

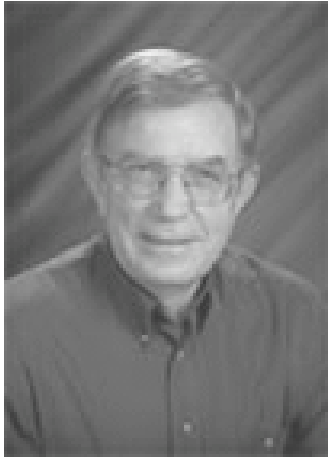
Christian Studies

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In Memoriam



Dr. Mike White
1938–2007

Dr. Mike White, son of John and Frances White, was born November 26, 1938, in Danville, Illinois. He died August 31, 2007, while visiting his son Paul in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Mike received his undergraduate degree from Harding College where he met Gwen Combest, whom he married in 1960. After graduating from Harding, Mike entered the University of Illinois where he received his Ph.D. in Chemistry. Mike came to the University of Texas in 1966, where he held the Robert A. Welch Chair in the Department of Chemistry.

Mike published over 650 scholarly articles and graduated more than 50 doctoral students, many of whom are now teaching in universities around the world. In 2004 Mike

began a joint research appointment with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Washington State, where at the time of his death he was director of the Department of Energy's Institute for Interfacial Catalysis.

Mike was a longtime member and elder of the Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ in Austin and served on the Board of Austin Graduate School of Theology. Mike is survived by his wife Gwen; son Mark and daughter-in-law Melissa; daughter RaeAnne and son-in-law Todd Landrum and their children; and his son Paul. He is also survived by his mother, Frances, and four siblings.

A friend and administrative associate described Mike as "a mentor, a teacher, a friend, a model for righteous living, and a loving husband, father, and granddad. He treated those he met with respect and generosity, and his passing leaves a mighty gap in not just the academic and scientific community but also in the circles of faith in which he served and lived."

Mike's common exhortation to friends was "Press on." And we will press on; and because of having walked a part of the journey with Mike, we will do so with more resolve, and courage, and expectancy than had we not known him.

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Foreword

This issue of *Christian Studies* is in part a response to the resurgence of interest in Calvinism which has over the past several decades captured the attention of many who monitor the American religious scene. Concern for biblical truth and a desire to grow in biblical knowledge and to deepen one's faith are always to be commended. Many in Restoration churches have been exposed to this renaissance of interest in Calvinism. Throughout the nation, writers such as John Piper, John MacArthur, Beth Moore, and R.C. Sproul; A Beka Book curricula; and Bible Study Fellowship classes all variously introduce readers, listeners, and students to Calvinism's distinct teachings. This issue of *Christian Studies* presents articles which seek to promote informed reflection on topics associated with Calvinism. In this regard, special thanks are owed to Professor Ben Witherington III for permitting an edited copy of a much longer essay to be printed here.

Readers of *Christian Studies* are encouraged to remember an old truth: not infrequently we find that disagreeing with those who challenge us to think deeply is more beneficial than agreeing with those who do not lead us to new insights. As always, articles in *Christian Studies* are intended to encourage reflection on beliefs, commitments, and practices that sustain faithful churches and faithful lives.

This issue of *Christian Studies* is dedicated to the memory of a dear friend of AGST and a faithful Christian, Dr. Mike White. Although Mike was a renowned scientist who received acclaim in America and in Europe, he exemplified humility, compassion, and personal integrity, all characteristic of his Christian faithfulness.

Michael R. Weed
Editor

Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom in the Old Testament

R. Mark Shipp

Recent years have seen renewed interest in the ideas of divine sovereignty and determination of human actions. Popular writers such as John Piper,¹ John MacArthur,² and R. C. Sproul³ have brought traditional Calvinism back into discussion, after Reformed theologians such as Karl Barth⁴ had distanced Reformed theology from its foundations. Churches of Christ have not escaped the impact of this revival of Calvinism. Most churches of any size will have members who are aware of these writers and who subscribe to at least some Calvinist beliefs.

But in every age, radical determinism will be countered by an equally radical affirmation of human freedom: every Augustine has his Pelagius, every Calvin his Arminius. The present revival of Calvinism has as its counterpoint the radical “free-will-ism” of Postmodernism and Open Theism. The

¹ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 150.

² John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to Be Certain of Your Salvation* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1992), especially chapter three, 39–51.

³ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis: Grason, 1992).

⁴ Note Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. II, Part 2: The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 43. Barth says, “[God’s election] is intended for every man, and it concerns and determines every man. But it does so without necessitating that he should be elected or rejected immediately and in advance.”

debate rages on. Just how free are we? Can humans respond freely to a loving God, or is human freedom illusory?

All sides in such debates appeal to scripture. What *does* the Bible say about divine sovereignty and human freedom?⁵ My thesis is that there is a mystery at the heart of the matter: God is completely sovereign and humans are completely responsible. God, who exists beyond time and sees “the end from the beginning” (Isa 46:10), determines that his will ultimately be accomplished for his people and his creation, but at the same time God permits human freedom and fully engages the human will.⁶

Three Old Testament texts—the plague narratives of Exodus 7–12, Psalm 51, and Jeremiah at the potter’s house in Jeremiah 18—shed light on the issue of divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Determinism and Freedom in the Plague Narratives

The plague narratives in Exodus are well known for the “hardening of the heart” motif: God hardens Pharaoh’s heart so that he does not acquiesce to Moses’ demand to let the children of Israel go. If one appeals to God’s statement to Moses in chapter 7:1–5 (“I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and

⁵ For a good review of four ways of looking at the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom, see *Predestination & Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, David and Randall Basinger, eds. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1986). While the subject is immense and has had much literary output devoted to it over the centuries, the Basingers have isolated four representative views: 1) Proponents of the *specific sovereignty* of God, which holds that human freedom does not limit God’s specific will for his creation. This is the freedom of humans doing what God knew they inevitably were going to do. These proponents can be further subdivided into those who believe all human action is determined by what has happened before, and therefore real “choices” are possible, and those who believe that human freedom is real, so long as humans are free to do what they want to do. 2) Proponents of *general sovereignty*, which holds that human freedom places limitations on God’s control. These are also further subdivided into those who believe that God retains complete foreknowledge of events and those who believe that human freedom is incompatible with divine foreknowledge.

⁶ Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 102.

though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you”), it would seem to tip the scales in favor of divine determinism. God has ordained a hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, so that he might get glory over Pharaoh and that Israel and Egypt might know who the LORD is. Nor does it help to suggest that this is simply an account of God’s foreknowledge. It is not just foreknowledge which is in view here, but active hardening!

In examining the actual plague accounts, however, the picture becomes somewhat different. In the first five accounts, God is never mentioned as the active agent of hardening. In each of these, the simple active (*hazaq*, “to be strong, stubborn”) or stative verb (*kabed*, “to be heavy”) is used, with “Pharaoh’s heart” as the subject, without specifying the agent of hardening.⁷ In one of the initial plague accounts, however, the agent is clearly specified. In the fourth plague, Pharaoh hardens *his own* heart (*wayyakbed*). Since the first plagues do not specify the agent, but use mainly a stative verb (*kabed*), it is tempting to read “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened,” along with the RSV, as a circumlocution for God’s activity. The formula “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened and he did not let the people go” is better understood, however, as parallelism: “he did not let the people go” explains what it means to say that “his heart was hardened.”

⁷ Several terms are used for “harden” in the Exodus plague narratives. *Kabed* (“to be heavy,” “to make heavy” in the causative) is used five times relative to Pharaoh’s agency, in Ex 7:14, 8:15, 8:32, 9:7, and 9:34. It is used of God’s agency in 10:1, 14:4, and 14:17. *Qashah*, “to make hard” in the causative, is attributed to God in 7:3 and to Pharaoh’s agency in 13:15. Finally, *hazaq*, “to grow strong or stubborn,” is used of Pharaoh’s agency in 7:13, 7:22, 8:19, and 9:35. It is used of God (all in the *piel* conjugation, in a causative sense) in 4:21, 9:12, 10:20 and 27, 11:10, 14:4, 14:8, and 14:17. These all appear to be synonymous and are used interchangeably, irrespective of sources which may predate the narrative as we have it.

The agent of hardening in the first five plagues is Pharaoh himself.⁸ The fourth plague narrative in 8:20–32 makes it inescapably clear that Pharaoh hardens his own heart (*wayyakbed par`oh et-libbô*, “and Pharaoh made his heart hard”). This is followed by “this time *also*,” suggesting that a pattern of willful hardening had been set by Pharaoh. Also, plague five (plague on cattle) begins with a warning from the Lord to Pharaoh: “For if you refuse (*ma`an*) to send (them) away and you are still holding them (the causative of “to be strong, hard”), then the hand of the Lord will be on your cattle” (Ex 9:2–3). Pharaoh’s stubborn refusal and persistence in “hardening”—holding the people captive, the same word used for Pharaoh’s hard heart in 8:19—eventuate in further plagues and judgment upon Pharaoh and Egypt. Finally, as mentioned above, it is only with the sixth plague that God is explicitly mentioned as the active agent of hardening. Distinct from the first five plagues, from the sixth plague on the Hebrew is explicit that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

It seems that the statement in chapter 7 (“I will harden Pharaoh’s heart”) is indeed proleptic, but it is more than that. God actively hardens Pharaoh’s heart, but only after several plagues have made it abundantly clear that Pharaoh’s heart is hard and no amount of warnings or destructions will alter that.⁹ From the sixth plague on, God allows the hardness, participates in it, encourages it, and hastens Pharaoh and the Egyptians to their judgment.¹⁰

⁸ Fretheim, 98.

⁹ David Gunn, “‘The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart’: Plot, Character, and Theology in Exodus 1–14,” in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Narrative* (JSOTS No. 19; Sheffield: JSOT, 1982), 79–80 suggests development in Pharaoh’s relationship with God and Moses: “‘Pharaoh’s heart was hardened’ . . . becomes a kind of shorthand for ‘Yahweh caused Pharaoh’s heart to harden.’ If Pharaoh may have been directly responsible for his attitude at the commencement, at the end of the story he is depicted as acting against his own better judgment.”

¹⁰ Fretheim says, “God’s statement concerning Pharaoh’s refusal to listen is not an absolute statement about the future” and “If Pharaoh is an automaton, a ‘puppet in

One is reminded of other passages which deal with “divine complicity” in human wickedness, such as 2 Thess 2:9–12:

The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Such texts can be multiplied. Chief among them is the story of Ahab and Micaiah son of Imlah in 1 Kings 22, in which Micaiah tells Ahab that God had sent lying spirits to his prophets, so that he might go to battle and be killed. Ahab believes neither the truth (that he will believe a lie and be killed), nor the lie given by Micaiah (“Go forth and prosper”). The fact that he cannot hear the truth and the divine word by Micaiah paradoxically hastens Ahab’s demise.

I know of no better passage than the plague narratives to underscore the complex and profound interplay between God’s will and human freedom. In the ancient Near East God is seen as the ultimate agent of all things—all agency is attributable to God. Therefore it is *God* who hardens Pharaoh’s heart, since agency is his. On the other hand, as the plague accounts develop it is clearly Pharaoh who hardens his own heart. The plague accounts demonstrate the profound mystery of divine involvement in human actions: God is sovereign and directs the course of human history, while at the same time humans are utterly responsible moral agents.

Psalm 51 and Human Evil

Another passage often cited in connection with traditional Calvinism is Psalm 51. In this psalm, attributed to David, the psalmist opines that his sin is

the hands of God,’ then God is not shown to be much of a God at all” (Fretheim, 100, 102).

so deep-seated that he has been a sinner from his birth. R. C. Sproul connects this passage with the doctrine of original sin when he writes:

We are sinners not because we sin. Rather, we sin because we are sinners. Thus David laments, “Surely I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”¹¹

Sproul goes on to cite the Westminster Confession, that “we are wholly inclined to do evil,” and that out of this sinful nature “proceed all actual transgressions.”¹² Is this interpretation of the psalmist’s cry correct? Is it a fair evaluation of what the psalmist intended?

Clearly, the Old Testament consistently portrays the universality of sin.¹³ That sin is a universal human reality is not in question. The controversy revolves around v. 5: “Lo, I was born in iniquity and in sin my mother conceived me.” On the surface, this appears to suggest either that sin is communicated from mother to child, or that the birth process itself is sinful. It is unnecessary to go to either of these extremes. As was the case with the plague narratives in Exodus, careful exposition of Psalm 51 clarifies the difficulties. I will look first at the concepts of sin and cleansing in Psalm 51 and then at similar terminology in ancient Near Eastern literature.

Sin and cleansing in psalm 51: Psalm 51 is one of the seven penitential psalms of the Psalter.¹⁴ Penitential psalms—individual laments, where the complaint is against the self—are typical in structure and imagery. What makes Psalm 51 unusual is the graphic portrayal of personal sin and the cry for forgiveness, where petitions and cries for help abound.¹⁵ Historically, the

¹¹ Sproul, 146.

¹² Sproul, 146.

¹³ “All have sinned” (Rom 3:23), “the imagination of their hearts was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5), “no one born of a woman can be righteous” (Job 15:14, 25:4), and others.

¹⁴ Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143.

¹⁵ James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 198.

focus of the interpretation of Psalm 51 has been upon the concepts of sin, repentance, and forgiveness reflected both in the body of the text and in the psalm's superscription. However, the actual interpretation of the structure and theology of the text has not received adequate attention.¹⁶

Vv. 1–2 introduce the themes which characterize the whole: the pervasiveness of sin—impurity and covenant breach—and request for cleansing. It is impossible to understand the psalm without recourse to the language of ritual impurity and cleansing found in Leviticus.

The “complaint section” of this lament, where the lament is articulated and the petition is made, is in vv. 3–13. Here, the language of sin and transgression abounds. The psalmist's sin (*hattat*, covenant-breaking¹⁷) and transgression (*pasha`*, willful rebellion) are clear and obvious to the psalmist (v. 3). Sin *always* involves harm to another—there is no such thing as sin which does no damage to the neighbor, no completely private sin. But in this psalm, guilt against and harm to the neighbor pale in comparison to the covenant breach against the Lord and the offense done to him (“against you *alone* have I sinned,” v. 4). The result of this personal offense against the Lord is the knowledge that God is completely just and correct in condemning the psalmist. Indeed, God is portrayed as “clean” in his judgments (v. 4), as opposed to the psalmist, who is dirty, requiring cleansing (v. 1) and washing (v. 2). The psalmist's sin is so pervasive that he cannot remember a time when he was

¹⁶ For a recent example of interpreting Psalm 51 via the superscription, see James Limburg, *Psalms*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: WJKP, 2000), 71–72.

¹⁷ Edward Dalglisch, *Psalm Fifty-One in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Patternism* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 134, suggests the semantic range of \sqrt{hata} as “to miss (goal or way),” “to wrong,” “to sin.” Note in Tiglath-Pileser III's Summary Inscription 7: “Zaqiru, lord of Sha'alli, sinned against (*hatû*, cognate with Hebrew *hatta`*) the covenant of the great gods . . .” $\sqrt{hatû}$ often occurs in Assyrian royal inscriptions relative to covenant-breaking. See Hayim Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), 162–163.

not a sinner. He is so steeped in sin, he has been unclean from his birth and even before (v. 5).

The text deals with that which is hidden and that which is revealed. God desires truth in hidden places and in the inmost self (v. 6). The sins which were committed in secret, God has graphically revealed to the psalmist (v. 3). Consequently, the psalmist petitions the Lord to hide his face from the psalmist's sin (v. 9).

The complaint of vv. 3–6 includes six occurrences of terms for wrongdoing—sin (*hattat*), transgression (*pasha`*), evil (*ra`*), and iniquity (*awôn*)—, but the petition section of vv. 7–12 barely mentions sin. In the petition, the imperative mood predominates, including several words for ritual cleansing: hyssop (v. 7),¹⁸ wash (*kabas*),¹⁹ cleanse (*tahar*),²⁰ and blot out (*mahah*).²¹ Finally, inasmuch as his sinfulness is utterly pervasive, stretching back to the womb, it is only a new creation (*bara`*, v. 10) which will suffice to deliver him from his guilt.

Edward Dalglish makes the case for the psalm reflecting both the pervasiveness of sin in human society (that the psalmist is thrust into a sinful world from the very beginning, v. 5) and that this does not excuse one's sin.

¹⁸ Hyssop occurs 12 times in scripture, and all but two of those occurrences refer to its function in the sacrificial system, especially relative to ritual cleansing (see Ex 2:22, Leviticus 14, and Num 19). See Dalglish, 134–135. As is so often the case, things mean what they mean and their opposite. Here, “to purge” in v. 7 is also based upon \sqrt{hata} , but with the meaning “to purify from sin,” *piel* stem. This term also is used almost exclusively in ritual contexts in Leviticus, Numbers, and in Ezekiel, the prophet most influenced by priestly ideology.

¹⁹ *Kabas* occurs 51 times in the Old Testament and all but a handful of occurrences deal with cultic and ritual purity.

²⁰ For *tahar* see especially Leviticus 11–17.

²¹ See Num 5:23 (but note that “blot” is used most often in the Old Testament to refer to God's actions in annihilating the Canaanites and all others who were guilty of gross sin or who opposed Israel). *Mahah* also occurs relative to priestly ritual activity. In Psalm 51, the psalmist requests that God not blot him out, but rather blot out his sin (v. 9).

As sin was with him from the beginning, so were truth and wisdom (v. 6). God desires truth and wisdom in the innermost self. The psalmist knows his sin (v. 3). There is no excuse for sin, for though sin is present everywhere, so is truth, wisdom, and the knowledge of God.²²

While the response or resolution section typical of laments is difficult in this psalm, the vows of vv. 13–15 are typical of resolution sections in laments, so I assign the “shift” in the psalm to v. 13. As the psalmist has himself been guilty of transgression, he will teach transgressors (v. 13). Under-scoring the ritual orientation of this psalm are the trust assertions of vv. 16–17, where the true sacrifice, a broken spirit, is commended to the reader.

In place of a closing benediction or call to praise is a petition that God might do good to Jerusalem, specifically to “build” or “rebuild” its walls. With a restored Jerusalem, presumably inhabited by all those who have offered the righteous offerings of a contrite heart, then the typical sacrifices and whole burnt offerings will be acceptable to God (vv. 18–19).

It is clear that Psalm 51 is filled with the language of impurity, cleansing, and sacrifice taken from the cult and ritual. This is the thought world of the psalmist, one which also informs his understanding of conception and birth. The sexual act bestows ritual impurity, requiring cleansing before the Israelite can return to worship in the sanctuary (see Lev 15:16–18, 31–32). Birth, also, brings ritual impurity, and Israelite women must go through a cleansing process before returning to worship (see Lev 12; note that even though it is “ritual,” and not “moral,” impurity, a sin offering must still be offered!).²³ The psalmist is not making a theological statement about original

²² Dalglish, 121–127.

²³ Jonathan Klawans, *Sin and Impurity in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 36. In discussing Psalm 51, Klawans says, “The real key to understanding these passages is this: the hope expressed is that full atonement from sin could prove to be as easy a matter as purification from ritual impurity.”

sin and the bondage of the will. He is stating that his entire life was characterized by sin and impurity, from conception, to birth, to the present. It is no wonder that he is so impure—his life has been pervasively impure from the beginning.

Other Old Testament and ancient rabbinic writers also understood the passage to refer to cultic impurity: that a human is conceived and is born in ritual impurity.²⁴ But this does not connote moral evil. The OT, however, does not make a clear distinction between ritual and moral impurity—both render the person impure and unqualified for worship.²⁵ Given the repeated references to cultic terms (hyssop, sacrifice, etc.) in the psalm, my suggestion is this: the psalmist knows that he is indeed extremely sinful, and rightly so: his very conception was in impurity, a paradigm for his entire life. He is profoundly frustrated because of his frailty and tendency towards impurity, and this impurity goes back all the way to his conception.

Psalm 51:5 and ancient Near Eastern Literature: The literature and themes of Psalm 51 are not *sui generis* in antiquity. There is a rich background of Egyptian and Assyro-Babylonian penitential literature which sheds light on Psalm 51, particularly v. 5. As with the Old Testament understanding of the pervasiveness and universality of human sin, so with ancient Near Eastern literature.

²⁴ See Lev 12:8 and 15:18; see also *Seder Tohoroth*, tractate *Niddah*, which describes the ritual impurity of birth reflected in Psalm 51:5 in much the same way I have here. The *Talmud*, tractate *Niddah* 31b, says “R. Isaac and R. Ammi further stated: A woman conceives only immediately before her menstrual period, for it is said, “Behold I was brought forth in iniquity” (*Niddah* 31b, in *The Babylonian Talmud*, *Seder Tohoroth*, ed. by I. Epstein (trans. Israel Slotki; London: Soncino, 1948), 217.

²⁵ Klawans, 36–37, suggests that there is a distinction between ritual and moral defilement, but that they “overlap in various ways,” particularly in the use of the *hattat* (sin!) sacrifice for both ritual and moral defilement. Note that Psalm 51 uses *hattat* in vv. 2–4, along with other symbolic language from the sphere of the sacrificial system.

Among the most interesting laments in the ancient world is the Sumerian Job-like poem, “Man and His God.”²⁶ Here, the sufferer cries out to his god for deliverance from suffering and for forgiveness of sin.²⁷ In continuity with their understanding of the universal tendency towards sin, the Sumerian scribe says

They say—the valiant sages—a righteous word and straightforward:
 “Never has a sinless child been born to its mother,
 . . . A sinless workman has not existed from of old.”²⁸

There are several connections in “Man and His God” with Psalm 51. Note the connection between the universality of human sin and birth into the world, as in Psalm 51:5. Second, in spite of the universality of sin, the sinner is responsible for his or her own sin and can respond with contrition and penitence. In lines 111ff of “Man and His God,” the lamenter says

My god, now that you have shown me my sins,
 . . . I, the man, would confess my sins before you.²⁹

The god then hears his lament and restores him (lines 117–131).³⁰

Psalm 51, Divine Sovereignty, and Human Freedom: In what sense do Psalm 51 (and Near Eastern penitential psalms) inform our understanding of divine sovereignty and human freedom? Here again one must be careful not to overemphasize either divine determinism or human freedom. The psalmist had no say about the ritually impure state in which he entered the

²⁶ Samuel N. Kramer, “‘Man and His God’: A Sumerian Variation on the ‘Job’ Motif,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, festschrift H. H. Rowley, eds. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, vol. 3; Leiden: Brill, 1969), 170–182.

²⁷ Kramer, 170–172.

²⁸ Kramer, 179.

²⁹ Kramer, 180.

³⁰ Other penitential psalms in the ancient Near East include the Sumerian *erschahunga* lament (for which see Dalglisch, 128) and Canaanite penitential prayers (for which see Marie-Joseph Seux, *Hymnes et Prières aux Dieux de Babylonie et d’Assyrie* [Littératures Anciennes du Proche-Orient; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1976], 203–207).

world. Likewise, that humans come into a world which is morally perverse is beyond the psalmist's control. On the other hand, the psalmist uses terms which connote personal and willful culpability in covenant-breaking: *pasha`* (rebellion), *hattat* (covenant infraction), *`avôn* (iniquity). Also, v. 6 stands as a counterpoint to v. 5 in Psalm 51: God expects truth and wisdom in the innermost being. The psalmist woefully confesses that human sin is inevitable, but not necessary.

Jeremiah 18: Jeremiah at the Potter's House

A third text often cited in support of divine determinism is Jeremiah 18, Jeremiah at the potter's house. Jeremiah is commanded by the Lord to go to a potter's house and observe him making pottery. When the clay he was using became "spoiled," or misshapen, he destroyed that vessel and began fashioning a different one. This "living parable" demonstrates that Israel is like the clay in the Divine Potter's hand. If Israel becomes spoiled in the business of being shaped, then God could destroy her and begin again. God, the Divine Potter, can do as he wills with his clay. This text would seem to favor determinism—God has arranged matters so that people have no choice but to respond to his shaping.

As is the case with the plague narratives, however, reading further in the text can be illuminating. Divine determinism is not so much the focus of this text as is the interplay of human freedom and divine sovereignty. What at first appears to be divine caprice and arbitrariness in judgment—the clay is completely subject to the potter's will—quickly becomes an illustration of God's grace in responding to Judah's repentance.³¹ It is true that Judah r e-

³¹ Ronald Clements says, "[D]ivine justice does not exclude the possibility of human repentance. Rather it demands and expects it!" Clements, *Jeremiah*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 113. According to Clements, God's relationship to Israel relative to the future is an open one. John Bracke, on the other hand, is more impressed with the futility of the extension of grace to Israel: v. 12 says "It is

fuses to repent, but this is a far cry from the Lord refusing to extend the possibility of repentance because the outcome was inevitable.

One is reminded of the inevitability of judgment upon Israel in Amos 5:2 (“Fallen, no more to rise, is virgin Israel!”), yet at the same time, Amos 5:6 says, “Seek the Lord and live!” Thus the inevitability of judgment on sin and the possibility of repentance both remain as realities, even in Amos, a book characterized by almost unrelieved judgment on Israel. Furthermore, one must ask the reason for such proclamations of judgment. That Amos is willing to hold out a dim “perhaps” to Israel, even in the midst of thoroughgoing judgment, is witness to the need for balance in the human perceptions of divine determinism and human freedom.

Conclusion

The themes of God’s sovereign oversight of his creation and the reality of human freedom are not presented in the Old Testament as if they are in conflict. On the one hand, to limit God’s sovereignty in order to safeguard the reality of human freedom is to construct a God different from the one who “sits enthroned above the cherubim.” Yet, to suggest that human “freedom” is only the freedom to be what God has already ordained paradoxically limits not only humans but God as well. What are we saying about a deity who cannot or will not grant true choices to humanity?³² What does a human “response” to God mean in worship, prayer, and devotion in a deterministic system?

The incarnation is the point at which divine sovereignty and human freedom find their fullest expression and meaning. “God with us” means that God in his sovereignty has entered our human situation. God’s initiative in

no use, we will follow our own plans.” “God’s people are incapable of repentance. God has little choice but to ‘pluck up and break down and destroy’.” Bracke, *Jeremiah 1–29*, Westminster Bible Companion (Atlanta: W/JKP, 2000), 153.

³² See Fretheim, 102.

Christ implies that his will for his creation will not be thwarted—that in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). It also implies vulnerability on God’s part, that humans can and do neglect, abuse, and deny his grace. Ironically, as Reformed theologian Karl Barth said relative to divine sovereignty and human freedom:

According to Scripture, the divine election of grace is an activity of God which has a definite goal and limit. Its direct and proper object is not individuals generally, but one individual—and only in him the people called and united by him . . . It is only in that one man that a human determination corresponds to the divine determining. In the strict sense, only He can be understood and described as “elected” ...³³

³³ Barth, 43.

The Trouble with Tulips: Romans and Reformed Theology*

Ben Witherington III

Scholars who look to Calvin and Luther and their legacy pride themselves on being biblical and giving meticulous attention to the biblical text. This is not a surprise since both Calvin and Luther were formidable exegetes and theologians, and they set examples that many have sought to follow ever since. Reformed exegetes have a hard time coming to grips with the paradox of a God who is both sovereign and free, and yet somehow so exercises that sovereignty and limits his own freedom that he has made it possible for human beings to have and exercise a measure of freedom as well, including in matters of salvation. They have a hard time understanding that holy love does not involve determinism, however subtle. Indeed love, if it is real love, must be freely given and freely received, for God has chosen to relate to us as persons, not as automata. They have a hard time dealing with the idea that God programmed into the system a certain amount of indeterminacy, risk, and freedom. And maybe, just maybe the good old Evangelical lust for certainty

* Printed by permission from the much fuller discussion in Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005). Excerpted for *Christian Studies* by Jeffrey Peterson, Professor, AGST.

leads us all too quickly to fill in gaps and silences of Scripture, driving us to bad exegesis.

There are in fact profound exegetical problems with the T.U.L.I.P. theology of Calvinism and to a lesser extent of Lutheranism.¹ These the o-logical ideas are linked, and, with the exception of the “T” and the “L,” are necessary corollaries of each other. For example, if one believes that God has predetermined people to be saved from before the foundation of the world, then of course election is unconditional, grace is irresistible, and persever-ance is inevitable. These three linked ideas do not necessarily require the no-tion of total depravity or limited atonement (e.g., God could have predeter-mined to save everyone, and original sin might not have had as extensive an effect as sometimes thought).

There is then a logical consistency to this cluster of linked ideas, and it is the logic and coherency that seem to make it compelling, rather than its real exegetical viability. And of course the danger of any such necessary linking of ideas is that if one link in the chain is dropped then the chain ceases to hold. For example, if it can be demonstrated that apostasy from the true faith is not merely possible but is an idea that Christians are regularly warned against in the New Testament, then there is something wrong not only with the notion of perseverance but also with the ideas of irresistible grace and predetermination. This essay will deal with some of the key texts of the Reformation, showing the problems with the traditional Reformed exegesis.

Romans more than any other source has determined Evangelical exe-gesis when it comes to the nature of salvation, and within the text of Romans, there is no text more commented on than Romans 7. Oddly enough, one of

¹ T.U.L.I.P. is an acronym summarizing the main points of classical Reformed theology: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints.

the most fundamental problems in Evangelical exegesis of Romans is the failure to read Romans cumulatively, rather than sound-biting it. This failure manifests itself when Romans 7 is read as if it has little or no connection with Romans 5. But the story told in Romans 5:12–20 is the very story that underlies and undergirds Romans 7, as we shall see. In order to set up the discussion, it is necessary to speak briefly about Augustine’s views on Romans 5–7 and their influence on Luther and others. Augustine’s interpretation of Romans, and especially Romans 7, seems to be in various regards an overreaction to Pelagius, who argued that sin comes from human beings’ free imitation of Adam and can be overcome by imitating Christ. Pelagius also suggested that justification, at least final justification, is through determined moral action.

T. J. Deidun aptly summarizes the key points of Augustine’s mature interpretation of Romans:

- 1) The “works of the Law” which Paul says can never justify, mean moral actions in general without the grace of Christ, not Jewish practices as Pelagius and others maintained.
- 2) The “righteousness of God” is not an attribute of God but the gift he confers in making people righteous.
- 3) Romans 5:12 now became the key text for Augustine’s doctrine of original sin: all individuals (infants included) were co-involved in Adam’s sin. As is well known, Augustine’s exegesis of this verse largely depended on the Latin translation *in quo* (“in whom”) of the Greek *eph hoi* (“in that,” “because”) and on the omission in his manuscripts of the second mention of “death,” with the result that “sin” became the subject of “spread”: sin spread to all (by “generation,” not by “imitation”).
- 4) Romans 7:14–25, which before the controversy Augustine had understood to be referring to humanity without Christ, he now applied to the Christian to deprive Pelagius of the opportunity of applying the positive elements in the passage (esp. v. 22) to unredeemed humanity. To do this, Augustine was obliged to water down Paul’s negative statements: the apostle is describing not the bondage of sin but the bother of concupiscence; and he laments not that he cannot do good (*facere*) but that he cannot do it perfectly (*perficere*).

5) During this period Augustine came to express more boldly his teaching on predestination. It does not depend on God's advance knowledge of people's merit as Pelagius and others maintained in their interpretation of Romans 9:10ff. nor even on his advance knowledge of "the merit of faith" as Augustine had supposed in 394 in his remarks on the same passage: it depends rather on God's "most hidden judgment" whereby he graciously chooses whom he will deliver from the mass of fallen humanity. Everything is pure gift (1 Cor 4:7).²

Of course all of these points of Augustine are today under dispute among interpreters of Romans, and some are clearly wrong, such as the conclusions based on the Latin text of Romans 5:12. For our purposes it is interesting to note that Augustine, having changed his mind about Romans 7:14–25 in overreacting to Pelagius, must water down the stress on the bondage of the will expressed in this text in order to apply it to Christians. Luther takes a harder and more consistent line, even though in the end he refers the text to the wrong subject—namely everyone including Christians. It is also noteworthy that Pelagius does not dispute God's destining of persons, only that God does it on the basis of his foreknowledge of the response of believers.

The discussion of merit which Pelagius introduced into the conversation about Romans resurfaces in the medieval exegetes after Augustine. Paul's doctrine of "justification" is filtered through Aristotelian thinking, so that grace becomes a *donum super additum*, something added on top of God's gift of human faculties (see Aquinas). "Divine *charis* became 'infused grace.'" The nominalist school of William of Occam focused on merit, even in a Pelagian way, and it was to this repristinization of Pelagius' case that Luther, an Augustinian monk much like his founder, was to react in his various lectures and then in his commentary on Romans. But it was not just Pelagius he was reacting to. In due course Luther came to see self-

² T. J. Verdun, "Romans," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden; Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 601.

righteousness as the most fundamental of human sins (not concupiscence), and his polemics were directed against both Judaism and Catholicism, which he saw as religions embodying this besetting sin, as well as being preoccupied with “merit.” Luther thought that Romans 7:14–25 was about that sin of self-righteousness.

We are perhaps by this time all too familiar with Luther’s own wrestling with his Augustinian heritage, especially when it came to the problem of sin, and particularly sin in the life of the believer. But before we too quickly join that wrestling match, leaping into the fray and shouting *simul justus et peccator* as a description of the normal Christian life, it will be well to ask if in fact Romans 7 describes the Christian life at all. My answer will be—on further review no, it does not. Christians are not in bondage to sin as non-Christians may be said to be. But to understand Romans 7, we must hear Paul’s explicit telling of Adam’s tale in Romans 5 first.

The logic of argumentation found in Romans 5:12–21 will seem strange to many moderns, for it deals with the concept of how one can affect many, for ill or good, and not only affect them but determine their destiny to a real extent. Paul can say in the midst of such an argument that death spread to all humans because they all sinned, but then turn around and say that death reigned over even those who did not trespass in the same fashion Adam did. Some have drawn an analogy with the notion of federal headship over a group of people (e.g., when the president declares war on another nation, whether the citizens of the United States will it or not, they are affected by this decision and are in effect also at war with the nation in question). This analogy does get at some of the dimensions of Paul’s argument. But there is a dimension of corporate personality—or better, incorporative personality—to Paul’s argument as well.

Romans 5:12–21 does not stand in isolation but indicates some further conclusions to be drawn from the previous argument in Romans 5:1–11. The *dia touto* of v. 12 must surely refer back to the material in the first eleven verses of this chapter, and should be translated “because of this.” In other words, vv. 12ff. take the argument to a further stage, based on what had been said in 5:1–11. This whole section is comparing Adam and his progeny with Christ and those in him. It is not about comparing Adam with all other humans. Notice that the phrase “through him” is in the emphatic position in the first part of the leading sentence, which suggests that Paul is going to tell us in the last part of the sentence what is true through another one.

Paul is not suggesting that Adam and Christ are alike in all respects, not even in the way they affect the race that flows forth from them. The point of comparison is simply this: that the act of the one man had far-reaching consequences for all those who came after him and had integral connection with him. In all other respects, and at some length in vv. 13–17 Paul wishes to distinguish Adam and Christ. Thus, it is not necessary to argue that Christ’s salvation must pass to or affect everyone in the exact same manner as Adam’s sin, for as Paul says, the gift of salvation is in many ways not like the trespass. Paul’s “universalism is of the sort that holds to Christ as the way for all.”³

In v. 14 we hear that Adam is the type of the Coming One. The word *homoiomati* refers to likeness (the mark made by striking or an impression made by something, or the form or pattern of something made by a mold), but the term *typos* is even more important. A *typos* refers to something or someone that prefigures something or someone else, in this case someone or something that belongs to the eschatological age. C. E. B. Cranfield says,

³ N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (ed. L. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 529.

“Adam in his universal effectiveness for ruin is the type which . . . prefigures Christ in his universal effectiveness for salvation.”⁴ Notice that it is Adam’s transgression which makes him that type of Christ. In short it is his one deed which affects all, just as the Christ event affects all. “Paul sees history gathering at nodal points and crystallizing upon outstanding figures . . . who are notable in themselves as individual persons, but even more notable as representative figures. These . . . incorporate the human race, or sections of it, within themselves, and the dealings they have with God they have representatively on behalf of their [people].”⁵

Having initiated the analogy, Paul in v. 15 proceeds to clarify by saying that the trespass is in fact not exactly like the gift of grace. Again we have a “how much more” argument. If the trespass affected many and many died, how much more will the grace of God and the gift that comes through the one man Christ abound to many all that much more. While it is true that *polloi* can be used to mean “all,” it may be significant that Paul at this juncture switches to using *polloi* (usually translated “many”) whereas before he had used *pantes* (“all”) Paul does not wish to convey the notion of automatic universal salvation. While Paul and his coworkers do not have a problem with the idea that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, not just for the elect (see, e.g., 1 Tim 2:5–6: “for there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all persons”), Paul does not believe that this automatically means all will be saved. There is the little matter of responding in faith to God’s work of salvation in Christ and receiving the gift of God’s grace. Still it is a crucial

⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 283.

⁵ C. K. Barrett, *From First Adam to Last: A Study in Pauline Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1962), 5.

Pauline theme as early as Galatians and as late as the Pastorals that God's desire is for all to be saved, and that Christ's atonement is to cover the sins of the world, not just of the elect.

First Timothy 2:3–4 provides the sort of context in which we should view this matter, namely that God desires that “all people be saved and come to the full knowledge of the truth,” a theme we also find in 1 Timothy 4:10 where we hear of “the living God who is the Savior of all people, especially of the faithful.” Notice that the limitation comes at the point of those who respond in faith, not at the point of God's desire or will. It is in this context that we must evaluate what is said in Titus 3:5–6 about how this salvation happens “according to his mercy, he saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, which is poured out on us in abundance through Jesus Christ, our Savior.” The language of election is used in a corporate sense in these letters, and when salvation is spoken of, God's desire for universal salvation is expressed while at the same time making clear that only those are saved who respond in faith to the message of salvation, are reborn, and receive the Holy Spirit.

What is intimated in Romans is made quite explicit in the Pastorals. The tulip begins to wilt when one reads Romans in light of the Pastorals rather than through the much later lens of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. Paul will address in Romans 6–7 a series of questions that arise out of his telling of the Adam story as it was compared to the Christ story in Romans 5. The story of Adam and those in Adam, and the story of Christ and those in Christ continue to undergird and underlie the discussion throughout the material leading up to Romans 8. J. D. G. Dunn puts it this way: “Paul's thought is still determined by the Adam/Christ contrast of 5:12–21. The death here spoken of is the death of Adam, and those in Adam and of the Adamic epoch.”

In one large argument in four parts encompassing all of Romans 6–7, Paul will discourse on human fallenness in the light of the Christ event. His thought does indeed move from solution to plight. Thus, some of what Paul will say about life outside of Christ he will say looking at things through the eyes of Christ rather than through the lens of the Law. To some extent Paul must forestall some possible false conclusions that one might draw from the previous argument in Romans 5:12–21. Here, however, we must reiterate two crucial points: (1) It appears clear from a close reading of Romans 5 that neither Augustine, nor Luther, nor Calvin understood the trajectory of Paul’s argument properly. We can see where that argument is leading in texts like 1 Timothy 2:3–6. Paul is his own best interpreter. (2) The incorporative nature of life in Adam or life in Christ does not in either case alleviate individuals of their own responsibilities for their own sin, nor for the need for their own response to the offer of salvation. As for God’s desire, God desires that none should perish or fall short of eternal life.

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Pagan and Christian Reflections on Human Free Will

The following citations indicate that three centuries of Christian leaders, East and West—Greek and Latin, are virtually unanimous regarding humans as created with a broad range of freedoms and responsibilities, including the freedom to seek or ignore, obey or reject, God’s presence and will. This was not associated with humans “saving themselves” apart from grace. Rather, human freedom to reason and deliberate, to weigh evidence and to consider options was all taken to be part of God’s honoring us by creating us in the first place, i.e., grace. It should be noted that it is obscurantist to designate these early Christian views as “Arminian.” “Arminianism” is derived from Dutch Calvinist, Jakob Arminius (d. 1609) whose views were condemned at the Synod of Dort (1618-19).

Editor, *Christian Studies*

The Pagan Background

Semonides of Amorgos

Zeus controls the fulfillment of all that is, and disposes as he will. . . .we live like beasts, always at the mercy of what the day may bring, knowing nothing of the outcome that God will impose upon our acts.

Theognis

No man, Cynus, is responsible for his own ruin or for his own success: of both these things the gods are the givers. No man can perform an action and know whether its outcome will be good or bad. . . . Humanity in utter blindness follows its futile usages; but the gods will bring all to the fulfillment that they have planned.

Above citations from E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks And The Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951)

Vettius Valens, 2nd cent A.D.

For it is impossible for any man by prayers or sacrifices to overcome what was fixed from the beginning and alter it to his taste; what has been assigned to us will happen without our praying for it, what is not fated will not happen for our prayers.

Cited in A. D. Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background* (Harper, 1964, orig. 1928)

Early Christian Reflections

Justin Martyr (160)

God, wishing men and angels to follow His will, resolved to create them free to do righteousness. But if the word of God foretells that some angels and men shall certainly be punished, it did so because it foreknew that they would be unchangeably (wicked), but not because God created them so. So if they repent all who wish for it can obtain mercy from God.

Dialogue CXLI

We have learned from the prophets, and declare as the truth, that the penalties and punishments and good rewards are given according to the quality of each man's actions. If this were not so, but all things happened in accordance with destiny, nothing at all would be left up to us. For if it is destined that one man should be good and another wicked, then neither is the one acceptable nor the other blameworthy. And if the human race does not have the power by free choice to avoid what is shameful and to choose what is right, then there is no responsibility for actions of any kind. . . . God did not make man like other [beings], such as trees and animals, which have no power of choice. For he would not be worthy of rewards or praise if he did not choose the good of himself, but was so made, nor if he were evil would he justly de-

serve punishment, if he were not such of himself, but was unable to be anything different from that for which he was formed.

First Apology, 43

Tatian (c. 165)

And each of these two orders of creatures was made free to act as it pleased, not having the nature of good, which again is with God alone, but is brought to perfection in men through their freedom of choice, in order that the bad man may be justly punished, having become depraved through his own fault, but the just man be deservedly praised for his virtuous deeds, since in the exercise of his free choice he refrained from transgressing the will of God. Such is the constitution of things in reference to angels and men.

Address to Greeks

Irenaeus of Gaul (c. 130-200)

. . . there is no coercion with God, but a good will is present with Him continually. And therefore does He give good counsel to all. And in man as well as in angels, He has placed the power of choice (for angels are rational beings), so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves . . .

If then it were not in our power to do or not to do these things, what reason had the apostle, and much more the Lord Himself, to give us counsel to do some things and to abstain from others? But because man is possessed of free-will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free-will in whose likeness man was created, advice is always given to him to keep fast the good, which thing is done by means of obedience to God.

Against Heresies, XXXVII

Athenagoras of Athens (c. 177)

Just as with men who have freedom of choice as to both virtue and vice (for you would not either honor the good or punish the bad; unless vice and virtue were in their own power, and some are diligent in the matters entrusted to them, and others faithless), so it is among the angels.

Embassy for Christians XXIV

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215)

But we, who have heard by the Scriptures that self-determining choice and refusal have been given by the Lord to men, rest in the infallible criterion of faith, manifesting a willing spirit, since we have chosen life and believe God through His voice.

Stromata, Bk ii ch. 4

But nothing is without the will of the Lord of the universe. It remains to say that such things happen without the prevention of God; for this alone saves both the providence and the goodness of God. We must not therefore think that He actively produces afflictions (far be it that we should think this!); but we must be persuaded that He does not prevent those that cause them, but overrules for good the crimes of His enemies.

Stromata, Bk iv ch. 12

Nor shall he who is saved be saved against his will, for he is not inanimate; but he will above all voluntarily and of free choice speed to salvation. Wherefore also man received the commandments in order that he might be self-impelled, to whatever he wished of things to be chosen and to be avoided. Wherefore God does not do good by necessity, but from His free choice benefits those who spontaneously turn.

Stromata, Bk vii ch. 7

Tertullian of Carthage (c. 155-225)

I find, then, that man was by God constituted free, master of his own will and power; indicating the presence of God's image and likeness in him by nothing so well as by this constitution of his nature . . . you will find that when He sets before man good and evil, life and death, that the entire course of discipline is arranged in precepts by God's calling men from sin, and threatening and exhorting them; and this on no other ground than that man is free, with a will either for obedience or resistance. . . . Since, therefore, both the goodness and purpose of God are discovered in the gift to man of freedom in his will . . .

Against Marcion, Bk II ch. 5

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 350)

. . . when we are dealing with the divine and holy mysteries of the faith, we must not deliver anything whatsoever, without the sacred Scriptures, nor let ourselves be misled by mere probability, or by marshaling of arguments. And do not simply credit me, when I tell you these things, unless you get proof from the Holy Scripture of the things set forth by me. For this salvation of ours by faith is not by sophistical use of words, but by proof from the sacred Scriptures.

Catechetical Lectures IV.18

And you must know your soul to be endowed with free-will, and to be God's fairest work in the image of himself, its maker. It is immortal in as far as God grants it immortality. It is a rational living creature not subject to decay, because these qualities have been bestowed by God upon it. And it has the power to do what it chooses. For you do not sin because you were born that

way, nor if you fornicate is it by chance. And do not take any notice of what some people say, that the conjunctions of the stars compel you to fall into unclean living. Why should you avoid acknowledging that you have done wrong by blaming it onto the stars that had nothing to do with it?

Catechetical Lectures IV.18

Learn this also, that before it came into this world, your soul had committed no sin, but that we come into the world unblemished, and, being here, sin of our own choice. Do not listen, I say, to anyone who expounds, “If then I do that which I would not” in the wrong sense, but remember who says, “If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land; but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword,” and what follows.

Catechetical Lectures IV.19

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395)

Being the image and the likeness . . . of the Power which rules all things, man kept also in the matter of a free-will this likeness to Him whose will is over all.

On Virginity (ch. XII)

John Chrysostom (347-407)

All is in God’s power, but so that our free-will is not lost . . . it depends therefore on us and on Him. We must first choose the good, and then He adds what belongs to Him. He does not precede our willing, that our free-will may not suffer. But when we have chosen, then he affords us much help . . . It is ours to choose beforehand and to will, but God’s to perfect and bring to the end.

On Hebrews, Homily 12

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

It does not follow, therefore, that there is no power in our will because God foreknew what was to be the choice in our will. For, He who had this foreknowledge had some foreknowledge. Furthermore, if He who foresaw what was to be in our will foresaw, not nothing, but something, it follows that there is a power in our will, even though he foresaw it. The conclusion is that we are by no means under compulsion to abandon free choice in favor of divine foreknowledge nor need we deny—God forbid!—that God knows the future, as a condition for holding free choice. We accept both. . . . For no one sins because God foreknew that he would sin. In fact, the very reason why a man is undoubtedly responsible for his own sin, when he sins, is because He whose foreknowledge cannot be deceived foresaw, not the man's fate or fortune or what not, but that the man himself would be responsible for his own sin. No man sins unless it is his choice to sin; and his choice not to sin, that too, God foresaw.

The City of God Bk V ch 10

Contemporary Christian Reflections on Human Free Will

The sin of both men and of angels, was rendered possible by the fact that God gave them free will; thus surrendering a portion of His omnipotence (it is again a deathlike or descending movement) because He saw that from a world of free creatures, even though they fell, He could work out (and this is the re-ascent) a deeper happiness and a fuller splendor than any world of automata would admit.

C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*

We must not picture destiny as a film unrolling for the most part on its own, but in which our prayers are sometimes allowed to insert additional items. On the contrary; what the film displays to us as it unrolls already contains the results of our prayers and of all our other acts. There is no question whether an event has happened because of your prayer. When the event you prayed for occurs your prayer has always contributed to it. When the opposite event occurs your prayer has never been ignored; it has been considered and refused, for your ultimate good and the good of the whole universe. (For example, because it is better for you and for everyone else in the long run that other people, including wicked ones, should exercise free will than that we should be protected from cruelty or treachery by turning the human race into automata.)

C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*

Universal Salvation and the Christian Story

Allan J. McNicol

Everyone who teaches a Bible class is aware that there is always the possibility of questions coming from the class which will be difficult to handle with the brief response dictated by a limited amount of time. Among the most thorny questions are those that focus on election and predestination. When they are raised we almost inevitably drift into an “on the one hand,” but “on the other” type of equivocal response that usually leaves the questioner bewildered and the teacher unsatisfied. Certainly our salvation from beginning to end involves the work of a sovereign God who is finally determinative in the process of creation and redemption. Yet, inherent in the Christian story is a strong affirmation of human responsibility. So when all is said and done, what have we learned? We still wonder how these two great concepts intersect so that the total Christian story has some degree of intellectual consistency.

Over the years issues such as the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart and a fair interpretation of Romans 8:28-30 have provided much grist for the mill in countless Bible classes in Churches of Christ. Since the formative years of the Restoration movement were grounded both in the wake of the European Enlightenment and a reaction to the excesses of Calvinism, we usually rested confident in the notion that our class discussions would never undercut the preservation of personal freedom. My experience in these situations is that

we nearly always end up on the side of personal freedom. If someone insists on pushing predestination, we tend to end the conversation.

But the cultural landscape in which these discussions take place has begun to shift. Surprisingly, as reflected in the religious and metaphysics section of bookstores, contemporary popular thought and ideas are permeated with various forms of fatalism and determinism.¹ This is not only true of the general cultural ethos but is evident in the evangelical community which, in recent years, has had an increasing impact on Churches of Christ.² Expressions of determinism are found in the immensely popular neo-Calvinism of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*.³ More classical expressions of Calvinism are also making a comeback. This theology is embedded in the influential talks of R. C. Sproul which are carried on vast numbers of Christian radio stations. So the issue of whether our choices are our own or dictated by some "invisible hand" is a matter of vital concern for many believers. Questions revolving around divine foreknowledge and predestination are surfacing again as a popular topic of religious conversation.

¹ In the ancient church in its earliest centuries these perspectives often traveled under the label of Gnosticism. Although he has made modifications freely, it is fascinating that the influential literary critic Harold Bloom uses the same term (Gnosticism) to describe what is central to the American religious experience. See *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

² This odyssey is traced in my essay, "Churches of Christ Meet the Evangelicals," *Christian Studies* 19 (2003): 71-78. Note especially the dominance of Calvinism in the intellectual wing of contemporary evangelicalism.

³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). In this work and in subsequent writings, Warren claims that our lives are totally scripted. "Because God made you for a reason, he also decided *when* you would be born, and *how long* you would live. He planned the days of your life in advance, choosing the exact time of your birth and death . . . Nothing in your life is arbitrary. It's all for a purpose." (23) It is difficult to see how this perspective coheres with the general flow of the biblical narrative where God's relationship with the world is far more dynamic. Our freedom entails our capacity to make all kinds of choices—even ones that are clearly against the will and approval of the Creator.

Of course, in the biblical tradition these matters touch on issues far beyond the interpretation of Romans 8:28-30 and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. They surface in many different texts. To get the flavor of how this issue is often framed we will open with a short discussion of several texts in the book of Revelation. As indicated by the title of this essay, we will only take up one aspect of this complex subject. Conveniently, these texts in Revelation will also introduce us to our central focus – the belief of a growing number of people that God, in his Sovereign Purpose, has determined that all will, in the end, be saved.

Divine Determinism in Revelation

Toward the end of the New Testament the reader of Revelation 17 encounters a series of bizarre images that function as descriptions of the Roman Empire. Rome is pictured as a world power that seeks to exercise an illegitimate, idolatrous claim of ultimacy over the vast network of peoples within her borders. Some of the imagery such as Babylon (i.e., Rome) pictured as a scarlet beast borders on being excessive. If this description were not challenging enough, suddenly one is catapulted into another intellectual briar patch. We learn that those who collaborate in Rome's claim of ultimacy over all areas of life are described as "the earth dwellers" (Rev 2:8; cf. 3:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14); then suddenly we are startled to see a line in Revelation 17:8 that tells us that the "names [of these earth dwellers] have not been written in the book of life *since the foundation of the world.*" Does this mean from the beginning of time some names are in the book of life and some are not? Has this entire struggle been predetermined down to the last detail? It certainly sounds like what we normally call predestination!

Thus we have before us a text that appears to confirm a persistent view: namely, the thrust of the biblical witness is that God's sovereignty over the world is so scrupulous that the spiritual destiny of each person is scripted

from the beginning of time. Indeed there is more in Revelation that appears to support this view. In Revelation 13:8 we read that the book of life is the property of the Lamb (Christ) “slain from the foundation of the world.” This claim is no idle matter. The book of life is a key concept in Revelation. At the last judgment those not found in this book are thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 20:12, 15).⁴

An obvious question emerges. Do these texts presuppose that the ultimate spiritual destiny of individuals has already been mysteriously pre-scripted? Other texts suggest that this may be true with respect to the salvific power of the death of Christ (Acts 2:23; 1 Peter 1:18-20).⁵ But does the content of this foreknowledge of God’s salvific plan for humankind also encompass the spiritual destiny of each person as well? And, if so, is there a way to know what has been decided? Questions like these have often been viewed as coming within the field of philosophical theology. But the terminology and scope of this discipline may not be of help to the average Bible teacher on Sunday morning. To be plausible to our constituency we need to get a clearer picture of how the concept of divine determinism functions in the biblical narrative.

Perhaps it is now clear to the reader why we have invoked the book of Revelation as illustrative of divine determinism. But the title of this essay also alludes to the question of universalism, or universal salvation. How does this connect with the book of Revelation? It is well known that there is no place in the Bible which speaks with greater clarity about the fate of the lost than Revelation. Not only are they consigned to the lake of fire but, in what surely is one of the most terror-striking texts in scripture, those devoted to

⁴ Presumably the opposite is true. Since the foundation of the world the names of the righteous are written in the book of life (Rev 3:5; cf. 14:1).

⁵ See also G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 168.

the form of idolatry implicit in the emperor cult are threatened with fire and sulphur *in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb* (Rev 14:9-11; cf. 20:10, 14-15; 21:8). This is the ‘second death.’ This is so foreboding that early in the book the Lord promises deliverance for the faithful believer (Rev 2:11; cf. 20:6, 14; 21:8).

Despite these unequivocal statements concerning the fate of the wicked, there is a stream of interpreters who argue that deep down Revelation mandates the view that all will be saved.⁶ This claim is based on the presupposition that what God has created as good will be redeemed and not lost.⁷

Although the basic grounds for this line of reasoning is the logical outcome of the rigorous pursuit of a particular theological trajectory, it has widespread and growing force. Many more people believe it than we may think. Its starting point is that the core of the biblical tradition is God’s love—ultimately displayed in Jesus Christ—is so broad and deep that it will irresistibly draw everyone, in a final outcome, into the orbit of universal salvation. Texts such as Isaiah 66:18-23, John 3:17, Romans 11:32-36, and 1

⁶ This position seems to have gained impetus fairly recently with the writings of Matthias Rissi, *Time and History: A Study on the Revelation* (trans. G.L. Winsor; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965) and *The Future of the World: An Exegetical Study of Revelation 19:11-22:15*; *Studies in Biblical Theology*, 2nd series, 25 (Naperville: Allenson, 1972); M. Eugene Boring, “Revelation 19-21: End Without Closure,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* Suppl. 3 (1994), 56-84 and *Revelation: Interpretation Commentary Series* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 226-231; Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation: Sacra-Pagina Series 16* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), 229-235 and “Positive Eschaton Only: Revelation and Universal Salvation,” *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 15 (1993), 42-59. Also, although Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York; Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101-104, 137-140, eschews universalism, he comes perilously close to accepting it in some discussions of the conversion of the nations.

⁷ Vernard Eller, “How the Kings of the Earth Land in the New Jerusalem: The World in The Book of Revelation,” *Katallagete* (September, 1975), 24.

Timothy 2:3-4 are taken to foreshadow this outcome which is reckoned to find its climax in Revelation (Rev 1:7; 5:13; 14:6-7; 21:24-27).⁸

While it is conceded that there also exist many texts that suggest final salvation will be limited to those who faithfully serve the one God of Abraham and Jesus, it is frequently asserted that the trajectory of the final triumph of God's love for all—resulting in universal salvation—carries greater weight. These two strands (limited and universal salvation) thus stand in a paradoxical relationship. Many argue that the weighty emphasis, implicit in the biblical story, of the potentially terrible consequences for failure to worship the Creator and live faithful lives is trumped by the mercy of a redeeming and gracious God.⁹ God desires all to be saved and, because he is God, it will be done. That is the claim. In a culture where a premium is placed on tolerance, and even believers are deeply uncomfortable about the doctrine of hell, universal salvation presents an attractive option.

Our Proposal

As already seen, discussions about election and predestination have far reaching implications. We wish to probe the most far-reaching issue of all: is the final movement of the pendulum of God's action toward limited or universal salvation? By and large most ordinary Christians believe in limited salvation. Salvation is ultimately God's work. People have the capacity to come to faith. Those who do not believe bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions. On the other hand, some view the matter differently. Christ is the same substance as the Father who is Creator and Redeemer.

⁸ Harrington, *Revelation*, 231, lists these sets of texts as clear evidence that scripture teaches universal salvation.

⁹ Harrington, "Positive Eschaton Only," 47; cf. Boring, "End Without Closure," 81, puts it this way: "Our decisions are open, and they matter. What they cannot do is nullify the ultimate decision of God who triumphs without ever violating our freedom." In other words, for now, the two strands remain in constant tension. But in the *eschaton* God will resolve them in favor of universal salvation.

God's work as Creator has a universal thrust. If Christ is both Creator and Redeemer, why should one not conclude too that God has elected or determined to redeem all of his creation? This theological discrimen functions as a basic presupposition for those believing in universal salvation.

Procedurally, this essay will trace the chief theological features which inform the modern movement toward universal salvation and assess its viability. We will observe that the idea of universal salvation is rendered problematic by the biblical witness. The latter houses these questions within a strong eschatological framework. We will argue that although the Bible strongly asserts the universal claim of God over creation, the *consistent* witness of scripture is in the direction of limited salvation. Our goal is to provide the ordinary Bible student with resources enabling him or her to see the scriptural framework for approaching the difficult issues of divine determinism in light of modern challenges.

Universalism and Its Theological Underpinnings

From the first book of the New Testament to the last there is abundant textual evidence that scripture teaches there will be some who will not participate in the benefits of the new creation (Matt 13:30, 49; 25:41, 46; Rev 14:10-11; 20:15; 21:8). The rest of the New Testament seems to be consistent with this witness (2 Thess 1:7-10; 2 Peter 2:9). With several notable exceptions this conclusion constitutes a broad consensus of the key Christian thinkers with respect to interpreting biblical texts until the nineteenth century.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century widespread cultural disenchantment with

¹⁰ The most notable exception, of course, was Origen, a leader in the ancient Greek-speaking church. As noted by Richard Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," *Themelios* 4/2 (September 1978), 49-50, in his very informative historical overview of those in church history who accept universal salvation, Origen's universalism was a product of the logic of his theological system. Heavily influenced by Platonism, he believed in the restoration (Greek *apokatastasis*) of all things to ultimate Being (God). Humans have free will and so will fall into various levels of

belief in a God who punishes some in hell led many to search for a theological rationale for universal salvation. Theologians engaging in this task sought to take selected texts out of scripture and unite them in new directions of theological argument.

Fundamental to theological proposals housed in the biblical tradition are the doctrines of creation and redemption. Ever since the early centuries of Christianity, assisted by the development of Trinitarian thinking, these doctrines have been linked closely. As a co-agent with God in creation (Col 1:15-20), Christ's redemptive life could be viewed as an ongoing expression of the divine creative power.¹¹ Some began to argue that since God's work as Creator has a *universal* thrust, it follows that Christ's redemption also has *universal* consequences.¹² On these grounds some influential theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries began to make a case for universal salvation. Aided by the growth of liberalism in elite European society they were seeking to underscore what many people wanted to accept anyway.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was a key figure who marched to the drumbeat of the modern tempo. In his classic, *The Christian Faith*, he developed a comprehensive argument for universal salvation.¹³ This theological treatise brought to full expression Schleiermacher's basic view that at some precognitive level all human beings apprehend the Creator through a sense of "absolute dependence." This sense of "absolute dependence," or

sin. In Christ, some return to the Father in this life but with others it will take a process of time extending into eternity. But because God is God and everything emanating from him will be returned to him (cf. 1 Cor 15:28), in the end, all will have closure in ultimate reconciliation. Clearly this is a highly speculative philosophy intertwining Platonism and scripture.

¹¹ Mark Ellingsen, *Doctrine and Word: Theology in the Pulpit* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 33.

¹² Ellingsen, *Doctrine and Word*, 33.

¹³ William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 274.

awareness of the divine, was always present in the world. But since the incarnation its most coherent expression is in Christ.¹⁴ When one is touched by the story of Jesus, he or she is regenerated and sanctified. Schleiermacher thought that this sense of a divine-consciousness, although deeply embedded in the life of the church, would ultimately extend to all creation.¹⁵ He bolstered this claim with a creative reworking of the doctrine of election. A long line of theological giants (e.g., Augustine and Calvin) had left a theological legacy that Christ's redeeming work was only effective for the sake of that portion of humanity whom God elected from the beginning.¹⁶ Schleiermacher knew this tradition well.¹⁷ He culminated his magnum opus, *The Christian Faith*, with a discussion of election and predestination.¹⁸ But he makes a major revision. He flatly rejects the idea of the *decretum absolutum* (double predestination). He claims that, from the beginning, *all* have been elected to salvation through Christ! And since Christ is Creator, as well as Redeemer, even despite the apparent unfaithfulness of many, God's electing purpose to

¹⁴ For Schleiermacher, Christ was the purest expression of "god-consciousness."

¹⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (trans. edited by H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart of the second German edition 1830; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 549-551.

¹⁶ Ellingsen, *Doctrine and Word*, 34. It is important to understand the logic informing this position. The design is to protect and enhance a sense of God's glory and sovereignty over the creation. God took such care with his work of creation that he set apart a group of 'the elect' from the 'foundation of the world' to manifest his glory. This is entirely a matter of God's choice. Therefore, individual salvation comes down to God's decision – not ours! Supposedly this perspective, properly received by awestruck mortals, promotes respect and gratitude for God's glory. Neither Augustine or Calvin flinched with respect to the consequences for those not chosen.

¹⁷ This is the notorious doctrine of double predestination. Because the decree was before (*supra*) the creation and fall (*lapsus*) it is sometimes called the supralapsarian decree. This is to be distinguished from another version (the infralapsarian decree) which supposedly is understood to be made after (*infra*) the fall.

¹⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 536-560; 717-722.

reconcile all will not fail.¹⁹ Indeed, for those already blessed with faith, to think otherwise would not be worthy of their claim that they were living in keeping with the mind of Christ which, above all, is love.

Although he had fundamental differences with Schleiermacher, the twentieth-century theological giant, Karl Barth, came to a similar position on election.²⁰ One should not construe what God did at the foundation of the world as a decision to elect some and reject others. There is no decree of God with respect to salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Barth spells this out in a treatise of over five hundred pages in his *Church Dogmatics*.²¹ Barth sought to shed light on what was revealed in scripture about God's mysterious purposes on these matters. He concluded there was no such thing as a mysterious decree made with respect to individual salvation at the beginning of time. Instead, Jesus Christ is the prototype of both election and rejection.²² It is not that God chose us, but God chose Christ—to be both rejected and elected. As the rejected One he took upon himself the rejection of the sinner; as the elect One, all are elected to salvation in Christ, the prototype of the new creation.²³

¹⁹ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 709-716. Here the biblical teaching on the last things seemed to be understood as an extended metaphor on all things being subject to God (1 Cor 15:27-28).

²⁰ Generations of lecturers have amused students with the purported quip featuring Barth's comment on a bust of Schleiermacher in his study: "It has to be either him or me."

²¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, part 2 (trans. G.W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 3-506.

²² Barth, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, part 2, 94-144.

²³ Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey" (52), puts it succinctly, "Predestination thus becomes not an equivocal doctrine of God's Yes and No, but a fully evangelical doctrine of God's unqualified Yes to man. The reality of man—of all men—is that in Jesus Christ the reconciliation of all men has taken place. The gospel brings to men the knowledge of what is already true."

Like Schleiermacher, Barth's doctrine of election becomes central to his theological system.²⁴

Barth denied persistently that he taught universal salvation. Any claim that God must save all is a denial of his sovereign freedom.²⁵ Yet it is difficult to see how Barth could escape the logic of his conclusion. Of course, Barth did not deny the widespread phenomenon of unbelief. He came up with a contrived explanation. He argued, somewhat unpersuasively, that most humans perversely choose to live unaware that we are chosen for a higher purpose. Put bluntly, Barth pictures humans as elected for glory but unaware of it!

But how do you preach a gospel of bringing people to "accept that they have been accepted," to paraphrase a contemporary of Barth? If we are already part of the elect, where is the motivation to change?

The traditional model used in evangelistic preaching of moving from plight to solution seems to have gone out the door. Arguably Schleiermacher and Barth were the two most influential theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although vastly different in their approaches, in the fertile soil of modernity, the effects of their theological underpinnings for the

²⁴ Edward L. Miller and Stanley J. Grenz, eds., *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 12, states incisively Barth's position, "Every teaching of Christian theology begins and ends with the biblical teaching about Jesus Christ, and every teaching about Jesus Christ begins and ends with election."

²⁵ Barth, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, part 2, 422-423, discusses the text, "Many are called but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14). What Barth seems to be claiming is that those who deny the reality of election ("the many") by living perversely (Rom 1:18-32) function in a twilight existence always under the threat of final separation from God. God's refusal to change this situation may have given Barth cause for agreeing to the charge of universalism. As Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," 54, notes with respect to Barth, God never withdraws the threat of acquiescing to human perfidy and giving humans up to the consequences of their actions. At the end of the day, final salvation is not a given but a hope.

acceptance of universal salvation have been enormous. For example, consider the impact it has on motivation for mission in most mainline churches.

But has all this been a colossal detour for the church? As popular as it is, does the proposal for universal salvation have a solid grounding in the biblical story? I will now assess briefly why the vision of universal salvation is problematic as a theological construct. We will conclude by noting how the Bible unfolds its own particular view of God's universal sovereignty.

Universal Salvation: A Critique

The basic proposal of those who accept 'universal salvation' is that all human beings will finally achieve redemption on the grounds of God's gracious love.²⁶ Since we are conducting this discussion within the parameters of the Christian faith, an immediate problem emerges; namely, this proposal stands in tension with a number of texts of scripture (viz., Matt 10:18; 22:14; 25:31-46; Mk 16:16; Rom 2:6-16; 2 Thess 1:7-10; Rev 14:9-11). Is it true that in every instance God's triumphant and all-conquering love finally wins over the tide of evil that rolls forward throughout history with its corollary, the stubborn resistance of the human heart?

Given the above-mentioned texts, it is hardly incontestable that those who entertain such proposals adopt creative readings of scripture. The most common approach is akin to what the Germans call *Sachkritik* (a kind of criticism that rejects one witness of scripture in favor of highlighting another theological principle also appearing in the text).²⁷ Earlier we noted that the

²⁶ Harrington, "Positive Eschaton Only," 46. This is opposed to the alternative position that salvation is limited. These limitations may vary according to various theological views, but it does presume that on the grounds of what we do in this life, some will be saved and others eternally lost.

²⁷ A discussion of whether this principle can fit into a defensible doctrine of interpretation of scripture would take us too far afield and must be left for another day. Suffice it to say it is used widely. See Richard Hays, "Scripture-Shaped Community: The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics," *Interpretation* 44 (1990), 46-47, for a good example of its use.

key passages are Isaiah 66:18-23, Romans 11:32-36, and I Timothy 2:3-4 which routinely are set forth in favor of this view. These texts function as the foundation for an overarching theological proposal that there will be an ultimate reconciliation between God and all human beings. Scriptures to the contrary are dismissed.

Such a proposal is open to question not only because of its attitude to scripture but also for two other reasons. First, it is unclear whether the key texts cited affirm universal salvation. Second, on theological grounds, such a picture arguably trivializes the reality of evil and denies the ultimate significance of the last judgment. We will note both of these points briefly.

Isaiah 66:18-24 is one of the most far-reaching passages in scripture. It is the basis for the influential vision of a 'new heavens and a new earth' (cf. Isa 65:17). This descriptive phrase is used again in Revelation 21:1-8, where it functions as an image for God dwelling eternally with his people. However, in both passages the immediate context indicates those who oppose God's way are judged and separated. The passages assert that the glory of the unity between God and his people is to be viewed in contrast with the dire outcome of those who oppose God's way (Isa 66:15-16; Rev 20:11-15; 21:8, 27; 22:11, 15).

Similarly, while it is true that Romans 11:32 speaks about God having mercy on all, this must be viewed in light of the wider argument over the role of Jew and Gentile in God's plan found in Romans 9-11. Paul is saying that at various times in history both Gentiles and (now) Jews have found themselves trapped in a web of disobedience to the divine mandate (Rom 11:32a). But this is all part of a mysterious wider purpose. This purpose has finally allowed many Gentiles to come to faith and it ultimately will work the same way for many in Israel. As Romans 11:14, 20, and 23 show emphatically,

Paul was under no illusion that every last Gentile or Jew would accept the claims of the gospel.

Finally, 1 Timothy 2:3-4 should also be examined in its context. The basic topic under discussion in the text is prayer.²⁸ Believers are exhorted to pray for all men—even those authorities who are not believers. One never knows who will hear the word and believe and be saved, because God is no respecter of persons (1 Tim 2:3-4). Even today, who can predict which person will come to faith? Yet as 1 Timothy 2:5-7 points out, salvation comes through acceptance of the one gospel. The underlying presupposition is that those who do not accept it or fall away will be lost (1 Tim. 1:6-11; 4:1-2; 5:24; 6:9-10). God’s desire for all to be saved does not overrule the freedom he gives to his creatures to make choices and accept their consequences.

Our textual analysis was brief and cursory. Yet contrary to what is sometimes asserted,²⁹ we believe that if it were extended we would see that there is no stream of texts in scriptures asserting universal salvation.³⁰ Second, we venture to assert that such a position severely undermines the basic coherence of the Christian story. Especially, this is the case with respect to a key pillar of this story: the pervasiveness of evil and its defeat at the last judgment. Some years ago J. A. T. Robinson wrote a short book that has served as a manual for many arguing in favor of universal salvation.³¹ His analysis was primarily philosophical and theological. His central point was

²⁸ N. T. Wright, “Towards a Biblical View of Universalism,” *Themelios* 4/2 (September 1978), 57.

²⁹ Harrington, “Positive Eschaton Only,” 46.

³⁰ Even if one is committed to *Sachkritik* as a valid principle of biblical interpretation, it is open to question whether it is applied appropriately in this instance. It does not appear that universal salvation is a presupposition of any biblical writer. Of course one *can* ignore scripture on these matters altogether and still assert the outcome of universalism as a theological principle. That discussion is for another place.

³¹ J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God ... : A Study of the Christian Doctrine of the Last Things* (London: James Clarke Co., Ltd., 1950), 99-123.

that an omnipotent *loving* God must, in the end, triumph over human resistance; otherwise this would be an infringement on the very meaning of omnipotent power. Here is an astonishing expression of faith. The power of God's love is so great that it will irresistibly elicit the free choice of all humans (even Hitler?) to surrender to it. It is claimed that the language about judgment and eternal separation in the Bible is not about absolute reality. This language functions metaphorically. Potentially it is there to remind us of the seriousness of our present need to respond to the divine overture.³² Sooner or later all will surrender to this 'irresistible call.'

But as attractive as this theological vision may be, surely this is a deep distortion of the biblical narrative. Whether it is the first or the twenty-first century, it strains credibility to claim that, in the end, we are all disposed to submit to the way of love. This is to lose touch with reality. History teaches us otherwise. The Bible from beginning to end takes evil with absolute seriousness. The theme of the wrath of God runs wide and deep in scripture. Only a judgment that has real consequences can do justice to the intense and pervasive conflict with the kind of evil both our Lord and the people of faith in history have encountered. Thus we conclude that not only is the doctrine of universal salvation unable to be grounded decisively in the biblical text and the story of the people of God, it fails to take seriously the process the Creator inaugurated through the death and resurrection of Christ to bring about the ultimate defeat of evil at the end of the age. A major part of the Christian hope is that this process will culminate in the last judgment (Heb 9:27; Rom 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:10).

³² Robinson, *In the End, God . . .*, 119, "Hell is an ultimate impossibility because *already* there is no one outside of Christ. Whenever the New Testament speaks from this point of view, this is its message." Of course advocates of universal salvation readily admit that there are many who resist the divine calling to the grave. Some who take this position are not above invoking some version of a 'second chance' in the world to come.

The Biblical Framework for Issues of God's Sovereignty

Biblical universalism consists of one God and one way of obedience (righteousness by faith) to him. It is universal in the sense that God's offer of salvation is for all. To those who pursue this way the end-times visions of the Bible are filled with promises of hope. To those who refuse this way there is no hope (1 Thess 4:13). It stresses that God's door is always open but we are free to slam it in his face. As N. T. Wright notes:

This view specifically excludes the other sort of 'universalism,' because scripture and experience alike tell us that many do miss the one way of salvation which God has provided.³³

The Bible teaches the universality of God. It does not teach universal salvation.

Without question the notion that not all will enter into eternal life is inherent to the Christian story (Matt 7:13-14). As one of the great texts in this area asserts, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14). This brings us back to the questions we raised at the outset. Are these matters decided from the beginning of time? Are questions of God's choices and human freedom destined to be concealed in unresolvable tensions? When these issues come up in Bible class is it best to steer clear of them?

What is striking is that in the centuries covered during the writing of the scriptures it is difficult to find a theoretical discussion in the text itself that deals with the issue of divine sovereignty vis-à-vis human freedom. By and large it does not appear that this issue seemed to be a topic of conversation among the people of God. This suggests that we may be approaching the question wrongly. Indeed, once we decide that from the beginning of time God chose a select few to be saved it must necessarily follow that he rejected others. Without question, people during the biblical period were capable of

³³ N. T. Wright, "Toward a Biblical View of Universalism," 58.

drawing this conclusion.³⁴ Yet people in the biblical period did not talk in these terms. The idea of double predestination or supralapsarianism is not only absent in biblical vocabulary but is in tension with passages such as 1 Timothy 2:4 and 1 John 2:2. The early Christians could readily see that these ideas cannot cohere with the fundamental claim that God is a God of love.³⁵

The Bible avoids addressing definitively the issue of predestination of individuals to heaven or hell. It does not teach that there is a special category of the elect that is given a special grace to bring them to salvation. This is not just because biblical thinking is primarily in images where opposite conceptions can be housed under one roof in a kind of mosaic.³⁶ But, far more profoundly, questions about divine election and human freedom are framed in a different context.

It is important to note that overtones of issues of predestination emerge out of the doctrine of creation. But they involve reflection about the role of the human in the total created order. Specifically, biblical thinking presumes that the first creation *prefigures and incorporates* the whole history of the world.³⁷ Whether it be as a heavenly reality or something in God's mind it existed from the creation. It follows that the conclusion to all things at the end of the age will correspond to the reality of the first creation. Thus the

³⁴ Krister Stendahl, "The Called and the Chosen: An Essay of Election," in *The Root of the Vine: Essays in Biblical Theology by Anton Fridrichsen and other Members of Uppsala University* (London: A & C Black, 1953), 72, notes several instances in non-biblical writings (cf. CD 2:7; 4:3; 2 Baruch 30:2; 75:5).

³⁵ What father could be called 'loving' who would decide to separate himself eternally from his children before they were born?

³⁶ Contra Stendahl, "The Called and the Chosen," 67.

³⁷ As noted by Nils Dahl, "Christ, Creation and the Church," in *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church; Essays by Nils Alstrup Dahl* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 127.

events of the end, from this perspective, can be considered to be *preexistent* or *predestined*.³⁸

To pursue this point adequately would take another essay. Suffice it to say that the ultimate rehabilitation of all things by the Creator finds its preliminary visible manifestation in history with the coming of Christ and the founding of the church (Col 1:15-20; Eph 1:3-14; 2:11-22).³⁹ The New Testament presumes that from eternity Christ was designated and predestined to found the church and to bring to final glory his *special people*, sometimes called the “*Jerusalem from above*” (Heb 12:22-23; Rev 21:2). These are the people of the ‘book of life’ who can truly, in a collective sense, be considered to be predestined (Eph 1:4; Rev 13:8). God’s true purpose for the creation is shown in their lives of faith today. It will be fully revealed at the end of the age.

The theological consequences of this way of approaching reality are far reaching. It simply renders irrelevant the detailed metaphysics and fine distinctions many make with respect to God’s foreknowledge and sovereignty vis-à-vis human freedom on the matter of the salvation of individuals. God, as personal, has from the beginning related to the people of his creation. This relationship is open to all. But he will never, on the basis of love, undercut our freedom to choose or reject this relationship. Indeed the Bible simply leaves that issue alone.⁴⁰ Some believe and others do not. That is all that can be said about it.

³⁸ Dahl, “Christ, Creation and the Church,” 127-130.

³⁹ Dahl, “Christ, Creation and the Church,” 128-129.

⁴⁰ This rules out specific ideas that our lives are scripted (contra Rick Warren) or that we, like the potter’s vessel, are passive objects of some version of God’s irresistible grace (Augustine and some Reformers).

On the other hand, we are now able to develop an appropriate appreciation for language about predestination in the scriptures.⁴¹ From the beginning, inherent in the created order, God has destined Christ to relate to a people who would reflect the divine glory. The biblical story is fundamentally an account of how this primordial decision unfolds. From this perspective, the work of Christ was present from the beginning (1 Peter 1:18-20); likewise there would come a people who would accept that work (Rev 13:8 and 17:8), and sadly, a wide number who would reject it (Rev 20:10, 14-15; 21:8).

Conclusion

In this essay our focus has centered on the question of election and predestination. The issue is complicated and covers many areas of theology. We were not able to discuss every text or evaluate every approach. We took up the specific question of whether biblical faith affirms limited or universal salvation. We concluded that it is a fair representation of the biblical witness that God has not predestined all humans to salvation and that salvation is limited. We sometimes hear it stated, “the New Testament and early Christians clearly held that it will be true and is already true that ‘outside Christ there is no salvation’. To which they implicitly add, ‘there is no outside Christ’.”⁴²

At first glance this seems to reflect the sentiment of those wishing to avoid the horrible idea of ‘double predestination.’ Instead these interpreters move to the opposite extreme by asserting that God’s eternal choice of Christ, the new Adam, incorporates all into the sphere of salvation. To be sure, this reminds us of something we should do well not to forget. When the

⁴¹ And there are many texts. The recent monograph by Steven C. Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow? A Comprehensive Biblical Study* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006) mentions many of them, although it defends very cogently the neo-Calvinist reading of the scriptures.

⁴² Gerald O’Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 225.

day is over we are in awe at the simple fact that ‘God so loved the world.’ In Genesis the biblical story does not begin with the election of one group over another. It starts with the account of the creation of Adam who is both an individual and a collective for all of humankind. The Bible ends with the nations streaming into the New Jerusalem which comes from above (Rev 21:23–22:5). From beginning to end the Bible presumes there is one sovereign God who cares deeply for all peoples. God does not wish for any to perish, but is this description enough to make it the final swing of the pendulum in favor of universal salvation?

Nevertheless, it would do us all well to confess that God’s grace is greater than some of the boxes and other limiting boundaries which we often place around the story of salvation. We have noted that the Bible eschews definitive teaching on the matter of individual predestination. No mortal has all the answers on these mysteries concerning eternal destiny. Matthew 25:31-46 notes that there will be surprises at the last day. This we do know: God’s grace and mercy are greater than human wisdom. Our confidence, finally, is not in the brilliance of our explanations but in the One who is the Answer.

Beyond the Darkness

Martha Pounders Walker

05/22/2008

Oh, the loneliness of just-past sundown,
when tired day begs to stay—
when anxious night hovers in the wings
eager to command the stage.

Oh, the weariness of the unrelenting
task master pounding my brain, dividing
to conquer. The youth in me wants to finish;
the older me looks longingly at the sofa.

Oh, the guilt-ridden list, still incomplete,
the questions of indecision and the “if-onlies.”
Where is time hiding, and when did the body
become so unwilling to cooperate?

Finally night slips his dark shawl around my
weighted shoulders like a caul, protecting
the precious embryo of resignation from
which shall come thoughts of hope—
germinating, growing, and finally bursting forth—
Hope for the new day that was conceived when
darkness extinguished the struggling lights
of my regrets and my repentance.

How long now before that final twilight? How long
before that last night wraps me in his velvet shroud?
I cannot know *when*, but I can know hope—
Hope in the One *who* worked under cover of darkness,
Bringing day from the nothingness of night.

That same Creator, who brought me from the darkness
of my mother’s womb, shall likewise draw me from
the darkness of the grave—into the Light of His Presence.
I cannot remember that first nocturnal work, but
He can never forget. He has *promised* to do it again!

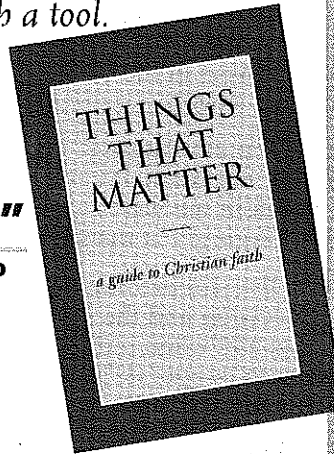
He shall surely shred the shroud, and
Darkness shall never strut again!

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From Mystery to Mastery: Christo-Paganism Then and Now

Michael R. Weed

Differences regarding the nature of worship assemblies have disturbed American churches and synagogues for the last several decades. Revising the nature of worship assemblies reflects the influence of many factors in addition to the respective theological and liturgical traditions of different religions. Virtually all religious groups in America—Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—are experiencing major changes in the way the role of religion in their lives is understood. This is especially true with regard to the nature and purpose of worship assemblies.

A non-theological factor is also recognized as contributing to this development; namely, the plurality of religions and especially numerous versions of Christianity with differing ways of “doing worship” within specific traditions. This plurality has meant that regardless of church doctrine and church polity, religious groups compete with one another in attracting members from a broad pool of self-identifying but unattached believers and curious nonbelievers, referred to as “seekers.” Or, from another perspective, individual believers and believing families are faced with many options as they search for a church (or synagogue) which offers what they are looking for or which “meets their needs.” And as often as not, the criteria employed in finding a church have little to do with the historic beliefs of specific religious traditions or their doctrinal commitments. Surveys indicate that a high per-

centage of “church shoppers” list among their primary criteria for choosing a church such considerations as “accessibility” and “well run programs and activities for the children.”

A major factor contributing to the present situation is the indisputable fact that America has become a nation of spectators and entertainment consumers. Television offers instant entertainment—and distraction—in American homes twenty-four hours a day. Teachers, parents, and advertisers know that TV-watching, unlike reading, requires little concentration or attention and develops no particular skills. Not surprisingly, the attitudes and expectations that are being shaped and molded by the inescapable presence of the entertainment culture are not only being manifested in American schools; they are also being reflected in American churches and synagogues—and especially in worship assemblies.

Further, over the last several decades, intentional efforts have been made to adapt worship practices to popular tastes and trends of the surrounding culture. Surveys and questionnaires are now regularly consulted by church leaders in order to determine the type of music attractive to non-Christians, and worship is planned accordingly (e.g., music with fast-paced tunes and simple repetitive lyrics). In some up-to-date “worship centers,” well-placed coffee kiosks and the smell of popcorn are intended to put modern mall shoppers “in a good mood” and make them “feel comfortable.”¹

It should be noted that strategic adaptations of the Christian faith intended to minimize its jars and clashes with the beliefs, attitudes, and tastes of non-Christian cultures were initiated many centuries ago. A classic example of this approach is evidenced in the missionary strategy advised by Pope Gregory in his letter to Augustine (later Bishop of Canterbury) and the party of monks whom Gregory had commissioned as missionaries to England in

¹ Cf. John Parker, “Guide for the Perplexed,” *Touchstone* (Jul/Aug, 2006), 19.

596. In a letter dated July 18, 601, Pope Gregory clearly commends a policy of tactical accommodation to English paganism, advising Augustine and his companions that

the heathen temples of these people need not be destroyed, only the idols which are to be found in them. . . . And since the people are accustomed, when they assemble for sacrifice, to kill many oxen in sacrifice to the devils, it seems reasonable to appoint a festival for the people by way of exchange.²

This strategy of adaptation and accommodation to pagan cultures was carried out with numerical success and lies behind the evolution of St. Valentine's Day, Halloween, and the reshaping of the archangel Michael in the model of old Irish heroes. Centuries later, Spanish missionaries accompanying the conquistadors to Central and South America employed the same method of adaptation and adoption from which, among many other similar developments, evolved the Christo-pagan festival, *Dia de los Muertos* ("Day of the Dead").

It should be observed that in adapting the Christian faith to surrounding cultures, the church was accommodating Christianity to a mysterious world. It was a world inhabited by many religions, both crude and sophisticated, which at numerous sites and shrines, and through ancient and mysterious rites, variously related their devotees and adherents to a universe rife with good and evil supernatural powers and forces. Through this strategy of intentionally adapting Christian faith to the spiritualities of pagan environments, the church inevitably developed its own sacred sites, rites, and a panoply of intermediaries and intercessors—saints and martyrs—intended to replace their pagan counterparts. However unintentional, the result of such strategies was that paganism left an indelible stamp on Christian missions.

² Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1966), 68.

The New Adaptation: From Mystery to Mastery

With the sweeping cultural changes—intellectual and spiritual—which accompanied the arrival of the Renaissance (1350 ff.) and the Enlightenment (1650 ff.), earlier adaptations of Christianity to the world of paganism soon proved a liability. The growing perception of an ordered universe operating according to discoverable physical laws pushed back the boundaries of ignorance and superstition. To be certain, a universe ordered according to laws discoverable by the human mind could support belief in the existence of a rational God. But the vision of such a universe also evoked unprecedented confidence in human abilities not only to comprehend the universe but also (employing knowledge of the workings of the universe—“natural laws”) to exercise increasing degrees of mastery over the seemingly “natural world.” Since the Enlightenment, attitudes associated with this outlook have continued to accelerate through modern science and technology’s relentless advances in mastering both the micro- and the macro-universes.

With immediate and practical applications to everyday life, the world of modern science quickly displaced the old world of mystery. The new and exciting world emerging was a world of problems to be solved and frontiers to be mastered through the continuing applications of human reason through science and technology. Telephones, automobiles, airplanes, air-conditioning, and television, not to mention medical advances and space travel, all in effect “sacramentally” validate and sustain the new “sacred cosmos” of science and technology which has extended its aura throughout the world over the past four centuries.

Not surprisingly, over the past several centuries Christianity has both consciously and unconsciously adapted itself to the emerging “sacred cosmos” of modernity in a manner similar to its earlier adaptations to the prevailing polytheistic environments. Understandably, adaptations of Christian-

ity to modern scientific and technological cultures are radically different from older Christo-paganisms. The incipient self-confidence in human mastery of the environment which becomes characteristic of modern Christo-paganism is clearly evidenced by nineteenth-century revivalist of the Second Great Awakening, Charles G. Finney. In 1835, in a lecture defending revivalism titled “What a Revival of Religion Is,” Finney clearly and candidly described the phenomenon of religious revivals by stating:

There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists entirely in the *right exercise* of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else. . . . It is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the applications of means.³

Over a century and a half later, modern church growth exponent Rick Warren evidences that Finney’s “Christo-pragmatism” is perhaps even more suited to contemporary minds. In his best-selling church growth manual, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Warren exhorts church leaders that “healthy churches don’t need gimmicks to grow.” Warren tells his readers that “healthy churches grow the way God intends”—“they grow naturally.”⁴ Following this, Warren explains how his Saddleback Church has carefully engineered its numerical success through such strategies as “not using songs with minor keys”⁵ and “by avoiding ‘dead time’ in worship services to accommodate those with MTV- shortened attention spans.”⁶ Warren also recommends

³ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960, orig. 1835), 13.

⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Zondervan, 1995), 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

that “doubling the light wattage in your worship center (he advises ‘secretly’) alters ‘the mood and may cause ‘a revival’.”⁷

Fifteen centuries earlier, Gregory’s missionaries adapted the Christian faith to the outlook, beliefs, and habits of seventh-century English pagans. The result was a Christian faith combined with a paganism which believed in countless mysterious supernatural forces—angels, demons, nymphs, sprites, ogres, fairies—who were believed variously to intersect human lives in the home, in the forests and fields, and in the market place.

Similarly, Rick Warren’s strategies adapt the Christian faith to the familiar taken-for-granted outlook of modern twentieth-century men and women. The result is a religious “outlook” which evidences a pre-committed confidence in “scientific” means-ends reasoning and thus pragmatically employs contemporary advertising strategies and promotional techniques with the same good intentions with which Gregory and earlier accommodationists adapted Christian faith to their own intellectual and spiritual environments.⁸

Three Prophetic Voices

Not surprisingly, the evolution of the assumptions and outlook of modernity—and especially the influence of modernity on modern religion has not been without critics.

⁷ Ibid., 206.

⁸ For example, Rick Warren encourages readers of *The Purpose Driven Church* to: “Figure out what mood you want your service to project, then create it.” (264); “We start positive and end positive.” (271); “We use humor in our services . . . it is not a sin to help people feel good.” (272); “Cultivate an informal, relaxed, and friendly atmosphere.” (272); “We made a strategic decision to stop singing hymns in our seeker services.” (285); “We have attracted thousands more because of our music.” (285); “Saddleback now has a complete pop/rock orchestra.” (290); “Use more performed music than congregational singing . . .” (291) (emphasis on entertainment); “The ground we have in common with unbelievers is not the Bible, but our common needs, hurts, and interests as human beings. You cannot start with a text . . .” (295); “make your members feel special . . . they need to feel special” (320, 323).

Within roughly a decade of Finney's observations, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the enigmatic Søren Kierkegaard was engaged in writing searing attacks upon the state church of Denmark. With his satirical invectives, Kierkegaard ridiculed the spiritual impotence and corruption of the Danish church. Among other things, Kierkegaard charged the state church with having abandoned the Christianity of the New Testament.⁹ With biting satire he also accused the Danish state church of having "out-miracled" Jesus. Kierkegaard observed that whereas Jesus had turned water into wine, the modern church had turned the wine back into water.¹⁰

With the popularity of books like Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church* it is ironic, though no doubt insightful, that Warren himself predicts that the key issue for churches in the twenty-first century will not be church growth: it will be "church health."¹¹ Although Warren is not explicit, one wonders if he is reflecting on the long-term effects of strategic dilution—even trivialization—of Christian faith.¹² Warren's prediction appears to be receiving some support from recent surveys indicating significant dissatisfaction among megachurch members. For example, Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago with 17,000 weekend worshipers recently found

⁹ Kierkegaard repeatedly juxtaposes "New Testament Christianity" and "the Christianity of the New Testament" to the church of his time. See his *Attack Upon Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1954), 48. Among other things, Kierkegaard also criticized worship services with trained choruses which he saw as reducing would-be worshippers into passive audiences. Kierkegaard suggested that God is the audience; the congregations are the performers.

¹¹ Warren, 17.

¹² One wonders if "church health" will be a major concern in part because "church growth" churches, weakened by preoccupations with lighting and fast-paced entertainment-style worship, and mistrustful of leaders because of manipulative and covert methods, will be unable to engage the onset of boredom as they fail to keep pace with ever-pressing demands for newer—larger, louder, faster, brighter—distractions.

that involvement of church members in “church activities” was not being accompanied by spiritual growth. One of Willow Creek’s ministers is quoted as saying, “We found our people were hungry for more . . . they wanted to go deeper with the Bible. They wanted to go deeper with personal spiritual practices.”¹³

Finally, Neil Postman, a Jewish social critic, professor at New York University, and one of the first to study the impact of technology on modern culture, specifically called attention to the impact of television on education and religion. In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Postman warned that

on television, religion, like everything else, is presented, quite simply and without apology, as an entertainment. Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence. On these shows . . . God comes out second banana.

Postman made two further observations:

There is no great religious leader—from Buddha to Moses to Jesus to Mohammed to Luther—who offered people what they want. Only what they need. But television is not well suited to offering people what they need. It is “user friendly.” It is too easy to turn off. . . . As a consequence, what is preached on television is not anything like the Sermon on the Mount. Religious programs are filled with good cheer. They celebrate affluence.¹⁴

¹³ “Willow Creek finds limits to its model,” *Christian Century*, January 29, 2008, 16. In this article, researcher Diana Butler Bass reports having interviewed “dozens and dozens of people” leaving megachurches for churches which provide a deeper level of Christian faith. See also Mark Galli, “A Deeper Relevance: Why Many Evangelicals Are Attracted to That Strange Thing Called Liturgy,” *Christianity Today* (May 2008), 29-41.

¹⁴ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1985), 121.

Then, an especially sobering reminder for modern Christians to hear from a non-Christian, Postman notes:

I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether.¹⁵

Another Kind of Religion Altogether

Indeed, “another kind of religion,” is a risk associated with all adaptations of Christianity to human cultures. Modernity, however, with its indisputable accomplishments in science and technology, constantly threatens to attract human trust away from the transcendent Creator to confidence in the creature’s ability to master the natural, the social, and—increasingly—the spiritual environments.

William Willimon has suggested that contemporary Christians must be self-consciously and intentionally countercultural. Modern culture has been compared to the undertow at the beach: it is relentless, invisible, and dangerous. Christians should not be in the habit of raising wet fingers in the cultural winds—or constantly monitoring questionnaires and surveys—in order to accommodate modern tastes. Without an alternative frame of reference, accommodation is not strategy or a tactic; it is an inevitability.

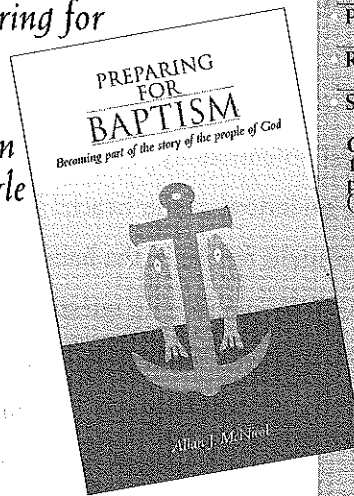
As the eschatological community, the church incarnates a transcendent reality. As such, the church provides a vantage point from which to discern the pseudo-realities of a world which, estranged from its Creator, is estranged from its own nature and purpose.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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Baptism: Mode *and* Meaning Rethinking Baptismal Practices

Editor, *Christian Studies*

Three years ago, an article appeared in *Pro Ecclesia* discussing baptismal practices in evangelical churches. The author, Melanie Ross, points out that her church was one of many whose preaching traditions led *to* baptism rather than *from* baptism.¹ She further observes that, properly understood, baptism is not a point action in time but the initiation of a lifelong process:

Baptism is the slaying of the Old Adam and the resurrection of the new man, both of which actions must continue in us our whole life long. Thus the Christian life is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever continued.²

The author continues with the equally important point that the congregation's presence at baptism is not that of spectators. Baptism is not only the occasion of the conversion of an individual; it is also an occasion for the gathering of the baptized—the church—to reaffirm their identity and continuing pilgrimage both corporately and individually: “Baptism,” the author writes,

¹ Melanie Ross, “Dunking Doughnuts? Rethinking Free Church Baptismal Theology,” *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. XIV, No. 4 (2005), 435.

² *Ibid.*, 441.

“thus calls for the transformation of both the individual and the ecclesial community.”³

This attempt to recover the fuller dimensions of a biblical understanding of Christian baptism wisely recognizes that “there is no role for spectators” at Christian baptismal services.⁴ This observation leads to expressed concern that some popular contemporary practices do little to convey the significance of the Christian rite either for the individual baptized or for the baptized community.⁵

Ross concludes by calling on evangelicals to give more attention to recovering the rich biblical and theological meanings of baptism—both corporately and individually—and on reflecting these meanings in baptismal practices.

Following is a suggested baptismal service which attempts to involve the one baptized and the baptized community in the fuller meanings of the biblical rite of Christian baptism.

³ Ibid., 446.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. Ross observes that the ritual of applause neither signifies the corporate dimension of baptism nor preserves the sense of the candidate being baptized into the church’s communal narrative.

Baptismal Service

The New Testament contains portions of early Christian instruction, confessional or hymnic phrases, and texts reflecting early Christian baptismal practices. The following baptismal service incorporates baptismal texts from Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5. It was presented at the AGST Sermon Seminary, May 2007.

Confession: Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and resurrected Lord?

Hymn(s): *Come, Holy Spirit, Guest Divine*

In the baptistry

Reader: Put to death what is earthly in you.

Congregation: Put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, foul talk, and untruthfulness.

Reader: The world walks in these, but you must now put them all away.

Baptism occurs: “Upon your confession...” (includes “Son of God,” “Christ” and “Lord”). *Baptismal statement incorporates “forgiveness of sins” and “reception of the Holy Spirit.”*
Newly baptized remains in the baptistry

Reader: Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead.

Congregation: And Christ will give you light.

Reader: Put on then, as God’s chosen one(s),

Congregation: compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience. As the Lord forgives you, you must also forgive others.

Reader: Above all, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Congregation: And let the peace of Christ rule in your heart.

Prayer: *Prayer for the newly baptized and for the baptized community, the church*

Hymn: *We Bless the Name of Christ the Lord*

Preparing For The Lord's Supper ad

Obiter Dicta

Baalism Revisited

Do we realize how almost exactly the Baal culture of Canaan is reproduced in American church culture? Baal religion is about what makes you feel good. Baal worship is a total immersion in what I can get out of it. And of course, it was incredibly successful. The Baal priests could gather crowds that outnumbered followers of Yahweh 20 to 1. There was sex, there was excitement, there was music, there was ecstasy, there was dance. . . . And what did the Hebrews offer in response? The word

Eugene Peterson, "Spirituality for all the wrong reasons: Eugene Peterson talks about lies and illusions that destroy the church." *Christianity Today* 49:3 (Mar 2005), 42-48.

Discipleship/Churchmanship

In response to Peter's sermon at Pentecost, hearers were "cut to the quick," and asked how they could be saved. Calling them to personal faith in Christ, the apostle nevertheless directed them not to their own individualistic piety but to baptism and communion with the church. . . .

To become a Christian was to begin one's life-long journey in the company of pilgrims under the care of the church. Discipleship was defined by churchmanship. Personal faith in Christ was never set over against active membership in the visible body of Christ.

Michael Horton, "All Crossed Up," *Touchstone* 21:2 (Mar 2008), 12.

Getting Out of the Way

What we wear, where we stand, how we move...all matter, not because we are ritualists but because this is God's drama and we can easily get in the way. When those leading worship stand to one side, this makes the point dramatically; when worship-leaders, including musicians, assemble directly in front of a congregation like a rock group at a concert, this can make exactly the wrong point To insist on a free-flowing succession of worship songs at the whim of one leader is not to strike a blow against ritualism, but

to put that leader precisely in the place where the Reformers saw the mediaeval priest, coming between the worshipers and God. Good liturgy preserves us from personality cults whether Catholic or Protestant.

Wright, N.T. "Freedom and Framework, Spirit and Truth: Recovering Biblical Worship." *NTWrightpage.com*. Available from http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Biblical_Worship.htm.

Gospel as Product

Repentance, dying to self, submission—these are not very attractive hooks to draw people into the faith. I think the minute you put the issue that way you're in trouble. Because then we join the consumer world, and everything then becomes product designed to give you something . . . if we cast the evangel in terms of benefits, we're setting people up for disappointment. We're telling them lies.

Eugene Peterson, "Spirituality for all the wrong reasons: Eugene Peterson talks about lies and illusions that destroy the church." *Christianity Today* 49:3 (Mar 2005), 42-48.

Impatience

We get impatient and start taking shortcuts and use any means available. We talk about benefits. We manipulate people. We bully them. We use language that is just incredibly impersonal....

The impatience to leave the methods of Jesus in order to get the work of Jesus done is destroying spirituality, because we're using a non-biblical, not-Jesus way to do what Jesus did. That's why spirituality is in such a mess as it is today.

Eugene Peterson, "Spirituality for all the wrong reasons: Eugene Peterson talks about lies and illusions that destroy the church." *Christianity Today* 49:3 (Mar 2005), 42-48.

Kindness

If kindness alone were enough, there would have been no cross. Jesus would have formed a sensitivity group and urged us to share our feelings, or a support group where we could affirm each other. Knowing full well the limits of humanity, the seriousness of our sin, and the depths of evil, he formed a church and charted a different way.

William Willimon, "The Limits of Kindness," *Christian Century*, 99:13 (Apr 1999), 447-449.

Liturgy

It is precisely the point of liturgy to take people out of their worlds and usher them into a strange, new world – to show them that, despite appearances, the last thing in the world they need is more of the world out of which they've come. The world the liturgy reveals does not seem relevant at first glance, but it turns out that the world it reveals is more real than the one we inhabit day by day.

The liturgy does not target any age or cultural subgroup. It does not even target this century. (It does not imagine, as we moderns and postmoderns are tempted to do, that this is the best of all possible ages, the most significant era of history.) Instead, the liturgy draws us into worship that transcends our time and place. Its earliest forms took shape in ancient Israel, and its subsequent development occurred in a variety of cultures and subcultures – Greco-Roman, North African, German, Frankish, Anglo-Saxon, and so on . . . As such, it has not been shaped to meet a particular group's needs. It seeks only to enable people – people in general – to see God.

Mark Galli, "A Deeper Relevance: Why Many Evangelicals Are Attracted to that Strange Thing Called Liturgy," *Christianity Today*, 52:5 (May 2008), 38-41.

Missing the Point

We meet with the high and holy one, the God of fire, in order that we may ourselves be transformed and be agents for the healing of his world...To enjoy worship for its own sake, or simply out of a cultural appreciation of the

“performance” would be like Moses coming upon a burning bush and deciding to cook his lunch on it.

N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 73-4.

Present Moral Crisis

Traditionally, through centuries and millennia, the limits upon pleasure and power had been set by the “higher law,” a law beyond all human manipulation and control. And this “higher law” was understood to emanate from that which was ultimate in the universe, God for the Hebrews, Reason for the Geeks. The entire spiritual structure of the Western world was built upon these convictions. With these convictions so rapidly losing their appeal to the modern mind, nothing has been left but the indulgence of pleasure, the anarchy of power, and the chaos of “self-created values.” The moral crisis of our time is, at bottom, a metaphysical and religious crisis.

Will Herberg, “What Is the Moral Crisis of Our Time?” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Vol. 4 (Spring 1968), 63-69.

Shaping Life

For all previous cultures, the cardinal problem of human life was to conform the human self somehow to objective reality (a reality believed to be greater than Man, and to include God, truths, or values); and to do so through such things as wisdom, virtue, or religion.

For our culture, the cardinal problem of human life is to conform objective reality to the wishes of Man... The humanization of nature rather than the divinization of Man is our new *summum bonum*.

Peter Kreeft, *Love Is Stronger than Death* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1979), 27.

Spiritual Addiction

When churches abandon the ordinary ministry for the extraordinary “excitements sufficient to induce conversion” (Finney’s phrase), the innovations become traditions and the insatiable craving for ever-new experiences of

spontaneous expressivism, like a drug addiction, leads eventually to the spiritual equivalent of a heart attack. Tragically, the landscape of American religion is littered with successive waves of “revival” (often patterned on American trends in salesmanship) followed inevitably by periods of fatigue and skepticism...

Michael Horton, “All Crossed Up,” *Touchstone* 21:2 (Mar 2008), 12.

Triumph of Technology

... if relativism began the process, it was the triumph of technology that carried it to its disastrous completion. We are not yet in a position to grasp fully what the accelerated and unfettered expansion of technology has done to human life in the past three hundred years. But we can at least begin to assess its major impact upon the consciousness of the West, and that is the exaltation of power over truth as the object of man’s intellectual and moral quest.

Will Herberg, “What Is the Moral Crisis of Our Time?” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Vol. 4, (Spr 1968), 63-69.

Vitality

A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.

G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* in vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. David Dooley (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 263-64.

Vocabulary Matters

It’s very dangerous to use the language of the culture to interpret the gospel. Our vocabulary has to be chastened and tested by revelation, by the Scrip-

tures. We've got a pretty good vocabulary and syntax, and we'd better start paying attention to it because the way we grab words here and there to appeal to unbelievers is not very good.

Eugene Peterson, "Spirituality for all the wrong reasons: Eugene Peterson talks about lies and illusions that destroy the church." *Christianity Today* 49:3 (Mar 2005), 42-48.

Reynolds, Jim. *The Lepers Among Us: Homosexuality and the Life of the Church*. Xulon Press, 2007. Reviewed by M.Todd Hall

How the church should relate to homosexuals is a key issue in North American churches. Jim Reynolds enters the discussion with his new book, *The Lepers Among Us: Homosexuality and the Life of the Church*.[□] Reynolds argues that para-church ministries are not enough to redeem the broken lives of those struggling with homosexuality. Rather, true healing must be mediated through the church itself. *The Lepers Among Us* is a call to all churches to stop treating believers who struggle with same-sex sin as lepers and to live out the gospel in mediating grace and healing to these rejected believers.

Reynolds' book is divided into three sections. The first six chapters deal with the church's relationship to healing in the lives of those who struggle with same-sex sin. Reynolds argues that churches must be places of transformation for homosexual strugglers. They must stop demanding silence and offer a place of transformative discipleship for *all* believers. "When the church condemns sin yet offers no real hope then the only option is to live in hopelessness or pursue our human 'wants' to the detriment of our spiritual beliefs and convictions." (14)

Reynolds calls the church to embody the teaching of the New Testament. He argues that life in the community of Christ is integral to understanding and rightly interpreting the New Testament. Reynolds calls on the church to bring those struggling with same-sex sins into the life of the church and to understand them as "we" rather than "they or them" (33). In order to include homosexuals in the redemptive community of the church, the church must recognize its own sexual sins as equally destructive and damnable as homosexuality. The church must repent, be healed and thus become healing.

[□] Dr. Jim Reynolds has served as preaching pastor of the Lake Highlands Church in Dallas. He is a longtime friend of AGST.

The second part of Reynolds' work offers an extended discussion of the "sexual culture" of the United States since the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s. Reynolds offers a brief but useful account of the hyper-sexualization of America, with all of the major events leading to the present confusion. Technology that allowed for worry-free sex led to accountability-free sex, and this has had dire consequences. "In 1968 the new sex technology seemed to offer us the Promised Land. In 2006 it looks more like the aftermath of a nuclear war zone" (77-8). Reynolds also mentions *Roe v. Wade*, the Nature or Nurture debates, and the Civil Unions and Same-Sex Marriage debates. All of these factors contribute to a "new-paganism," which deifies experience, crowns impulses, and makes few demands on the individual.

In the third chapter of section two Reynolds elaborates on the most controversial theme of his book. Reynolds relies on recent research as well as that of psychiatrist Charles Socarides to make the point that homosexuality is in fact a disorder, "violative of the psyche-sexual order inherent within our humanity and therefore treatable." (114) Reynolds argues that multiple factors serve as causes for one's being homosexual. He rightly leaves the genetic question unanswered and points out the impossible simplicity of the "gay gene" idea, while leaving open the possibility of yet unproven genetic factors behind homosexuality.

In this discussion, though he does interact with Socarides, Reynolds could have benefited from providing more information from him. Socarides argues convincingly that environmental/developmental factors are keys to understanding the origins of homosexuality.¹ His work is a vital counter-

¹ Socarides, relying on studies such as a 1989-1990 study published in 1992 by *The Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect*, makes the conclusion that Freud was correct when he asserted that "homosexuality is caused by two factors: 1) an early disturbance in sexual identity formation, and 2) some form of childhood sexual seduction." Charles W. Socarides, *Homosexuality: A Freedom Too Far*, 88. The quote-

point to current arguments that suggest an innate same-sex “orientation” among homosexuals.

In the final two chapters of this section, Reynolds suggests that those who argue the “normalcy” of homosexuality largely ignore the ambivalence of millions of homosexuals toward their same-sex attraction. “In other words, the ‘orientation’ is *not nearly* as fixed and powerful in most same-sex strugglers as [some] claim.” (129) The afterword of the book has the testimony of three young men who have, through the church’s ministry, abandoned the homosexual lifestyle. These serve as powerful validations of Reynolds’ argument.

The final section of Reynolds’ book addresses biblical views of homosexuality. Reynolds’ exegesis, while solid, is not ground-breaking, and is unlikely to change either side in the debate.

Reynolds’ next chapter argues that the dominant cultural picture of the gospel is inadequate, as it can usually be summed up by the phrase “Christ taught us to love, so if two people love each other it must be OK.” Reynolds argues that to summarize the gospel as “love one another” falls short of what the gospel really is. Here, however, Reynolds could have done more of a service by reclaiming the idea of “love.” The moral imperative of the gospel can be summed up by the phrase “love one another” (John 13:34; 15:12, 17, etc.). It is precisely the nature and character of *this* love that Reynolds hopes to actualize in the church: a sacrificial, other-oriented love.

Reynolds voices a passionate plea for the church to be the church. It is clearly the work of one who is not only deeply involved in the discussion, but also has engaged in ministry in this area for many years. He has witnessed

heading for chapter 4, “Origins,” is “Given a good father-son relationship, no boy develops a homosexual pattern.”

the mistreatment of a sincere group of people at the hands of *both* sides of the debate.

Ultimately, however, there remain many practical matters for churches to consider if they desire to reach out to homosexual strugglers which even the testimonies in the afterword do not address. Prudence requires a different approach to ministry for this group of sinners than for others. A gathering of alcoholics to discuss their alcoholism and support one another in their struggle with alcoholism is one thing; a gathering of those struggling with same-sex sin is another altogether. How can the church support these sinners while at the same time respecting the necessary practical boundaries? This remains largely unaddressed.

Reynolds' book could prove more helpful in a less obvious area than the one for which it is written. Given the current state of society – its individualistic and experientially driven views of life – Reynolds calls the church to become the transformative *community* of Christ for *all* sinners. This is an area in which all churches should hear Reynolds clearly. His clarion call applies to all sinners: “The most crucial task facing us is the formation of communities seeking to live under the *word*.” (20) The call for the church to move beyond being a “user-focused” entity to a transformative community is a timely word of exhortation for all Christians and all sinners.

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