup> Conversion was oriented toward moral and spiritual transformation into Christlikeness, not merely the satisfaction of minimal entry requirements for “going to heaven” after death.

What is needed is a practice of Christian conversion arising from and reliably producing fruits in keeping with a biblically sound and theologically coherent account of the beginning and goal of the Christian life. A well-formed beginning to the Christian life should demonstratively bear the seeds of the end of the Christian life within it.

Such a practice would not be a quick fix. It would require engaging in the hard, slow work of conversion on the front end, in order to construct a spiritual foundation from which Christian maturation could better develop. There once was such a practice. The early church, under pressure of persecution and in fidelity to Christ, developed an extensive catechetical practice designed both to engender true belief and to set a clear trajectory towards a fully transformed life.

In hopes of finding help for our day, we turn now to consider the ancient Christian model of catechesis. But a word of caution is in order. The following account is purely descriptive. Much of what follows will certainly sound strange. Its feel is foreign. I have made no effort to domesticate the third and early fourth century practices. It is important to recognize they are indeed different from ours. We cannot simply adopt their practices. I am not advocating a mere reproduction of this model.

Nonetheless, the early Christian catechumenate also constitutes the sole example of a fully developed process of conversion both based on normative commitment to adult believer’s baptism and functioning within a religiously

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<sup>3</sup> See James Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

plural environment. So it addressed similar issues to those of our day from a kindred theological stance. As such we would do well to weigh carefully the elements of the model and remember its historical fruit in the formation of many who literally shed their blood in order to confess Jesus as Lord. Surely, if any brothers and sisters are worth listening to, the martyred church is.

### **Conversion in Early Christianity: An Ancient Model of Formation**

May I ask you to imaginatively follow a typical third century convert with me? We will observe Theophilus as he makes his first acquaintance with the church, hears the gospel, and comes to trusting, transformative commitment. In so doing we will gain a basic overview of the early church's catechetical process. We may also catch glimpses of possibilities for our own day.

#### *Stage One: Basic Formation in Faith and Moral Transformation*

*(POTENTIALLY UP TO TWO-THREE YEARS IN DURATION)<sup>4</sup>*

Theophilus was a Greek craftsman who lived with his extended family in the city of Carthage, North Africa. He first found interest stirring when he noticed Chrestus, a slave engaged in the same craft. Chrestus lived according to a moral sense that Theophilus admired but could not understand. On several occasions, Theophilus had observed Chrestus give to others from his meager resources and repay hostilities from other slaves with genuine kindness. Puzzled, Theophilus resolved to ask Chrestus the reason for his actions. The answer involved a strange tale about a crucified teacher who lived again, along with Chrestus' offer to introduce Theophilus to someone who could better explain.

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<sup>4</sup> The first, and longest, stage of the early Christian catechumenate requires the most detective work to reconstruct. Unlike the orations delivered throughout Lent and the weeks preceding and following Easter, we lack full transcriptions of the everyday instruction delivered to the developing convert during the first phase of instruction. Fortunately, we do have scattered references in the Fathers and a handful of primary texts, which likely reflect this stage of teaching, from which reconstruction is possible.

*Enrollment in the Catechumenate and Initial Instruction*

Theophilus' initiation into the faith began when Chrestus introduced him to Possidius, the church's head catechist. Sponsorship was an essential feature of the catechetical process. Chrestus had now become Theophilus' sponsor and would accompany him through the entire process from initial instruction to full immersion.<sup>5</sup>

On this introductory meeting, Possidius interviewed Theophilus and Chrestus together. The questions were crafted to assess Theophilus' motives, current moral fault lines, professional commitments, educational background and degree of previous knowledge about the faith. But the questions were not directed to Theophilus alone. Chrestus was asked to vouch for Theophilus' answers. The interview helped Possidius discern how best to lead Theophilus into a fully committed faith.

Following the interview, Possidius delivered his first instruction to Theophilus in the presence of Chrestus. The basic outline of the first instruction consisted of an overview of the story of God's deeds from creation to the fulfillment of God's promises of the church seen in the present day. Of course, much had to be left out, but the primary joints or "knuckles" of the story structured this teaching. Augustine of Hippo describes the appropriate way to summarize the grand story.

What we ought to do, however, is to give a general summary sketch of all the content in such a way that a certain number of quite remarkable events are selected, ones that our listeners find particularly appealing and that constitute the critical historical turning points.<sup>6</sup>

So Possidius narrated God's deeds to Theophilus, tailored to his spiritual state. The summary traced the highlights from Creation to Noah (18.29–

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<sup>5</sup> If a seeker approaches the catechist without a sponsor, a sponsor is soon provided for the seeker.

<sup>6</sup> *Instructing Beginners in Faith* 3.5, p. 64 in Augustine, Raymond F. Canning, and Boniface Ramsey, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, (The Augustine Series; Hyde Park: New City Press, 2006). Parenthetical citations in the text refer to this work. A very helpful contemporary analogue would be Allan J. McNicol, *Preparing for Baptism : Becoming Part of the Story of the People of God* (Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2001).

19.32), from Noah to Abraham (19.33) and Abraham to David (20.34–20.36), from David to the Babylonian Captivity (20.37) and the Babylonian Captivity to Christ (21.38), culminating in an account of God’s deeds from the First Coming of Christ to His Second Coming (22.39–24.44). Theophilus was told that the perfect epitome of the story, as well as its culmination, is found in God’s humble love descending to us in Christ. As such, Christ embodies the principle by which God has been approaching us, indeed pursuing us, since the very beginning.

Possidius concluded by exhorting Theophilus to live in a manner worthy of God’s humble love in light of his salvific deeds. Focal points for moral striving were addressed. Theophilus must guard himself against relapsing into idolatry. He must seek to resolve anger before evening. Sexual immorality must be shunned and all forms of deceit renounced. Chrestus would be his companion in the spiritual and moral journey to follow.

This teaching rang true to Theophilus and he indicated his initial assent. So Possidius completed Theophilus’ enrollment among the catechumens by praying over him, signing him with the cross and giving him a taste of salt in Jesus’ name. (Salt was a preservative and symbolically embodied a prayer for the catechumen to be preserved through the trials of conversion to come.) From this point on, Theophilus was considered a Christian, though only a “catechumen” and not yet one of the “faithful.”<sup>7</sup> Theophilus and Chrestus were dismissed with a blessing and the task of living out Christian teachings.

### *Joining a Catechetical Group*

At the next catechetical instruction, Possidius integrated Theophilus and Chrestus into a group of catechumens at a similar moral and spiritual level.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> If persecution arose and he was called upon to confess Jesus, Theophilus would be expected to confess. Should he be martyred, his salvation would not be doubted. The early church held that martyrdom constituted a “baptism in one’s own blood.”

<sup>8</sup> Consider the testimony of Origen. “[A]s far as they can, Christians previously examine the souls of those who want to hear them, and test them individually beforehand; when before entering the community the hearers seem to have devoted themselves sufficiently to the desire to live a good life, then they introduce them. They privately appoint one class consisting of recent beginners who are receiving elementary instruction and have not yet received the sign that they have been purified, and another class of those who, as far as they are able, make it their set purpose to desire nothing other than those things of which Christians approve’ (Origen, *Con-*

This group would meet twice weekly over the course of the next couple of years. The content of the curriculum would be a deeper exploration of the biblical history of salvation coupled with insightful moral exhortation and mentoring leading to personal renovation. Three practices especially made the early Christian catechumenate much more than a “Christianity 101” class.

First, mentoring facilitated spiritual and moral growth.<sup>9</sup> Apart from camaraderie in the transforming process, sponsors provided an external diagnosis to the convert. None of us see ourselves in a fully accurate manner. Chrestus’ frank observations provided Theophilus with a regular check on self-deception and a stimulus for moral striving. Likewise, Chrestus was expected to help Theophilus make sense of the teachings imparted in the catechetical sessions. If a particular point was opaque to Theophilus as a newcomer, Chrestus as one of the faithful elucidated the matter.

Second, each session concluded with a team of “exorcists” praying over Theophilus and other catechumens individually for their deliverance from evil.<sup>10</sup> “Exorcism” was the early church’s word for this process, but that word conjures inaccurate images to our Hollywood-fed minds.

Basically, the exorcism process acknowledged that there are multiple layers of agency within a person, and the person does not have direct access to every layer. There are parts of me that need changing, but I cannot simply choose to change them on my own. Thus God’s help is needed and prayer is appropriate.

To develop a more accurate picture of the typical effects of exorcism, consider this description from the mid-third century.

We affirm that the whole human world has evidence of the work of Jesus since in it dwell the churches of God which consist of people converted through Jesus from countless evils.... [T]he

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*tra Celsum* 3.51 [trans. Henry Chadwick; Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1980 (1953), 163]).

<sup>9</sup> A moving testimony to Origen’s manner of mentoring the catechumen, written by a person he taught and converted is Gregory Thaumaturgus’ *Address of Thanksgiving to Origen*.

<sup>10</sup> By mid-third century there were 52 exorcists active in the church in Rome (cf. Eusebius and John Ernest Leonard Oulton, *The Ecclesiastical History Vol. 2 / with an English Transl. By J.E.L. Oulton* (London: 1964)..

name of Jesus still takes away mental distractions from men, and daemons and diseases as well, and implants a wonderful meekness and tranquility of character, and a love for mankind and a kindness and gentleness, in those who ... genuinely accepted the gospel about God and Christ and the judgment to come.<sup>11</sup>

So a more accurate translation of the process for contemporary purposes might be “prayer saturation.” In other words, twice per week Theophilus would be the beneficiary of focused prayer by one who knew him well. Specific areas of Theophilus’ moral weakness and spiritual failure would be saturated in prayer and God’s deliverance would be sought for those layers at work within Theophilus that were beyond his immediate control.

Third, to the mentoring relations and prayer saturation were added periodic “scrutinies” or guided discernment sessions with the catechist. The catechist led the convert through this diagnostic process, one on one, in order to provide spiritual direction and determine specific needs for transformation. For instance, Theophilus might emerge from his first scrutiny with a commitment to notice early signs as he began slipping toward anger. He might then learn to step out of the process before anger seized control. Subsequent scrutinies might lead Theophilus to focused decisions to practice forgiveness more readily or to guard his tongue against hasty speech, depending on his spiritual and moral state of development at the time.

### *The Liturgy of the Catechumens*

During the catechetical process, Theophilus and his fellow catechumens gathered each Sunday with the church. They attended the first phase of the service known as the “liturgy of the catechumens.” Through attending the liturgy, Theophilus too was formed by the songs and prayers of the church. He heard a homily with the rest of the congregation. However, there were certain elements of the service for which Theophilus was not yet prepared and could not attend. Catechumens were dismissed from the service prior to the holy kiss, the recital of the Creed, the communal praying of the Lord’s Prayer, and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper or any Baptism. These elements were concealed under what scholars refer to as the “discipline of secrecy” in the ancient church.

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<sup>11</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.67.

As we consider all that was involved in “stage one” of the catechetical process, we should note that this stage typically lasted two or three years, but chronology was not the decisive factor. We have several examples of catechumens in the early church that progressed more rapidly and were baptized earlier. The key factor was spiritual development, not the period of time intervening. So we should not imagine the protracted period as a time in which baptism was denied. Rather, the church was making provision for guiding persons through the full temporal process typically required for a complete conversion. Prodigious, quick conversions are easy to accommodate. Wise guidance for the typical conversion process requires more forethought and care.

*Stage Two: Competency, the Lenten Preparation for Baptism*

(40 DAYS IN DURATION)

After two years of mentoring, Theophilus was approaching a settled trust in Jesus and commitment to Jesus’ way of life. Possidius and Chrestus, seeing Theophilus’ growth, encouraged him to join those petitioning for baptism.

The solemn ceremony, which marked formal enrollment among the “petitioners,” occurred each year at Epiphany (January 6). At this time the bishop counseled potential “petitioners” to count the cost of full allegiance, issued warnings of the consequences of ill-intentioned initiation, and provided descriptions of the spiritual benefits of a fully committed life with God.<sup>12</sup> Catechumens, like Theophilus, who sought baptism at the coming Easter, placed their names into a basket in the bishop’s presence as the congregation chants Psalm 42, “As the deer longs for flowing streams....” Chrestus too must be present as Theophilus’ sponsor. The bishop’s scrutiny, which followed, directed questions to them both concerning Theophilus’ manner of life. When the bishop was satisfied of Theophilus’ sincere intentions, he was formally enrolled among the “petitioners” (*competentes*) and entered the stage of “competency”.

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<sup>12</sup> For an example of this type of homily see the Procatechesis in Cyril and F. L. Cross, *St. Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on the Christian Sacraments : The Procatechesis and the Five Mystagogical Catecheses* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986).

The Lenten fast began the day after enrollment and continued until Easter. Theophilus was healthy enough to sustain a rather rigorous deprivation. Through this time of competency, he was expected to abstain from wine, meat, bathing, public entertainment, and the marriage bed. Some petitioners with weaker constitutions were allowed to include a little wine or meat for health's sake. But all engaged, as they were able, in a manifestation of repentance for sins from which they would be cleansed in baptism. During this repentance, they might even dress in coarse goatskin garb and walk barefoot.

Theophilus was now expected to participate in a daily regime of liturgy, instruction and exorcism. Petitioners gathered at six each morning for a program that lasted about three hours; this was primarily a time for testing. Scrutinies became more frequent. Theophilus was exorcised or saturated in prayer on a daily basis. Each time he came for instruction, hands were imposed upon Theophilus and the power of Christ invoked over him. The residual pockets of disorder within him were named and Satan was commanded to depart.

For the first four weeks, the content of instruction reviewed what was covered in the previous two years. So the history of God's deeds and moral exhortation still occupied center stage.<sup>13</sup> On the Saturday fifteen days before Easter, however, the focus shifted. In a ceremony known as the *traditio symboli*, the creed was "handed over" to Theophilus and the petitioners. Theophilus was led through a process of memorizing the creed, for it could not be written down lest it fall into the hands of unbelievers. Over the next week, Chrestus helped Theophilus to memorize it completely. Eight days later, on the following Saturday, Theophilus was asked to "hand back" the creed in a formal recitation known as the *redditio symboli*. The daily instruction of the intervening week focused on expounding the creed article by article.

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<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Marcia L. Colish, *Ambrose's Patriarchs : Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005). and Chrysostom John and Paul W. Harkins, *Baptismal Instructions, Ancient Christian Writers the Works of the Fathers in Translation*, (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1963).

*Stage Three: Enlightenment in Rite and Word*  
*(Holy Week and the Easter Octave)*

On Palm Sunday (the Sunday before Easter), Holy Week began with another rite of “handing over” (*traditio orationis dominicae*). Here Theophilus was first introduced to the Lord’s Prayer. As he memorized the words of the Lord’s Prayer, Theophilus was learning the words that would be his birth-right. Following his emergence from the waters of baptism on Easter morning, he would join others in calling upon “Our Father” for the first time. Again, the instruction of the final week commenced with a focus on expounding the meaning of the petitions within this prayer.

Holy Week also involved special worship services, most lasting about three hours, in which special readings, prayers, and songs were given voice. On Wednesday the didactic focus shifted from the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer to meditation upon the passion of Christ.

On Thursday the petitioners received a brief respite. In honor of the Lord’s Last Supper, Theophilus and his co-petitioners were allowed to enjoy a bath and to break their fast for a special evening meal. As Jesus did in John’s Gospel, the bishop now washed the feet of those gathered.

Good Friday was devoted to commemoration of Christ’s crucifixion. Theophilus and the petitioners gathered with the faithful. Through the final three days, all fasted together, faithful and petitioner alike. On this day, Theophilus heard the entirety of Matthew’s passion narrative read and the bishop preached on the significance of Jesus’ death.

Saturday Vigil began with the lamp lighting as the church gathers at sunset in the *Martyrium*, which housed the remains of those killed for their witness to Christ. Amid reminders of the costly witness borne by local brothers and sisters past, Theophilus joined the church in a nightlong prayer punctuated by a series of readings, songs, and sermons.

At cockcrow, Theophilus’ two-year conversion process reached its climax.<sup>14</sup> The baptismal ceremony begins at first light with the consecration of

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<sup>14</sup> The definitive examination of all known witnesses to baptism in the first five centuries is Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009). One might also profitably consult Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian*

the baptismal waters. While chanting Psalm 42, Theophilus and the other petitioners were led down to the water.

At the water's edge, Theophilus removed his penitential garb of goat-skin. He stood upon it naked and faced West. The bishop asks, "Theophilus, do you renounce Satan and all his pomp and temptations?" Theophilus replied, "I do renounce Satan," whereupon the bishop hissed in his face and demanded Satan to depart Christ's property forever. The hiss was called "exsufflation" and, if directed toward a statue of the emperor, was considered a treasonous act. A deacon now grasped Theophilus' shoulders and turned his body to face East. The bishop then asked, "Theophilus, do you give yourself to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who set creation in motion and before whom all things tremble?" Theophilus responded, "I do, and may Christ grant me to perform all his will without blame."

With this pledge of allegiance to Christ, Theophilus was led into the water. Waste deep in water, Theophilus was asked, "Do you believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth?" When Theophilus said, "I believe," strong hands grasped his head and shoulders and plunged him beneath the water. A moment later Theophilus rose. Again he was asked, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, born of the virgin, crucified under Pontius Pilate, dead, buried and raised again for our sins?" Again, upon his confession, Theophilus was plunged and held beneath the waters. When Theophilus rose, the final question greeted him: "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, who inspired the prophets, overshadowed the virgin Mary, indwells the church, and by whom our bodies will be resurrected on the last day?" Theophilus assented and a third time the waters received him with a splash.

On the other side of the baptistery, Theophilus' head was doused in oil and the sign of the cross marked upon his forehead. The "chrismation" represented the gift of the Holy Spirit just received in immersion. Someone draped a new, white garment around Theophilus' shoulders and he was lead to join

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*Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007); Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*, Liturgy, Worship and Society Series (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd., 2006); Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: Baptismal Homilies of the Fourth Century* (Slough,: St. Paul Publications, 1972).

the other newly baptized “infants”. When all were gathered before the church, the “infants” exercised their birthright and called upon “Our Father in the heavens.” They then received the Lord’s Supper for the first time with the faithful. At their first celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the “infants” were given a cup of mixed milk and honey symbolizing both their infant status (for this was typical baby food of the day) and their entrance into the life, of which the “land flowing with milk and honey” was an Old Testament type.

Over the course of the Easter Octave (the eight days from Easter through the following Sunday), the “infants” would continue to wear their white robes and return daily to receive the Lord’s Supper and teaching. The teaching during this week<sup>15</sup> was called “mystagogy.” In terms of content, mystagogical orations expounded upon the significance and symbolism of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and other aspects of the church’s liturgy as they reflected again scriptural images. The “infants” were welcomed into the company of the faithful and shared in the full worship service, including the holy kiss, the Lord’s Supper, praying the Lord’s Prayer, and confessing the creed.

Each of these experiences was new to Theophilus. Though he had pieced together some fragmentary expectations, he had never witnessed any of these rites. He needed explanations to reap the full spiritual benefits of participation in worship. At this point, Theophilus learned that the waters into which he had been plunged stand in continuity with those waters over which the Spirit of God hovered “in the beginning.” The waters by which the earth was cleansed in Noah’s day and the waters, by which God delivered his people from the evil of Pharaoh’s army, also rippled through Theophilus’ understanding. But above all, Theophilus learned that in the waters of baptism he and his fellow catechumens had become members of the one body of Christ.

Similarly, Theophilus learned that the bread and cup not only referred to a sacrificial action in the past, they also symbolized a sacrifice yet intended—namely, the sacrifice that the church seeks to become. Theophilus now communed with Christ as he took the bread, but he also meditates upon how

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<sup>15</sup> The timing of the mystagogical orations (explanations of the sacraments) varied from place to place in the ancient church. However, two practices prevailed. Mystagogical orations were delivered either during Holy Week preceding baptism on Easter, or during the Easter Octave on the days immediately following baptism.

he and this community were called to be an extension of Christ's sacrificial life in the world.

Thus the mystagogical orations provided a pivotal orientation for Theophilus' solidifying conversion. At the Easter Octave, the "infants" wore their white robes for the last time before melding in with the faithful at large. But they were exhorted to keep their lives evermore as clean within as the robes were without. The conversion process had reached its ritual conclusion, but the life of Christian maturation had just begun. The extensive, and at times exhausting, process of the early Christian catechumenate constituted a sound beginning for a life of spiritual growth.

### **Suggested Retrieval for Our Day**

Not every aspect of the above catechetical and baptismal process is worth reproducing in our day. Let us harbor no fantasies that replicating every aspect of the early Church's catechetical process would be either possible or beneficial today. The "discipline of secrecy," for instance, is forever a thing of the past. That is probably a good thing. Religious institutions in our day have not used secrecy well.

Retrieval is not the same thing as a reproduction. What we must seek are appropriate analogues for our own day. Nonetheless, a few aspects of the ancient catechumenate seem particularly important to retrieve in some form for our own day.

First, an extensive mentored process of moral and spiritual formation on the beginning of a person's interaction with the church would foster a more complete conversion, which in turn would enable sound processes of Christian maturation over time. And the basic, twofold content of teaching as a reframing of the self within the story of God's deeds and guidance into the Christian moral life cannot be improved upon. For those who come to faith and are immersed more quickly, the same program would foster maturation in Christ.

To be clear, I am not advocating *denying* baptism to a person at any stage. The point of developing a longer catechetical program is to accommodate the actual length of real life conversions. Under prodigious circumstances like the Ethiopian Eunuch or the Philippian Jailer, where conversion takes

hold very quickly, we should never withhold the water based on an abstract timetable. To be fair to the ancients, this also was true of the patristic model.

However, most persons I have worked with take years to come to full faith commitment. This has been my own experience in mission. From conversations with other missionaries and ministers across Europe, it matches their experience of evangelism over the last couple decades.

A qualitative study of actual converts conducted by the British Bible Society in the 1990s came to this conclusion. “The gradual process is the way in which the majority of people discover God and the average time taken is about four years: models of evangelism which can help people along the pathway are needed.”<sup>16</sup> It may be in our cultural environment that a process slightly longer, not shorter, than the early Christian catechumenate will be needed.

So I am in favor of having a general catechetical program ready to walk with people for several years until full conversion and immersion occur. However, I am also in favor of immersing persons at whatever pace they actually find themselves turning toward Christ and ready to join him in baptism, whether that in actuality takes a few days or several years. If baptism comes at one month, then much of that program would still be worthwhile for the early maturation process beyond baptism.

Second, the sponsorship-mentoring model is essential and should be fostered today. Conversion, at whatever pace, is a disorienting and potentially isolating experience. Finding non-coercive ways to ensure that a more experienced follower of Christ accompanies the convert on his or her spiritual journey would be a merciful and helpful act of the church. Of course, the church must take special care to ensure that sponsorship never degenerate into a manipulative or authoritarian relation of control. Such would certainly be damaging and our own history supplies cautionary tales sufficient to warn. Nonetheless, the lack of accompaniment along the journey of conversion brings its own perils and we would do well to supply, with chastened hearts, the support needed.

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<sup>16</sup> John British Finney and Society Foreign Bible, *Finding Faith Today* (British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992), p. 25.

Third, exorcism played a stronger role than we often think in the conversion process. Since the term miscommunicates today, we should dispense with the term without abandoning the substance. As an analogue, I suggest the development, training and extensive utilization of “prayer saturation teams” within our congregations as part of the regular catechetical process.

Fourth, I would advocate a shift in teaching about baptism from a singular focus on the “necessity” of baptism, to an equal emphasis upon the meaning and significance of baptism. Such a focus would better prepare persons for receiving the transformative blessings that baptism was meant to bestow. However, to be truly effective in solidifying conversion, this shift in teaching about baptism, must be mirrored in our manner of bestowing baptism.

To be clear, I would advocate making the baptismal service constitute the whole of our worship on Sundays in which a baptism is to be performed. In other words, baptism should never be a speedy, perfunctory add-on to the end of our worship service. Properly developed, a full baptismal service beautifully preaches the gospel in deed, accompanying words, and congregational song. Periodic baptismal services, wherein the whole worship service is devoted first to explaining, elaborating, and performing baptism and then culminates in a corporate sharing of the Lord’s Supper should become the norm. This practice would both enrich the church’s worship and, by the very time devoted, emphasize the church’s care for her newly birthed brothers and sisters in Christ.

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# “Smash Them Against the Rocks”? The Christian Appropriation of Difficult Psalms

R. Mark Shipp

## Introduction

Psalms is the hymnbook of the Bible, and is thus the particular domain of the synagogue and the church. It has comforted the lamenter and given expression to the praises and thanksgivings of worshippers for thousands of years. It is friendly to the life of faith, for it was produced out of the depth of experience of faithful ones of old who passed on their praise, thanksgiving and lament to us.

This, at least, is the book of Psalms as it is offered for public consumption—a view, so to speak, from outer space. When we actually read the Psalms on the ground, we are often confronted with a strange world of cultural practices, beliefs, and cosmology different from our own. Often the theology is foreign to our experience and sometimes can be offensive to our modern sensibilities. Take, for example, the so-called imprecatory Psalms, or Psalms of vengeance:

Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?  
I hate them with perfect hatred;  
I count them my enemies (Psalm 139:21–22).

These sentiments seem to fly in the face of the injunction in Romans 12 not to seek vengeance, but to repay evil with good. Such passages as this in the Old Testament, and particularly the book of Psalms, are off-putting to

many Christians, leading them to adopt a dispensational or even semi-Marcionite attitude toward them.

How *should* we approach such Psalms and their difficult sentiments? In many churches, the Psalms have been relegated to the pre-Christian, Judaic past, and are primarily of historical interest. Many Christian groups heavily redact the Psalms, picking and choosing those parts more friendly to Christian worship, and effectively deleting others not deemed appropriate for inclusion. Others “baptize” the Psalms, making them “crypto-Christian,” that is, reading them primarily as allegory or prophecy. My approach is to present a few categories of Psalms that Christians often find difficult, and to give some considerations for how they may still be important for Christians today.

### **“I Am Weary with My Crying”: Psalms of Lament**

I have talked to Christians who feel that the reading or personal use of lament Psalms by the Church is inappropriate, since we live on the other side of the cross. Lament is not a worthy sentiment for Christians, we are told, because Christians are supposed to be people of praise. This strikes me as odd. It is not unlike a parent telling his or her child, “Stop crying! You should be happy, because you are my child.” I have recently been told about a young man who was responsible for putting another person in the hospital. He went to church the next day, hoping for some word in the service to articulate or legitimate his pain, but the only songs and readings were happy and oriented to praise.

People in both testaments cry out to the Lord in pain and petition. The fact that God will “wipe away every tear from their eyes ... and mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev 21:4) in the eschatological age implies that in these in-between times there *will* be crying, and pain, and mourning. It is not only appropriate, but essential, to voice our lament to the Lord. It is not that Christians lament; everyone laments. It is that Christians voice their laments to the Lord, and it is the covenant commitment of the Lord to hear and draw near to all those who cry out to him.<sup>1</sup> With whatever

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<sup>1</sup> See Deut. 26:7: “We cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.” Also see Psalm 34:7: “When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, and rescues them from all their troubles.”

else we do with lament Psalms, these observations are intended to orient us to their appropriation.

- 1) The lament is the honest cry to the Lord. But lament Psalms do much more than just give utterance to our honest complaints.<sup>2</sup> They give us the vocabulary and movement of complaint so we may lament faithfully. “We do not know how to pray as we ought,” and we might say the same thing about lament: “We do not know how to lament as we ought.” The biblical laments provide us with a template for faithful lament and protest directed to God.
- 2) Lament is also “structured grief,” possibly the most highly structured and ritualized expression of human grief. Lament provides structure to what is otherwise unredeemable chaos.<sup>3</sup> It is from a deep longing for order that cries of lament to God arise.
- 3) Lament is much more than just complaint. It is the invocation of God into lament with the sufferer and is therefore the ultimate act of trust.<sup>4</sup> It is to give to God everything we are and have. It is to cry out to God, suspended by our fingernails over the abyss.
- 4) Finally, lament is an important dimension of Christian worship.<sup>5</sup> I have told my students for 20 years that on any given Sunday, half or more of our church members come to worship with profound burdens. When we build lament into our services, we give them permission to cry out to God and provide them with the structure and vocabulary to do so faithfully.

The most dreadful (i.e., “full of dread”) example of the lament genre is Psalm 88. Psalm 88 is one of very few lament Psalms with no shift to praise or thanksgiving in it. It is unrelieved lament. We might conclude from lament Psalms that they may be appropriated by the church in worship *because* most of them end with praise and thanksgiving. However, if it is God’s cov-

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<sup>2</sup> See Sally Brown and Patrick Miller, eds., *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (Louisville: WJKP, 2005), xiv–xvi and Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Augsburg Old Testament Studies; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 52–53.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Brown and Miller, *Lament*, p. xvii.

enant commitment to be near to all who cry out to him, then it is the cry itself which demonstrates faith, not just the movement from lament to praise. I am reminded of the Canaanite woman who cries out persistently to Jesus in the words of the faithful lamenter in the Psalms: *Haneni YHWH*, “Have mercy on me, O Lord.” She, a Gentile woman, was commended for her faith when she persisted in crying out to Jesus, not because her lament ended in praise (Matt 15:21–28).

### **“I Hate Them with a Perfect Hatred”: Psalms with Imprecations**

Something has been said already about Psalms which include imprecations or cursing, Psalms which call the wrath of God down upon the enemy. One of the best known of such imprecations is the closing part of Psalm 137, a communal lament often set to music in its opening lines, but which turns into one of the most resistant passages in the Old Testament to Christian appropriation. The verses in question are vv. 7–9, especially vv. 8–9, dealing with Babylon:

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!

Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!

It is not difficult to imagine why many metrical Psalms based upon Psalm 137 have skipped these verses. Indeed, it is difficult for us to imagine anyone commending bashing babies against the rocks in solemn Christian worship. In those psalters which do give a metrical paraphrase of vv. 7–9, strange things can happen. Note the *Bay Psalm Book*'s version of v. 9:

O happie hee shall surely bee  
that taketh up, that eke  
thy little ones against the stones  
doth into pieces breake.

Note the slightly more poetic Ravenscroft Psalter:

Yea, blessed shall that man be called  
That takes thy children young,  
To dash their bones against hard stones,  
Which lie the streets among.

Perhaps the prize for most clever, but ill-advised, appropriation of vv. 8–9 is a verse attributed to Robert Burns, Scottish poet laureate:

O blessed may that trooper be,  
 Who riding on his naggie,  
 Shall tak' thy wee bairns by the taes  
 And ding them on the craggie.<sup>6</sup>

What shall we do with such passages as these? As one who edits metrical psalters, I am keenly aware of the exegetical, theological, and poetic decisions which must be made in the process of rendering ancient Semitic poetry into modern verse. Walter Brueggemann has suggested it is a mature and visceral faith which gives rise to these sentiments, although it is not a “noble vision” in scripture.<sup>7</sup> James Mays says “There is no evading the passionate pain and anger that animates these prayers. They call for the accounts in the books of history to be balanced.”<sup>8</sup> Craig Broyles says “These expressions referring to the slaughter of children are a way of depicting the end of an oppressive dynasty ... Psalm 137 is in the mouth of powerless victims, not powerful executioners.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most interesting and cogent discussion of prayers of imprecation is that of Patrick Miller, who states that prayer to God for vengeance has been superseded by the prayer of Christ from the cross for forgiveness and the command to actively seek the good of the enemy. He also, however, recognizes that such imprecations are cries to the Lord for justice, surely a contemporary concern.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Some recent psalters skip these verses altogether—due to the difficulty most churches would have in singing these lines in communal worship—or condense them to lessen the offense (the ELCA worship supplement *With One Voice* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995], no. 656 only sets vv. 1–4; the CRC *Psalter Hymnal* [Grand Rapids: CRC, 1987], condenses the verses; Michael Morgan, in *Psalter for Christian Worship* [rev. ed.; Louisville: Witherspoon, 2010], p. 166 condenses the last three verses into two lines; in *Psalms for All Seasons* [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012], pp. 897–900, all 9 verses are condensed in versions A, D, and E; in the Missouri Synod *Lutheran Service Book* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2006] and Christopher Webber's *A New Metrical Psalter* [New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1986], Psalm 137 is skipped altogether).

<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation Commentary; Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 423.

<sup>9</sup> Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 480.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 299–303.

While the theological issues posed by this text are difficult, there are some ways we can approach imprecatory Psalms and orient ourselves toward their potential use in worship. 1) The Psalms of lament, including imprecations, are honest cries to the Lord. One of the gifts of the Psalter is that of legitimating our anger and protest and articulating it to God, individually and corporately. 2) Israel in particular, and Semitic cultures of the ancient Near East in general, were societies characterized by “corporate personality.” What I mean by this is that while the individual was understood in these ancient cultures, individuals only had meaning as part of the group to which they belonged. To “smash the little ones against the rocks” is a way of saying “Lord, do not let the injustice of the Babylonians continue; end their culture of violence and do not let a new generation of Babylonians continue their legacy of terror and evil.” 3) These imprecations are cries for justice, for God to rise and act against the wholesale slaughter of innocents and extreme injustice of the Babylonians. They are never cries for personal vengeance. It is God’s job to exact vengeance, for he knows how to perfectly execute justice. Perhaps two movements related to injustice and the enemy are critical: first, the biblical curse is directed against evil and its destructive force, and is an appeal to God for justice; second, our job is not to curse, but to war against injustice by actively pursuing the good of the enemy.

With imprecatory Psalms one must recognize the full brunt of the evil inflicted upon the sufferer. Equally, however, one must recognize the lamenter is not seeking personal revenge. It is the justice of God to which the Psalmist appeals. Vengeance is God’s appropriate domain, and his alone.

### **The Royal Psalms**

In my teaching experience, I have found that students are eventually able to understand the value of lament and even imprecation, but often the most foreign of the Psalms are the Royal Psalms. These reflect an ideology of government and society far removed from our own. Royal Psalms also reflect kingship by divine choice and right, a cosmology of kingship reflecting the microcosm of Israelite kingship over the nations as the counterpart to the macrocosm of God’s heavenly reign. The Royal Psalms sit uneasily in our worship psalters, since democracy, governmental accountability by the people, and a material view of the cosmos are the norm in Western society. Even

though my own congregation has a Psalm reading/singing many Sundays, I cannot remember the last time a Royal Psalm was utilized in worship.

Some Royal Psalms are more resistant to appropriation than others. A few we are somewhat familiar with, as they have been filtered through the New Testament, and so a New Testament application of these texts almost always trumps the surface, literal reading in Christian appropriation. I think in this regard of Psalm 2, with its language of divine adoption of the son of David, and Psalm 110, which says the king is a priest like Melchizedek. Other Royal Psalms, or portions of the ones just mentioned, do not fare so well in terms of Christian adoption. Psalm 45 clearly concerns a royal wedding. Psalm 89 is something of a double whammy: not only is it a Royal Psalm, it is also a lament. Psalm 110 uses language similar to royal inscriptions dealing with empire building.

Although the imagery and theology of the Royal Psalms is among the most foreign to our experience in America, appropriation in worship can be quite simple. Regardless of whether we think human kingship in the Old Testament is an aberration or a blessing, God has elected to bring blessing and reconciliation through the medium of the kingship of David's line. Also, regardless of our political persuasion, in the Church we submit to a most benevolent monarch. In my judgment, it is appropriate when singing the Royal Psalms to think of David's greatest son and heir, Jesus the son of David, the son of Abraham.<sup>11</sup> In this manner, baptizing the Psalm for Christian use is not really necessary; they are already, in a sense, "baptized." Jesus the Christ is a great king who still holds sway over the nations and calls them to account.

### **Psalms of Zion**

Psalms of Zion are related to Royal Psalms. The "twin pillars" of God's covenant with David are David's dynastic succession and the eternal choice of Jerusalem as the city of the temple and its priesthood. The Songs of Zion reflect that second of God's eternal choices, his special relationship to the city of Jerusalem.

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<sup>11</sup> James. L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: W/JKP, 1994), 19, 100–102.

There are obvious problems with this theology of eternal covenant concerning a city and a temple. First, Jerusalem was destroyed, producing a theological crisis articulated several times in the Old Testament, especially in Psalm 89, Jeremiah 25–29, and Ezekiel 37. Second, the spatial connection of the covenant with David to a Near Eastern city seems at odds with the insistence in the New Testament that the kingdom of God is “not of this world.” Finally, the cosmology of these songs is an important corollary to God’s choice of mount Zion and the city of Jerusalem, but is foreign to our material understanding of the cosmos. It is this cosmology that I want to highlight.

If God chose Zion above all other locations on earth, there are implications to this which are reflected many places in the Old Testament. First, Zion is the tallest of all mountains, reflecting the greatness and glory of the Lord (Ps 48, Isaiah 2). Second, it is the center, or navel, of the earth, reflecting its importance in the cosmos (Ezek 38:12). Third, Zion, with the temple in its midst, is the holy mountain, the “Olympus” of Israel, with the temple as the earthly representation of the heavenly court and throne (Isa 6, Ps 48). Fourth, Zion exerts a profound and inexorable draw on all the nations around, causing them to either do battle against it, or in their inevitable defeat, to be drawn to it in honor, worship, instruction, and submission (Isa 2, Pss. 46 and 48).

All of this seems at odds with the theology of the “new Jerusalem,” the abode of God and of his throne, and the notion of the church as the “living stones” of a spiritual temple. On the other hand, the need to democratize and spiritualize the cosmology of Zion and the temple is a process we see at work in the pages of scripture: from Ezekiel’s vision of an eschatological Zion, temple, and land, to the holy city coming down from heaven at the end of Revelation. It seems to me that scripture itself contains the hermeneutical keys for appropriating the cosmology and imagery of the Zion Psalms.<sup>12</sup>

In appropriating Zion theology for the Church we should let the imagery and cosmology of the Zion Psalms stand, as it is not a major jump from the all-encompassing reach and importance of physical Zion to the comfort and peace of spiritual Zion. It is important, however, for us to recognize that

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<sup>12</sup> J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 150–152.

there is both continuity and discontinuity between the ancient, and the modern understanding of Zion. There is indeed thematic continuity: “Zion” is the place where God exercises righteous rule, the location in space and time where God’s holy people gather for worship. Just as importantly, there is discontinuity between the ancient and modern understandings of Zion, temple, and the cosmology surrounding them. Their view of the cosmos (comprised of heavens, earth, and underworld) is not our own. Jerusalem was not literally the “center” of the universe. We do not usually think of the physical temple as the copy of the divine temple in heaven and the conduit of God’s blessing and presence. We have no king who sits on a throne in a physical city and holds sway over the nations. But even these physical understandings of God’s rule and the spatial understanding of God’s presence in worship may be understood theologically and metaphorically: where God is the true center of the universe. Jesus the Christ fulfills what it means to be the true, faithful, anointed son of David, who extends his kingdom over the nations even today. The Church is the true temple of God, where God’s presence dwells within his people, and in the end, the new Jerusalem of God will be the dwelling-place of God’s people forever.

### **Conclusion**

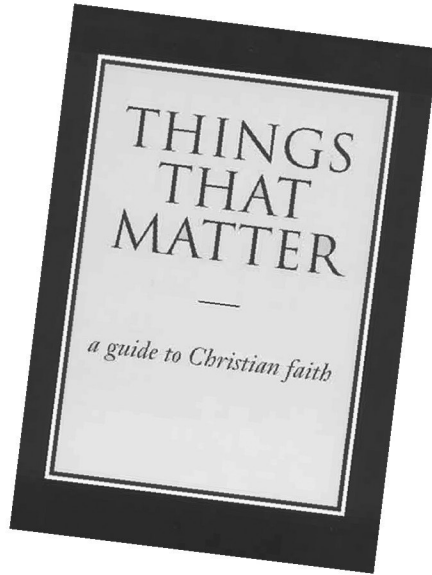
In this study I have attempted to offer suggestions for how we may recover “difficult” Psalms for Christian worship and the life of faith today. I have suggested that laments are the honest cries to the Lord of those who hurt, the essence and not the absence of faith. Incorporating lament Psalms into worship will give the many who come to worship in pain or distress permission to lament, and also give them the appropriate words and theology so they may do so faithfully. I have suggested that Psalms of imprecations are cries for the Lord to execute justice in a world sadly lacking in it. I have suggested that Christians appropriate Royal Psalms and Songs of Zion as Psalms that pay homage to the son of David who still rules, and that help us envision Zion as the place of God’s throne. “Difficult” Psalms are invitations to reflect on aspects of Christian life and worship which resist simple or comfortable appropriation, but which repay those who are disciplined and taught by them with more profound insight into the holiness and presence of God.

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# A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives

A Review Essay  
Allan J. McNicol

And in so far as Matthew foresees vengeance on the part of God, the question that arises is whether violence might be ontologically constitutive of reality.<sup>1</sup>

This question is typical of those which David Neville raises throughout this book. At base there is a key issue that may be framed in the following way: since several significant biblical texts depict God as expressing vengeance at the last judgment what does this say about his exact nature? In short, how do Christians understand whom we call God—or ultimate reality?

This challenging question could be framed within another, larger one: is there a yawning gap between counsel for believers to follow a nonviolent ethic and the retributive judgment exercised by the returning Son of Man? Throughout the gospel tradition Jesus' announcement of the coming of the kingdom is accompanied by the frequent word that his mission inaugurates, ultimately, a time of peace (Luke 2:14; 19:38; Matt 10:6–13). From the Sermon on the Mount to Rev 13:10 the New Testament is full of appeals for the disciples of Jesus to be humble, peaceful, and nonviolent. However, these same texts present Jesus settling accounts by showering retributive violence upon his enemies and the unfaithful at the end of the age (Matt 25:41, 46; 2 Thess 1:6–10; Rev 14:9–11; 19:11–21). If there is a gap between the ethic of nonviolence and retributive justice, what are the theological consequences?

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Neville, *A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 40.

Usually the ethic of nonviolence is grounded in Jesus' decision not to respond with physical resistance against those who sent him to the cross. Since we appeal to the representation of Jesus from the whole of Scripture, can we dismiss the biblical descriptions of eschatological retribution? As I write, this is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg. Both sides of that tragic episode appealed to the God of Abraham and Jesus as a warrant for their belligerent actions that they claimed were designed to bring peace. Is there a biblical warrant for violence by Christians? Today, most preaching presents Jesus as an ambassador of good news, not grim news.<sup>2</sup> Is this a fair representation of the biblical tradition?

### Neville's Analysis

Armed with this perceived discrepancy between prescribed human moral conduct and the perceived action of the Son of Man at the eschaton, Neville spends several hundred pages examining New Testament texts seeking an answer to his question. His analysis covers three areas: (1) Matthew and Mark; (2) Luke-Acts; (3) the Gospel of John and Revelation. Noticeably absent are the contributions of Paul and the writer to the Hebrews. Despite 2 Thessalonians Neville reads Paul as a preacher of promised divine rectification that triumphs in bringing peace to the human community. Of course, for Paul, there will be a final judgment (2 Cor 5:10); but the thrust of his gospel presumes that the Father of the Lord Jesus is a God of peace.<sup>3</sup>

In the main, Neville engages fairly with the biblical texts and significant secondary literature he chooses to discuss. The texts that prove most difficult for him theologically are Matthew and Revelation. Here he presents what he believes these texts are saying. One can always take issue with the particulars of any thorough analysis. Nevertheless, I was impressed with his attempt to be balanced and would commend this book as a fair reading of what many of these biblical texts say on this topic.

Theologically, Neville does not hide the fact that he regards the exercise of eschatological (i.e. end-time) violence as problematic with reference to his

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (trans. Linda M. Maloney: Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2012), 153 for the catchy phrase.

<sup>3</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 50–52.

own understanding of God. In one particular area this discrimen is helpful in his analysis as he embraces “Proto-Mark” as the earliest source on the life of Jesus. His source position gives him some leverage to develop his view that Jesus was the ambassador of peace. He concludes that Matthew’s hard sayings on eschatological vengeance, while attributed to Jesus, could be the work of an author or editor redacting the Markan text later.<sup>4</sup> However, on the whole, Neville does not avoid engaging the difficulties raised by his position.

Neville’s reading of Paul, taken with his reading of Mark, suggests that there might be a center to the message of the New Testament. This center presents Jesus as announcing that the world was in the throes of an upheaval that would conclude by inaugurating a new era of peace. This is especially indicative of Mark’s Gospel, which is a word for the church on discipleship as believers await the end. Even such terrifying language as Mark 13:24–26, signifying the breakup of the cosmos, is viewed as a precursor of believers’ salvation rather than a sign of divine judgment.<sup>5</sup> In view of this coming salvation, believers are urged to renounce pursuing status, instead exercising humility, as this ethic instantiates the essence of the powerful One (God) and the Savior whom we follow.<sup>6</sup>

Neville suggests that similar points can be made about Luke-Acts. This section was less satisfactory, in part due to the sharp edges (the consequences of the failure of many in Israel to believe and passages such as Acts 5:1–11 and 17:31) which were not given sufficient weight in the analysis. Nonetheless, numerous passages in Luke-Acts make the point that disciples of Jesus should not respond to rejection with retaliation (e.g., Luke 9:51–56);<sup>7</sup> true Christian discipleship affirms the ultimate victory of peace.

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<sup>4</sup> It should be observed that even on the Two Source Hypothesis strong judgment sayings of Jesus appear in significant percentages throughout Q, Mark, and Matthew and Lukan special material. In short it is very difficult to separate it at any level from the received Jesus tradition.

<sup>5</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 73.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (trans. John Bowden: London: SCM Press, 1999), 75–76.

<sup>7</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 96–98.

Finally, Neville maintains that in John's Gospel the world's judgment occurs in and by the crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Thus, essentially this judgment has already taken place; its significance as closure is seen as John 20 ends with three announcements of peace to Jesus' own (John 20:19, 21, 26). Thus, according to Neville, the in-breaking of eschatological peace is the central strand that runs throughout the New Testament.

### **Those Troubling Exceptions**

Nonetheless, two particular documents of the New Testament remain troublesome: Matthew and Revelation. Neville states that there is little doubt Matthew took the position that God or His agents will ultimately indulge in retributive violence against the unrighteous on the last day.<sup>9</sup> First, this is evident in the many references to *Gehenna* and with much of Matthew's characteristic language such as "weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Most of the Matthean parables end in a judgment sequence. This is significant because Matt 13:34–35 states that Jesus tells parables "to proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world." Lamar Cope points out that this statement is followed in Matthew by the interpretation of the parables of the weeds among the wheat and the separation of the good from the bad fish in the parable of the net.<sup>10</sup> In other words, this outcome is part of the order of the cosmos. Such parables were designed to reveal the secrets of the end-time to those who *see and understand*.

Thus Matthew makes it clear that his understanding of the Jesus tradition is that the *parousia* of the Son of Man will occasion the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous and the exercise of retributive violence on the unfaithful (Matt 21:43–22:14; 25:31–46). Neville acknowledges this point. This teaching bothers him.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 196–197. Neville is arguing that John 16:33, the statement of victory, must be read in light of John 12:31–32.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>10</sup> Lamar Cope, *Matthew: A Scribe Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 5 (Washington: CBA, 1976) 11–29.

<sup>11</sup> Commenting on the conclusion of the parable of forgiveness (Matt 18:34–35), he states, "Indeed, the image of Jesus' heavenly Father handing over unforgiving believers to torturers is obscene." David J. Neville, "Toward a Teleology of Peace:

Neville's analysis of Revelation moves in a somewhat different direction, placing considerable emphasis on the image of the triumphant Lamb. It is clearly the most prominent Christological theme in Revelation, occurring 28 times. Central to its usage is Rev 5:9–10, where the slain Lamb (Christ)—the model of the power of suffering love—becomes the victor through his death and resurrection and is reckoned worthy of worship.<sup>12</sup> Neville thinks that this is a master symbol of the book, taking precedence over other symbols (some violent). This symbol speaks the last word (Rev 22:1–3). Similarly, the rider on the white horse (Rev 19:11–21), although pictured as a warlike figure, also signifies the nonviolent power of suffering love. The warrior king triumphs by the power of the cross.<sup>13</sup>

This is one place where Neville's conclusion may be contested. Commencing at Rev 6:1 there are sections of this book that picture Rome (Babylon) as an idolatrous power, "drunk with the blood of the saints" (Rev 18:3, 24). Rome is marked out for a visitation of divine wrath which is pictured in Rev 16:17–18:28. This occurs when an Eastern king functions as an agent of divine wrath to bring Rome down. Many indicators within the text suggest that God, as in countless places in the Old Testament prophets, is active in history, working through retributive violence between the nations to fulfill his purposes. Likewise, in Rev 19:17–21, the text suggests that the earthly political powers who raised their fist against divine rule will also suffer eschatological violence.<sup>14</sup>

I initially noted Neville's concern regarding a perceived discrepancy between the prescribed nonviolent conduct demanded of disciples vis-à-vis the expectation of the eschatological vengeance of the Son of Man on the last day. Neville's analysis of the texts confirms these tensions are evident. His response is to resort to a form of *Sachkritik* (a version of interpretation giving preference to one witness of scripture in favor of another). He construes a "hermeneutics of consent" in favor of texts that advocate a theology of

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Contesting Matthew's Violent Eschatology," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30/2 [2007]: 147.

<sup>12</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 227–235.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 235–259.

<sup>14</sup> Even Neville himself equivocates on his reading of Rev 19:11–21 as a metaphor for the triumph of the Lamb through a shalom-oriented gospel message. Cf. *Ibid.*, 252–253.

peace. The images of retributive violence are “deconstructed” along the lines of a hermeneutics of suspicion in favor of the functioning of a “wider story” of the emergence of eschatological peace as the core message of the Bible.<sup>15</sup>

Neville suggests that this wider story constitutes a theology of *shalom*. It is anchored in the creation account of Genesis 1–3, reaches a mid-point in John 1:1–18, and concludes with the new creation in Revelation.<sup>16</sup> These passages form the center of a group of “Treasure texts” on nonviolence that provide a kind of “master trajectory” that trumps other perspectives for interpretation that emerge in the narrative.

Admittedly, this hermeneutical approach has the advantage of steering people of faith away from some difficult theological implications. If violence can only be vanquished by greater violence, has either been overcome? This is a good question.<sup>17</sup> Thus we come back to the initial query about the present form of the biblical narrative: “Is violence ontologically constitutive of reality?” By raising these theological questions the book has real value. But an issue remains: is Neville’s reading of the biblical story a fair construal? Or, are there more compelling ways of reading these texts?

### A Preliminary Assessment

Neville’s monograph is a far cry from the arid analysis that often characterizes technical New Testament scholarship. It raises important theological issues that need to be confronted by Christians inclined to reflection. My brief response focuses on the matter of divine retributive violence. Has Neville represented it correctly?

Here, I believe the argument is somewhat equivocal. Even after several hundred pages of analysis his position is that a clear tension exists in the biblical accounts. There is a discrepancy between the gospel accounts of the earthly Jesus that construe him as a messenger of peace and “expectations of end-time vengeance on the part of the returning Jesus.”<sup>18</sup> In terms of the

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<sup>15</sup> Neville, “A Teleology of Peace,” 158.

<sup>16</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 183–191.

<sup>17</sup> Neville, “Teleology of Peace,” 179. He states on the same page, upon reading Matthew that “one is entitled to consider whether vindictive retribution is morally superior to love that seeks to emulate the (supposed) indiscriminate goodness of God.”

<sup>18</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 247.

wider biblical metanarrative, both the elements of an orientation toward peace and the exercise of eschatological violence are present. One must decide theologically between the two. Neville's interpretation of Revelation suggests that war metaphors are reused or "reborned" in light of peaceful, suffering witness.<sup>19</sup> Especially because of this interpretation, he argues that violence as divine action should be discounted.

Such a position can elicit considerable support. After all, even at the end of his life, Jesus speaks words of forgiveness while he suffers on the cross. Yet I do not believe this gets the thrust of the metanarrative of the Bible quite right.

As Neville, I accept that our understanding of the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus is mediated through the biblical story. Thus the pursuit of a hermeneutics of suspicion that transmutes the texts on retributive violence into a different understanding of the action of the Holy One is disconcerting. There is too much here to deconstruct. After the victory at Exodus Yahweh is described as a "man of war" (Exodus 15:3). Under the Judges and Monarchy battles for the survival of Israel and Judah were thought to be carried out under the auspices of Yahweh. There is even a reference to a book of the 'wars of Yahweh' (Numbers 21:14). To be sure, the prophets are insightful discerners of history and often question whether Yahweh is on Israel's side (1Kings 22:1–36). But even here they spend considerable time speaking of future days of divine wrath and vengeance that Yahweh will visit upon his people for their sins as well as the nations (Hosea 4:1–8:14; Isaiah 61:2, 63:1–6). The accounts of the appearance of divine eschatological wrath in Matthew and Revelation are far from aberrations; they are part and parcel of the fabric of the biblical story.

It appears that those who deconstruct this feature of the biblical metanarrative come close to approaching the text with a degree of reckless randomness. In the end the biblical story links terminology of the Holy One as Judge and Vindicator together. He is both a God of peace and the dispenser of eschatological vengeance.

Usually, when we run into dead ends like this in construing theological issues it helps to frame the question in a different way. I would seek to do

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<sup>19</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 227.

that here. Throughout the biblical accounts God is pictured as the one who in his own time chooses to act on behalf of his own people. He may act to save his people by defeating their enemies—sometimes even through the machinations of other nations—or he may exercise retributive wrath in disciplining his people. The point is that God is active and works in history both to bless and punish. As these dynamics are operative in history the biblical metanarrative assumes that something similar will take place on the last day. This will be the time of the full verification of God’s justice and saving power.

The juxtaposition of God’s retributive wrath and saving power has posed a continual challenge to believers. I have always been struck by some observations of Gerhard Lohfink.<sup>20</sup> Speaking about the work of the prophet Hosea he observes that the bulk of the book is a series of oracles that describe God as so angry with his people that he demands a divorce. The people rightly deserve to bear his wrath and punishment. But, just when it appears they will be annihilated, divine wrath collapses into the announcement of a future transformed by love (Hosea 11:8–9). At the end of the threat of wrath there is a “nevertheless.” God’s fidelity to his people is absolute. They remain accountable, but in the end there are those who will play a part in the future order that will ultimately be set right.<sup>21</sup> Construing reality in this way, I believe, comes closer to the heart of the biblical metanarrative.

### Conclusion

I am grateful that David Neville has given attention to theological issues centering on the use of violence in scripture. Christians often dismiss the tension between the call of Jesus to “love our enemies” and the texts that speak of retributive judgment on the last day. We seldom pause to reflect that these different images of the first and second comings may mask some serious theological questions about how we understand the nature of God. Throughout this monograph this issue was never far from the surface. For me it is

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<sup>20</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church: Toward a Theology of the People of God* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press 1999), 97–100.

<sup>21</sup> Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church*, 100. He repeats almost the same point in *Jesus of Nazareth*, 163–165.

crystallized in the question, “Is it possible for peaceful ends to be realized by violent means?”<sup>22</sup> A good question!

I have argued that the author’s response of utilizing a hermeneutics of suspicion to deconstruct violent eschatology eschews the biblical metanarrative. Yet, I understand the sentiments. Topics such as eschatological wrath have not traveled well in modernity. But if God is absolute truth, past injustices must be brought to light and dealt with in impeccable righteousness. Undoubtedly this means judgment—a judgment tempered by divine fidelity. Only then is God truly God. Perhaps we need to realize again that God takes sin seriously. It is so deeply embedded in this world that only divine action has the power to remove it. To me this is also the message of the biblical metanarrative.

In some ways this book skirts close to being compatible with the popular current movement claiming that the Bible anticipates a *telos* which ends up in universal salvation. Several years ago I addressed this wider issue in *Christian Studies*.<sup>23</sup> There are growing numbers of Christians who accept the position that the entire human community will ultimately attain redemption entirely on the grounds of God’s gracious nature. My critique is a reminder that such a position, while appealing, is far from a comprehensive reading of the biblical metanarrative. Divine justice, with its inseparable companion of judgment, properly construed, is an essential constituent of reality.

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<sup>22</sup>Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 218.

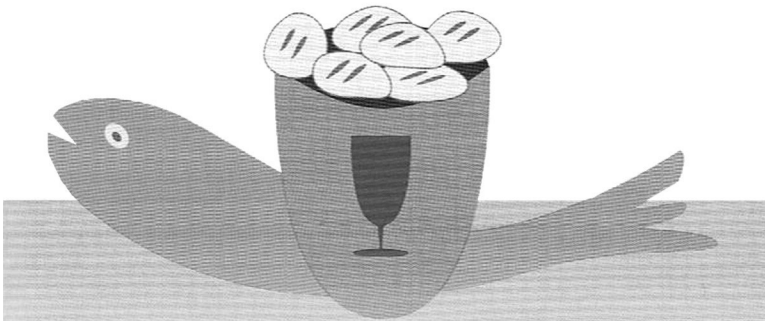
<sup>23</sup>Allan J. McNicol “Universal Salvation and the Christian Story,” *Christian Studies* 22 (2007-2008): 37–56.

*Allan J. McNicol*

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## Relevant Theology

“Where the question of relevance becomes the *theme of theology*, we can be certain that the cause has already been betrayed and sold out.” Why should this be? Programmatic concern for relevance grants to the world, rather than the Word, the status of *decisive* reality; it effectively “feters” the properly unfettered word of God and affords the present ... *de facto* status as “another source” of divine purpose and claim which delimits the hearing of the Word and channels the church’s message. Put otherwise, to pursue “relevant theology” in this sense is to confess the perspicacity of our social-political contexts and the obscurity of the Scriptures.

Philip G. Ziegler, *Bonhoeffer, Christ, and Culture*

## Preparing for the Presence of the Son of Man

Whether we go or he comes, personal theological preferences do not alter eschatology, and contemplation of that fact should have some sanctifying influence. Such thinking should keep our souls athletically trim, free of the weight of the excessive and useless. Such thinking should aid us in keeping gains and losses in proper perspective. Such thinking should chase away the demons of dulling dissipation and cheer us with the news not only that today is a gift of God but also that tomorrow we stand in the presence of the Son of man.

Fred Craddock, *Luke*

## Popular Atheism

Materialism is a conviction based not upon evidence or logic but upon what Carl Sagan (speaking of another kind of faith) called a “deep-seated need to believe.” Considered purely as a rational philosophy, it has little to recommend it; but as an emotional sedative, what Czeslaw Milosz liked to call the opiate of unbelief, it offers a refuge from so many elaborate perplexities, so many arduous spiritual exertions, so many trying intellectual and moral problems, so many exhausting expressions of hope or fear, charity or remorse. In this sense it should be classified as one of those religions of consolation

whose purpose is not to engage the mind or will with the mysteries of being but merely to provide a palliative for existential grievances and private disappointments. Popular atheism is not a philosophy but a therapy.

David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God*

### **All Things New**

On the third day the friends of Christ coming at daybreak to the place found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. In varying ways they realized the new wonder; but even they hardly realized that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth; and in a semblance of the gardener God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but the dawn.

G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*

### **Life in the Face of Death**

This is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we follow him and may stand with him at the border where the Now and the Then touch each other, that we at this border may believe, love, and hope. It is at this border where light falls into darkness, where life always rejoices in the face of death, where we are great sinners yet righteous, where we are taken captive yet free, where we see no way out yet we have hope, where we have doubts yet we are certain, where we weep yet we are glad.

In our thoughts about our Matthias we do not want to put ourselves in any other place than precisely at this border. He has now crossed over it, and we are still here. But we are not far from each other if we put ourselves at this border. In Jesus Christ there is no distance between Now and Then, between here and there, however profoundly they are separated. Our Matthias—just as he really was—is in Jesus Christ, yet very differently than the way he used to live with us and we with him. He is the same, yet he has become completely different. Because Jesus Christ has taught us about both, about life and death, death and life, we may now therefore remember our Matthias and thus speak about him.

Karl Barth, funeral sermon for his son Matthias, *This Incomplete One*

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