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Stromata

“...a vehicle for scholarly expression,”

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by

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Contents

Articles

**The Use of Reason in Francis Turretin’s Arguments
for God’s Existence**

David Sytsma 1

Luther and Anti-Judaism

Craig Hoekema 27

**A Prayer From the Depths: A Typological Examination
Of Jonah 1:17 – 2:10**

Laurie Zuverink 48

An Emerging Vision for the Church in the 21st Century

Brian McLaughlin 58

A Case of Mistaken Identity:

Understanding the Context of John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*

Leon Johnston 86

The Religion of “O” – A Well-Formed Religion?

Brenda Janssen 99

Sermons

The Power of Darkness: Sermon for Passion Sunday

William Jensen 120

Romans 7: “Where’s Your Story At?”

Brad Knetsch 126

The Imperative of Forgiveness: Matthew 18:23-35

Kelvin Tarver 131

The Use of Reason in Francis Turretin's Arguments for God's Existence

David Sytsma

Reason is the instrument which the believer uses, but it is not the foundation and principle upon which faith rests.

- Francis Turretin

Present State of the Question

While older twentieth century scholarship characterized post-Reformation Reformed scholastic theology as rationalist such that “reason assumes at least equal standing with faith in theology, thus jettisoning some of the authority of revelation,”¹ more recent research has challenged this assumption.² Accordingly, since scholasticism is best understood as a method of inquiry in the form of a *quaestio disputata*,³ it should not be identified or confused with

¹ Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 32; cf. Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 147-261. On the historical development of this premise, see Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker, “Introduction,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism*, ed. Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 14-24.

² Notably, Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520-1725* [hereafter *PRRD*] (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), I:2.6; idem, “*Vera Philosophia cum sacra Theologia nusquam pugnat*: Keckermann on Philosophy, Theology, and the Problem of Double Truth,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15/3 (1984): 341-365; Sebastian Rehnman, “Alleged Rationalism: Francis Turretin on Reason,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 37/2 (2002): 255-269; Martin I. Klauber, “The Use of Philosophy in the Theology of Johannes Maccovius (1578-1644),” *Calvin Theological Journal* 30/2 (1995): 376-391.

³ Armand Maurer, *Medieval Philosophy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1962), 90-92; Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classical, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 111-112; J. A. Weisheipl, “Scholastic Method,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2003), XII, 747-749; David

rationalism. A fundamental flaw of this older scholarship, in the estimation of Richard Muller, is that it did not “[distinguish] adequately between the rationalizing tendency that is an integral part of the creation of theological system and the rationalist philosophy of the seventeenth century that identified human reason as the prior and primary norm of all constructive intellectual endeavor.”⁴ The former was characteristic of the period of Reformed orthodoxy (ca. 1565-1725) while the latter was characteristic of various seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers including René Descartes (1596-1650) and Christian Wolff (1679-1754),⁵ seventeenth century Socinianism,⁶ and the so-called Enlightened orthodoxy of the eighteenth century including Francis Turretin’s only son, Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671-1737), and Jacob Vernet (1678-1789).⁷

Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (London: Longmans, 1962), 87, 90; William T. Costello, *The Scholastic Curriculum at Early Seventeenth-Century Cambridge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 11; Muller, *PRRD*, I, 35; idem, *Scholasticism and Orthodoxy in the Reformed Tradition: An Attempt at Definition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1995), 3-4.

⁴ Muller, *PRRD*, I:2.6 (138); cf. van Asselt and Dekker, “Introduction,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism*, 21.

⁵ Muller, *PRRD*, I:1.3C, 2.6C (83, 144).

⁶ Bernhard Pünjer, *History of the Christian Philosophy of Religion from the Reformation to Kant*, trans. W. Hastie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1887), 199-204; Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism* (Boston: Beacon, 1945), I, 571-572; cf. Muller, *PRRD*, I, 394.

⁷ Martin I Klauber, *Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671-1737) and Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Selingsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1994); idem, “Reformed Orthodoxy in Transition: Bénédict Pictet (1655-1724) and Enlightened Orthodoxy in Post-Reformation Geneva,” in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 93-113; idem, “The Eclipse of Reformed Scholasticism in Eighteenth-Century Geneva: Natural Theology from Jean-Alphonse Turretin to Jacob Vernet,” in *The Identity of Geneva: The Christian Commonwealth, 1564-1864*, ed. John B. Roney and Martin I. Klauber (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 129-142; idem, “Theological Transition in Geneva from Jean-Alphonse Turretin to Jacob Vernet,” in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. Carl Trueman and R. S. Clark (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 256-270; idem, “Between Protestant Orthodoxy and Rationalism: Fundamental Articles in the Early Career of Jean LeClerc,” *Journal of the History*

Among theological works of the period of Reformed orthodoxy, Francis Turretin's (1623-1687) *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (1679-1685)⁸ presents what is perhaps the most detailed discussion of the faculty of reason for use in theology.⁹ This is undoubtedly due both to Turretin's training in philosophy at the Academy of Geneva¹⁰ and to the polemical nature of the work itself. The important place of Francis Turretin in seventeenth century polemical theology has been succinctly noted by Richard Muller:

In Protestant circles, particularly among the Reformed, the name of Francis Turretin (1623-1687) is virtually synonymous with the term 'Protestant scholasticism.' Turretin's system, the *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (1679-1685), stands at the apex of the development of scholastic theology in the post-Reformation era, prior to the decline of Protestant system under the impact of rationalism, pietism, and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth

of *Ideas* 54/4 (1993): 611-636; Martin I. Klauber and Glenn S. Sunshine, "Jean-Alphonse Turretini in Biblical Accommodation: Calvinist or Socinian?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 25/1 (1990): 7-27; Graham Gargett, *Jacob Vernet, Geneva, and the philosophes* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1995).

⁸ The English translation here used is *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1997). Citations will be noted in the order of topic, question, paragraph.

⁹ Though many other examples exist: Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Philosophical Works: On the Relation of Philosophy to Theology*, vol. 4, *The Peter Martyr Library*, ed. and trans. Joseph C. McLelland (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 1996), 6-29; Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharius Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Willard (Columbus, OH, 1852; repr. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1985), 3-6; Philip du Plessis Mornay, *A Woorke concerning the trewnesse of the Christian Religion*, trans. Philip Sidney and Arthur Golding (London, 1617), "The Preface to the Reader"; John Prideaux, *De usu logices in Theologicis in Viginti-duae lectiones de totidem religionis capitibus* (Oxford, 1648); Richard Baxter, *More reasons for the Christian religion and no reason against it* (London, 1672); John Owen, *The Reason of Faith. Or an Answer unto that Enquiry, Wherefore we believe the Scripture to be the Word of God* (London, 1677), 131-145; Johannes Braunius, *Doctrina foederum, sive systema theologiae didacticae & elencticae*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam, 1702), I.i.15-22; Herman Witsius, *An Essay on the Use and Abuse of Reason in Matters of Religion*, trans. John Carter (Norwich, 1795). Cf. Rehman, "Alleged Rationalism," 259.

¹⁰ James T. Dennison, Jr., "The Life and Career of Francis Turretin," in *Institutes*, vol. 3, 642, 645.

century.¹¹

Thus, as one of the major representatives of Reformed orthodoxy, Turretin provides an important model for the perennial question of the relationship between faith and reason. Yet, despite his reputation, only a handful of studies have been made on theological topics addressed by Turretin,¹² including the relation between faith and reason.¹³

It is the contention of this essay that Francis Turretin held that reason served an instrumental role in both elucidating and defending Christian doctrine. Furthermore, Turretin argued that indemonstrable first principles of natural logic, natural religion, and natural law arise spontaneously in the mind such that a carefully circumscribed use of reason, both presupposed by and harmonizing with supernatural revelation, could supply premises for polemical theology. Thus, various arguments or proofs for God's existence could be advanced

¹¹ Richard A. Muller, "Scholasticism Protestant and Catholic: Francis Turretin on the Object and Principles of Theology," *Church History* 55/2 (1986): 195.

¹² Martin I. Klauber, "Francis Turretin on Biblical Accommodation: Loyal Calvinist or Reformed Scholastic?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 55/1 (1993): 73-86; E. P. Meijering, *Reformierte Scholastik und patristische Theologie: die Bedeutung des Vaterbeweises in der Institutio theologiae elencticae F. Turretins: unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Gotteslehre und Christologie* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1991); idem, "The Fathers and Calvinist Orthodoxy: Systematic Theology (A. Polanus, J. Wolleb, and F. Turretini)," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, II, ed. Irena Backus (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 867-887; Stephen Spencer, "Reformed Scholasticism in Medieval Perspective: Thomas Aquinas and François Turretini on the Incarnation" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1988); idem, "Francis Turretin's Concept of the Covenant of Nature," in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), 71-91; Timothy Phillips, "Francis Turretin's Idea of Theology and Its Bearing Upon His Doctrine of Scripture" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1986); Muller, "Scholasticism Protestant and Catholic."

¹³ Stephen Grabill, "Theological Foundation for a Reformed Doctrine of Natural Law" (Ph.D. diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2004), 262-301; idem, "Natural Law and the Noetic Effects of Sin: The Faculty of Reason in Francis Turretin's Theological Anthropology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 67 (2005): 261-79; Sebastian Rehnman, "Alleged Rationalism"; idem, "Theistic Metaphysics and Biblical Exegesis: Francis Turretin on the Concept of God," *Religious Studies* 38/2 (2002): 167-186.

against assertions of atheism. This essay, therefore, will first set forth Francis Turretin's model for the nature and use of the faculty of reason. Then the use of reason for apologetics will be illustrated through its application to arguments for God's existence in refutation of atheists.

The Nature of Reason

With respect to the place of reason in anthropology, Francis Turretin acknowledges three types of objects that can be known (viz., spiritual, sensible, intelligible) corresponding to three faculties in a human subject (viz., faith, senses, reason).

As to the state of the question, it must be noted that as there are three kinds of things which may be known (viz., those known by faith [*pistai*], by the senses [*aisthetai*] and by the intellect [*noetai*]), so there are three faculties answering to them (viz., the senses, reason and faith); and that the senses perceive sensible things, reason intelligible things, and faith spiritual and supernatural things...but each faculty is occupied with its own objects, and as they ought not to be confounded, so they ought not to be mutually opposed.¹⁴

The place of reason, therefore, is held to be distinct from both faith and the senses. Subjectively considered, human reason is "that faculty of the rational soul by which man understands and judges between intelligible things presented to him (natural and supernatural, divine and human)."¹⁵ The rational faculty, assumes Turretin, both judges and wills: "it is called 'intellect' when it is occupied in the knowledge and judgment of things, but 'will' when it is carried to the love or hatred of the same."¹⁶ Here we will be considering the rational faculty inasmuch as it knows and judges.

Apart from reason considered as the faculty in a subject, it is also considered objectively for the light of truth naturally known. In

¹⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.xi.3.

¹⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.1. Cf. Witsius, *An Essay on the Use and Abuse of Reason*, 4.

¹⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, X.i.5. Cf. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, 2 vols., trans. William Crookshank, D.D. (London, 1822; repr. Kingsburg, CA: den Dulk Christian Foudnation, 1990), III.vii.4-5, who attributes this view to Duns Scotus.

this sense, reason is “the natural light both externally presented and internally impressed upon the mind by which reason is disposed to the forming of certain conceptions and the eliciting of conclusions concerning God and divine things.”¹⁷ This “natural light” whereby the human being forms conceptions is a spontaneous act. It is analogous to “the act of life in one living or of sense in one perceiving as soon as he breathes.”¹⁸ Turretin’s precise description is worth citing at length:

For it is certain that no actual knowledge is born with us and that, in this respect, man is like a smooth tablet (*tabulae rasae*). Rather the question is whether such [natural theology] can be granted at least with regard to principle and potency; or whether such a natural faculty implanted in man may be granted as will put forth its strength of its own accord, and spontaneously in all adults endowed with reason, which embraces not only the capability of understanding, but also the natural first principles of knowledge from which conclusions both theoretical and practical are deduced (which we maintain).¹⁹

While Copleston assumes the incompatibility of the Stoic doctrine of innate principles with the Aristotelian doctrine of the mind as initially a *tabula rasa*,²⁰ Turretin clearly combines the two perspectives. The mind intuitively and spontaneously knows innate first principles while it is a *tabula rasa* with respect to discursive, acquired knowledge.²¹ This view of spontaneously arising “seeds” of knowledge seems to have originated with Stoicism and been appropriated by important theologians in the Western church such as Augustine (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).²² For

¹⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.1. Cf. Witsius, *An Essay on the Use and Abuse of Reason*, 4.

¹⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.iii.2.

¹⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.iii.2.

²⁰ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, III, *Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 227.

²¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.iii.11. Cf. Jeffrey Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza 1519-1605* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 104.

²² Maryanne Horowitz, *Seeds of Virtue and Knowledge* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

example, according to the Stoic Aetius, “But of thoughts, some arise naturally...without technical skill, while others come by our teaching and conscious effort. These latter are called thoughts only (ἐννοιαί) but the others are also termed *preconceptions*.”²³ As will be discussed more fully below, Turretin assumes that such conceptions pertaining to reason (objectively considered) spontaneously arise in the three areas of logic, natural theology, and natural law. Here we merely note a basic difference of opinion between the Reformed orthodox as represented by Turretin and seventeenth century Remonstrants and Socinians who denied any such spontaneously arising knowledge of God.²⁴

Turretin’s Christian faith especially impinges upon his definition when the fall is taken into consideration.²⁵ He writes, “Again, reason can be viewed in two aspects: either as sound and whole before the fall or as corrupt and blind after it.”²⁶ In the “concrete” (i.e. actual fallen individuals), reason is corrupt and therefore possibly opposed to theology. In the “abstract,” however, reason is sound and, while ignorant of mysteries, is not inherently opposed to theology.²⁷ This distinction protects revealed articles of faith from the over-reaching of reason by pointing to the necessity, on the one hand, of a renewed or enlightened reason by the Holy Spirit,²⁸ and on the other hand, the placement of strict boundaries upon it lest

²³ Jason Saunders, *Greek and Roman Philosophy after Aristotle: Readings in the History of Philosophy* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 68.

²⁴ On the Socinians, see Turretin, *Institutes*, I.iii.1. On the Remonstrants, see John E. Platt, “The Denial of the Innate Idea of God in Dutch Remonstrant Theology from Episcopius to van Limborch,” in *Protestant Scholasticism*, 213-226. For an example of this denial of implanted notions, see John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I.ii-iv, esp. I.iv.8-11.

²⁵ For contemporary approaches to the problem of the noetic effects of sin, see Stephen K. Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin: A Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects Our Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 213-240, 280-289.

²⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.1.

²⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.ix.10. Cf. Witsius, *An Essay on the Use and Abuse of Reason*, 7-8.

²⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.x.3, 5-7, 12; I.xii.17.

it encroach upon the mysteries of the faith not in its sphere. However, it is worth noting that in the estimation of Sebastian Rehnman, Turretin's view is "that the effects of the fall upon reason was ethical rather than ontic in character. Constitutionally or structurally man remains what he was before the fall, but there is a definite directional, ethical difference in opposition to God."²⁹

Reason as the Instrument of Faith

Turretin claims that in contrast to the Socinians who "err in excess" by giving reason "in matters of faith more than its due," and the "Anabaptists, Lutherans, and papists" who "err in defect" by underrating reason, the Reformed take a middle road by allowing reason an instrumental role "always and everywhere."³⁰ Turretin sets forth his approach in the following manner:

A ministerial and organic relation is quite different from a principal and despotic. Reason holds the former relation to theology, not the latter. It is the Hagar (the bondmaid which should be in subjection to Scripture); not the Sarah (the mistress which presides over Scripture). It ought to compare the things proposed to be believed with the sacred Scriptures, the inflexible rule of truth.³¹

Therefore, "Reason is the instrument which the believer uses, but it is not the foundation and principle upon which faith rests."³²

As to its instrumental use, Scripture opposes a principle role for reason.³³ The unregenerate reason is blind to the law (Eph. 4:17-18; Rom. 1:27-28; 8:7) and gospel (Eph. 5:8; 1 Cor. 2:14) and must be taken captive (2 Cor. 10:3-5). We are directed by the Holy Spirit only to the word (Dt. 4:1; Is. 8:20; Jn. 5:39; 2 Tim. 3:15; 2 Pet.

²⁹ Rehnman, "Alleged Rationalism," 264-265.

³⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.2-4; also I.xiii.1. Cf. Witsius, *An Essay on the Use and Abuse of Reason*, 3.

³¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.6. On philosophy as the bondmaid (Hagar) of theology (Sarah), see Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, I.v, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Roberts and Donaldson, II (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950-51), 306.

³² Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.7; cf. I.ix.17.

³³ Cf. Witsius, *An Essay on the Use and Abuse of Reason*, 8; Muller, *PRRD*, I, 394.

1:19). Grace and supernatural revelation are not derivable from reason (1 Cor. 1:19-20; Mt. 11:25). Corrupt reason is opposed to faith (Rom. 8:7; 1 Cor. 2:14; Mt. 16:17). Thus, echoing Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum*, Turretin writes, "Faith is not referred ultimately to reason, so that I ought to believe because I so understand and comprehend; but to the word because God so speaks in the Scriptures."³⁴

Yet, though Scripture denies reason a despotic relation to faith, Turretin shows that reason is useful for illustration, comparison, inference, and argumentation.³⁵ First, the apostle appeals to the judgment of the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:15). Second, Christ, the apostles, and prophets used reason to teach the faith and "the force of reasoning does not depend upon the infallibility of the person using it, but upon the evidence of the thing." Third, 1 John 4:1 implies the use of reason. Finally, if faith assumes the use of the senses, it should also assume the use of reason which is superior to the senses. Thus, even though Paul demands thoughts to be taken captive (2 Cor. 10:5), "He does not therefore mean to take away reason entirely because grace does not destroy, but perfects nature."³⁶ Sebastian Rehnman refers to the relationship between faith and reason in Turretin's *Institutes* as "modified Thomism."³⁷

There are two main instrumental, positive uses for reason: judging contradictions and eliciting conclusions. These uses are derived from the teaching of Scripture. As to the judging of contradictions, Turretin provides the following arguments:

The reasons are: (1) the Scriptures frequently enjoin this judgment (Mt. 7:15; 16:6; Col. 2:8; 1 Thess. 5:21; Heb. 5:14); (2) the examples of the saints confirm it, as the Bereans (Acts 17:11) and the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:15); (3) the design of Scripture teaches it (which is the perfection of the man of God in the knowledge of the truth and the conviction of gainsayers, which cannot be accomplished without it); (4) the use of reason is a

³⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.5.

³⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, Lix.7; I.viii.3.

³⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, Lix.15; cf. I.x.7.

³⁷ Rehnman, "Alleged Rationalism," 264. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (1911; repr., Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), Ia, q. 1, art. 8.

strong proof because as the knowledge of the affirmation and negation of propositions and the doctrine of contradiction belong to it, so also must such a judgment.³⁸

This judgment of contradiction is “dangerous when the judgment is formed from corrupt principles” by blind reason, but is acceptable according to “enlightened reason giving its decisions from the word.”³⁹ Judgment also extends to contradictions “indirect and implied (deduced by necessary consequence)” (e.g. purgatory, ubiquity of Christ),⁴⁰ as well as those contrary to the first principles of nature and natural religion (e.g. transubstantiation, ubiquity, adoration of creatures),⁴¹ though not those above nature (e.g. God’s omnipotence).⁴²

The use of consequences (i.e. eliciting conclusions), Turretin notes, was already argued by Augustine.⁴³ From the argumentation of Paul in 1 Cor. 15:12-14, Augustine considered it necessary to distinguish between the truth of propositions and the truth of conclusions.⁴⁴ Turretin provides several arguments for eliciting conclusions.⁴⁵ First, the design of Scripture (for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction, comfort; 2 Tim. 3:16; Rom. 15:4) would not be possible otherwise. Second, human beings are “reasonable creatures” who are told to search the Scriptures (Jn. 5:39) and “penetrate to the very kernel and sense” of it. Third, God is wise and every wise being (whether God or man) desires conclusions to be drawn from his words. Fourth, heretics such as the Arians denied the use of consequences to preserve their errors. Moreover, Christ used consequences when proving the resurrection of the dead (Mt. 22:32) from Ex. 3:6, while the apostles used consequences to prove that Jesus was the Messiah from the Old Testament. These examples of Christ and the prophets have their force from that nature of the arguments themselves. For even though the Sadducees did not accept

³⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.x.4.

³⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.x.6.

⁴⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.x.9.

⁴¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.x.14; I.x.16.

⁴² Turretin, *Institutes*, I.x.15.

⁴³ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.11; I.xii.4.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.31-32.

⁴⁵ The following are found in Turretin, *Institutes*, I.xii.9.

Christ's authority, they were nonetheless silenced.

Thus, a discursive, dianoetic use of reason may affirm the “truth of conclusions” regardless of the truth of the propositions used.⁴⁶ This is the truth of consequence. Hence, when deducing conclusions from supernatural revelation, “Faith perceives the consequent, but reason the consequence.”⁴⁷ Such deduction of the consequences by right reason is analogous to faith through hearing—the argument is from faith even if it comes through hearing.⁴⁸

Objective Axioms: Natural Conceptions of Nature, God, and Morals

In judging contradictions and eliciting conclusions, Turretin distinguishes between two kinds of axioms (a.k.a. propositions, sentences): those known by nature and those known by supernatural revelation.⁴⁹ Obviously, Turretin believes that Scripture provides the source for the uniquely known sentences of faith which derive from infallible authority.⁵⁰ The question of natural axioms then remains. Turretin allows for a limited use of reason (objectively considered) for supplying natural first principles that are *presupposed* in the articles of faith.⁵¹ While the first principles of nature (natural axioms) are reliable as sources of truth, conclusions drawn from them are often not. He writes,

Thus here the first principles of nature (known of themselves) must be distinguished from the conclusions and conceptions of reason which are deduced from those principles. The former are true and sure; the latter obscure, often erroneous and fallible.⁵²

⁴⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.11.

⁴⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.12. Cf. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, s.v. “ratio consequentia” (257).

⁴⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.12.

⁴⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.ix.2.

⁵⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.11.

⁵¹ Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 1, art. 9; Ia, q. 2, art. 2; Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, III.v.15; Witsius, *An Essay on the Use and Abuse of Reason*, 10-11.

⁵² Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.21.

“Reason may be a small light,” notes Turretin, “but in things civil and natural, not in things supernatural.”⁵³

From this “small light” of nature, indemonstrable *principia* which do not require proof (since they are that by which other things are proved) may be gathered. “It is not always necessary that a thing should be proved by something else,” writes Turretin.

For there are some things which are self-evident according to the philosophers (as the highest category of things, and ultimate differences and first principles) which are not susceptible of demonstration, but are evident by their own light and are taken for granted as certain and indubitable... Aristotle says there are certain axioms which do not have an external reason for their truth “which must necessarily be and appear to be such per se” (*ho anankē einai di’ auto kai dokein anankē, Posterior Analytics* 1.10); i.e., they are not only credible (*autopiston*) of themselves, but cannot be seriously denied by anyone of a sound mind.⁵⁴

This indemonstrable character to *principia* regarding natural things, according to Turretin, is analogous to the testimony of the Spirit with respect to Scripture.⁵⁵ Turretin elaborates on these first principles and their relation to faith in the following manner:

Although the human understanding is very dark, yet there still remains in it some rays of natural light and certain first principles, the truth of which is unquestionable: such as, the whole is greater than its part, an effect supposes a cause, to be and not to be at the same time are incompatible (*asystatous*), etc. If these were not the case, there could be no science, nor art, nor certainty in the nature of things. (2) These first principles are true not only in nature, but also in grace and the mysteries of faith. Faith, so far from destroying, on the contrary borrows them from reason and

⁵³ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.22.

⁵⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, II.vi.18. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, III, 2 (996b26-997a14); V, 1 (1013a1-23), in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 719, 752; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 210-211; Muller, *PRRD*, I, 431; idem, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), s.v. “*principia per se nota*” (245); “*archē*” (44).

⁵⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, II.vi.11; II.vi.18.

uses them to strengthen its own doctrines. (3) Although reason and faith are of different classes (the one natural, the other supernatural), they are not however opposed, but hold a certain relation and are subordinate to each other. Reason is perfected by faith and faith presupposes reason, upon which to found the mysteries of grace.⁵⁶

Just as grace presupposes nature, so also faith presupposes reason. Turretin assumes God has implanted into human reason spontaneously arising first principles concerning nature, God, and morals.⁵⁷ This is also mirrored in the confessional standards of the Reformed churches. The *Canons of Dort* (III/IV, Article 4) refers to precisely these three areas.

There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby *he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil*, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.⁵⁸

In what, then, do these natural axioms concerning nature, God, and morals consist? With respect to nature, Turretin provides examples of what appears to be an incomplete list of presupposed first principles. They include: “the whole is greater than the part”; “an effect presupposes a cause”; the principle of non-contradiction (“to be and not to be at the same time are incompatible”); a natural body is local, and has essential properties such as quantity and extension; accidents cannot exist without a subject; species exist in a genus; the testimony of the senses provide reliable knowledge of a subject when assuming certain conditions.⁵⁹ Principles such as these were a commonplace of Protestant logic textbooks and were elaborated at

⁵⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.ix.5; cf. I.ix.15; I.x.13-14, I.x.16; I.xiii.3.

⁵⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.ix.2; I.viii.1; XI.i.7.

⁵⁸ *The Creeds of Christendom*, III, 6th ed., ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 565, 588: “Residuum quidem est post lapsum in homine lumen aliquod naturæ, cujus beneficio *ille notitias quasdam de Deo, de rebus naturalibus, de discrimine honestorum et turpium retinet*, et aliquod virtutis ac disciplinæ externæ studium ostendit.” (emphasis mine)

⁵⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.ix.5; I.viii.14, 24; I.xi.7; I.xii.16, 19; III.xxi.11, 14, 17; XIX.xxvii.2, 14; XIX.xxviii.3.

greater length therein.⁶⁰ Underlying such natural principles available to human reason was the assumption, common to the philosophy of the Reformed orthodox, of “a correlation between the real order and the logical order.”⁶¹ Thus, the most principle notions regarding natural things, spontaneously arising in the mind during the ordinary rational development of a human being, were assumed to reflect the real order of things in nature.⁶²

With respect to natural knowledge of God, Turretin distinguishes between implanted (*notitia Dei insita*) and acquired (*notitia Dei acquisita*) natural theology.⁶³ While the Socinians denied any implanted knowledge of God, “The orthodox, on the contrary, uniformly teach that there is a natural theology, partly innate (derived from the book of conscience by means of common notions [*koinas ennoias*]) and partly acquired (drawn from the book of creatures discursively).”⁶⁴ That innate and acquired natural knowledge of God exists in the human reason, contends Turretin, is proved by Ps. 19:1; Acts 14:15-17; 17:23; Rom. 1:19-20.⁶⁵ Paul refers to innate knowledge in Rom. 1:19a (“that which may be known of God is manifest in them”) and to acquired knowledge in 1:19b (“for God has showed it to them”).⁶⁶

According to Turretin, both God’s existence and attributes such as justice, wisdom, and goodness are presupposed truths of

⁶⁰ For example, Franco Burgersdijk, *Institutionum logicarum, libri duo* (Cambridge, 1637); Philip du Plessis Mornay, *The Elements of Logick*, trans. Nathanael De-Lawne (London, 1624); Thomas Wilson, *The Rule of Reason, conteinyng the Art of Logike* (London, 1580).

⁶¹ Muller, *PRRD*, I, 379.

⁶² For an extended contemporary Reformed defense of natural certainty as the necessary foundation for *scientia*, over against various forms of rationalist and empiricist reductionism, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, *Prolegomena*, 207-233.

⁶³ Cf. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, s.v. “*notitia Dei insita*” (204); “*notitia Dei acquisita*” (204).

⁶⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.iii.4; cf. I.ii.7. For historical support to Turretin’s claim, see John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: The Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575-1650* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982); Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza 1519-1605*, 107.

⁶⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.iii.6. Cf. Stephen Grabill, “Theological Foundation,” 271-274.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

revealed theology and “are common to natural theology and sound reason.”⁶⁷ Along with John of Damascus (b. 676) and others before him, Turretin affirms that the existence of God is an implanted common notion: “there is implanted in each one from his birth a sense of deity which does not allow itself to be concealed and which spontaneously exerts itself in all adults of sound mind.”⁶⁸ The knowledge of God’s attributes, on the other hand, is acquired by means of creatures.⁶⁹ Following a Thomist approach common to post-Reformation orthodoxy, Turretin argues that such acquired knowledge is imperfect and derived by way of causality, eminence, and negation in an analogical (as opposed to univocal) manner.⁷⁰

The acquired knowledge of God is usually obtained in the threefold way of causality, eminence and negation. By way of causality, when from the effects we infer the cause and from second causes we ascend to the first: “He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eye, shall he not see?” (Ps. 94:9). By way of eminence, we eminently ascribe (*kat’ exochēn*) to God whatever of perfection there is in creatures. By way of negation, we remove from him whatever is imperfect in creatures, as when he is said to be invisible, immortal, immutable. By way

⁶⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.1; cf. I.iii.10.

⁶⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.8; cf. III.i.4; III.i.17; III.ii.5. Cf. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, I.i, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd ser., vol. IX (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890-1900); Bonaventure, *Works of St. Bonaventure: Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, ed. George Marcil, O.F.M., trans. Zachery Hayes, O.F.M. (New York: The Franciscan Institute, 2000), q. 1, art. 1; Philip Melancthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 76; idem, *Loci Communes Theologici* (1521), trans. Lowell J. Satre, in *Melancthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (London: Westminster Press, 1969), 50-51; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.iii.1; Vermigli, *Philosophical Works*, 20; Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, 11, 64, 76, 86-87, 127, 144-145; Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza 1519-1605*, 105-106.

⁶⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.ii.7; I.iii.4; I.iv.8.

⁷⁰ Cf. discussion in Muller, *PRRD*, III, 166, 213, 216-217, 220, 225-226; Rehnman, “Theistic Metaphysics and Biblical Exegesis,” 172-178. Also see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 2, prologue (*via negativa*); Ia, q. 13, art. 2 (*via positiva*).

of negation we arrive at the knowledge of negative attributes. By way of eminence, we know the positive attributes. And by way of causality we ascend to the knowledge of relative attributes.⁷¹

All such acquired natural theology, however, since it exists “qualitatively and consecutively (for qualities admit of increase and diminution),” will “vary as to degree in relation to its subjects, who differ in intellectual acumen.”⁷² Therefore, it is not surprising that innate or acquired knowledge is often barely noticeable in some people due to their suppressing it in unrighteousness.⁷³

In addition to natural theology, Turretin claims that the orthodox hold that human beings have the first principles of natural law impressed upon their mind.⁷⁴ These he refers to as “common practical notions” that exist by nature in every individual and serve to distinguish between what to do and what to avoid.⁷⁵

They [the orthodox] affirm that there is a natural law, not arising from a voluntary contract or law of society, but from a divine obligation being impressed by God upon the conscience of man in his very creation, on which the difference between right and wrong is founded and which contains the practical principles of immovable truth (such as: “God should be worshipped,” “parents honored,” “we should live virtuously,” “injure no one,” “do to others what we would wish them to do to us” and the like).⁷⁶

According to Turretin, it is especially important to distinguish between the primary notions (principles)—such as those listed above—which are immutable and oriented toward the common good, and secondary notions (conclusions) which are more remote and often corrupted by sin through natural corruption, wrong education, or vicious custom.⁷⁷ While primary notions and immediately deduced

⁷¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.ii.8.

⁷² Turretin, *Institutes*, I.iv.12.

⁷³ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.iv.14.

⁷⁴ Cf. Grabill, “Theological Foundation,” 284-301.

⁷⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, XI.i.10.

⁷⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, XI.i.7. Cf. Melancthon, *Loci Communes Theologici* (1521), in *Melancthon and Bucer*, 50-51; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 94, art. 2, 4; I-II, q. 100, art. 1.

⁷⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, XI.i.11.

conclusions are the same for all, secondary notions derived as conclusions from the primary notions admit of great variety due to the fall.⁷⁸ In his discussion of primary and secondary practical notions, Turretin seems to nearly reproduce the same argument of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.⁷⁹

Turretin therefore assumes the reliability of a limited set of primary notions in the areas of logic, natural theology, and natural law which spontaneously arise in the normally functioning human mind. These notions are variously referred to as natural principles, axioms, propositions, or sentences.⁸⁰ In every noetic sphere, Turretin consistently distinguishes between primary principles which are sure and conclusions which often contain an admixture of error.

With this distinction between principles and conclusions in mind, Turretin's general rules for the use of natural principles of reason are more readily comprehensible. Though he definitely allows for the use of natural propositions drawn from reason, Turretin provides the following "threefold caution":

- (1) That the judgment of reason not be considered as necessary, as if theology could not do without it.
- (2) That the word of God (where also these truths are revealed) be considered always as the primary rule and reason as the secondary.
- (3) That when the word adds something unknown to nature to a thing known to nature, then we should not judge of it by nature or reason, but by the word (not that the word and reason are at variance, but because reason is perfected by the word). But in things known only by revelation (as the mystery of the Trinity, of the incarnation, etc.), the only rule is the word of God, beyond or above which we must not be wise.⁸¹

These rules seem to have in mind the reconciliation of the problem of double truth and the noetic effects of sin.⁸² When the same

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 94, art. 4. A point apparently overlooked in Grabill, "Theological Foundation," 290.

⁸⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.21; I.ix.2-3.

⁸¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.ix.3. Cf. Mallinson, *Faith, Reason, and Revelation in Theodore Beza 1519-1605*, 76-79.

⁸² On the problem of double truth in Reformed orthodoxy, see Richard Muller, "*Vera Philosophia cum sacra Theologia nusquam pugnat*," Keckermann on

propositions of a principle nature are dealt with in both nature and Scripture, it is Scripture that is to be heard and reason that is to be subject. Turretin follows this pattern of argumentation in rigorous scholastic fashion throughout his *Institutes* by treating topics first according to Scripture and then buttressing them by ancillary rational proofs where applicable.

Arguments for God’s Existence Against Atheism

Philosophy, as “the knowledge of things human and divine (as far as they can be known by the light of nature),” argues Turretin, is a useful handmaiden of theology.⁸³ With respect to the use of philosophy, therefore, the Reformed avoid both the errors of defect and excess.

The orthodox occupy a middle ground. They do not confound theology with sound philosophy as the parts of a whole; nor do they set them against each other as contraries, but subordinate and compound them as subordinates which are not at variance with, but mutually assist each other. Philo Judaeus and, after him, the fathers appropriately illustrated this by the allegory of Sarah and Hagar—the mistress and servant. Theology rules over philosophy, and this latter acts as a handmaid to and subserves the former. They acknowledge that it has many and various uses in theology which must be accurately distinguished from its many abuses.⁸⁴

One purpose of philosophy as handmaiden of theology is the conversion of atheists. Drawing on the example of Clement of Alexandria and Paul (Acts 14 and 17), Turretin assumes that philosophy “serves as a means of convincing the Gentiles and preparing them for the Christian faith.”⁸⁵ However, it must be stressed that sound philosophy does not provide any *soteriologically*

Philosophy, Theology, and the Problem of Double Truth,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15/3 (1984): 341-365; idem, *PRRD*, I, 384-387.

⁸³ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.xiii.4.

⁸⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.xiii.2.

⁸⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.xiii.5. Cf. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, III.v.8-15. Also see the discussion of the “material call” to the Gentiles in Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 408-412.

useful knowledge; it only demonstrates human inexcusability.⁸⁶ He cautions that “what philosophy teaches must be understood of its own kingdom and of natural causes, not of the kingdom of grace and in a supernatural order. Therefore, they are at fault who use such arguments against the creation of the world, the incarnation and the resurrection of the dead because Scripture teaches us that these things were the results not of natural causes, but of the omnipotence of God.”⁸⁷ With this said, Turretin presents two principle avenues of converting atheists.

Although reason is not the principle of faith, it does not follow that atheists cannot be converted. The manner of dealing with them can be either theological (by arguments founded on Scripture) or philosophical, so that by the principles of reason the prejudices against the Christian religion drawn from corrupt reason may be removed.⁸⁸

Sound philosophical arguments for God’s existence and attributes, therefore, are useful for removing objections to Christianity and at least presenting the plausibility—though certainly not the foundation—for faith.⁸⁹ Such arguments from sound reason are at least able to provide “unanswerable arguments” for the existence of God.⁹⁰ We will now turn to Turretin’s philosophical arguments against atheism for the existence of God.

Turretin puts to rigorous use the spontaneously arising notions concerning nature, natural theology, and natural law in his arguments for God’s existence. They seem to follow an *a posteriori* pattern of demonstrating causes by their effects (in common with the majority of Reformed orthodox)⁹¹ and build on the threefold way of acquiring knowledge of God: causality, eminence, and negation.⁹²

⁸⁶ Grabill, “Natural Law and the Noetic Effects of Sin,” 270; Muller, *PRRD*, I, 308.

⁸⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.xiii.6.

⁸⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, I.viii.23. Cf. Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharius Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 121, 147.

⁸⁹ Muller, *PRRD*, III, 182.

⁹⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.4.

⁹¹ Muller, *PRRD*, III, 183-184.

⁹² Cf. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, s.v. “via causalitatis” (326); “via eminentiae” (326); “via negatione” (326).

These arguments divide into “four foundations principally: (1) the voice of universal nature; (2) the contemplation of man himself; (3) the testimony of the conscience; (4) the consent of all mankind.”⁹³ In the opinion of Richard Muller, “The first of these categories contains all the standard a posteriori arguments with the exception of Aquinas’ third way (which is omitted by Turretin). The second could be viewed as a form of causal argument, but the third and fourth are purely rhetorical.”⁹⁴

The first argument from the voice of nature concerns the first means of the acquired knowledge of God: causality (*via causationis*). Since it is in the nature of causality that all production involves ordering of prior and posterior, it is impossible for something to be its own cause. Here Turretin appeals to the absurdity of an infinite series of cause and effect, for it would make all causes middle and thereby overthrow the order implicit in productive causes. Therefore, “we must grant some first and unproduced being from whom all things are, but who is himself from no one.”⁹⁵

Turretin further applies this reasoning about the absurdity of an infinite regress to time, motion, and the generation of human beings. This may be seen as a form of acquired knowledge by way of negation (*via negationis*). Since the world began with motion and time and is not self-originate, it must come from God. “Now there are many proofs,” writes Turretin, “that the world had a beginning and is not eternal.”⁹⁶ Time and eternity are essentially different. For if they weren’t, then there would never have been a first day and we arrive at the absurd conclusion that “there was a day before there was a day.”⁹⁷ (Turretin apparently assumes time is the finite measure of duration involving motion.)⁹⁸ In addition, he applies here the logical difference between whole and part: “Third, if time is eternal, there

⁹³ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.5.

⁹⁴ Muller, *PRRD*, III, 184.

⁹⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.6. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 2, art. 3 (second way); Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharius Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 123.

⁹⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.7.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.x.3. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 10, art. 1; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, *God and Creation*, 162; Muller, *PRRD*, III, 347.

were infinite years, infinite months, days and hours. But the number of months, years and days will either be equal or not. If equal, it would follow that a part is equal to the whole, and the whole is not greater than its part. If unequal, there will be made a greater and lesser in an infinity.”⁹⁹ With respect to motion, Turretin argues that it involves succession of priority and posteriority which is opposed to eternity.¹⁰⁰ Human generation could not possibly extend to eternity, for such an infinite series is impossible.¹⁰¹ Thus, the finite succession of motion, time, and human generation argues for an essentially distinct eternal God who began the series.¹⁰²

Another argument from nature concerns the beauty of the universe. This argument apparently draws from the second way of acquired knowledge of God, viz., that of eminence (*via eminentiae*). Since beauty consists of order, and order requires wisdom and intelligence, it follows that the beauty in the order of the universe demands infinite wisdom which is God.

Now he is blind who does not see the most beautiful order everywhere and most wicked who does not acknowledge it. There is so suitable a disposition of parts, so constant a concord of things so discordant, so harmonious an agreement and consent of creatures the most diverse, so swift and at the same time equable motion of the heavenly bodies and so immutable a stability and constancy of the order once established. So not only do the heavens declare the glory of God, but every blade of grass and flower in the field, every pebble on the shore and every shell in the ocean proclaim not only his power and goodness, but also his manifold (*polypoikilon*) wisdom, so near each one that even by feeling, God can be found.¹⁰³

Turretin implicitly assumes the truth of the logical notion that in nature the whole is greater than the part and therefore the whole orderly arrangement of finite things demands infinite wisdom. This argument is quite similar to that found in Article 2 of the *Belgic*

⁹⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.7.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.8.

¹⁰² Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 2, art. 3 (first way).

¹⁰³ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.10. Cf. Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharius Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 148.

Confession, which refers to the universe as an “elegant book.”¹⁰⁴ It also resembles Aquinas’s fourth way in moving from the perfections of creatures to their cause in God.¹⁰⁵

Turretin anticipates the objection that the visible beauty of the universe is an arrangement “by chance and by a fortuitous concourse of atoms.”¹⁰⁶ This anticipation may represent Turretin’s awareness of the revival of Epicurean atomism taking place in mid-seventeenth century Europe by such figures as Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), Walter Charleton (1620-1707), Robert Boyle (1627-1691), and Isaac Newton (1642-1727).¹⁰⁷ He calls such an opinion “absurd,” for beauty is not of chance but of “the highest art (*technēn*).” “For things which come by chance are uncertain and ill-arranged and have nothing constant and similar; but nothing can be conceived more regular and composed than this universal frame.”¹⁰⁸

The teleological argument is another form of *a posteriori* argument that seems to draw on acquired knowledge *via eminentiae*. It ascribes the perfection of intelligent direction to God as an explanation for the observation that unintelligent natural things act for some end according to their natural properties.

For since all natural beings act for the sake of some end (which they always certainly and infallibly pursue), they must necessarily be directed by the design of some ruler. Inasmuch as nature does nothing in vain, if it acts for the sake of some end, it must either itself know and seek that end or if it does not know or seek it, be directed to it by another. Now since among natural things there are many incapable of forming plans (because they are either inanimate or devoid of reason [*alogoi*]), they need some external counsel to direct them. Now that external counsel

¹⁰⁴ *The Creeds of Christendom*, III, 384.

¹⁰⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 2, art. 3.

¹⁰⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.11.

¹⁰⁷ Turretin had listened to Gassendi lecture in Paris. See Dennison, “The Life and Career of Francis Turretin,” in *Institutes*, vol. 3, 643. On the revival of ancient atomism in early modern science and philosophy, see especially Robert Kargon, *Atomism in England from Hariot to Newton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); idem, “Walter Charleton, Robert Boyle and the Acceptance of Epicurean Atomism in England,” *Isis* 55/2 (1964): 184-92; Barry Brundell, *Pierre Gassendi: From Aristotelianism to a New Natural Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987).

¹⁰⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.11.

can be attributed to no other than the author and ruler of nature.¹⁰⁹

Nature simply refers to the natural property of each singular thing. Appealing to the logical axiom that a property cannot exist without a substance, Turretin reasons that since properties (or “common natures”) only exist in either singular things or an “intelligent and subsisting substance by whose counsel all things are directed,” unintelligent brute creatures that manifest common, teleological inclinations must be directed to their common ends by God.¹¹⁰

After these *a posteriori* arguments drawn from the consideration of the effects of creatures, Turretin offers what appears to be a multifaceted argument from the contemplation of human nature as a *microcosmos*. By reflection on one’s own body and soul, argues Turretin, one can recognize a “little world” that reflects the perfections of its creator.

For whence is the body constructed with such wonderful and truly stupendous skill? Whence so many different members created together by a mutual interweaving and so fitly disposed to their peculiar offices, unless from an immense spirit? Whence the mind, a particle of the divine breath, possessed of so many faculties, furnished with so many gifts, unless from a supreme intelligence? This image clearly bespeaks its prototype, and everyone who pays attention will not only hear and see God present in himself, but also in a manner touch and feel him.¹¹¹

This argument is unique for it does not argue from only one avenue of the acquired knowledge of God, but rather compounds many ways. As Muller notes, “This might be identified as a form of rational argumentation, given its resemblance to arguments from causality and degrees of perfection and its teleological dimension, but it is mounted primarily as a form of testimony, akin in form to the argument from conscience.”¹¹²

Each of the arguments heretofore considered, it should be

¹⁰⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.12. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 2, art. 3 (fifth way).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.13. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* (1559), I.v.3; Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharius Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 148.

¹¹² Muller, *PRRD*, III, 187.

noted, combine implanted, indemonstrable first principles of logic with acquired, discursive knowledge drawn from observation of the book of nature. Those arguments which follow these are derived from indemonstrable common notions about God and morality to produce largely rhetorical arguments which “are, in effect, a form of a posteriori testimony.”¹¹³ They are the arguments (1) from conscience, (2) *e consensus gentium*, and (3) *ad hominem*.

The first rhetorical argument from conscience presumes the accusations of conscience point to the existence of God as judge and avenger of evil. Like Calvin before him, Turretin brings forward the example of eminently wicked deniers of God’s existence such as Caligula. “For how comes it that the conscience is tormented after a crime committed (even in secret and with remote judges), where no danger threatened from men (even in those who held supreme power) unless because it is affected by a most intimate sense of deity (as appears from the case of Nero, Caligula and others)?”¹¹⁴ If terrors of conscience arise even without the threat of civil law, there must be a judge who people know they are accountable to for even their secret thoughts. The only explanation for this is “that there is a God whom right reason itself teaches them to fear and orders them to recognize as the Lord and judge of all.”¹¹⁵ Thus, the accusations of conscience arising from implanted common notions of natural law impressed upon the mind are *a posteriori* effects pointing to the existence of the lawgiver and judge.

Turretin’s second rhetorical argument is that of *e consensus gentium*. Citing Cicero’s *Laws*, Turretin points to the universal agreement among nations that some deity ought to be worshipped even if the “reason and method of worshipping him” is erroneous and various.¹¹⁶ “Since then this constant and universal agreement of all men concerning this primary truth can either have arisen not from a simple desire...nor be founded on state policy or ancestral tradition...it follows necessarily that it took its rise from the evidence

¹¹³ Muller, *PRRD*, III, 184.

¹¹⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.14. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* (1559), I.iii.2-3; Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharius Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 121-122, 148-149.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.16.

of the thing itself.”¹¹⁷ The rare exceptions to this consensus, argues Turretin, are no more of an objection than “instances of insanity overturn the definition of man as a rational animal.”¹¹⁸

Turretin’s argument *ad hominem* points to the undesirable consequences of God’s nonexistence. There would be no real basis for morality and therefore anything would be permissible.

For if there were no God, no republic, no society in the world would be safe. Without virtue, without religion, nothing can be safe. If there were no God, there would be neither virtue nor religion. What would the world be but a mere den of robbers in which license would be each one’s law, no such thing as right or wrong, no right of government, no necessity of obedience—the most abandoned, the superior and the most powerful, the master? No check would be placed upon the oppression of rulers and the rebellion of subjects. Each one would follow the bent of his own inclination.¹¹⁹

Such would be the negative effects of the denial of God’s existence: unbridled license, violence, and injustice.¹²⁰

Conclusion

Francis Turretin’s proofs for the existence of God build on a view of the faculty of reason which incorporates both an instrumental role for reason in drawing conclusions and a limited positive role for supplying natural axioms. These naturally implanted “common notions,” according to Turretin, arise spontaneously in the human mind and correspond to realities inherent in the created order. Furthermore, since Turretin assumed such implanted notions correspond to basic realities of the created order, knowledge which is acquired through the created order in continuity with these common notions could point back to the existence of a Creator by means of *a posteriori* effects. Turretin, therefore, along with much of Reformed orthodoxy, does not seem to fall into more recent categories of presuppositionalism or

¹¹⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.17. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* (1559), I.iii.1-2.

¹¹⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.16.

¹¹⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, III.i.21.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

evidentialism.¹²¹ At the risk of sounding anachronistic, he seems rather to hold to a hybrid position which assumes elements from both approaches. His doctrine of indemonstrable common notions seems akin to presuppositionalism, while his approach to acquired knowledge drawn from the book of nature seems akin to evidentialism. This approach to the use of indemonstrable first principles along with acquired knowledge was evidently a common enough approach in the older Reformed scholasticism that it appears to have been a major structural assumption to the scientific foundations of theology in the more recent revival of Reformed orthodoxy represented by Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*.¹²² In a similar manner, Turretin's arguments for God's existence against atheism should be understood in his larger framework of the harmony between reason and faith, natural and supernatural theology, and nature and grace.¹²³ This relation, as noted in the body of this essay, bears a striking resemblance to Aquinas. And so it is not surprising that, like Aquinas, Turretin's arguments also follow an *a posteriori* pattern which he views as harmonizing with the supernatural revelation contained in Holy Scripture.

¹²¹ W. Andrew Hoffecker, "Benjamin B. Warfield," in *Reformed Theology in America: A History of its Modern Development*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 80-86; Wesley A. Roberts, "Cornelius Van Til," in *Reformed Theology in America*, 173-186.

¹²² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, *Prolegomena*, 207-233, esp. 223-233; II, *God and Creation*, 59-76.

¹²³ Grabill, "Natural Law and the Noetic Effects of Sin," 267.

Luther and Anti-Judaism

Craig Hoekema

In April of 1994, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America released a declaration concerning their collective stance on the past and present treatment accorded to the Jewish people. They expressed the special burden they felt in the development of anti-Judaism, and they pledged themselves to the opposition of anti-Semitism within their own circles and in the communities around them.¹ Such a statement was deemed necessary because of the deeply anti-Judaic thoughts and propositions that flowed from the pen of their denominational namesake. In a post-Holocaust society, it may be hard to understand how Martin Luther, a devout Christian, could advocate highly intolerant attitudes toward the Jewish people. Such hostility, at first glance, seems grossly inconsistent for a man who emphasized the unconditional and unfathomable love of Christ. However, this paper seeks to demonstrate that Luther's anti-Judaic sentiments toward the end of his life, although severe, are consistent with his historical context and his understanding of the Word of God.

The reality of Luther's remarks against the Jews, particularly in his treatise "On the Jews and Their Lies," leaves little ambiguity as to how passionately he opposed Judaism. Luther was not known for his willingness to express his deep convictions with tact or diplomacy. His views concerning the Jewish religion are no exception. He refers to Jews as incarnate devils;² stinking scum; dried-up froth; moldy leaven and boggy morass; dreary, rotten, stinking, rejected dregs of their father's lineage;³ thieves and robbers;⁴ and in response to Jewish accusations that they are held captive by Christians Luther

¹ *Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community*, 18 April 1994; available from <http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/interfaithrelations/jewish/declaration.html>; Internet: accessed 15 October 2005.

² Martin Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *Luther's Works* [hereafter *LW*], trans. Martin H. Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) 47:214.

³ Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW* 47:241.

⁴ Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW* 47:242.

says, “I hold them in captivity like I hold captive my gallstone, my bloody tumor, and all the other ailments and misfortunes which I have to nurse...”⁵ It is then that Luther begins with his recommendations about how to handle the Jews. In order to keep their teachings from spreading he proposes burning their synagogues and schools; destroying their houses; taking away their prayer books, Talmudic writings, and Bibles; forbidding rabbis to teach on pain of loss of life and limb; abolishing their safe-conduct on the highway; and even taking their silver and gold.⁶

Anti-Judaism in Luther’s Day

The first step in attempting to understand such strong comments is to explore Luther’s historical context. Before examining the attitudes toward Jews in Luther’s day, it is important to be clear about what is meant by ‘anti-Judaism.’ It is rather imprecise to refer to the thoughts and opinions of the late middle ages and Reformation era as ‘anti-Semitic.’ With few exceptions, the attitudes that preceded and surrounded Luther were in no way directed at ethnicity. As Bernhard Lohse points out, the conflict of that period was neither national nor racial but strictly religious. For the most part, whenever a Jew converted to Christianity, the prejudices collapsed of their own weight.⁷ Luther’s attitudes were no exception to this rule. As Gordon Rupp points out, Luther, in his last sermon before his death says, “If they [Jews] give up usury and receive Christ we will willingly receive them as our brethren.”⁸ For this reason, it is better to refer to the sentiment of the day as ‘anti-Judaism’ as distinguished from the ethnic implications of ‘anti-Semitism.’

The general overview of the Jew’s situation in the fifteenth and sixteenth century is quite bleak. During this time Jews in Europe were effectively blamed for a host of catastrophes from the frustration of failed Crusades to the plague known as Black Death to

⁵ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:266.

⁶ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:268-270.

⁷ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology, Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 338.

⁸ E. Gordon Rupp, *Martin Luther and the Jews* (London: Council of Christians and Jews, 1972), 21.

the hundreds of unresolved violent crimes. During the middle ages, Jews had been forced eastward into Northern Italy and Eastern Europe when countries like England, France, Spain and Portugal respectively drove out their Jewish populations.⁹ Sixteenth century Germany was politically fragmented leaving hundreds of jurisdictions, each with its own choice about whether or not to grant native and refugee Jews a place to call home. Increasingly, these sectors were deciding against the Jews. As a result, groups of Jews would huddle in villages outside of German cities where they were generally isolated from society. Inability to own land forced Jews to make their living through usury which only fed the hatred and envy directed against them.¹⁰

With this general picture of Jewish life on the eve of the Reformation, we now turn to the thoughts and writings of a few prominent Christian thinkers during Luther's lifetime. The theological climate of that time period was such that, as Oberman says, "This was a religious world that viewed truth as indivisible, banned deviation as error, and dreaded patent heresy as blasphemy fatal to life with God." Many Christians of this time period went back and forth between two last resorts. Either the Jews were to be forced into large-scale conversions, or the failed attempt should be interpreted as the punishment of God leaving no choice but to enforce a mass Jewish expulsion.¹¹

One of the individuals who promoted these two exclusive options was Johannes Reuchlin. In Oberman's assessment, Reuchlin viewed the misery of the Jews as punishment from God, not an injustice inflicted by men. Thus a Jew's only hope for escaping this punishment was conversion. Oberman also attributes to Reuchlin the notion that the Talmud is what stands between the Jews and their conversion. Having earlier condemned those who destroyed Jewish writings, by 1511 Reuchlin argued that his defense of Jewish texts had been misunderstood, and he no longer had any hesitation about encouraging others to confiscate and lock away any portions of the

⁹ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 336-337.

¹⁰ Rupp, *Martin Luther and the Jews*, 5-7.

¹¹ Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, trans. James I. Porter (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 25.

Talmud that were heretical or blasphemous. Reuchlin believed strongly in the Christian right to protect their own society and thus concluded that for any Jews too obstinate to convert, expulsion remained the only option.¹²

Johannes Pfefferkorn had a unique perspective in that he converted from Judaism before authoring numerous anti-Jewish tracts reviling his earlier comrades in the faith. Pfefferkorn endorsed the burning of all Hebrew books except the Old Testament.¹³ The goal was to sweep away any and all obstacles that stood in the way of Jewish conversions. He did, however, reprimand Christians for damaging their own cause by validating the popular old wives' tales of that day about Jewish ritual murders. By promoting stories about Jews who kill little Christian children for the medicinal properties of their blood, Christians were making fools of themselves and exposing the faith to ridicule.¹⁴

One of the men giving credence to such tales was none other than Luther's theological adversary Johannes Eck. Andreas Osiander wrote an anonymous tract in 1529 denouncing all charges against the Jews of ritual murder. In 1541, Eck responded with his own treatise ("Against the Defense of the Jews") in which he not only defended such charges, he claimed to know of several well-attested cases of the barbaric behavior. Eck labeled Osiander a "Jew-protector" and asserted that the Talmud explicitly commands Jews to murder Christian children.¹⁵

Erasmus of Rotterdam, another man with whom Luther debated, was also a proponent of the anti-Judaic sentiments of the day. One of his most well known anti-Jewish statements came in a letter in 1516 when he praised France for being the "purest blossom of Christianity, since she alone is uninfested with heretics, Bohemian schismatics, with Jews and with half-Jewish marranos." Unlike many of his contemporaries who handed converted Jews the right hand of fellowship, Erasmus refused to concede that a baptized Jew was a full-fledged Christian. To him they would always remain 'half-Jews.'

¹² Oberman, *Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 28-31.

¹³ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 338.

¹⁴ Oberman, *Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 34-35.

¹⁵ Oberman, *Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 35-36.

Also unique to Erasmus was his willingness to jettison the Old Testament—in order to stop the growth of Judaism—under the assumption that the coming of Christ had made the Old Testament obsolete.¹⁶ Although Erasmus was an advocate of harmony and peace, he saw no place for Jews in this utopia and believed that the company of Christians was the proper setting to achieve these ideals.¹⁷

When holding Luther up to his historical context, many parallels can be drawn. Like many others who hated Jews for usury, Luther too condemned their “accursed” greed.¹⁸ Like Reuchlin who said that the Talmud stood between Jews and conversion, Luther also argued that Jewish rabbis enabled and fueled the wrong interpretation of scripture. Like Pfefferkorn who said that Jewish books should be impounded and burned, Luther too proposed the disposal of Jewish literature. Like Eck who perpetuated stories of ritual murder, Luther also made reference to such practices and said, “I do know that they do not lack the complete, full, and ready will to do such things either secretly or openly where possible.”¹⁹ Like Erasmus who lauded France for being free of Jews, Luther too argued that Jews should be driven from Germany.²⁰ Much of what Luther said against the Jews was in keeping with the anti-Judaic thought of his day. Olaf Roynesdal notes, “Luther’s treatises evoked strong reactions from some of his contemporaries, yet these reactions were not focused on what Luther said about the Jews but rather on how he said it. Thus his contemporary critics focused on his harsh and crude language, but hardly a voice was raised in opposition to his basic view of the Jews or his recommendations concerning them.”²¹ Bernhard Lohse is right to assert that Luther was heavily influenced by the anti-Judaism of his day and did not exceed the judgments conditioned by that time.²²

The Development of Luther’s Anti-Judaic Thought

¹⁶ Oberman, *Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 38-39.

¹⁷ Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 338.

¹⁸ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:211.

¹⁹ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:217.

²⁰ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:288.

²¹ Olaf Roynesdal, *Martin Luther and the Jews* (Ph.D. Thesis: Marquette University, 1986), 271.

²² Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 345.

Now we turn to the progression of Luther's thoughts concerning the Jews. It is unquestionable that the tone and intensity of Luther's remarks shift over the course of his life, and yet, as some scholars have already noted, it is wrong to think of his foundational beliefs as having altered drastically. As Oberman points out, change does not necessarily imply fundamental rethinking, and does not indicate that Luther ever shifted his opinion of the Jews who refused to side with Christian truth.²³ Or, as Rupp puts it, "Luther and the Jews is yet another subject in which you cannot drive a wedge between the young and the old Luther. Though he changed his emphasis from time to time...yet from beginning to end there is in this, as in the rest of his theology, a deep, underlying continuity."²⁴ As we shall see, the growing hostility in the tone of Luther's writings is significantly connected to his fleeting hope concerning Jewish acceptance of Christ as the Messiah. As such, it is Luther's fundamental passion for Christ—the Word incarnate—which drives his growing enmity toward the Jewish religion.

Rupp notes that in Luther's lectures on Romans in 1515, Luther seems skeptical about a final conversion of the Jews and sees no evidence in scripture that more than a few individuals might be saved. He did have more hope about contemporary Jews, however. In his exposition of the Magnificat in 1521 Luther says that it is important not to treat Jews in an unfriendly way. The reason for this is that there are potential and actual Christians among them.²⁵

Just two years later, in 1523, Luther wrote the treatise that gives us some of the clearest insight into his perspective on Judaism at that time. At the Diet of Nurnberg in 1522, it was rumored that Luther was teaching that Mary conceived Christ through Joseph, and that she had many sons thereafter. Given the high view of Mary in that day, these were not minor charges, and Luther was eventually persuaded to clear his name in a treatise he entitled, "That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew."²⁶ At the beginning of the document Luther explicitly states that he will make his argument from Scripture in

²³ Oberman, *Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 45.

²⁴ Rupp, *Martin Luther and the Jews*, 7.

²⁵ Rupp, *Martin Luther and the Jews*, 10.

²⁶ Walther I. Brandt, "Introduction to That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," in *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 45:197.

order that he might win some Jews to the Christian faith. According to Luther, the popes, bishops, sophists, and monks had so mistreated the Jews that if he himself were a Jew and had seen such “dolts and blockheads” teaching the Christian faith, he “would sooner have become a hog than a Christian.” It was his contention at this time that if one only dealt kindly with the Jews and instructed them carefully from scripture, “many” of them would become genuine Christians.²⁷

Aside from opening his discourse with these explicitly charitable and hopeful statements, it is also worth noting Luther’s general tone throughout the treatise. At one point, as Luther is trying to persuade his readers that Mary was indeed a virgin, he refers to the testimony of Matthew and Luke. Afterwards he adds, “But because the Jews do not accept the evangelists, we must confront them with other evidence.”²⁸ He simply acknowledges the difference between the Jewish and Christian canon and thus moves on to demonstrate his case from the Old Testament. As we shall see, Jewish rejection of the New Testament will not forever be met with such a mild impassionate approach. Later on in the treatise, Luther makes one of his common apologetic arguments from Genesis 49:10 (“The scepter will not depart from Judah...”) that Jesus must be the one who fulfills this passage, or the Jews must explain where the scepter has been for 1500 years. He says, “No such person can be found except Jesus Christ; otherwise this passage is false.”²⁹ The significance of such wording can be seen in light of his later treatises which—rather than using the placid phrase “otherwise this passage is false”—forcefully say that Jewish misinterpretation of scripture makes God a liar.

At the close of the 1523 discourse, Luther reiterates his opening suggestions that Christians deal gently with Jews and instruct them from scripture in the hopes of conversion. “So long as we thus treat them like dogs, how can we expect to work any good among them?” Luther even admits that the current efforts to ostracize the Jews have “forced” them into usury.³⁰ The tone of this document is such that it led Lohse to conclude, “This treatise demonstrates such

²⁷ Martin Luther, “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew,” in *LW*, 45:200.

²⁸ Luther, “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew,” in *LW* 45:208.

²⁹ Luther, “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew,” in *LW* 45:216.

³⁰ Luther, “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew,” in *LW* 45:229.

an open attitude toward the Jews that it gave reason to think that a new epoch in Christendom's relation to the Jews was about to begin."³¹

Having said this, it is also important to realize that there is nothing in the treatise suggesting that Luther was not firm in his conviction that Christians were right and the Jews were wrong. He may have used an impassionate tone, but he is certainly assured of what he writes. Luther himself says, "If the Jews should take offense because we confess our Jesus to be a man, and yet true God, we will deal forcefully with that from Scripture in due time. But this is too harsh for a beginning. Let them first be suckled with milk..."³² Luther's mild tone in the treatise is very intentional and most certainly does not indicate a charity willing to tolerate anything less than Jewish acceptance of Christian truth.

Luther's next writing that deserves attention is a letter he wrote in 1537. By this time, Elector John Frederick had issued an edict forbidding Jews to reside or even travel through his territory. One of the most prominent Jewish spokesmen and leaders during that time, Rabbi Josel of Rosheim, wrote a letter to Luther asking him to obtain from the elector permission to pass through his territory. In his response, Luther assured Josel that he is still of the opinion that one should treat Jews kindly in order that God may bring them to accept Christ as the Messiah. However, he denied Josel's request.³³ There are a couple reasons Luther responded the way he did. First of all, as is evident from the "Table Talk" of this era, Luther was of the opinion that Christians in Moravia were being circumcised by proselytizing Jews. Second, as he says explicitly in his letter responding to Josel, Luther was disgusted that his pleasant amity toward the Jews had profited, not their conversion, but the strengthening and hardening of their error. Thus he says that his denial of the request is a result of his unwillingness to contribute to the obstinacy of the Jews.³⁴ As Oberman says, "The 'brotherliness' he was still urging in 1523 had

³¹ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to his Life and Work*, trans. Rob C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 89.

³² Luther, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," in *LW* 45:229.

³³ Martin H. Bertram, "Introduction to Against the Sabbatarians: Letter to a Good Friend," in *LW* 47:61-62.

³⁴ Rupp, *Martin Luther and the Jews*, 14.

not only proven ineffective as an inducement to conversion, but appeared to confirm the Jews more fixedly in their error.”³⁵ This undoubtedly was a thorn that sank deeper and deeper into Luther’s flesh.

Directly connected with his suspicion that Jews were proselytizing Christians, one year later (1538) Luther wrote a treatise he called, “Against the Sabbatarians.” ‘Sabbatarians’ referred to any number of movements in Christianity that contained an insistence on obedience to the essentials of Jewish Sabbath observance. Because Luther thought that the Jews were behind this movement, a majority of his discourse is directed against them rather than the Sabbatarians as such.³⁶

In this treatise, we see the light of Luther’s hope to convert many Jews continue to dim. He now says that their rabbis have made them stubborn, and they are difficult to win over. Instead of Christian evangelists, it is the Jews who are making inroads throughout the country “with their venom and their doctrine” forcing Christians to be circumcised and to doubt the coming of the Messiah.³⁷ As we shall later examine in more detail, Luther’s reading of the Old Testament leaves no doubt that the Messiah must have come 1500 years ago. As such, it is evident that God has forsaken the Jews and they can no longer be called God’s people. He is no longer writing with the motive of evangelizing the Jews. Toward the end of the treatise he says to his Christian readers,

I hope, my dear friends, that you will at least have been supplied with enough material to defend yourself against the Sabbatarians and to preserve the purity of your Christian faith. If you are unable to convert the Jews, then consider that you are no better than all the prophets, who were always slain and persecuted by this base people who glory solely in the boast that they are Abraham’s seed...In brief, since these fifteen hundred years of exile, of which there is no end in sight, nor can there be, do not humble the Jews or bring them to awareness, you may with a

³⁵ Oberman, *Roots of Anti-Semitism*, 45-46.

³⁶ Bertram, “Introduction to *Against the Sabbatarians*,” in *LW* 47:59-61

³⁷ Martin Luther, “*Against the Sabbatarians: Letter to a Good Friend*,” in *LW* 47:65.

good conscience despair of them.³⁸

It is now that we turn to 1543 to Luther's harshest and most explicit anti-Judaic writing, "On the Jews and Their Lies." Interestingly enough, Luther had actually declared—after writing "Against the Sabbatarians"—that he would no longer write about or against the Jews. However, when he was handed a copy of a Jewish apologetic pamphlet, Luther decided to break his silence and write once more against the Jews.³⁹ By this time, one of his key assertions from "Against the Sabbatarians" had solidified even more firmly; namely, debating with the Jews is futile. In a number of places throughout the treatise, Luther claims that the light of his hope to convert the Jews has been snuffed out, explicitly asserting that Jewish conversion is impossible.⁴⁰ He lists his motives for writing as both to provide Christians with enough material to defend themselves against the blind venomous Jews and to turn them into foes against the Jew's malice, lying, and cursing.⁴¹

He begins the document by exposing what he considers to be the "false boasts" of the Jewish people. In Luther's depiction, the Jews are entirely arrogant and self-satisfied. They boast in their physical lineage, which Luther says is unfounded since we all descend from Noah. They boast in circumcision, which he says means nothing since their hearts are uncircumcised. The Jews boast in having been issued the Law of Moses, which he says they do not keep, solidifying their condemnation. Finally, they boast in the land of Canaan, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple of God, but he says they do not realize that these were gracious gifts not given on account of their righteousness.

Luther's loss of patience concerning Jewish conversion is evident in his tone throughout the document. Throughout the piece, as we shall see in greater detail later, Luther accuses them of raging against their own consciences when it comes to their interpretation of scripture. "Thus we must let them go their way and ignore their

³⁸ Luther, "Against the Sabbatarians," in *LW* 47:95-96.

³⁹ Martin H. Bertram, "Introduction to On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW* 47:133.

⁴⁰ Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW* 47:137.

⁴¹ Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW* 47:139.

malicious blasphemy and lying.”⁴² Luther now rails against them for practicing usury, which he earlier confessed was something they were driven to by unfair treatment. He labels them as a people greedier than any under the sun and says their breath stinks with lust for the Gentile’s gold and silver. He says they steal and murder and teach their children to behave the same way.⁴³ He has an extended discourse on how much the Jews detest the Gentiles. Even if they seem to be performing some good deed, says Luther, you can rest assured that they are prompted not by love but by expediency alone.⁴⁴ Thus Luther poses the question, “What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews?”⁴⁵ It is then that he proceeds with his proposals: burn their synagogues; destroy their houses; take all their books, including the Old Testament; forbid them to pray, give thanks, and teach publicly; abolish their safe conduct on the highways; forbid them to utter God’s name within earshot of a Christian; prohibit their usury; put tools in their hands so they can earn their bread.⁴⁶ Luther viewed Jewish teaching as blasphemy against the Word of God and destructive to neighboring Christians. Since he now viewed evangelism to the Jews as essentially futile, Luther saw no other option than to contain their destructive influence as much as possible. As horrible as such proposals sound, especially to post-Holocaust ears, there can be little doubt that they are deeply connected to Luther’s fundamental passion for Christ.

The final document we’ll examine in the progression of Luther’s thought is his very last sermon probably delivered only hours before he died in 1546. Interestingly, by this time in Luther’s life he has returned—at least in part—to his previous notion that the Jews must be dealt with in a Christian manner. The reason is so that his listeners may try to bring them to the Christian faith so that they may receive the true Messiah who is their own flesh and blood. Luther contends that the Jews must be invited to turn to the Messiah and be baptized. He still maintains that if conversion fails, the Jews

⁴² Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:190-191.

⁴³ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:211, 227.

⁴⁴ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:217.

⁴⁵ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:268.

⁴⁶ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:268, 285-286.

must be driven out on account of their daily blaspheming of Christ. Yet he also says, “If they will give up usury and receive Christ we will willingly receive them as our brethren.”⁴⁷

It is worth noting that even in Luther’s most severe treatise (“On the Jews and Their Lies”), even when he explicitly says that Jewish conversion is impossible, it still cannot be said that every last ember of hope is truly extinguished. These nearly suffocated sparks of hope subtly reveal themselves in Luther’s comments to the effect that there is no hope *until* their misery makes them pliable (emphasis mine).⁴⁸ While Luther—in 1543—seems to have utterly despaired of human ability to reason with the Jews, his belief in God’s all-surpassing power may be a factor in keeping this meager hope from disappearing altogether. As is the case with much of Luther’s thinking, the development of his anti-Judaism cannot be neatly categorized as a movement from hope of conversion to no hope at all. The hope flickers even in his darkest treatise and seems to have rekindled by the time he preached his last sermon. Nevertheless, it is clear that the growing severity of Luther’s remarks does indeed coincide with the amount of hope he has for Jewish conversion. Thus we see that Luther’s anti-Judaism, as well as being a product of his historical context, is intimately connected with his passion for God’s incarnate Word.

Luther’s Understanding of the Word of God

In order to assert that Luther’s anti-Judaism is connected to Luther’s passion for God’s Word, we must have at least a basic sampling of how Luther perceived and what he meant by ‘the Word of God.’ For Luther, ‘the Word of God’ was simultaneously a reference to God’s revelation of himself in scripture and to God’s revelation of himself in Christ. Since Luther saw all scripture as pointing toward Christ, there is no significant distinction between the two meanings that lie behind the phrase, ‘Word of God.’ This intimate connection between Christ and scripture can be seen in a number of Luther’s writings. In the “Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences” he says that all who forbid the preaching of

⁴⁷ Rupp, *Martin Luther and the Jews*, 21.

⁴⁸ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:138.

the Word—so that indulgences may be preached—are enemies of Christ.⁴⁹ To silence scripture is to silence Christ. In “The Smalcald Articles” he says that the merits of Christ are offered freely and *solely* through the preaching of God’s Word (emphasis mine).⁵⁰ Scripture is the *only* means by which we can get to Christ. In *A Treatise on Christian Liberty*, Luther explicitly states that the Word *is* the gospel of God concerning his Son (emphasis mine). Scripture is void of all usefulness apart from giving Christ to sinners. As such, Luther says, “Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God.”⁵¹

Even though Christ does not explicitly appear until the New Testament, Luther is highly unwilling to go to Erasmus’ extreme of abandoning the Old Testament. In his treatise, “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels”, Luther encourages his writers to pour over the writings of the prophets and of Moses in order to “see what Christ is, for what purpose he has been given, how he was promised, and how all Scripture tends toward him.”⁵² There are not four gospels in Luther’s cannon; rather, there is one. Luther’s use of the term ‘gospel’ does not designate a literary genre but is a name for the message that constitutes the foundation of the church; the message in which all Christians must put their hope. For Luther, ‘gospel’ is found anywhere in scripture that human beings are told to put their hope in the grace of God.

The way in which the Old Testament leads people to trust in the grace of God is most evident in Luther’s “Preface to the Old Testament.” The chief function of the Old Testament is pedagogical; it teaches laws that show sin and demand good. The law’s greatest function is to pile up sins and burden the conscience of the sinner until he feels his own inability and nothingness in achieving the good. Man is thus compelled to seek something beyond his own abilities and the law, “namely, the grace of God promised in the Christ who

⁴⁹ Martin Luther, “Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 26.

⁵⁰ Martin Luther, “The Smalcald Articles,” in *BTW*, 508.

⁵¹ Martin Luther, *A Treatise on Christian Liberty*, trans. W.A. Lambert, rev. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 9.

⁵² Martin Luther, “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels,” in *BTW*, 109.

was to come.”⁵³ Since the Old Testament is little more than a book of laws, the New Testament is where we go to get the power to fulfill the law (i.e. Christ). Bertram is right to observe that Luther understood the proper meaning of Old Testament scriptures to be Christological.⁵⁴ Thus it makes sense why Luther says that the Old Testament is to be highly regarded and diligently read.⁵⁵

It is also important to see the passion with which Luther spoke about the Word of God. It would be wrong to understand his Christological view of scripture as little more than an academic lens with which he impersonally exegeted the text for university lectures. The Word of God, written and incarnate, was undoubtedly one of Luther’s greatest passions. As he emphasizes in *Christian Liberty*, the Word of God—the gospel of Christ—is the one thing and only one thing necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. The human soul can do without *anything* except the Word of God (emphasis mine). Thus there is “no more terrible disaster with which the wrath of God can afflict men than a famine of the hearing of his Word...Likewise, there is no greater mercy than when he sends his Word...”⁵⁶ In “The Smalcald Articles,” it is Luther’s passion for the Word that leads him to call the pope the antichrist and the devil’s apostle.⁵⁷ The pope demands things that scripture does not, and thus he sets himself up against Christ.

Luther’s passion is known to take on a more personal nature as well. In his treatise, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” Luther makes the assertion that the Laws of Moses, even the Ten Commandments, were given to the people of Israel and thus do not bind or even pertain to non-Jews.⁵⁸ He contrasts this with the gospel which Christ explicitly commanded to be preached to all nations and all creatures. It is then that Luther pens these passionate, comforting, and pastoral words: “...therefore no one is exempt. Rather all are thereby included; no one should doubt that to him too the gospel is to be preached. And so I believe that word; it does pertain also to me. I

⁵³ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Old Testament,” in *BTW*, 127.

⁵⁴ Bertram, “Introduction to On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 45:132.

⁵⁵ Luther, “Preface to the Old Testament,” in *BTW*, 119.

⁵⁶ Luther, *Christian Liberty*, 9.

⁵⁷ Luther, “The Smalcald Articles,” in *BTW*, 513.

⁵⁸ Martin Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” in *BTW*, 138-139.

too belong under the gospel, in the new covenant. Therefore I put my trust in that word, even if it should cost a hundred thousand lives.”⁵⁹ Such personal passion for his Messiah is also evident in the midst of his treatise against the Jews. He thanks God with full, overflowing joy in his heart, grateful that all we had lost has been restored to us through Christ our Messiah.⁶⁰

Luther also understood the Word of God to be incomparably powerful. In Luther’s famous debate with Erasmus, Luther responds to Erasmus’ assertion that often the Word of God is not understood due to the weakness of the human mind. Luther much prefers to attribute the cause of man’s misunderstanding to the malice of Satan. It is Luther’s contention that if Satan were not at work, “the whole world of men would be converted by a single word of God once heard, and there would be no need of more.”⁶¹ Apart from Satan’s destructive intervention in human affairs, Luther saw God’s Word as having the power to effect the universal and permanent conversion of all mankind. This leads to another very key element of Luther’s view concerning the power of the Word. In his same treatise against Erasmus, Luther pictures the Word of God as the inevitable catalyst for conflict. He says,

The world and it’s god cannot and will not endure the Word of the true God, and the true God neither will nor can keep silence; so when these two Gods are at war with one another, what can there be but tumult in the whole world? To wish to stop these tumults, therefore, is nothing else but to wish to suppress and prohibit the Word of God. For the Word of God comes, whenever it comes, to change and renew the world.⁶²

It is extremely important for our purposes to realize that when it came to debates over the meaning of God’s Word, Luther viewed his battle as a fundamental struggle between the true God and the forces of the devil himself. Thus conflict was certainly not something from which

⁵⁹ Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” in *BTW*, 145.

⁶⁰ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW*, 47:294.

⁶¹ Martin Luther, “The Bondage of the Will,” in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Phillip S. Watson, The Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 167.

⁶² Luther, “The Bondage of the Will,” in *Luther and Erasmus*, 129.

he was willing to shy away.

The final component in Luther's doctrine of the Word that is worth examining for our purposes is his understanding of the perspicuity or clarity of scripture. This is an observation that is certainly not unique to Luther, but nevertheless particularly apparent in Luther's writings. Luther did not mean by perspicuity that every jot and tittle of scriptural language was immediately and fully comprehended. He did, however, mean that the most important message of salvation was clearly set forth and that, "we must everywhere stick to the simple, pure, and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language... We ought to shun as the deadliest poison every trope that scripture itself does not force upon us."⁶³ Any fancy and complicated hermeneutics that ruled out the common man's comprehension of the plain message of salvation should be avoided at all costs.

A good example of Luther's sentiments can be found in his attack on Emser's division of the letter and the spirit. Luther gave his treatise the protracted title, "Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig—Including Some Thoughts Regarding His Companion, the Fool Murner." In it he accuses Emser of allowing human teaching and human laws to stand in the way of scripture's clear teaching. Luther argues, "The Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and adviser in heaven and on earth. That is why his words could have no more than the one simplest meaning which we call the written one, or the literal meaning of the tongue... Scripture does not tolerate the division of letter and Spirit, as Emser so outrageously [divides them]. It contains only a simple priesthood and a simple meaning."⁶⁴ Luther saw all human inventions as a hindrance to the obvious and perspicuous meaning of God's Word.

Jewish Denial of the Word of God

As we've seen, Luther viewed all scripture, Old Testament

⁶³ Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," in *Luther and Erasmus*, 221.

⁶⁴ Martin Luther, "Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig—Including Some Thoughts Regarding His Companion, the Fool Murner," in *BTW*, 79.

and New Testament, through the lens of Christ. It was beyond dispute that Christ was the obvious and exclusive aim of Moses, the prophets, and the apostles. This is largely why Luther was so hopeful in the 1520's that Jewish conversions would certainly result from a clear and friendly explanation of scripture. Therefore, as his hope of Jewish conversion began to dim, he could attribute it to nothing less than the Jews' conscious obstinacy and willful blindness toward the clearly Christological scriptures. It is for this reason that his later treatises are primarily scriptural expositions that indubitably—at least in Luther's mind—expose the Jews' lies and denial of God's Word. This is why Roynesdal concludes, "The chief source of his attitude toward the Jews was the Bible...the Bible contained God's word, and because of it's source—God—it could not present anything but truth. Otherwise, as we shall see, God would be seen a liar."⁶⁵

There are a few key texts that Luther uses in his treatises ("Against the Sabbatarians" and "On the Jews and Their Lies") that in his opinion amount to insurmountable proofs that the Jews are missing the point of scripture. Two of these texts go hand in hand: Genesis 49:10 in which Jacob promises that the scepter will never depart from Judah, and 2 Samuel 23:5 in which David recalls the everlasting covenant God made with him. The glaring problem in Luther's estimation is that since the time of Herod, the Jews can point to no one who continues the fulfillment of these prophecies. The scepter has been gone for 1500 years and David's throne has been empty for 1500 years. There are only two conclusions that Luther will allow concerning either of these texts. Either the Messiah came at the time of Christ, or God failed to keep his promise and subsequently lied. No one would dare to concede the latter conclusion, "save the accursed devil and his servants, the false bastards and strange Jews. They do this incessantly. In their eyes God must be a liar."⁶⁶ Specifically concerning David's throne, Luther calculates at the time he writes that David's throne has now been empty 500 years longer than it was occupied.⁶⁷ This only serves to

⁶⁵ Roynesdal, *Martin Luther and the Jews*, 40.

⁶⁶ Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW*, 47:184.

⁶⁷ Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW*, 47:205.

demonstrate that the Jews are given to babbling and lying.⁶⁸

In “Against the Sabbatarians,” Luther offers the Jews a potential loophole for explaining the 1500 years. It is indeed impossible to conclude that God is a liar; thus they would have to attribute this lack of promise fulfillment to their sins. They would have to view themselves as being in a sort of exile, or as Luther calls it, ‘Roman captivity’. Luther then proceeds to point out a few major problems with this conclusion. First of all, the Jews cannot name a sin for which they are being punished. Second, the sins of Israel before the Babylonian exile were graver than whatever sins they can currently name, and that was only 70 years of exile. This is hardly comparable to the 1500 years that must currently be explained.⁶⁹ Third, Jeremiah 31 promises the forgiveness of sins and the termination of their remembrance, and yet the Jews are forced to infer that sin is the cause of their punishment. These conclusions are contradictory in Luther’s opinion, and thus someone is lying: God or the Jews.⁷⁰ Finally, there is no prophet or word from scripture during this Roman captivity telling them how long this exile will last. God has never done this before and would certainly not do it now.⁷¹ Therefore, the Jews must consider Christ to be the fulfillment of Genesis 49 and 2 Samuel 23; otherwise they make God a liar.

Another passage that Luther spends a significant amount of time with is Haggai 2:7. Here Haggai prophesies the coming of the ‘desire’ or ‘treasure’ (*chemdah*) of all the Gentiles. Luther accuses rabbinical glosses of interpreting this not as the Messiah, but as the gold and silver of the Gentiles. “You may ask why the Jews make this kind of gloss here. I will tell you. Their breath stinks with lust for the Gentile’s gold and silver; for no nation under the sun is greedier than they were, still are, and always will be, as is evident from their accursed usury... wherever they can quote Scripture to satisfy their insatiable greed, they do so outrageously.”⁷² And so here too, Luther accuses the Jews of blatantly ignoring the perspicuous Christological focus of scripture thus avoiding the true meaning with human

⁶⁸ Luther, “Against the Sabbatarians,” in *LW*, 47:75.

⁶⁹ Luther, “Against the Sabbatarians,” in *LW*, 47:69.

⁷⁰ Luther, “Against the Sabbatarians,” in *LW*, 47:70.

⁷¹ Luther, “Against the Sabbatarians,” in *LW*, 47:75.

⁷² Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW*, 47:211.

inventions.

Luther uses a considerable quantity of ink explicitly attacking Jewish rabbis. He views them as the heart of the problem in that whenever a Jew is persuaded from scripture, he immediately turns away from the text to rabbinical teaching. It is the accursed rabbis who are knowingly poisoning the minds of young and old alike, averting their intellect from the truth.⁷³ In one of his clearest statements Luther says,

They [rabbis] have done nothing these fourteen hundred years but take any verse which we Christians apply to our Messiah and violate it, tear it to bits, crucify it, and twist it in order to give it a different nose and mask. They deal with it as their fathers dealt with our Lord Christ on Good Friday, making God appear as the liar but themselves as the truthful ones, as you heard before. They assign practically ten different interpretations to Jacob's saying in Genesis 49. Likewise they know how to twist the nose of Haggai's statement. Here you have two good illustrations which show you how masterfully the Jews exegete the Scriptures, in such a way that they do not arrive at any definite meaning.⁷⁴

For this reason, it is not surprising that he refers to rabbis as ignorant, untutored asses that do not study scripture or history but simply say whatever they want against God.⁷⁵

Luther also spends a fair amount of time railing against the Jews' treatment of the prophets. God honored the Jews very highly by entrusting his Word to them. In order for God to preserve his Word among these people, he lavished them with gifts. He gave them a special country; he performed miracles through and among them; he ordained kings and government for them; and most importantly, he lavished prophets upon them to inform them of the future and offer them the promise of the Messiah.⁷⁶ But as Luther thoroughly points out, Israel's response to these prophets was never proper. Luther berates them as a prophet-murdering people. Whenever God so graciously gave them his Word through the prophets, they were never

⁷³ Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW*, 47:146.

⁷⁴ Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW*, 47:238.

⁷⁵ Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW*, 47:246.

⁷⁶ Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *LW*, 47:163.

able to tolerate it. “So it became apparent that they were a defiled bride, yes, an incorrigible whore and an evil slut with whom God ever had to wrangle, scuffle, and fight. If he chastised and struck them with his Word through the prophets, they contradicted him, killed his prophets, or, like a mad dog, bit the stick with which they were struck.”⁷⁷

But perhaps this was only the true of the Old Testament Jews and not the Jews of Luther’s day. Luther is certainly not convinced that this is the case. He says that if Isaiah, Jeremiah, or other prophets went among the Jews today and proclaimed that their present hope for the Messiah was futile, the prophets would again die at their hands as happened in the past.⁷⁸ Luther draws his proof from present day Jewish exegesis. He says that since the Jews can no longer physically stone or kill the prophets, they do so spiritually by mutilating, strangling, and maltreating their written texts. For Luther, the Jews’ past and present treatment of the prophets is one of the most explicit ways in which they show themselves to be set against God’s Word.

By 1543, Luther has also lost his patience with the Jewish rejection of the New Testament. He is, of course, deeply convicted that the New Testament is just as much the Word of God as is the Old Testament. In past treatises, such as “That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew,” Luther was deliberate about meeting the Jews on their own terms and making his arguments from the Old Testament. By this time, he is willing to reprimand the Jews from either Testament. He cites passages from Matthew 10, Luke 10, John 5 and John 15, the thrust of each passage being that to reject the son is to also reject the Father. Thus the Jews, along with the rest of the world, are obligated to know and accept that the New Testament is also the Word of God.⁷⁹

For Luther, what this really all amounts to is nothing other than malicious blasphemy against the very Word of God. The Jews, more than any other people in the world, have had access to God’s Word and yet, in Luther’s opinion, have deliberately chosen to ignore the Messiah contained therein. Instead of the beautiful face of the

⁷⁷ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW*, 47:166.

⁷⁸ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW*, 47:163.

⁷⁹ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW*, 47:278, 280.

divine word, the Jews “have to look into the devil’s black, dark, lying behind, and worshipped his stench.”⁸⁰

Conclusion

Many who read Luther’s comments against the Jews, especially in a post-Holocaust society, are bound to be appalled and confused. Some have pointed to physical and psychological ailments in order to explain away the apparent discontinuity between Luther’s Christianity and his anti-Judaic writings. Many are, as Rupp says, tempted to drive a wedge between a young Luther and an old Luther. However, when Luther’s context and thought progression are analyzed more thoroughly, it becomes clear that no such discrepancy really exists. Certainly the severity of Luther’s tone and proposals concerning the Jews developed over the course of his life. Yet this progression is consistent with both his historical context and his understanding of God’s incarnate and written Word.

⁸⁰ Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW*, 47:256.

A Prayer From the Depths: A Typological Examination of Jonah 1:17 – 2:10

Laurie Zuverink

Introduction

The story of Jonah in the belly of the big fish is a familiar story in Christian tradition. It is a great story with drama, suspense, irony, satire and humor. Children (and adults) love to hear the saga of how Jonah tries to run away and hide from God, gets punished, is swallowed up by a big fish, repents and gets spit out again only to reluctantly do what he was supposed to do in the first place. On the surface, this may seem like a nice story to use in Sunday school or for a children's message to teach some moral lessons about forgiveness and obeying God. However, a closer examination of the life of the prophet Jonah and the book of the Bible that bears his name reveals much deeper, more complex reasons for including this narrative in the message of Scripture. Through the Jonah narrative, God unfolds his desires for his people Israel as they serve as his prophet among the nations of the earth. Through Jonah, God lays out the formula for his redemptive plan for all the nations in his Son, Jesus Christ, and through Jonah, the church today can understand how she is supposed to witness to the nations about the saving grace of Jesus Christ and ultimately serve the one true, sovereign God and King.

The purpose of this paper is to show how and why the prayer of Jonah while he was in the belly of the fish is specifically included in the book of Jonah and in Scripture. Both the structure and the content of this psalm of thanksgiving, though seemingly out of place in the narrative account, are necessary to complete the prophetic message of Jonah being portrayed to the kingdom of Israel and to the church today.

Jonah the Prophet

Jonah was a prophet during the reign of King Jeroboam II in Israel. We know very little about Jonah except that he was the son of Amittai and came from Gath Hepher which is identified as being just

northeast of Nazareth.¹ The only reference we have to the prophet Jonah (other than what is found in the book of Jonah) is in II Kings 14:25. Jonah prophesied that Jeroboam II would expand the northern borders of Israel back to what they were in David's time.²

During the time that Jonah prophesied (about 800-750 B.C.) the Assyrians defeated Damascus who had under their control the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians had some internal difficulties of their own which then allowed Israel to restore her borders. The Assyrians, however, still remained a threat.³ (An important note, as it helps explain Jonah's reactions and emotions on behalf of Israel). Jonah and Elisha prophesied that these events would take place, and when they did, the people of Israel became self-righteous and gloated about being the chosen people of God. They lost sight of the very reason God had chosen them – to be his representatives to the Gentile nations of the world. God then sent the prophets Amos and Hosea to warn the Israelites he had enough and would judge them for their behavior, and he sent Jonah to preach repentance to the Assyrians at Nineveh or they too would be judged.

The Book of Jonah

The book of Jonah is unlike any other prophetic book. It is an account, a narrative concerning certain actions in the life of the prophet Jonah. It has only one verse of verbal prophecy and instead focuses on the personal experience of the prophet himself. The book of Jonah is a supreme example of God using "the prophets' lives in their entirety ... as virtual living billboards that advertise his intentions."⁴

A prophet is someone who represents God, his community

¹ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*. Word Biblical Commentary 31 (Waco TX: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 431.

² Trent C. Butler, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, Holman Old Testament Commentary 19 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 263.

³ "Introduction to Jonah" in *The New International Version Study Bible* (eds. Kenneth Barker et al.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 1363.

⁴ Michael J. Williams, *The Prophet and His Message: Reading Old Testament Prophecy Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 83.

and himself through words, behaviors and affections.⁵ Jonah's negative experiences of fleeing from God (chapter 1) and disgust at the withered vine (chapter 4) represent both his own personal biases and attitude toward the Gentile nations as well as the negative attitude of the people of Israel. At the same time, Jonah represents God who through his sovereign rule and supreme mercy remains with a sinful, reluctant Jonah to the depths of despair and graciously offers him salvation.

The central theme of the book of Jonah "concerns the nature of God and his mercy towards all people of the world."⁶ In chapter 4, twice God asks Jonah if he has any right to be angry about things that are not under his control. These questions, although spoken to Jonah, really challenged the Israelite's attitude of superiority and jealousy concerning the possibility that "their" God would show compassion to the wicked pagan nations around them, especially the one that threatened their very existence!

Jonah and the Israelites fell to their knees in gratitude when God extended his grace in their direction. However, when God chose to extend that same grace in directions they felt were not appropriate, the Israelites complained about unfair treatment. Christians in the church today do the very same thing. It is easy and wonderful to accept God's grace, but extending that grace to others who have caused deep hurts is extremely difficult. God, however, requires this of his chosen people. The message of both judgment and mercy for all is the message that God gave to his people through the prophet Jonah. It is the same message made complete through the blood of Jesus Christ that the church today must boldly proclaim and bear witness to.

Jonah's Prayer

Jonah 2 is a record of a psalm of thanksgiving offered by Jonah inside the belly of the fish, in response to the grace God showed him in rescuing him from a sure death in the stormy seas. This humble prayer is in stark contrast to the rebellious accounts of

⁵ Ibid, 101.

⁶ Peter C. Craigie, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah and Jonah*, Twelve Prophets 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 214.

Jonah's other actions. Through the words of this prayer, Jonah represents God as the one who controls all things and the one who provides salvation when it is most needed.

Historically, the placement of this poetic prayer within the narrative context of the book has brought into question two things. First of all, some feel this psalm does not belong in the narrative at all for the very reason that a prayer of thanksgiving in the belly of a fish seems highly inappropriate; a prayer of lament would make much more sense.⁷ However, a proper understanding of the circumstances makes it easy to see why Jonah is thankful. If the fish had not swallowed him, Jonah would have surely drowned in the storm. Instead, Jonah was rescued. God provided a way to protect Jonah in the stormy sea, and Jonah acknowledges this in his prayer of thanksgiving.⁸

The second historical issue that comes up in regards to Jonah's prayer is where exactly chapter 2 starts. The NRSV and the NIV Bibles follow the grouping of the Septuagint and Vulgate in renumbering Jonah 2:1 as Jonah 1:17.⁹ This was done because the verse is narrative and the prayer of Jonah is poetry so it was thought to belong with the narrative of chapter 1. However, placing this verse with chapter 1 makes it seem as if God's action of providing a fish to swallow Jonah is in response to the sailors' prayers. It also takes away the prose frame surrounding the poetic prayer which sets up and describes God's providential hand in providing the fish as a means of rescue for Jonah. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, Jonah 1:17 shall be included as part of the pericope.

The structure of Jonah 1:17 – 2:10

A detailed look at the structure of this passage reveals a highly stylized piece of poetry.¹⁰ It is filled with images involving water symbolic of the chaotic struggle between life and death, and is put

⁷ Raymond B. Dillard & Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 394.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 316.

¹⁰ Bryan Estelle, *Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2005), 79.

together in such a way that the organization of the poem itself underscores the message the words convey.

<p>17 But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.</p> <p>1 From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.</p> <p>2 He said: "in my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.</p> <p>3 You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, And the currents swirled about me; All your waves and breakers swept over me.</p> <p>4 I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; Yet I will look again toward your holy temple.</p> <p>5 The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; Seaweed was wrapped around my head.</p> <p>6 To the roots of the mountains I sank down; The earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.</p> <p>7 When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.</p> <p>8 Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.</p> <p>9 But I with a song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you.</p>	<p>17 The pericope begins and ends with a prose frame showing the Lord's providential action in saving Jonah.</p> <p>1 The setting is given to us and Jonah is praying from the deep.</p> <p>2a Bicolon in synonymous parallelism with the following bicolon. Also the beginning of a chiasm (A) in which Jonah refers to the underworld.</p> <p>2b Bicolon which completes the underworld picture. The idea of the depths is taken to the extreme as in the Hebrew the phrase "belly of Sheol" is used (the NIV translates it "depths of the grave." In fleeing from the Lord, Jonah could not escape him, even in the depths Sheol. Amos 9:2-3 also claims that God will find the wicked even if they flee to Sheol.</p> <p>3 Four cola in climactic parallelism. The second part of the chiasm (B) in which Jonah now refers to the cosmic waters. An ellipsis is used in the first two cola in which the words "You hurled me" is left out of the second. Jonah acknowledges the Lord as the Sovereign One who is punishing him, but never acknowledges his own sin. The currents, waves and breakers are parts representing the whole depths of the water.</p> <p>4 The climax of the chiasm (C). Three cola which state the plight of Jonah. He has reached the very lowest of points in being banished from the sight of the Lord yet there is a ray of hopefulness as he decides to turn toward the Lord.</p> <p>5 Back to the reference to the cosmic waters (B'). A climactic parallelism with 3 cola plus the 2 cola in vs. 6, even though verse 6 is the last part of the chiasm (A') with reference to the underworld. This combination shows how the waters and the underworld all come together in chaos to separate Jonah from the Lord.</p> <p>6a The reference to the earth barring him in is a reference to death and hell.</p> <p>6b This colon suddenly reverses the descent. Jonah sank as low as he could go and the earth barred him in, now only the sovereign LORD can bring him back up.</p> <p>7 Synonymous parallelism in which one bicolon is followed by a second bicolon with an ellipsis of "my prayer rose to you." Jonah is humbled by his situation and all he can do is pray.</p> <p>8 A piece of wisdom warning the people of Israel based on Deut. 29:24-26; Jeremiah 2:12, 13; and Psalm 31:6, 7.</p> <p>9 Three cola in which Jonah offers up thanks for God's rescue from drowning, and vows to make</p>
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forsaken me?”¹² As Jesus died, the presence of God left him and he descended into the depths of Sheol. Christ, as the Son of God, came to earth as the Son of Man to accept a punishment he did not deserve.¹³ Jonah descended into the depths of Sheol as judgment and suffering for his sins. As a prophet he represented what Israel would suffer if they continued to ignore God and His instructions. Jesus, however, was without sin. He suffered for no reason of his own, and he not only represented the suffering of Israel, he took on the suffering of all the nations so that anyone, Jew or Gentile, who believed in his gift, would never have to suffer that divine punishment.

In Matthew 12:39-41 and Luke 11:29-32, Jesus referenced Jonah’s descent and time spent in the fish when the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked him for a miraculous sign. Just as Jonah spent three days and three nights entombed in the fish, so too, Jesus would spend three days and three nights entombed in the grave. The difference between Jonah and Jesus is that Jonah’s journey was filled with rebellion and reluctance. Jesus accepted his task humbly and willingly.

The church today is called to be prophetic to the world in the same way as Jonah and the Israelite community.¹⁴ The church, however, has an advantage in that she can look back at the work of the perfect prophet Jesus Christ and strive to be a reflection of him while pointing forward to the time when Christ shall come again. Until that New Kingdom is fully realized, sin will be present in this world and suffering will still exist. The church can reflect the prophetic message of Jesus’ suffering in her words, attitudes and behaviors toward today’s sufferings.

The attitude of those in the church in times of suffering should be that of Christ Jesus - humble and willing to accept the Father’s will.

¹² See Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.

¹³ To fulfill the prophetic office fully, Christ had to be part of the community which he represented. Christ through his incarnation represented humanity perfectly and could thus bear the punishment for all since he himself had no sin to punish.

¹⁴ The church today is called to represent God, the community and herself with words, actions and behaviors just as the prophets did and as the community of Israel did. See Williams, *The Prophet and His Message*, chapter six.

Christians should also take comfort in knowing that because Christ suffered, he understands suffering and will remain with us no matter what. This is the message of Christ the church must represent to the world.

The church must also pray for those who are suffering, and work diligently to relieve that suffering by humbly attending to the physical and emotional needs of her community. The words of the church offering spiritual healing must match the attitudes and practices of the church.

The message being proclaimed about suffering should also point to that day when believers will suffer no more. Paul says in I Thessalonians 4:13b, “Do not grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.” Those in the church should live and work with an attitude of expectation eagerly hoping for and anticipating the Second Coming of the Lord. The church must work feverishly to spread the gospel message so that all people can be given the chance to eagerly anticipate that glorious day too.

An Ascent of Salvation

Throughout the Old Testament, water is used to symbolize chaos and disorder. In the creation account, God separates the waters to create order. In Genesis 6 the chaos returns through the waters of the flood. In order to enter the Promised Land, the Israelites must cross both the water of the Red Sea and the Jordan River, and Jonah, in his punishment is engulfed by the deep, stormy seas.

However, throughout these stories of chaos and disorder, God provides a glimmer of hope that progressively reveals his plan of salvation. Noah is saved from the flood. Moses begins his life in a basket on the Nile River and eventually leads the Israelites out of bondage across the Red Sea. Joshua, whose name means savior, leads God’s people across the Jordan into the Promised Land, and God provides a fish to swallow Jonah.

The fish is Jonah’s glimmer of hope for which he is thankful to God. It offers him the possibility of new life. Jonah’s prayer in chapter 2 acknowledges God’s sovereignty as the one who punished Jonah for his rebellion, but also as the provider of his salvation. Jonah concludes his prayer with the simple but profound statement “Salvation comes from the LORD.” With that realization, Jonah

spiritually ascends back to the presence of God and physically ascends back to dry land. This action was an example for the Israelites of what God would do if they repented and followed the instructions stated earlier in Jonah's prayer not to cling to worthless idols and forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

The fish, the symbol of hope for Jonah and Israel, points forward and is perfectly fulfilled in the hope offered through Jesus Christ's death (descent) and resurrection (ascent). Jesus' resurrection demonstrates the ultimate power, mercy, and grace of the Sovereign Lord. The water of the Old Testament which frequently threatened to squelch life becomes a symbol for new life and hope in Jesus Christ.

Jonah went through a rebirth. He was plunged into the depths and emerged having been given new life. Jesus plunged into the depths and emerged being able to offer new life. Jesus says to Nicodemus in John 3, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." In John 4, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that he is the living water. Anyone who drinks of his water will never be thirsty again. In Jesus, the glimmer of hope offered by the fish swallows up the chaos of the deep to bring life and healing.

Today, the church uses water in baptism to signify this new birth – this cleansing found in Jesus Christ. The church is called to tell the story of this new life, representing God by living lives which radiate with the joy and hope available to all through Christ's resurrection. Christians should be slow to judge others and quick to offer forgiveness and grace. Christians' lives must demonstrate the love, peace and contentment that come from knowing the risen Savior, and most importantly, Christians must graciously acknowledge God's sovereignty in his ability to save anyone. Christians must not be like the older brother in the story of the prodigal son whose jealousy gets in the way of celebrating the repentance of a lost soul. Nor should Christians be like the workers hired first who become jealous of the workers hired last making as much money as they are. Christ paid the debt for all. There are no levels or hierarchy in salvation. All of humanity deserved death, but Christ became the fish, the salvation for all.

The church looks forward to that day when the hope offered through Jesus Christ comes to full realization with his Second Coming. In the last days, those who accept the grace offered through

Jesus will be made totally new and given fresh, clean, radiate garments.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come...We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:17,20-21

Lord Jesus, come quickly; make us a new creation so that we might fully be the righteousness of God.

An Emerging Vision for the Church in the 21st Century

Brian McLaughlin

Introduction

“A many-sided debate about the relations of Christianity and civilization is being carried on in our time.”¹ These words, penned by H. Richard Niebuhr in 1951, resonate loudly at the turn of the twenty-first-century. Today a many-sided debate about the relations of Christianity and the emerging postmodern culture is being carried on. On one side of the debate are those who believe the emerging postmodern culture is a myth.² On the other side of the debate are those who believe the postmodern culture is emerging at such a rapid pace that a radical response is required to save the church from virtual extinction.³ Between these two extremes exists a seemingly unlimited number of beliefs.⁴ One belief is coming from a worldwide group of Christian leaders participating in a growing movement commonly known as the Emerging Church (hereafter ECM⁵).

The Emerging Church movement believes that if the church

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951), 1.

² For example, see Andy Crouch, “Life After Postmodernity,” in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet (El Cajon, CA: emergentYS, 2003), 63-104; and Michael Horton, “Better Homes & Gardens” in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet (El Cajon, CA: emergentYS, 2003), 105-142.

³ For example, see Leonard Sweet, *Carpe Mañana: Is Your Church Ready to SEIZE TOMORROW?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 19.

⁴ For example, see Myron B. Penner, ed. *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005); and Sweet, *The Church in Emerging Culture*.

⁵ The abbreviation ECM stands for “Emerging Church movement.” ECM will be used throughout this paper to refer to the Emerging Church in general and to those who do not specifically identify with the Emerging Church but share a similar understanding of theology, ministry and culture. When ECM is used, it should not be assumed that each and every individual within the Emerging Church agrees with the point being made, but that it seems to represent the majority opinion. A more detailed discussion of the difficulty of labeling this particular movement will be discussed in the first section of this paper.

does not appropriately respond to the emerging postmodern era, it will either live irrelevantly or die rapidly. More specifically, ECM believes that an appropriate response includes a new theological method and a new practical ecclesiology.

The objective of this paper is to develop an understanding of the Emerging Church movement's proposed response to the postmodern era. This will be accomplished by interacting with three primary questions: First, what is the Emerging Church movement? Second, what need does ECM seek to address? Third, how does ECM address this need? Finally, this paper will provide an analysis of ECM's vision for the church of the twenty-first-century.

What is the Emerging Church Movement?

Attempting to define the Emerging Church movement is a difficult task. Part of this difficulty is that those within ECM resist a strict definition or identity. Emerging Church professor and practitioner Eddie Gibbs claims that ECM is an “umbrella that covers many diverse movements.”⁶ As such, there is no official leader or spokesperson. Perhaps the closest person to being an official leader is the “lead pastor” of ECM, Brian McLaren.⁷ However, he resists any definitive label and does not even want the Emerging Church to be called a “movement,” but prefers the more nebulous label of “conversation.”⁸ But despite the difficulty in assigning a precise definition to ECM, several features of this conversation are well

⁶ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 41.

⁷ That Brian McLaren is considered to be the “lead pastor” of the Emerging Church is hardly debated. He is called the “leader” of the Emerging Church in Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 16; the “pastor” of the Emerging Church in Millar J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds. *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 22; “the de facto spiritual leader for the emerging church” in Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” 38; and “the emerging church’s most influential thinker” in D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 35.

⁸ Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today* 48 (November 2004): 39.

known.

The impetus of ECM is found in the transition from a modern era to a postmodern era, a transition Emergent Leader Tony Jones believes is akin to a “Second Reformation.”⁹ Although the “full-scale frontal assault” on modernity began in the 1970s, it didn’t reach the evangelical church until the 1990s.¹⁰ It was in this last decade of the twentieth-century that ECM was born.

This new movement began in individual churches around the world. Some leaders began postmodern worship gatherings in existing churches.¹¹ Other leaders left their existing church to plant new postmodern churches.¹² Over time these individual leaders learned of one another and entered into conversation. This conversation was broadened through books, such as Dave Tomlinson’s *The Post-Evangelical*,¹³ and conferences, such as the Consultation on Evangelizing Generation X in 1993 and the Young Leaders Network (now Emergent) conferences beginning in 1997.¹⁴ Since that time the conversation has grown exponentially through more conferences, books, and especially the internet. By 2006 a leading ECM website, www.emergentvillage.org, could boast of “national and regional networks” in Canada, Central Africa, New

⁹ Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 10. His involvement with Emergent Leadership is described on <http://www.emergentvillage.org/Site/Explore/EmergentLeadership/index.htm>. Others who discuss the current status of this transition include Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 61.

¹⁰ See George Lings, “What is ‘Emerging Church’?” <http://www.emergingchurch.info/reflection/georgelings/index.htm>, accessed 17 Nov 2005; Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 2, 5. Some authors use the date 2000 as an easy reference point to mark the beginning of the Emerging Church: see Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 59 and Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 16.

¹¹ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 30-33. Some of the more prominent examples include Dieter Zander’s Axis in Barrington, Illinois and Dan Kimball’s Graceland in Santa Cruz, California.

¹² Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 30-33. Some of the more prominent examples include Chris Seay’s University Baptist Church in Waco, TX and Mark Driscoll’s Mars Hill in Seattle.

¹³ See Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 32.

¹⁴ See Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 32.

Zealand, South Africa, United Kingdom and the United States.¹⁵

If the impetus of the worldwide Emerging Church movement is found in the transition from a modern era to a postmodern era, the passion of ECM is an appropriate Christian response to this transition. Robert E. Webber, who utilizes the phrase “Younger Evangelical” rather than Emerging Church, summarizes this passion well: “Here, then, is how I am using the phrase *younger evangelical*. The younger evangelical is anyone, older or younger, who deals thoughtfully with the shift from twentieth- to twenty-first-century culture. He or she is committed to construct a biblically rooted, historically informed, and culturally aware new evangelical witness in the twenty-first century.”¹⁶ Regardless of the specific manner in which individuals within ECM address this transition, the passion to address the transition remains at the foundation of everyone in the conversation.

Combining this impetus and passion provides a working definition of ECM: *The Emerging Church movement is an ongoing, worldwide conversation about how the Christian church must respond to and engage the emerging postmodern culture in order to continue to advance the mission of the church.* This definition might be complemented with a motto provided by McLaren: “if you have a new world, you need a new church. You have a new world.”¹⁷

A more detailed description of how ECM interprets the needs arising from this transition and how those participating in the conversation seek to address these needs forms the next two components of this paper.

What Need Does the Emerging Church Movement Seek to Address?

The Need in General: An Appropriate Response to Postmodernity

The Emerging Church movement believes that the primary need for the church in the twenty-first-century is to appropriately

15

<http://www.emergentvillage.org/Site/Belong/EmergingOrganizations/index.htm>, accessed 9 March 2006.

¹⁶ Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 16.

¹⁷ Brian McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 15.

respond to the transition from a modern era to a postmodern era. McLaren laments “our modern version of Christianity won’t work on the other side, any more than a software program will work on an incompatible platform.”¹⁸ This statement makes two claims of the present situation that are common to ECM. First, the twentieth-century Christianity is enmeshed with the modern worldview and second, the postmodern worldview is significantly different from the modern worldview. So important are these two foundations that nearly every book produced by those within ECM includes some type of comparison and contrast of the two worldviews.¹⁹ A brief summary of ECM’s understanding of these two worldviews is provided below. Special attention will be paid to the “lead theologian” of the movement, Stanley Grenz.²⁰

The Emerging Church Movement’s Understanding of Modernity

Although each author describes the modern era in his own unique way, at least four major themes are seen throughout the writings of ECM: rationalism, individualism, dualism, and a Judeo-Christian ethic. These four themes might correctly be deemed the hallmarks of the modern era that nearly everyone in ECM seeks to address.²¹

The primary hallmark of the modern worldview is the elevation and dependence upon human reason.²² That is, moderns

¹⁸ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 172.

¹⁹ For examples, see Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 31-37; Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 31-66; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 159-201; and Brian D. McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 52-58.

²⁰ Stanley Grenz is chosen because he is “a prolific writer and perhaps the most thoughtful author addressing the matter of rethinking evangelicalism for a postmodern world” (Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 78). He is called the “theologian” of the Emerging Church by Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 92 and the “professor” by Taylor in *Reclaiming the Center*, 24.

²¹ Grenz uses the term “hallmarks” many times in his description of modernity. See *Primer on Postmodernity*, 167-174.

²² Nearly every author of the Emerging Church recognizes this as the primary characteristic of modernity. For a sampling, consult: Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press,

believe that the universe is governed by universal laws that are accessible by human reason, particularly human reason utilizing the empirical sciences and the scientific method, which allows a rational person to discover objective truth in an unbiased manner. In other words, moderns “felt that we could be sovereign, unbiased, autonomous, knowing subjects, rendering the world around us into objects...and rendering our knowledge cleanly objective.”²³ Moderns not only believe that it is possible to understand the entire universe, but that attaining this understanding will bring about peace and prosperity to the world. Therefore, an appropriate summary of the modern worldview is that it “exercises an absolute faith in human rational capacities.”²⁴ The impact on Christianity, ECM claims, is that the modern world created a rationalistic oriented faith.

A second hallmark of modernity is that it is individualistic.²⁵ Since every individual is endowed with the capacity to learn truth for themselves, outside authorities or communities are not required for the acquisition of truth and ethics. The impact on Christianity, McLaren claims, is that the modern world created a faith of “me and Jesus, me and my Bible, me and my spiritual growth, me and my salvation – getting my needs met, getting my soul fed, acquiring the religious goods and services needed for me and my happiness and my success.”²⁶

A third hallmark of modernity is a practical dualism. “The Enlightenment project was built on the division of reality into “mind” and “matter.” This fundamental dualism affected the Enlightenment view of the human person as “soul” (thinking substance) and “body” (physical substance).”²⁷ The impact on Christianity, ECM claims, is

2000), 25; Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 30; Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 44 and 59; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 193; Sweet, *Carpe Mañana*, 33; Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 83-106.

²³ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 193.

²⁴ Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 4.

²⁵ Nearly every author of the Emerging Church recognizes this as a primary characteristic of modernity. For a sampling, consult: Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 25; Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 34; Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 44 and 59; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 195; Sweet, *Carpe Mañana*, 33.

²⁶ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 196.

²⁷ Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 171. Many authors of the Emerging Church recognize this as a characteristic of modernity. For a sampling, consult:

that the modern world created a faith that impacted only the “religious” part of man, not the whole person. A person’s faith and religion is not often connected or operative in the other aspects of a person’s life, including their work and play.

A final hallmark of modernity is the Judeo-Christian ethic.²⁸ Although not everyone within the modern era professed to be Christian, it is often assumed that the culture at large understood and agreed upon the basic Judeo-Christian ethic. That is, if someone were to mention the Ten Commandments, most people would understand the source and content of this term. The impact on Christianity, ECM claims, is that everyone in the modern era shared a similar background with similar values. A basic understanding of the Christian story could be assumed in modern teaching, preaching and apologetics.

Though many authors associated with ECM often speak negatively of this modern worldview, it is not entirely correct to state that everyone in the movement is against modernity. Carson’s critique that “it is difficult to find a paragraph in any of the emergent writings that says anything positive or grateful about modernism or about the Christian churches that went around the world under modernism” is an overstatement.²⁹ Many acknowledge that modernity was a legitimate period in the history of the world that cannot be denied or ignored. Emerging Church practitioners Dan Kimball and Tony Jones, for example, acknowledges that many parts of the United States are still modern and must be ministered to in a manner consistent with this worldview.³⁰ Many also acknowledge that the modern church responded to its culture appropriately. McLaren regularly cites appreciation for Willow Creek’s Bill

Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 36; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 194.

²⁸ Many authors of the Emerging Church recognize this as a characteristic of modernity. It is often labeled “post-Christian.” For a sampling, consult: Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 58; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 74-75; Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World (After Christendom)* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004).

²⁹ Carson, *Becoming Conversant with Emergent*, 65.

³⁰ See Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 61-62 and Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 38, 83.

Hybels³¹ and Gibbs says that the megachurch movement was appropriate in its time and place.³² Rather, most in ECM are opposed to the ways in which the church has blindly *adopted* the modern worldview. In addition to the impacts on Christianity listed above, many within ECM complain that the church has so absorbed the modern worldview that some elements of biblical Christianity have been lost. Tony Jones believes that “it seems that the individualistic, scientific approach of modernism was quite antithetical to Christianity.”³³ Another complaint against the church in modern culture is that it has failed to move on from the modern culture to the emerging postmodern culture. In other words, this is a complaint of the church being content with the status quo. The general consensus of ECM is that the church’s greatest failure is that she is not willing to make this transition. Sweet summarizes this view well: “Much of the religious world is archaistic rather than futuristic in tendency; it abjures innovation, mourning the moment, and caressing the status quo or the status quo ante.”³⁴ The reason that this complaint ignites so much passion is due to the commonly held belief that if the church does not respond to the transition from a modern era to a postmodern era, it will live irrelevantly or die rapidly.

The Emerging Church Movement’s Understanding of Postmodernity

Just as ECM’s understanding of modernity is foundational to the need facing the church today, so is ECM’s understanding of postmodernity. In contrast to the modern worldview, the postmodern worldview is best described as “post-.”³⁵ That is, postmodernity is a movement “flowing on from or coming after” modernity.³⁶ The four hallmarks of postmodernity include: post-rationalism,

³¹ See McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 111-113; McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 185-186.

³² See Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 39.

³³ Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 114.

³⁴ Sweet, *Carpe Mañana*, 25.

³⁵ See Brian McLaren, Jerry Haselmayer, and Leonard Sweet, *A Is for Abductive* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 242.

³⁶ Brian McLaren, “Response,” in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet (El Cajon, CA: emergentYS, 2003), 66.

post-individualism, post-dualism, and post-Christian.

First, if modernity is rationalistic, then postmodernity is “post-rationalistic.”³⁷ That is, the postmodern believes that “our humanity does not consist solely in our cognitive dimension.”³⁸ While the postmodern continues to regard reason as *one* path to knowledge, it is no longer regarded as the *only* path to knowledge. Rather, a person’s emotions, experiences, intuition, and communal context all contribute. This leads to the conclusion that “the scientific enterprise alone cannot put us in touch with every dimension of reality” and truth.³⁹ The postmodern does not believe that the scientific method achieves objective truth in an unbiased manner. Rather, even in the empirical sciences a person carries along their emotions, intuition, experiences and communal context with them.⁴⁰ The impact on Christianity, ECM claims, is that a faith built upon rationalism alone will not survive in a postmodern culture.

Second, if modernity is individualistic, then postmodernity is post-individualistic.⁴¹ Since every individual cannot learn truth for themselves, outside authorities or communities are required for the acquisition of truth and ethics. In fact, knowledge and truth has been removed from the individual to the community’s construction of reality. And since one community’s construction of reality is different than another, postmoderns celebrate diversity and plurality, including a plurality of beliefs. Grenz believes this “communal nature

³⁷ Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 169. Nearly every author of the Emerging Church recognizes this as the primary characteristic of postmodernity. For a sampling, consult: Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 25; Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 21; Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 31 and 56; Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 44 and 60; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 164-167; Sweet, *Carpe Mañana*, 33; Sweet, McLaren, Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive*, 242.

³⁸ Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 169.

³⁹ Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 169.

⁴⁰ See Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 47.

⁴¹ Nearly every author of the Emerging Church recognizes this as a characteristic of postmodernity. For a sampling, consult: Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 31; Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 44 and 60; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 164; Sweet, *Carpe Mañana*, 33; Sweet, McLaren, Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive*, 242.

of truth results in a new kind of relativism.”⁴² The impact on Christianity, McLaren claims, is that the church must discover a “gospel that’s bigger than the salvation of my individual soul” and “an approach to the church experience in which “we” does not exist for “me.””⁴³

When post-rationalism is combined with post-individualism, postmodernity naturally results in the rejection of universal truths or realities. “In fact, the postmodern ethos arises from the assumption that there is no unified whole that we can call “reality.” Postmodern thinkers have given up the search for universal, ultimate truth because they are convinced that there is nothing more to find than a host of conflicting interpretations or an infinity of linguistically created worlds.”⁴⁴ In other words, “truth is relative to the community in which we participate.”⁴⁵ According to Grenz, this leads to a postmodern epistemology that consists of two aspects. First, postmoderns “view all explanations of reality as constructions that are useful, but not objectively true.”⁴⁶ Second, postmoderns “deny that we have the ability to step outside our constructions of reality.”⁴⁷ Community for the postmodern is more than just a desire to be more social, but is foundational to understanding, including an understanding of God.

Third, if modernity is dualistic, then postmodernity is post-dualistic.⁴⁸ That is, every aspect of a person’s being is interrelated and all aspects of life influence and inform one another. The impact on Christianity, ECM claims, is that the church must experience Christ both inside and outside of church.

⁴² Stanley J. Grenz, “Participating in What Frees: The Concept of Truth in the Postmodern Context,” *Review and Expositor* 100 (Fall 2003): 692.

⁴³ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 196.

⁴⁴ Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 163.

⁴⁵ Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 8.

⁴⁶ Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernity*, 43.

⁴⁷ Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernity*, 43.

⁴⁸ Nearly every author of the Emerging Church recognizes this as a characteristic of postmodernity. For a sampling, consult: Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 22; Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 31 and 37; Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 44 and 60; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 164; Sweet, *Carpe Mañana*, 33; Sweet, McLaren, Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive*, 242.

Finally, if modernity is characterized by the Judeo-Christian ethic, then postmodernity is post-Christian.⁴⁹ While the modern recognizes the source and content of the Ten Commandments, the postmodern may not recognize either. Due to the rise of diversity and pluralism in the postmodern era, it can no longer be assumed that people have a basic understanding of the Judeo-Christian ethic. The impact on Christianity, ECM claims, is that the church cannot assume a shared knowledge-base, but must communicate the gospel in such a way that anyone can understand it.

A unifying theme of those within ECM is that these four hallmarks of postmodernity present an opportunity for the church. Because of this, it is the *church's response* to postmodernity that is the need, not postmodernity itself. Just like the modern era, the postmodern era is a reality that cannot be changed, and, therefore, is not the problem. Grenz summarizes this well: "Postmodernism poses certain dangers. Nevertheless, it would be ironic – indeed, it would be tragic – if evangelicals ended up as the last defenders of the now dying modernity. To reach people in the new postmodern context, we must set ourselves to the task of deciphering the implications of postmodernism for the gospel."⁵⁰ Furthermore, this does not necessarily mean, as is often confused, that everyone within ECM wants a postmodern church. An extended quote from ECM author Reggie McNeal makes this point well: "I did not say that we need a postmodern church, nor did I say we need for the church to pursue its understanding of the culture in order to mimic it. The last thing we need is a postmodern church. We need a church for postmodern people."⁵¹ Tony Jones agrees because of his belief that both modernity and postmodernity are potential ditches and "these ditches on either side of the road must be avoided. In the middle is a road of levelheaded wisdom: being aware of culture and its changing emphases without blindly embracing these characteristics."⁵²

⁴⁹ See Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 60-61.

⁵⁰ Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 10.

⁵¹ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 141.

⁵² Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 38. One common example is postmodernity's rejection of the metanarrative, with which most in the Emerging Church disagree. See Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 164.

The general need that everyone within ECM sees for the church in the twenty-first-century is an appropriate response to postmodernity. However, there are two specific needs within this overarching need that must be addressed: a new theological method and a new practical ecclesiology.

Specific Need #1: Theological Method

The first specific need that dominates much of ECM literature is the need for a new theological method.⁵³ ECM believes that the church in the modern era adopted the scientific method and applied it to their theological method. Specifically, the modern church did theology through the lens of rationalism, or sometimes called propositionalism or foundationalism. Grenz and Franke claim that this rationalistic theological method views the Bible as a sourcebook of facts that is used to create a Christianity based upon propositions.⁵⁴ The modern church “assumed that the theological propositions they drew from the Bible state universal – even eternal – facts and that the chief goal of theology as an intellectual, scientific discipline was to compile these various facts.”⁵⁵ This led to the common evangelical refrain that “there is one single meaning to every text of Scripture and we have the tools to discover that meaning and know the intent of the author.”⁵⁶

Tony Jones provides a favorite example of the modern theological method is the *Four Spiritual Laws* popularized by Campus Crusade for Christ.⁵⁷ According to Jones and others within ECM, there are two primary concerns with this type of propositional presentations of the Gospel. First, defining theology as “law” goes against postmodernity’s inherent skepticism of absolutes. As

⁵³ While this statement is true, the level to which the various authors address the need for a new theological method varies greatly. Some authors, such as Grenz and Jones fully comprehend foundationalism, while others speak vaguely of propositions.

⁵⁴ For this critique, see Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 13-14.

⁵⁵ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 34.

⁵⁶ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 20.

⁵⁷ For one example of this, see Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 122.

McLaren summarizes, postmodernism “critiques not only the objective world and other people, but also the self and the self’s very ability to know and understand.”⁵⁸ Second, some within ECM believe that postmoderns do not process information in the same manner as moderns. Leonard Sweet characterizes modern thought as “cause-and-effect” and “linear.”⁵⁹ He characterizes postmodern thought, on the other hand, as “non-linear, laminated, loopy ways.”⁶⁰ In other words, people in a postmodern culture do not, and perhaps cannot, think in the same manner as those in a modern culture. “Futurist” Leonard Sweet believes in “culture-induced neuroscientific changes” that will make linear, propositional thinking a thing of the past.⁶¹ The result is that the modern church communicates in a manner that is not understood or accepted in a postmodern world. In this regard, the new theological method is actually an aspect of the church’s mission to proclaim Christ to the world: “The Spirit invites us to engage in the theological enterprise cognizant of the context in the midst of which Christ calls us to be his people, which for many of us is the emerging postmodern society.”⁶²

It is important to note that most in ECM do not reject objective truth or all theological propositions. Kimball and Grenz, for example, recognize that theology does have a cognitive aspect and that some propositions can be legitimately derived from Scripture.⁶³ But the key is that ECM does not see theological propositions as the *goal* of theology as some in the modern church did. Rather, theology is a practical discipline that is lived out in historical and social contexts.⁶⁴ As Webber summarizes, theology in the postmodern era “will move from an analytical/systematic to an integrative/systems approach that emphasizes history, narrative, story.”⁶⁵

⁵⁸ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 162.

⁵⁹ Sweet, *Carpe Mañana*, 63.

⁶⁰ Sweet, *Carpe Mañana*, 63.

⁶¹ Sweet, *Carpe Mañana*, 62.

⁶² Grenz, “Agenda for Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern Context,” 5.

⁶³ See Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 188; and Grenz, “Agenda for Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern Context,” 6.

⁶⁴ See Grenz, “Agenda for Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern Context,” 6.

⁶⁵ Sweet, McLaren and Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive*, 282.

The need for a new theological method remains at the core of ECM.⁶⁶ Rob Bell, a popular practitioner in the movement, is frustrated that this aspect of ECM is often overlooked: “People don’t get it. They think it’s about style. But the real question is: What is the gospel?”⁶⁷ McLaren, too, wants to make clear that this is a foundational need that must be addressed: “We have to distinguish between genuine Christianity and our (individual and various culture-encoded) versions of it.”⁶⁸ But having addressed this need, it is appropriate to move to the second specific need, the need for a change in practical ecclesiology.

Specific Need #2: Practical Ecclesiology

The second specific need that dominates ECM literature is one of ecclesiology. It is important to note up front that it is not that the church itself is the need. Everyone within ECM sees the church as the God-ordained means for promoting the Kingdom of God on earth today.⁶⁹ The need is one of practice. Again, the Emerging Church is concerned that the modern church’s practice has been distorted by an adherence to modernity, and the epitome of the church adhering to the modern culture is the seeker-sensitive, megachurch movement standardized by Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Church. Though some within ECM acknowledge that these churches were appropriate in a modern context, nearly everyone within ECM complains that their time has passed. The two primary complaints against the modern church are its communication and structure.

First, the communication of the modern church is intimately related to its theological method. Therefore, ECM’s complaint against the modern church’s communication is that it is too individualistic and propositional. One prominent example that is often discussed in ECM literature is evangelism. The modern church evangelism emphasizes the cognitive aspects of conversion. That is,

⁶⁶ Carson agrees but discusses it in terms of epistemology rather than theological method. See Carson, *Becoming Conversant with Emergent*, 58.

⁶⁷ Crouch, “Emergent Mystique,” 41.

⁶⁸ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 172.

⁶⁹ For example, see Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 48.

the modern church utilizes the scientific method to prove that the Bible is true, lays out a series of propositions taken from the Bible that must be accepted or denied, and then attempting to resolve any apparent contradictions or complaints that may arise in the process. McLaren views this form of evangelism as a “win-lose argument.”⁷⁰ Rather, in both teaching and evangelizing, he believes that the church must communicate in a manner that is “short on sermons, long on conversations; short on answers, long on questions; short on abstractions and propositions, long on stories and parables; short on telling you what to think, long on challenging you to think for yourself; short on condemning the irreligious, long on confronting the religious.”⁷¹ This change in communication is essential, McLaren believes, for the postmodern culture to hear and receive the gospel.

In addition to a change in communication, ECM believes that there should be a change in church structure. In essence, the complaint is that modern church structures have become too corporate and consumer-driven.⁷² For example, Dan Kimball grieves the building that no longer looks like a church, the leader who acts like a corporate manager, and the programming that divides the community into different ages and life situations.⁷³ Kimball believes that all of these aspects of the structure of the church are merely an accommodation to the modern culture, rather than a picture of true Christianity. As such, he believes that such structures will not endure in the postmodern era which longs for spirituality and community. As Kimball concludes, “the changes in our culture are influencing emerging generations to crave a raw and vintage approach to Christianity and church. Therefore, contemporary seeker-sensitive methodology goes against what connects with them most deeply.”⁷⁴

Summary

⁷⁰ McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 25-29.

⁷¹ McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 15.

⁷² For examples, see Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 19; Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 41-45; Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 52; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 27-34.

⁷³ See Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 105-106, 127, 134, 229-231.

⁷⁴ Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 36.

In summary, the primary need that ECM sees is an appropriate response to the postmodern era. Specifically, ECM believes that the church needs a new theological method and a new practical ecclesiology in order to survive. Having briefly assessed the need, the next section of this paper will take these needs and briefly outline how ECM proposes that these needs ought to be met.

How Does the Emerging Church Movement Address these Needs?

Having outlined the needs that ECM believes are facing the church today, it is appropriate to provide a brief overview of how these needs are addressed.

Addressing Need in General: An Appropriate Response to Postmodernity

Since the primary need is an appropriate response to postmodernity, interaction with the postmodern worldview is essential. McLaren believes that there are three specific steps that the church must take to survive and thrive in a postmodern culture: understand it, engage it, and respond to it.

First, the church must understand postmodernity.⁷⁵ The church must not deny that this transition is taking place or assume that the transition from a modern era to a postmodern era is temporary, but it must accept the postmodern worldview is the worldview of the day. As such, the church must truly understand postmodernity and not simply reject it by accepting the common Christian critiques of postmodernity that McLaren believes are mostly mythical.⁷⁶ This first step is clearly a priority because, as shown above, nearly every book produced by ECM offers some comparison and contrast between the modern worldview and the postmodern worldview.

Second, the church must engage postmodernity.⁷⁷ It is not enough for the church to merely understand postmodernity, but it

⁷⁵ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 159-170.

⁷⁶ See McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 166-167.

⁷⁷ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 171-188.

must engage postmodernity to accomplish the mission. Some of the ways in which McLaren believes the church should engage postmodernity include the need to: “see truth and goodness where they exist in postmodernism,”⁷⁸ “address the postmoderns’ existential predicament,”⁷⁹ “listen to postmoderns’ stories,”⁸⁰ “address issues we have never even thought about before,”⁸¹ and “become seekers again.”⁸² ECM believes that it is only through engagement with the postmodern worldview, which does not necessarily equal uncritical acceptance, will the church continue live in the next century.

The final step McLaren sees in this process is to “get ready for revolution.”⁸³ This step is certainly the most controversial, as revolution often means the dismantling of all things modern. Gibbs and Bolger summarize this process well: “one must dismantle the old, clear the way, before one can build something truly new.”⁸⁴ While it is relatively easy to define which components of modernity Gibbs and Bolger would like to dismantle, it is not so easy to define what the church will look like after it is dismantled. One thing that ECM despises and tries to avoid at all costs is a standard model for all churches to imitate. Because “the emerging church is more of a mindset than a model...there is not a single model for the emerging church” but “hundreds and thousands” of methods.⁸⁵ But despite this zero tolerance for imitation, ECM does repeat several key themes: embracing a new theological method and a new practical ecclesiology.

Addressing the Need #1: A New Theological Method

The first thing that is called for in a theological method is the rejection of foundationalism. Specifically, this rejection is a denial

⁷⁸ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 173.

⁷⁹ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 177.

⁸⁰ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 178.

⁸¹ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 179.

⁸² McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 183.

⁸³ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 189.

⁸⁴ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 28.

⁸⁵ Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 14.

that the essence of being a Christian is the acceptance of the propositions that it produces. Tony Jones summarizes this position well:

The truth is, you can be a Christian without being a foundationalist – and you can share the gospel without using foundationalist arguments. We are not letting go of Christ, nor are we starting down the slippery slope that leads to liberalism. Instead, we are moving beyond the foundationalism that gave birth to liberalism and fundamentalism. We’re living in a world that is giving up on foundations, so it is imperative that we find ways to talk about the gospel without relying upon foundations.⁸⁶

Jones and others within ECM reject foundationalism because the postmodern era is post-rationalistic and they believe that “Christianity can stand on its own; it needs no rational defense.”⁸⁷ Therefore, the second thing that is called for in a theological method is nonfoundationalism. That is, in place of a theological method based upon foundationalism, Grenz and others propose a theological method based upon the Christian community: “More specifically, nonfoundationalist approaches see Christian theology as an activity of the community that gathers around Jesus the Christ.”⁸⁸ In other words, the Bible and current Christian theology consists of the experiences of God’s people and the sharing of these experiences through story. As Webber notes, postmodernity takes theology “from propositionalism to narrative.”⁸⁹

Consider Christian evangelism, to pick up on an earlier example. Rather than evangelism through propositions, ECM views evangelism in two primary ways. First, Webber and others often speak of incarnational apologetics.⁹⁰ Just as the incarnate Jesus communicated God to the world through his being, so the church is to continue this incarnation and communicate God through its being. This involves a life of intentional service where the church goes out into the community, rather than seeking to bring the community to the church. Second, Webber and others believe that story, or narrative,

⁸⁶ Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 143.

⁸⁷ Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 99.

⁸⁸ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 48.

⁸⁹ Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 83.

⁹⁰ See Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 95. See also Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 217; Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 47-50.

is the most important aspect of evangelism: “the case for the Christian faith is no longer reason against reason but faith against faith in opposing stories.”⁹¹ These stories might be the story of an individual Christian and his experience with God, or the story of the Christian community as found in the Bible. It is this post-foundational approach to theology that motivates nearly every ECM practitioner to emphasize the role of narrative or story in every aspect of the Christian life, including preaching, teaching and evangelism.⁹² McLaren brings these two points together in his summary of what evangelism should look like: “good evangelism is the process of being friendly without discrimination and influencing all of one’s friends towards better living, through good deeds and conversations. For a Christian like myself, evangelism simply means engaging in these conversations with the spirit and example of Jesus Christ.”⁹³

Addressing the Need #2: A New Practical Ecclesiology

In addition to a new theological method, ECM seeks to address the need for a new practical ecclesiology, primarily in terms of its communication and structure.

In its communication, ECM believes that the church should move from cognitive, propositional presentations of Christianity to an experiential, narrative experience of Christianity. A good example of how this communication might take place is to consider the idea of what a corporate worship gathering might look like. In worship, Gibbs “looks to communicate the gospel in language that both they and their hearers understand in the context of a world they both share.”⁹⁴ To accomplish this, Kimball proposes several aspects that differentiate it from the modern church. First, the gathering will be

⁹¹ Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 84.

⁹² For examples, see Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 27; McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 73-84; McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 25-33; Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 83-93.

⁹³ McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 15.

⁹⁴ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 77.

nonlinear.⁹⁵ That is, the service might be designed around a theme of Scripture and this one theme comes through in music, art, message, and any number of other elements, rather than the sermon being the focal point of the service. Second, the gathering will be multisensory.⁹⁶ Rather than focusing merely on cognition by listening to a message, the gathering should include seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. Third, the gathering will include members of all generations.⁹⁷ Finally, the gathering will be experiential.⁹⁸ Church should not be a “spectator sport,” but everyone should have an opportunity to participate. Such a service would communicate to the postmodern values that are post-rationalistic, post-individualistic, and post-dualistic.

In its structure, ECM wants a shift “from market driven to mission oriented.”⁹⁹ Many believe that this is accomplished when they are “not only focus on the life of Jesus but are also taking a fresh look at the gospel they thought they always knew.”¹⁰⁰ According to Gibbs, this rediscovery of Jesus’ mission typically points in three directions: focus less on numbers as the criteria for success, shift away from being seeker- and consumer-driven, and reclaim the gospel message that was distorted by modernity and consumerism.¹⁰¹ McLaren is representative of ECM in offering thirteen strategies to accomplish this, including a redefinition in mission, abandoning old structures, creating team oriented leaders and creating a culture of change that will always grow and develop.¹⁰²

In both of these aspects of practical ecclesiology, communication and structure, most within ECM finds its answer in the ancient church.¹⁰³ In fact, though ECM despises models to be imitated, the ancient church is one that it is proud to imitate. Webber

⁹⁵ Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 122-123.

⁹⁶ Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 128-130.

⁹⁷ Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 150.

⁹⁸ Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 155.

⁹⁹ Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 36.

¹⁰⁰ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 49.

¹⁰¹ See Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 39-45.

¹⁰² See McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*.

¹⁰³ For examples, see Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 65; Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 29, 88, 223; and Webber’s *Ancient-Future* series.

boldly proclaims, “the road to the future runs through the past.”¹⁰⁴ Many believe that all of these needs are addressed if the church were to return to ancient faith and practice: “The return to ancient faith and practice is increasingly seen as a way forward in churches polarized by worship wars and theological intransigence.”¹⁰⁵ Although many within ECM draw from practices from throughout church history, most see the first three centuries of the church as one that was engaged in a relativistic culture and had not yet been corrupted by the politicizing of the church under Constantine. Furthermore, it sees the first three centuries of the church as one that existed in a pluralistic and relativistic era of “mystery religions, polytheism, gnosticism, cults such as Manichaeism, and the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism and Neo-Platonism,” a diversity similar to the postmodern era.¹⁰⁶ As a result, many within ECM believe that the ancient model of church, worship, spirituality, mission and authority should be applied to the church of the twenty-first-century.¹⁰⁷ But the primary reason that the ancient church is admired, according to Webber, “is because it is truth that has the power to speak to a postmodern worldview. Early Christian teaching is simple and uncluttered, it cuts through the complexities of culturized Christianity and allows what is primary and essential to surface.”¹⁰⁸

An Analysis of the Emerging Church Movement

Any analysis of the Emerging Church movement is difficult because, as shown above, defining the movement is difficult. Even Jones acknowledges that the movement is “still flawed and partial” and is diverse and developing.¹⁰⁹ Because of this, there is a great potential to make generalizations about ECM that do not apply equally to all of its practitioners. Therefore, the following will attempt to be a fair and balanced analysis, with a recognition that not

¹⁰⁴ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 7.

¹⁰⁵ Scott Bader-Saye, “The Emergent matrix: A new kind of church?” *Christian Century* (November 30, 2004): 21.

¹⁰⁶ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 27.

¹⁰⁷ See Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 25-38.

¹⁰⁸ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 29.

¹⁰⁹ Jones, “Response to Recent Criticism.”

every point will apply to every individual practitioner within ECM. This analysis will briefly discuss the strengths and then outline three potential dangers facing ECM.

The Strengths of the Emerging Church Movement

Perhaps the greatest strength of ECM is that it recognizes that culture is transitioning to a postmodern era. It is possible, if not probable, that the transition from the modern era to the postmodern era is not as dramatic and clean-cut as many make it seem (see below), but there is definitely a transition.¹¹⁰ ECM must be commended for having their finger on the pulse of the culture.

But more than just recognizing this transition, ECM is passionate about responding to it for the sake of proclaiming Christ to the world. The reason that these leaders seek to engage the postmodern culture is for the sake of the gospel, not for the sake of accommodation. McNeal's comments are worth repeating: "the last thing we need is a postmodern church. We need a church for postmodern people."¹¹¹ It is shameful and inexcusable for the church to not have an understanding of the world around it and to not respond in a manner that the culture can understand and accept. The ECM is a leader in cultural awareness and challenging the status quo. It desires to see Christ proclaimed, understood, and accepted in the postmodern world. While some may debate their methodology, their motivation should not be questioned.

A second strength is ECM's ecclesiology that the church is God's ordained vehicle in the world today. Much of their critique of the modern church is not a critique of Christ's Church, but is motivated by a desire to see the church thrive and Jesus Christ proclaimed to the world.

Finally, ECM is bravely challenging the modern theological method. Some in the modern era definitely created a Christianity based upon mental assent to propositions. While the Bible does

¹¹⁰ I cannot agree with the likes of Andy Crouch and Michael Horton who dismiss such a transition altogether. For their thoughts, see Sweet, *The Church in Emerging Culture*, 63-142.

¹¹¹ McNeal, *The Present-Future*, 141.

provide objective truth which can be contained in propositions, is not a science text that should be defended or read in that manner. In a sense, ECM is doing at a popular level what the Reformed Epistemologists have done at an academic level.¹¹² Often conclusions in this area are overstated and potentially accommodating (see below), but the desire to pull away from pure propositionalism is commendable.

But recognizing that there are many positive aspects of ECM, there are at least three major dangers: the danger of misrepresentation, the danger of imitation and the danger of accommodation. The final section will briefly outline these potential dangers.

The Danger of Misrepresentation

Any movement that consciously reacts against another movement faces the danger of misrepresentation. ECM faces this danger in two ways: misrepresenting the modern and postmodern eras and misrepresenting the modern church practical ecclesiology.

First, ECM faces the danger of misrepresenting the modern and postmodern eras. Specifically, ECM authors present both eras as monolithic eras and, therefore, presents both eras as an “absolute antithesis” to one another.¹¹³ For example, Jones, Kimball and Sweet believe that moderns value the rational while postmoderns value the experiential.¹¹⁴ It often seems as if these authors believe that no moderns value any form of experience and no postmoderns value any form of reason. It is also difficult to see how the postmodern era in the United States is any less consumerist than the modern era.¹¹⁵ ECM often does not take into consideration the diversity found within each era and, as a result, creates an analysis that is “so stylized and reductionistic as to represent a major historical distortion.”¹¹⁶

¹¹² See Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); and the many helpful references to Plantinga and Wolterstorff in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 46-49.

¹¹³ Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 129.

¹¹⁴ See Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 44; Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 30-31; Sweet, *Carpe Mañana*, 33.

¹¹⁵ See McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 196.

¹¹⁶ Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 60.

Furthermore, ECM rarely takes into consideration that the beginning of the twenty-first-century represents a *transition* from modernity to postmodernity, so that both worldviews are present at the same time. Though it is possible to find some carefully nuanced verbiage about the modern to postmodern transition, the overall feeling that one is left with when reading many ECM authors is that the modern era is dead and gone, and a brand-new era has arrived in its place.¹¹⁷ Since ECM sees an appropriate response to postmodernity as the greatest need today, misrepresenting the modern and postmodern era poses a grave danger to the proposed responses for meeting this need.

Second, ECM faces the danger in misrepresenting the modern church's practical ecclesiology. The greatest misrepresentation may be that the modern church has lost its mission or, more dramatically, forgotten why it exists.¹¹⁸ This misrepresentation is most commonly charged against the megachurch movement. However, any brief analysis of the megachurch movement will reveal that it has a well-defined mission that is clearly aimed at reaching those who do not know Christ.¹¹⁹ Even Os Guinness, a strong critic of the megachurch movement recognizes the fact that most megachurches are passionate about the proclaiming Christ to the world.¹²⁰

Some of this same misrepresentation is found in their own self-description, rather than their description of the modern church. For example, Gibbs and Bolger's anecdotal *Emerging Churches* outlines nine characteristics that define an Emerging Church. The three major characteristics include: "identify with the life of Jesus," "transform the secular realm," and "live highly communal lives."¹²¹ These three major characteristics lead to several other minor

¹¹⁷ Jones says "in this period of cultural transition we'll have to combine old and new to reach all sorts of students," but the rest of his work leaves the impression of an absolute antithesis. See Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 83.

¹¹⁸ See Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 19, 63-64 and McNeal, *The Present-Future*, 15.

¹¹⁹ In addition to their websites, see Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); and Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

¹²⁰ See Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 22.

¹²¹ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 45.

characteristics, including “welcome the stranger” and “serve with generosity.”¹²² Throughout their survey, Gibbs and Bolger quote ECM leaders who believe that these characteristics are unique to the movement. For example, one leader states his church “looks to communicate the gospel in language that both they and their hearers understand in the context of a world they both share.”¹²³ Another church leader speaks of playing “secular” music so that “church resembles the rest of their lives.”¹²⁴ Gibbs’s final conclusion is that “emerging churches retrieved the life of Jesus as a reference point.”¹²⁵ In these descriptions it is, at best, ignorant and, at worst, arrogant to claim that these are unique to ECM.

The Danger of Imitation

A second danger ECM faces is, ironically, the danger of imitation. A major concern of ECM is that modern churches, derived from a mindset of consumerism, simply took the latest church success story or “how-to” and attempted to apply it to their own context. McLaren acknowledges that megachurch leaders like Hybels were visionaries within the modern era, but he laments when other churches imitated their style without their vision because they “violate the very process that made them successful.”¹²⁶ Furthermore, ECM believes imitation does not work in a postmodern culture because of the desire for authenticity and the rapid rate of cultural change. For this reason, leaders like Jones and Kimball often begin with not-so-subtle disclaimers: “Sorry. No models inside”¹²⁷ or “there is not single model for the emerging church”¹²⁸ However, many of these same books then proceed to outline how their church is structured in great detail. Kimball, for example, devotes over half of his book to detailing how he constructed a church for postmoderns,

¹²² Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 45.

¹²³ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 77.

¹²⁴ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 71.

¹²⁵ Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 64.

¹²⁶ McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, 111.

¹²⁷ Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001),

12.

¹²⁸ Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 14.

complete with diagrams of a worship gathering and detailed teaching topics.¹²⁹ Whether admitted or not, the vast amount of literature coming from ECM often reads similar to the “how-to” manuals of the modern era, thus encouraging others to imitate their methodologies.

The Danger of Accommodation

Os Guinness’ critique of the modern church provides a helpful analysis of the danger now facing ECM, accommodation. While Gibbs and others read Guinness’ assessment with great approval,¹³⁰ some of Guinness’ major concerns may now be appropriately turned onto ECM itself. Namely, it is the danger that ECM is flirting with accommodation to the postmodern era. The following analysis will use the example of the nonfoundationalist theological method to show how Tony Jones flirts with accommodation.

According to Guinness, the first step toward accommodation is assumption. In this assumption “some aspect of modern life or thought is entertained not only as significant, and therefore worth acknowledging, but as superior to what Christians now know or do, and therefore worth assuming is true.”¹³¹ It seems that Jones assumes that the postmodern method of emphasizing the impact of cultural context is superior to the modern method of emphasizing objectivity: “The first order of business is admit that our cultural context colors the way we read Scripture.”¹³²

The second step toward accommodation is abandonment: “Everything that does not fit with the new assumption is either discounted or cut out.”¹³³ This abandonment mentality is evident in Gibbs and Bolger’s analysis of ECM where a key phrase is “dismantle.”¹³⁴ In the example of theological method, Jones seems to want to abandon most claims to objective truth and theological propositions: “So we must stop looking for some objective Truth that

¹²⁹ See Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 101-261.

¹³⁰ Gibbs does approve of Guinness in *ChurchNext*, 42-64.

¹³¹ Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 56.

¹³² Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 201.

¹³³ Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 56.

¹³⁴ See Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*.

is available when we delve into the text of the Bible...let's embrace that truth as each student comes to it, without imposing our own slanted view of biblical truth on them."¹³⁵

The third step toward accommodation is adaptation: "something new is assumed, something old is abandoned, and everything else is adapted. In other words, what remains of traditional beliefs and practices is altered to fit in with the new assumption."¹³⁶ In the example of theological method, Jones often adapts the traditional understanding of Scripture: "The second order of business is to come to terms with the fact that the Bible is propaganda. Just as we do not read the Bible from a neutral, objective place, it was not written as a neutral, objective book."¹³⁷

The final step toward accommodation is assimilation: "at the end of the line, Christian assumptions are absorbed by modern ones. The gospel has been assimilated into the shape of culture, often without a remainder."¹³⁸ Though Jones concludes his section with the battle cry, "let's teach them the whole story of Scripture by *telling them stories*," it is not completely accurate to say that he has fully assimilated into a postmodern theological method. He does break from postmodernity by stating his belief in the metanarrative of Scripture "that is universally applicable and acceptable to all human beings."¹³⁹ This is the one aspect of the theological method in which Jones has not accommodated, but the danger is certainly present.

Conclusion

The Emerging Church movement is one of the most powerful and influential forces in Western Christianity at the turn of the twenty-first-century. The amount of literature by and about ECM reveals that this is a conversation that is only gaining momentum. As a result, it is important to understand what ECM is as well as the needs those within the movement are seeking to address. This author believes that ECM is a leader in responding to the ongoing cultural transformation from a modern era to a postmodern era. The analysis

¹³⁵ Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 201.

¹³⁶ Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 57.

¹³⁷ Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 202.

¹³⁸ Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 57.

¹³⁹ Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 205, 207.

and proposals of how to respond to this transition must be considered. However, ECM carries with it several dangers that must also be considered. But in its entirety, the Emerging Church movement is one movement with which all thoughtful church leaders must interact.

A Case of Mistaken Identity: Understanding the Context of John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*

Leon Johnston

Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666) seems the work of a religious extremist! It is almost unbelievable—at least to the modern reader. It depicts John Bunyan's (1628-88) emotional climactic conversion experience. This was common to him and his contemporaries, but is not as common to the modern Christian convert. Especially noticeable is the extreme stance he takes against seemingly 'minor' sins: swearing, 'gaming' on the Sabbath and ringing the church bell at inappropriate times. The entire book is a 'roller coaster ride' of emotions. But what such readers may not understand is that his conversion experience was more common than not in his day. It was not an extreme case. Such misgivings are corrected by understanding the context in which such works were written, the clarification of which is the goal here. Why did Bunyan write the autobiography and why does it look as it does? What does it reveal about conversion of his period? But first, what makes his autobiography so representative of the genre? In answering these questions I assume that most readers are familiar with Bunyan and/or with spiritual autobiography in general. If not, then this essay will serve as an introduction to both. At any rate, my main point is as follows: that *Grace Abounding* depicts a common conversion experienced by many in the later seventeenth-century, one largely influenced by Puritan theology and revolutionary circumstances.

Spiritual autobiography flourished in the seventeenth century.¹ Bunyan's is only one of many that were written and published in this period. It is ironic that at first his story was almost ignored, considering its present popularity.² There are many reasons for a renewed interest in Bunyan's account, all of which point to his

¹ Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 2.

² Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *John Bunyan* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961), 121.

story is an ideal sample to study in exploring later seventeenth century conversion: (1) Bunyan's autobiography was noticeably different. It was marked by greater emotional intensity; consequently, it was more memorable.³ (2) Yet, even though emotionally intense, the text revealed a real person, a "living, suffering human being, not a mere gush of words,"⁴ which sometimes characterized other nonconformist autobiographies (his readers identified with him). (3) And because Bunyan later wrote the popular allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), his other writings were noticed and preserved.⁵

Thus Bunyan's autobiography stands out among a multitude of life-stories written during that period, making it a true representative of the genre as a whole. Yet, Bunyan aside for the moment, why did the genre thrive? What stimulated this growth? Owen C. Watkins, in his *The Puritan Experience* (1972), explains that:

It was a genre that became popular with Puritan readers in the second half of the seventeenth century, and was the outcome of conditions that were distinctively English, notably the contribution made to reformed theology by the English Puritan divines in their doctrine of divine grace. . . . One of the results was that men and women with no special literary skill developed an ability to analyze and communicate their religious experience; the Puritan culture provided a body of theory, a technique, and a language with which to do so—and they were dedicated pupils.⁶

The genre seemed to just naturally emerge as the Puritans turned to express themselves in writing. And although Bunyan, as a Nonconformist, was not a Puritan *per se*, he had puritanical roots. He was the result of decades of Puritan teaching. And although Puritan dominance had waned recently, the theology was still pre-eminent. Thus, Bunyan was highly influenced by Puritan thought, and this

³ Margaret Bottrall, "Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*" in *Every Man a Phoenix: Studies in Seventeenth Century Autobiography* (London: John Murray, 1958), 88.

⁴ Winslow, *John Bunyan*, 126.

⁵ Winslow, *John Bunyan*, 126. Also, because of the recent tri-centenary of Bunyan's death (1988), many scholars have re-examined him.

⁶ Watkins, *John Bunyan*, 2.

influence was obviously seen in his conversion experience as recorded in his autobiography. Consequently, Bunyan is an excellent sample of spiritual autobiography. In fact, he is representative of the genre as a whole, considering the above reasons for a renewed interest in his life story. Thus, a study of his autobiography should be revealing as far as later seventeenth century conversion is concerned. But before Bunyan is examined more closely, the Puritans must be explored further: why were they such eager writers?

Perhaps the answer lies in their love for preaching. As devoted preachers, it seemed only natural that they would record their sermons, which they did already as early as the late sixteenth century.⁷ In the decades that followed, more sermons were written, as well as doctrinal treatises and later, personal conversion-narratives. This love for writing was inherited by the Nonconformists. William Haller, in *The Rise of Puritanism* (1957), remarks on the increased confidence of the Nonconformists to write in these later years:⁸

The vulgar prophet, having no diploma more academic in origin put forth his own account of his spiritual struggle and conversion as a kind of diploma from the Holy Ghost. Hence came not only the *Grace Abounding* of the Baptist tinker, John Bunyan, but a flood of such confessions from other Baptists and from the ranters, seekers, quakers, Muggletonians and the other enthusiasts to awaken the spirit in the lower classes after 1650.⁹

Indeed, then, the Nonconformists loved to write like the Puritans before them, but why spiritual autobiographies? What brought about such a flood of personal accounts? Watkins observes four factors: (1) in the 1640s there was an increased number of biographies added to funeral sermons; (2) seventy years of expert preaching resulted in religious experimentation, which encouraged individual religious expression; (3) the practise of requiring personal testimonies for church membership, and (4) the overall effect of

⁷ William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, (reprint, New York: Harper Torch Books, 1957), 5.

⁸ Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, 326.

⁹ Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, 115.

having other people's experiences available to read.¹⁰ These influences contributed to the Puritan framework of the seventeenth-century. A model developed for all to use for conversion. Watkins describes this model as a map to follow or a stick to measure against the self regarding conversion.¹¹ Diaries were often used as a 'measuring stick,'¹² which also contributed to the writing of autobiographies. But these are seemingly more narrow, religious influences (and rightfully so with religious conversion). What else occurred in the seventeenth century to promote this genre?

There are also more general cultural influences that encouraged the writing of spiritual autobiographies, especially those relating to economics and politics. Winslow describes the seventeenth century as being an 'age of introspection', especially for religion, politics and art.¹³ People began looking inward, emotions were amplified, and in the case of a religious person, sin was 'enlarged'. There were many changes in this century that contributed to an introspective personality. One major influence was the changing economic times. As R. H. Tawney, in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1964) says,

It was a society in rapid motion, swayed by new ambitions and haunted by new terrors, in which both success and failure had changed their meaning. Except in the turbulent north, that aim of the great landowner was no longer to hold at his call an army of retainers, but to exploit his estates as a judicious investment. The prosperous merchant, once content to win a position of power in fraternity or town, now flung himself into the task of carving his way to solitary pre-eminence, unaided by the artificial protection of guild or city. To the immortal poverty of peasant and craftsman, pitting, under the ever-present threat of famine, their pigmy forces against an implacable nature, was added the haunting insecurity of a growing, though still small, proletariat, detached from their narrow niche in village or borough, the sport of social forces which they could neither understand, nor arrest, nor

¹⁰ Watkins, *The Puritan Experience*, 28.

¹¹ Watkins, *The Puritan Experience*, 35-6.

¹² Watkins, *The Puritan Experience*, 18; and Winslow, *John Bunyan*, 123-4.

¹³ Winslow, *John Bunyan*, 123-4.

control.¹⁴

This was Bunyan's changing world. In short, life was uncertain.

Furthermore, the government was unstable. The monarchy was overthrown and replaced by the Protectorate only to be reinstated a decade later. But this economic and political instability was only partly to blame for the despair many felt. The greater influence was theological: Calvinism. But what was so troubling about John Calvin's theology? How did it nurture an extreme introspective conscience, which led to the writing of many autobiographies?

It goes without saying that Calvin was a dominant theological influence in Bunyan's time. There were large numbers of 'Calvinists' or 'Reformed' Protestants all over Europe who adhered to his teaching, recorded in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536).¹⁵ England was no different under the thoroughly Calvinist William Perkins, the influential English Puritan.¹⁶ But what did Calvin teach? And what were the implications of Calvin's theology?

It was the doctrine of predestination that was to heavily influence spiritual autobiography. Yet it is ironic that predestination would become so central in Puritanism as it was not Calvin's primary focus.¹⁷ However, the divine sovereignty of God *was* supremely important to him,¹⁸ and it was this view that logically led him to conclude that predestination was correct.¹⁹ It had to be. He defines his doctrine this way:

¹⁴ R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 2d ed., (London: John Murray, 1964), 137.

¹⁵ There were numerous revisions made to *The Institutes*, both in Latin and French; the last by Calvin was in 1560. John Stachniewsky notes in his *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) that Calvin was the most published writer in England between 1548 and 1650 (p. 17).

¹⁶ Stachniewsky, *The Persecutory Imagination*, 17; and see N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (England: Leicester Press, 1987), 240. Keeble calls Perkins the 'English Calvin'.

¹⁷ Stachniewsky, *The Persecutory Imagination*, 24.

¹⁸ See John Von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought*, American Academy of Religion, Studies in Religion, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 2.

¹⁹ Stachniewsky, *The Persecutory Imagination*, 19, 24.

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or to death.²⁰

Such teaching was to have painful consequences.²¹ Calvin's theology caused the individual to ask, 'How do I know I am saved?' and rightfully so, as a person is totally at God's mercy throughout the process. Was there really no certainty of salvation? The *Institutes* largely ignores the anxiety.²² It is almost as if Calvin just assumed that the 'elect' would simply concentrate on Christ and be confident of his or her salvation. This must have been his own experience.²³ He at least acknowledges that anxiety was possible, but instead of confronting this fear, he warns against the natural tendency to over-examine the soul. Stachniewski understands Calvin to say that even such anxieties may be a sign of reprobation; and it was not that Calvin forgot to talk about this. "It distorts Calvin's theology even to suggest that the lack of counsel was an omission."²⁴ The following is a sample of Calvin's treatment of the anxiety of the elect:

But what proof have you of your election? When once this thought has taken possession of any individual, it keeps him perpetually miserable, subjects him to dire torment, or throw him into a state of complete stupor. I cannot wish a stronger proof of the depraved ideas, which men of this description form of predestination, than experience itself furnishes, since the mind can not be infected by a more pestilential error than that which disturbs the conscience, and deprives it of peace and tranquility in regard to God.²⁵

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, trans. Henry Beveridge, (London: James Clarke and Co., Ltd., 1949), 206.

²¹ See Von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought*, 2.

²² Stachniewsky, *The Persecutory Imagination*, 20.

²³ Stachniewsky, *The Persecutory Imagination*, 26.

²⁴ Stachniewsky, *The Persecutory Imagination*, 20.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 243. Incidentally, Calvin does a fair job in describing Bunyan's struggle.

Why did Calvin largely ignore the anxiety over the uncertainty of salvation? Calvin perhaps underestimated the effect his theology would have on his readers. "That Calvin conceived of the experience of the reprobate as a foretaste of hell indicates the intensity of despair for which his theology provided."²⁶ Nevertheless, by the later seventeenth century, preoccupation with the doctrine of predestination had taken root deeper than what Calvin would have liked.²⁷ Thus, the inevitable happened: many doubted their election, having no way of knowing for sure if they were of the elect.

This doubt is clearly seen in Bunyan. In fact, his doubt turned to despair as he sought to determine if he was one of the elect. According to Damrosch, he was more despairing than most as *Grace Abounding* was "the most haunting and disturbing of all Puritan autobiographies."²⁸ Already by the title referring to 1 Timothy 1:14-15, Bunyan hints at his despairing view of himself. He was the worst sinner; on the other hand, the title also suggests that he experienced 'grace'.²⁹ *Grace Abounding* depicted the battle between hope and despair, between certainty and uncertainty of salvation.

Indeed, then, Bunyan was highly influenced by predestination, and his writing is representative of the genre. But what was his story? What was his response as he examined his life by the index of predestination? Why did he (and others) write so emotionally, almost despairingly?

Bunyan began his story by recounting his childhood poverty and lack of education. Michael A. Mullett believes that in this he probably exaggerated, for although Bunyan's family was not rich, they at least had the means to send him to school, and possibly even to grammar school, which was characteristic of a seventeenth century middle class family. Bunyan hyperbolized his poverty and education for effect. As Mullett says, "His main reason for bending the facts about his childhood's material circumstances is the overriding

²⁶ Stachniewsky, *The Persecutory Imagination*, 23.

²⁷ Stachniewsky, *The Persecutory Imagination*, xi.

²⁸ Leopold Damrosch Jr., *God's Plot and Man's Stories: Studies in Fictional Imagination from Milton to Fielding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 125.

²⁹ Roger Sharrock, "Spiritual Autobiography in *The Pilgrim's Progress*," *Review of English Studies*, 24 (April, 1948), 107.

religious nature and purpose of his autobiography. The centrality of the Christian religious inspiration of the work induced Bunyan to maximize the poverty and lowliness of his background.”³⁰

Bunyan also claimed to be a terrible sinner, “being taken captive by the Devil at his will.”³¹ By the time he married, he was more open to religion, and reformed outwardly by following biblical commands. Perhaps this change was due to some of his former crisis that made him re-evaluate his spiritual condition. For example, he spoke of almost drowning once, and of a near-miss death as a soldier. His reformation began, then, in these early years, even if Bunyan thought he changed out of “superstition” (9).

This outward religiosity spilled over to his inner man, and he questioned his religious identity. ‘Was he of the Israelites?’ he asked, thinking that, if he was, then “his soul must needs be happy” (9). It was at this point that Bunyan wondered about his election. Was he elected or not? Surely he was not if he was not an Israelite.

As Bunyan’s outward reformation continued, he was convicted of his vices: swearing, gaming on the Sabbath, dancing and ‘bell-ringing’. His inward change began when he overheard the conversation of some godly women in Bedford. As he listened, he realized that he had not ‘experienced God’ the way they had. “*I heard, but I understood not*, for they were far above out of my reach, for their talk was about a new birth, the work of God in their heart . . .” (14). Bunyan realized that religion was more than just practice, and a shift in thinking occurred, especially seen in two ways, that he had a growing awareness of the Scriptures and he felt uncertainty about his salvation. Regarding the former he says, “the Bible was precious to me in those days” (17). His uncertainty is seen in the question, “how can you tell you have faith?” (17). These two themes play out in the rest of the drama.

Already feeling uncertain over his election, his worry turned

³⁰ Michael A. Mullett, *John Bunyan in Context*, Studies in Protestant Nonconformity (Pennsylvania: Duquesne Press, 1962), 11.

³¹ John Bunyan, “Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners” in *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*. Oxford World Classics, eds. John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco (Oxford University Press, 1998), 6. Because Bunyan is quoted extensively in the next few pages of this study, the citation will be included in the text above by page numbers from this point on.

to despair with a vision. Bunyan saw a mountain and a wall that separated him and the godly people of Bedford. They basked in the sun, while he shivered in the cold. The only way to them was through a narrow gap, which he crossed with great difficulty. He interpreted the dream as an allegory. The mountain and wall were the Church and Word of God; the godly people of Bedford were in the Church, being on the sunny-side of the mountain. To enter the Church then, which pointed to assurance of salvation, Bunyan had to go through Jesus—the ‘gap’. Was this merely a dream or did it have spiritual significance? It certainly does seem to suggest that if Bunyan did not cross over to the ‘other side’, as the vision portrayed, then it was a foreshadowing of things to come.³²

Bunyan waffled between hope and despair, conditions mostly determined by his Bible-readings. At one point, he became convinced that he had ‘sold Christ’ (39-40), like Esau who sold his birthright for a meal in Genesis. Consequently then, like Esau, who never did receive his birthright, Bunyan would *never* be elected. The phrase, “to sell Christ,” became a common one for Bunyan in describing his anguish and is seen numerous times throughout the text. Similarly, Bunyan believed he had committed the “unpardonable sin” (42-43), based on Hebrews 6, by being tempted to give up on Christ, to “let him go if he will” (39-40, 52). This temptation seems to represent a decisive point for Bunyan, that if he admitted to committing this sin, he acknowledged his ‘subversive impulses’.³³ As Bunyan mused about his sin one day, he was in such a low state that he thought he saw the stones on the street and the tiles on the houses even ‘bend against him’ (54). Bunyan thought the whole world was out to get him.

Not long after this desperate low-point, Bunyan heard a *voice* saying, “this sin is not unto death” (54) and “my grace is sufficient”

³² See Lynn Veach Sadler, *John Bunyan*, Twayne’s English Authors Series, ed., Sylvia E. Bowman (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 36. She calls this the “turning point of Bunyan’s spiritual life . . . a vision that is comparable to Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus.” See also Vincent Newey, “‘With the Eyes of My understanding’: Bunyan, Experience and Acts of Interpretation” in *John Bunyan Conventicle and Parnassus*, ed. N. H. Keeble (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 195.

³³ Damrosch Jr., 135.

(59), which brought him relief. There might still be hope. It is as if he realized he was closer to salvation than he thought; he could not turn back now. Yet, his doubt still returned. The following passage well describes his emotional ‘ups and downs’:

By these words I was sustained [‘my grace is sufficient’], yet not without exceeding conflicts, for the space of seven or eight weeks: for my peace would be in and out sometimes twenty times a day: Comfort now, and Trouble presently; Peace now, and before I could go a furlong, as full of fear and guilt as ever heart could hold; and this was not only now and then, but my whole seven weeks experience: for this about the sufficiency of grace, and that of Esau’s parting with his Birth-right, would be like a pair of scales within my mind, sometimes one would be uppermost, and sometimes the other, according to which would be peace or trouble (59).

One can see the battle that raged within Bunyan’s soul over election. This type of emotion permeates the text. The reader hopes that Bunyan will survive his depression.

Although Bunyan never experienced total relief, he eventually came to some resolve over election. Ironically, it occurred while he studied the very passage that had previously grieved him, Hebrews 6:

I came to the sixth of *Hebrews*, yet trembling for fear it should strike me; which when I had considered, I found that the falling there intended was a falling *quite away*; that is, as I conceived, a falling from, and an absolute denial of, the Gospel of Remission of sins by Christ: for from them the Apostle begins his argument, *ver.* 1, 2, 3. Secondly, I found that this falling away must be openly, even in the view of the World, even so as to *put Christ to an open shame*. Thirdly, I found that those he there intended were for ever shut up of God both in blindness, hardness, and impenitency: *It is impossible they should be renewed again unto repentance*. By all these particulars, I found, to Gods everlasting praise, my sin was not the sin in this place intended (63-64).

With great relief Bunyan realized that his “righteousness was in heaven” (64), and that he too was among the elect. His excitement climaxed with the realization that “He [Jesus] wants my righteousness” (66). What follows is what looks to be Bunyan’s

climactic conversion moment:

Now did my chains fall off my Legs indeed, I was loosed from my affliction and irons, my temptations also fled away: so that from that time those dreadful Scriptures of God left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God . . . Here therefore I lived, for some time, very sweetly, at peace with God thorow Christ; O methought Christ! Christ! there was nothing but Christ before my eyes . . . Further, the Lord did lead me into the mystery of Union with this Son of God, that I was joynd to him, that I was flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone; and now was that a sweet word to me, in *Ephes.* 5. 30. By this was my faith in him, as my Righteousness, the more confirmed to me . . . (66).

Bunyan, the ‘elect’, closes his story with the following, which is like a summary of his self-taught theological education:

Now I saw Christ Jesus was looked on of God, and should also be looked upon by us as that common or publick person, in whom all the whole Body of his Elect are always to be considered and reckoned, that we fulfilled the Law by him, died by him, rose from the dead by him, got the Victory over sin, death, the devil, and hell, by him: when he died we died, and so of his Ressurrection. . .

Ah these blessed considerations and Scriptures, with many other of a like nature, were in those days made to spangle in my eyes, *Praise ye the Lord God in his Sanctuary, praise him in the firmament of his power, praise him for his mighty acts, praise him according to his excellent greatness*, *Psal.* 150.1,2 (67).

After his ‘benediction’, the narrative shifts from Bunyan’s story to what he has learned. He concluded that he did not pray enough to resist temptation (67) and that he had tempted God instead of trusting him (68).

Finally, Bunyan turned to his calling to ministry in what Christopher Hill calls “the penultimate section of *Grace Abounding* . . . the culmination of Bunyan’s spiritual autobiography.”³⁴ Through preaching, Bunyan continued to struggle

³⁴ Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and His Church*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 103.

against Satan, but externally, not internally as before. Preaching was therapeutic for Bunyan. It helped him fight his way out of the spiritual crisis that would follow.³⁵ Was preaching a sure-sign of his election? He must have felt some sort of confirmation as his church ‘called’ him to preach, and only the elect could do such work.

In the end it was Bunyan’s preaching experience that seemed to ‘seal-up’ his election. He recalled that at that time, “God let me into something of the mystery of union with Christ” (68). Likewise, he spoke of how “Scripture in these days did continually run in my mind, to encourage me, and strengthen me in this my work for God” (76). It was a time of growth for him, although the temptations never left (see 81-82). Nevertheless, the stronger, more ‘theologically sound’ Bunyan resisted most of these temptations, for, after all, he was now of the elect.

Thus is Bunyan’s story. Notice the pattern, which is rather common for the spiritual autobiographies of the time: the convert writes of his/her past sin, followed by a conviction of that sin, a time of repentance and often concluding in a calling to ministry. As people measured their spiritual progress through writing their autobiography, this common pattern naturally emerged. Perhaps Bunyan even modelled it for others.

More importantly, what has Bunyan’s story revealed about the context of later seventeenth-century conversion? Indeed, many told a similar story to Bunyan’s (refer to the Haller quote above [footnote 9]). This could not be coincidence as all Nonconformists were heavily influenced by Puritan theology. Certainly the troubled economy and political unrest played a part, but to these Christian converts, theology was likely the more powerful motivator. Calvinism forced Bunyan and his contemporaries to prove their salvation, which led to the writing of many spiritual autobiographies. Of course the details were different in each, but the pattern of conviction of sin, repentance and subsequent calling to ministry was generally common throughout. This pattern is clearly seen in *Grace Abounding*, and as a representative of the genre, it may be viewed as a standard for other autobiographies that followed.

³⁵ Ibid.

Such spiritual autobiographies, and in this case Bunyan's specifically, are often misunderstood by modern readers because the context is unclear. These stories must be rooted in Puritan theology and in the unstable economic and revolutionary times in which these writers lived. Anything less results in an unfair reading of the text, making the powerful testimony of Bunyan and others the work of extreme religious enthusiasts (almost gone mad?), instead of passionate converts to Christianity telling their stories.

Further study could be done to examine how present religious and cultural influences affect the conversion of modern Christians. Based on such a study, perhaps further conclusions would be made that sheds light on how outer (or inner) influences affect one's conversion. At any rate, Bunyan's autobiography has been examined with the context of his story in mind. He has helped us understand the general context of the later seventeenth century regarding conversion. The result is a newfound freedom to read seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographies as they were meant to be read: in their theological and cultural milieu as personal stories of deep spiritual zeal for the Christian faith.

The Religion of “O” – A Well-Formed Religion?

Brenda Janssen

My sister is not the academic type. As a full-time nurse, she rarely reads and when she does, it is usually only a few pages out of a magazine. But one afternoon a few years ago, she came home from the mall with a new purchase: a brand new book—novel—from the bookstore. With a title like, *The Rapture of Canaan*, I could not help but wonder what this book was about and why she bought it. When I asked her, her response startled me: “It is part of Oprah’s Book Club this month and she said it was *really* good.” I chuckled a little and reminded her that she does not read. She did not have much of a response. A few months later I noticed that she had a bookmark in chapter 2. That book remains on the shelf with the bookmark in the same place...

My mom and I are not heavy TV watchers; both of us prefer the company of books and friends and family. But this past Christmas break my mother and I happened to have on *Oprah*. In this particular episode, she was having in-depth conversations with the Wayans brothers in which they discussed a lot about their recent movie. Oprah repeated throughout the show, “If you have not seen this movie yet, you *have* to see it. It’s one of the funniest things I’ve ever seen.” A few days later, to my surprise, as my mom and I were searching for a Friday night video in the rental store, we found ourselves picking up the very movie Oprah recommended. Both of us were disappointed with the movie, not being close to the hype it was given.

These two events forced me to pause and think. How can this woman have so much power? Why does this woman seem to have so much power? Casting aside these feelings of disappointment we felt when Oprah was wrong, these questions prompted me to search deeper, to ask more questions, and to understand why it is many people do not find similar disappointment and are following her every move and message—whether it is the 2 million who receive her magazine, the 30 million who watch her show every day, or the 100

million who visit her website.

This phenomenon of the “Religion of Oprah” can be taken both objectively and subjectively. Not only does Oprah herself practice a specific religion, but she leads countless others to follow her. Like a prophet, or perhaps like a pastor in the “Church of O,” her voice is heard and her ways are followed and attempted by many. Oprah, surprisingly or not, can be viewed as the leader of a relatively well-formed religion as it serves to address the whole range of basic human concerns and integrates life by involving and orienting every significant aspect of existence. This can be shown by seeing the complexity of Oprah and her followers’ view of reality, the object of religious response, the relationship between them and the object (such as revelation, discipleship, worship), and finally, the benefits of this religion.

View of Reality

The Religion of Oprah has a unique overall view of reality. One of the most important things to note is that it is a religion for two kinds of people: women and Americans. Men play almost no role and the individually-centered American culture helps feed this religion which is clearly centered on this thing: the *Self*. Sociologist Philip Reiff calls this worldview “the therapeutic society” and, in the context of America, is the ideal religion for a people obsessed with Self; “it raises self-preoccupation to the level of religious duty, and turns self-indulgence into a spiritual discipline.”¹

But beyond this, the Religion of Oprah, like most well-formed religions, needs to start with an overall picture-- a narrative of reality, or a dynamic picture, of human life and history. In this religion, the picture seems to be of great comprehensiveness and perhaps even contradiction; Kathryn Lofton, a critical scholar of “Oprahism,” calls it an “unremarkable New Age hodge podge.”²

¹ Alan Morrison, “Soul Guest On your TV: Oprah Winfrey’s Religion,” [online article] available from http://www.diakrisis.org/oprah_winfrey.htm, Internet, accessed 26 April 2005.

² Kathryn Lofton, “Practicing Oprah; Or, the Prescriptive Compulsion of a Spiritual Capitalism,” received as email from Lofton as an article to be published in the November 2005 issue of *Journal of Popular Culture*, sent 29 April 2005, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

One might describe the Religion of Oprah as a feminist, consumerist religion of the Self, found in completeness with harmony in a transcendent God. Somehow, despite the centrality of the Self, Oprah seems to paint a great picture of a deeper force or power (which she often calls “God”) which controls herself. She says, “Moving with the flow of life has given me supreme confidence because I know there’s a Power greater than I, a natural rhythm to things that is a force beyond my own. I trust it and believe that no matter what, I will be okay. I know for sure that this is the ultimate in confidence.”³

Human action, purpose, and responsibility in Oprahism’s view of reality reflect such a tension between a transcendent ultimate and the ultimate within. Despite Oprah’s repeated phrases such as, “God has a plan for me” and “I exist only to glorify God,” it is clear that the god referred to here is not the “God” of American evangelicalism or any kind of American Christianity. Rather, if Oprah “suggests that each person is ‘co-creator’ of her own life and that ‘whatever you believe is what you will become,’”⁴ she appears to say that human purpose and responsibility is to find ultimate self-fulfillment simply by looking inward and, in an almost elementary ideology, “believing in yourself.” Human action, therefore, becomes that which only the Self—only the “I,”—can carry out.

This plays an important part in this worldview’s take on social existence. Although she would never deny that you affect the people who surround you and that there is a need to positively affect such people, Oprah continually encourages the followers of her religion that, primary, social existence must only ultimately be for your-*Self*. She writes, “Forget what everyone else wants for you.

³ Oprah Winfrey, “I know that I am more than my personality, my body, and my body image,” *O, The Oprah Magazine*, May 2004, 296. This discussion of Oprah’s interesting “mix” between a transcendent God with the immanent self will be carried out in full in the section “Object of Religious Affection.”

⁴ Kate Maver, “Oprah Winfrey and Her Self-help Saviors: Making the New Age Normal,” Maver, Kate. “Oprah Winfrey and Her Self-Help Saviors: Making the New Age Normal,” *Christian Research Journal* 23, no. 4 (2001), available from <http://www.equip.org/free/DN403.htm>; [online article] Internet; accessed 27 April 2005.

This is not your mother's or your best friend's journey. Your role is not just as your husband's wife, your boss's employee, or your children's mother. Only you were there for all the significant moments that hold the clues to your calling."⁵ One reporter who follows this religion jokingly states, "'I'm off to spend some quality time with someone who truly enriches my life... me!' As all Oprahites know, to love thyself is key."⁶

This self-focused religiosity therefore has one simple goal or means of fulfillment: the happiness of the Self—a perfect religion for an ascetic-fearing culture. But, as most religions contain the glorification of a transcendent being as the ultimate goal, so this also actually takes place within this framework—the transcendent being as that of the Self. Thus, happiness is both the means and the end to fulfillment. "God has become the guarantor of their self-fulfillment -- Oprah's god exists to make you happy."⁷

Thus, the basic human problem in the Religion of Oprah is simply that which comes between the Self and happiness. There could be, then, a variety of barriers. This could be the men or other powers attempting to oppress them. This could be family and friends who demand too much from them. But the biggest barrier to happiness is (you guessed it) yourself. Whether it is worrying too much about what others think and feel or not feeling good enough or taking care of yourself, *you* are the biggest obstacle to happiness. Oprah writes,

As I peeled away the layers of my life, I realized that all my craziness, all my pain and difficulties stemmed from me not valuing myself. And what I now know is that every single bit of pain I have experienced in my life was a result of me worrying

⁵ Oprah Winfrey, "What I know for sure: "the work of your life is to discover your purpose and get on with the business of living it out," *O, The Oprah Magazine*, September 2004, 286.

⁶ "The Cult of Oprah Inc," *The Irish Times*, 5 August 2000, 61. available from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=1321969cde53f9e1e7cf2634e4269a11&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVtz-zSkVb&_md5=72b5e0bd63ac815a3e854b0accf060b127; [online newspaper article] Internet; accessed 27 April 2005.

⁷ Morrison, "Soul Guest On your TV: Oprah Winfrey's Religion."

about what another person was going to think of me.⁸

She also writes, “Every single dysfunction is based on one thing... ‘I don’t think I’m good enough.’”⁹ For Oprah and her followers, the reality of sin appears to have no place. A person can be her own savior, yet the only thing she saves herself from is her unhappiness, not her depravity. Evil and the basic human problem is simply the result of the need for some readjustment of attitudes or realignment of ‘energies.’¹⁰ Again, there is a reappearance of the childish “believe in yourself” motif; she claims, “The only thing that frees you is believing you can be free.”¹¹

In sum, the worldview of the Religion of Oprah revolves around the Self. Despite her claims of a higher transcendent being (which will be discussed in the following section), human existence, the ultimate life-goal, and both the solution and the problem of the human condition all surround what the Self can be and do. And her followers hang on to every part of this worldview.

Object of Religious Response

As mentioned above Oprah and her followers’ obsession with the Self somehow, in this religion, does not contradict the belief in a transcendent being. Oprah seems to use a plethora of terms to describe this being: “the force,” God, Spirit, “higher power.” She also appears to have a plethora of views for this being, all seemingly varieties of monotheism, with a mixture of a significant amount of humanism. At first, Oprah and her followers will often speak of an Ultimate Power or being that is outside the self. She proclaims, “There is a natural order to things, a rhythm. Each moment you choose to move with the flow, you move forward... The flow is God.”¹² But this Ultimate Power, according to Oprahism, can both

⁸ Janet Lowe, ed., *Oprah Winfrey Speaks: Insight from the World’s Most Influential Voice* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1998), 155.

⁹ Susan W. Bauer, "Oprah's Misery Index," *Christianity Today*, 7 December 1998, 70.

¹⁰ Morrison, "Soul Guest On your TV: Oprah Winfrey’s Religion."

¹¹ Lowe, *Oprah Winfrey Speaks*, 28.

¹² Margaret Bernstein, "'My Life Was No Accident'," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans)*, 23 April 2005, p. 6, available from

be addressed in many ways as well as be accessed and viewed in different ways; It is hung up on neither what It is called (“I believe in the FORCE--call it God”) nor how It is perceived. Oprah states, ““What I know is that God, nature, the Spirit, the universe, whatever title you wish to give him—or her—is always trying to help each one of us to be the best and do the best we can.””¹³ On one of her shows she proclaimed, “One of the biggest mistakes humans make is to believe that there is only one way. Actually, there are many diverse paths leading to what you call God.”¹⁴ Fascinating as well is that Oprah refers to this “force” or God as either male or female,¹⁵ although one could argue for the female side considering the religion’s feminist tendencies.

But mixed in with this Ultimate Power seems to be this deep humanism—the idealized human nature, the human individual. In the Religion of Oprah, followers are encouraged to look deep within the Self to find God, or whatever they might call the Ultimate. They would never go as far as declaring themselves as God or the Ultimate Power,¹⁶ yet so much of their spirituality involves the self. Rather than completely being in communion with this Power, they seem to be in pursuit of elevating humanity to Divinity.¹⁷ One comment demonstrates this reality: ‘I am Creation’s son. I am Creation’s daughter. I am more than my physical self. I am more than this job that I do. I am more than the external definitions I have given myself...Those roles are all extensions of who I define myself to be, but ultimately I am Spirit come from the greatest Spirit. I am

http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=7dba3323f0bd386ee3741a12175329f5&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVtz-zSkVb&_md5=2875f6da6aa8d2404df9243855a890ad [online newspaper article]; Internet; accessed on 27 April 2005.

¹³ Bill Adler, ed., *The Uncommon Wisdom of Oprah Winfrey: A Portrait in Her Own Words* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1997), 233.

¹⁴ "The Gospel According to Oprah." *Watchman Fellowship of Alabama*. Available from http://www.wfial.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=artNewAge.article_1 [online article]; Internet; accessed on 27 April 2005.

¹⁵ Marie Perkins, "Oprah Winfrey - Friend or Foe," *According to Prophecy Ministries.*, available from <http://www.according2prophecy.org/oprah.html> [online article]; Internet; accessed on 27 April 2005.

¹⁶ Oprah herself declares: “I am not God. I hope I don’t give that impression. I am not God.” Lowe, 123.

¹⁷ "The Gospel According to Oprah."

Spirit.”¹⁸

This certainly shows the complications of Oprahism’s object of religious response as the tension between “God” as that which is both beyond and within, transcendent yet immanently in the Self. Fascinatingly, she likes to quote Ephesians 4:6 which perhaps gives a perspective on this interesting mixture: “One God and father of all, and through all, and in you all.”¹⁹ One reporter notes this tension as well: “Some days, Oprah speaks as if there were no love superior to self-love. Other days, she sounds like a woman who asks only to serve God. On one show, she celebrates romantic bonds; on the next, the triumph of the unencumbered woman.”²⁰ Perhaps this not only defends Kathryn Lofton’s comment about it being an “unremarkable New Age hodge podge,” but it might also be indicative of somewhat of how this religion functions so well—perhaps as a marriage between postmodern mysticism and American individualism, meeting the needs of those searching for a being greater than themselves while not willing to give up their self-focused individualism.

Relationship Between Them and the Object: Revelation

Well-formed religions need to have at least some form of revelation to meet the universal need. Religious philosopher John Cooper believes that revelation is “to provide special resources, enlightening perspectives, and/or authoritative information that provide and/or lead to solutions and answers. It gives the basic sense of security, meaning, hope, and endurance that people desire.”²¹ It is here when the Religion of Oprah shines as revelation comes in a multitude of forms and depths.

Verbal revelation is by far Oprahism’s greatest gift. Whether it is Oprah herself, passages from Christian Scripture, or words of wisdom from her magazine, followers of Oprah are not left stranded when they are searching for an encounter with the object.

¹⁸ Lofton “Practicing Oprah.”

¹⁹ Lowe, *Oprah Winfrey Speaks*, 24.

²⁰ David Skinner, “In Oprah We Trust,” *The Weekly Standard*, 3 July 2003, p. 22.

²¹ John Cooper, *Revelation: Encountering the Object of Religion*, received as handout on 2 March 2005.

Oprah herself can be seen as the head of verbal revelation in the Religion of Oprah. No, she is not God herself, but her prophetic voice acts as a revelation from the Ultimate.²² Over the years, Oprah's voice has become more and more recognized as that of a spiritual leader and "she has become a postmodern priestess—an icon of church-free spirituality."²³ Oprah sees herself very much as a "mission-worker" as she constantly proclaims how she hopes to lead people into better lives, into better spirituality. But what cannot be missed is her sincerity which gives her great credibility as a mode of revelation. She is quite generous (although we will not discuss her incredible wealth at length here) and displays great connection with and understanding of humanity and passion for it. One Nigerian Oprah follower notes her authenticity: "She's just like your big sister. She is somebody who positions herself to take that kind of compassionate stance. She'll cry with you when you're not happy, she'll laugh with you when you're happy. It's not something that's contrived. It comes natural to her."²⁴ At the same time, Oprah's own life success story displays the American dream and shows the possibility for all to achieve what she does, giving her an even stronger prophetic voice. This same Nigerian fan writes how "Oprah Winfrey is an icon not only for America but the rest of the world... Her life is a testimony that a slave can become free, that a poor man or poor woman can become rich."²⁵ Oprah's very prophetic

²² At this point, subsumed under the revelation of Oprah's prophetic voice will be both her television show and her website.

²³ LaTonya Taylor, "The Church of O: with a congregation of 22 million viewers, Oprah Winfrey has become one of the most influential spiritual leaders in America," *Christianity Today*, 1 April 2002, 38-46, available from http://web5.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/455/175/67014286w5/purl=rc1_GRGM_0_A84545775&dyn=12!xrn_5_0_A84545775?sw_aep=lom_calvincoll [online magazine]; Internet; accessed on 27 April 2005.

²⁴ Max Amuchie, "At 50, What Oprah Means to Nigerians," *Global News Wire - Asia Africa Intelligence Wire*, 15 April 2004, available from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=29f80c3694d381ae53b42b1547d218b7&_docnum=2&wchp=dGLbVtz-zSkVb&_md5=f8fa8dacaad11b2dc72a1946310979ac [online newspaper article]; Internet; accessed on 26 April 2005.

²⁵ Max Amuchie, "At 50, What Oprah Means to Nigerians," *Global News Wire - Asia Africa Intelligence Wire*, 15 April 2004 [online newspaper article]; available from http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=29f80c3694d381ae53b42b154

utterances as revelation can be proven simply by her influence on her followers: “There is a common recognizable refrain that ‘When Oprah speaks, people listen.’”²⁶ Such a statement can be defended simply by observing how much the beef industry fought against her for her comment on her show about never eating beef, or how much book, movie, or food sales go up when it is O-approved. Thus, Oprah’s life and words act as revelation in the prophetic form and her followers will stand by her every word: “They will read whatever books she endorses, ponder her every word, keep gratitude journals, donate money, remember their spirits, whatever.”²⁷

Verbal revelation does not end here in the Religion of Oprah. Somehow in the mix of this religion falls Christian Scripture. This leads some Christians to believe that she, too, is a Christian and praise her for her efforts. Growing up in the Baptist tradition, the Christian Bible became an integral part of Oprah’s life and teaching. However, she uses Christian Scripture the same way as a Jehovah’s Witness or Mormon might; Jesus is never portrayed as a Savior or the divine-human Son of God but is rather treated more like a God-realized teacher, someone who fully manifested God in their life’s journey.²⁸ Oprahism’s use of Christian Scripture is thus an integrated revelation that uses certain passages that fit its worldview. She says, “As I read more of Shirley MacLaine, crystals, and The Aquarian Conspiracy, it seems to me to say what the Bible has said for years. It is just that many of us were brought up with a more restricted, limited vision of what the Bible said.”²⁹ Revelation thus comes in pieces patched together from Christian Scripture. One of Oprah’s favorite verses, she says, is “Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Why? “I know for sure that we have to keep transforming ourselves to become who we ought to be...I believe that when you stop renewing, and are no longer open to change and the possibilities that continually unfold, you stop being alive and are just

[7d218b7&_docnum=2&wchp=dGLbVtz-zSkVb&_md5=f8fa8dacaad11b2dc72a1946310979ac](http://www.7d218b7&_docnum=2&wchp=dGLbVtz-zSkVb&_md5=f8fa8dacaad11b2dc72a1946310979ac); Internet: accessed on 26 April 2005.

²⁶ “The Gospel According to Oprah.”

²⁷ Taylor, “The Church of O.”

²⁸ Taylor, “The Church of O.”

²⁹ “The Gospel According to Oprah.”

getting through the years.”³⁰ Passages that appear are those which fit in with Oprah’s view of the Self and the individual as ultimate. Oprah has even appeared in some Christian churches, “preaching” and delivering messages “studded with Bible passages,” outlining God’s influence on her life, but somehow not referring to God as more than a life-flow or force, and with no message of the role of Jesus.³¹ Thus, a patchwork of Christian Scripture also plays a part of verbal revelation to “Oprahites”.

One final form of verbal revelation that cannot be overlooked is the very Scripture of Oprahism: the *O Magazine*. In this magazine, the more than one million women who subscribe can learn just about anything about how to better take care of the Ultimate, the Self; from the latest and greatest method to staying healthy (the “safe” way, of course) to psychologist “Dr. Phil” answering questions to serious life issues; from a list of the best books to read to a gallery of the most beautiful photography allowing for “Breathing Space.” There is “no aspect of life that could possibly be improved is outside the magazine’s boundaries.”³² And every month has an article from the prophetess herself titled, “What I Know For Sure,” to help people in their quest to find happiness in the Self. In her most recent article, in celebration of five years of the O magazine, Oprah writes in her usual personal-conversational tone and says,

“[I asked] ‘Why do I need a magazine? I already have a full-time job that speaks to women all over the world.’ ‘Because the *written word* is lasting, and women pass it on,’ [My editor] Ellen said... It was my intention to stimulate, inspire, seduce, and inform you each month. I wanted the words and pictures to be worth your attention and to mean something—because I value every precious moment.”³³

The previous italicized words give deep insight into the significance

³⁰ Oprah Winfrey, “What I Know for Sure,” *O, The Oprah Magazine*, January 2005, 172.

³¹ Bernstein, “My Life Was No Accident’.”

³² Skinner, “In Oprah We Trust,” 22.

³³ Found on the official Oprah website:

http://www2.oprah.com/omagazine/200505/omag_200505_mission.jhtml;
accessed on 5 May 2005.

of this verbal revelation. A reporter describes this fascinating form of verbal revelation as “the glossy bimonthly newsletter of a secular religion that boils down to a covenant between Oprah, America’s striver-in-chief, and her readers: She will keep exhorting you to improve and you will keep trying.”³⁴

But the Religion of Oprah does not stop at only verbal revelation to find ways to improve the Self and find deeper spirituality there. Oprahism also invites the paranormal, specifically meditation, to experience the true revelation of the Self and the God both within and beyond the Self. Sometimes, meditation is to reconnect with the Self; followers learn to centre themselves to find peace in busyness and stress. Oprah invites, “When you’re busy or stressed or feeling unappreciated it’s easy to lose sight of your vast potential. Find a quiet place and reconnect with that magnificent creature—your deepest self—waiting to burst forth.”³⁵ Oprahism’s follower (or perhaps fellow leader) Shirley MacLaine, who appears often on the show, also invites followers of Oprahism to go inside themselves, asking the “intuitive Self” to seek answers to life’s questions. Oprah agrees with MacLaine as she pulls from Christian Scripture why meditation is important: “You know, that is the same as the Bible says, ‘Ask and it shall be given, seek and ye shall find.’”³⁶ Thus, by finding time and quiet where one can stop and reflect on not only the Self, but also, in Oprahist fashion, the combination of the Self *and* the transcendent being: “Meditation for me is... just being still and knowing that there is something much greater than yourself at work within yourself. It is the stilling and quieting of the world outside yourself, so that you come to know the truth, the authentic truth, of who you really are.”³⁷

On the whole, revelation in the Religion of Oprah is that which invites people not just to sit back passively, but to actively participate in the activities that the revelation insists on. Oprah herself not only prophetically proclaims revelation through various means, but she practices what she preaches, inviting followers to do

³⁴ Skinner, "In Oprah We Trust," 22.

³⁵ Oprah Winfrey, "A Little Restoration Goes a Long Way," *O, The Oprah Magazine*, July 2004, 190.

³⁶ "The Gospel According to Oprah."

³⁷ Lofton "Practicing Oprah."

the same. Lofton sums it up concisely:

Winfrey's voice pervades throughout these instructions, simultaneously ordering and modeling her suggestions. It seems as if her every success demands that you wake yourself to her levels of alertness and action... The message is made manifest in each of her media modes: here's what to do, here's some sage testimony as to the utility of your newly-chosen habit, here's where to go to get it done, and here are some smart products to assist and decorate your process of self-realization. And in case you don't remember all Winfrey has told you to do, she provides three modes of reminder. The point of this media assault is clear: don't just watch, *do*.³⁸

Personal Commitment: Worship/Discipleship

All well-formed religions have an intrinsic necessity for some sort of response to the revelation and the object itself, something that indicates there is authenticity in the belief system—a personal commitment. In Oprahism, we find such a commitment. Belief and trust in the Ultimate, or faith, plays a very important role. One Oprahist, Sharon Salzberg, explains how faith needs to play a role:

Faith demands that, despite our fear, we get as close as possible to the truth of the present moment so that we can offer our hearts fully to it, with integrity. Faith is willing to engage the unknown, not shrink back from it. Faith doesn't mean the absence of fear. It means having the energy to go ahead, right alongside the fear... We might (and often must) hope and plan and arrange and try but faith enables us to be fully engaged while also realizing that we are not in control.³⁹

Yet, not surprisingly, what this “faith” exactly is or what it actually believes is very obscure: it could mean either faith in the Self, or faith in the transcendent beyond the Self. What becomes important in this religion, then, is that such a large part of belief and trust is manifested

³⁸ Lofton “Practicing Oprah.”

³⁹ Salzberg, Sharon, “Choosing faith over fear: Our lives shift, dazzle and appall...and we notice we're powerless to stop the changes. Sharon Salzberg offers a way to thrive in the face of uncertainty,” *O, The Oprah Magazine*, January 2002, 27.

in sincere *devotion* and activity—in this case, devotion to the Self. As we have just witnessed in the conclusion of Oprahism’s revelation, the need to actively participate in the religion of Oprah becomes critical. This religion demands constant practice of devotion, integrated in every aspect of life. Lofton notes this practical faith element with more words from Salzberg:

“Live Your Best Life” columnist and meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg wrote in the January 2002 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, “To be able to make an intense effort—to heal, to speak, to create, to alleviate our suffering or the suffering of others—while guided by a vision of life with all its mutability, evanescence, dislocations, and unruliness, is the particular gift of faith.” Another month, in the same column, the author made a similar argument that “faith is actually something you *do*.”⁴⁰

Therefore, it is important to note the incredible role that worship and discipline play as a religious response to personal commitment and faith.

In this religion, worship is discipline and discipline is worship; most features of this expression of commitment are difficult to determine as to which is worship and which is discipline. Although I will attempt to categorize, it is important to note the significant overlap of these two aspects of commitment.⁴¹

One of the first features I will categorize under an act of worship that cannot be ignored is the act of buying. Just watching her shows, looking through her magazines, or browsing on her website, one cannot get through without some sort of recommendation of a product or activity that will truly help one’s Self. In this act, one can find an important centering of the Self; away from the demands of family and friends, with time, money, and energy spent just on “Me,” one is able to find breathing space, giving an opportunity to find peace and hope. Lofton puts this worship act succinctly:

“Buying” is one way to both legitimate independent time (goods

⁴⁰ Lofton “Practicing Oprah.”

⁴¹ The following section will rely heavily on Kathryn Lofton’s argument that the Religion of Oprah revolves around the main practices of reading, writing, and buying.

must be bought to tend the home) and construct a situation of comfort in your leisure. The right goods, according to Winfrey's advocacy, encourage self-indulgence and relaxed reflection among individuals who spend too much time on others, not enough on themselves.⁴²

Thus, buying becomes not only an opportunity for meditation, but for glorification of the Self.

Yet, Oprah would never admit that money buys happiness; she encourages acts of generosity and she herself is constantly giving away free gifts and consumer goods to her audience and guests alike. (Perhaps money buys others' happiness for Oprah!) So buying, unless done in a mode of that of "worship," cannot truly fulfill; according to the prophetess, women should buy based on what reflects who they are and their inner spiritual beauty. Yet, when Oprah mentions a product on her show or it appears on her "O List" on her website, that products' sales soar; her followers cannot help but try to find the same experience as Oprah in her worshipful act of buying. Lofton cynically notes, "As long as you can spend, feel good about yourself, and look good, your religious belief will be tolerated on Planet O. The Religion of Oprah is the incorporated faith of late-capitalist America."⁴³ She shows how we can again see how well this religion fits with the individualist American female culture.

Another feature that can be categorized as an act of worship is that of writing, specifically journal writing. Oprah's website welcomes followers to "reflect, praise and honor yourself in a personal journal."⁴⁴ The website explains that "Through the process of writing, you will come closer to understanding who you are and who you want to be in life,"⁴⁵ and proceeds to give advice on how to journal and exercises to inspire this practice of worship of the Self. Lofton describes this practice of worshipful writing:

⁴² Lofton "Practicing Oprah."

⁴³ Lofton "Practicing Oprah."

⁴⁴ Found on the official Oprah website at

http://www2.oprah.com/presents/2005/self/self_nurture.jhtml; accessed on May 6, 2005.

⁴⁵ Found at on the official Oprah website at

http://www2.oprah.com/journal/journal_landing.jhtml; accessed on May 6, 2005.

As women follow Winfrey's writing assignments, they are told that they will "find" themselves on the page, and discover their truest selves. Winfrey recommends writing as a key motif in the interrogation of the spiritual self... [She] places writing at the center of her commentaries on the spirit and the self. Writing is the first step to an overall process of renewal, transformation, and self-actualization—it is the primary means by which Oprah viewers practice their faith.⁴⁶

Followers of Oprah are encouraged to journal about aspect of their lives and to even keep a variety of journals for these different aspects. Included in the many journals of Oprah herself is a gratitude journal, for thoughts of thanksgiving for the things she loves and appreciates, in praise of both the Self that achieves it and the God, or the Ultimate, that grants it—a true act of worship in Oprahite fashion.

This worshipful act of reading in the Religion of Oprah obviously includes an element of discipline as well as it affects the entirety of one's life. This helps segue into other such forms of discipleship: expressing personal commitment throughout life.

In general, discipleship is carried out by continual veneration of the Self. Although categorized as "acts of worship," journaling and buying reflect discipleship because these are continual, ongoing practices that shape life and the way it is viewed. Meditation, although characterized under "revelation" is also a practice of discipleship. One Oprahite reports her own view of discipline: "Embrace those buzzwords: balance, wholeness, meaning, external selves. You should remember your spirit, achieve authentic power—not being defined by your possessions or other false gods – and live life in the moment."⁴⁷ Incredibly syncretistic.

Yet again, discipleship in the Religion of Oprah requires also a seeking and honouring of the transcendent. Oprah continually speaks of honouring God and living for this purpose and that this God within the Self has unimaginable things in store for her, not to mention her followers. She says, "I ask that I be able to live my life so that it magnifies the power of God that is in me... And I'm striving

⁴⁶ Lofton "Practicing Oprah."

⁴⁷ "The Cult of Oprah Inc."

for wisdom, truth, and love.”⁴⁸ She also encourages her followers to never look past the work of “God” in their lives and how important it is to seek this; “I can’t help you if you don’t believe in something bigger than yourself,” she warns.⁴⁹

A sum of Oprahism’s general practice of discipleship is summed up by Oprah herself: ““I have church with myself: I have church walking down the street. I believe in the God force that lives inside all of us, and once you tap into that, you can do anything.”⁵⁰

One specific feature of discipleship that plays an important role is that of reading. In this religion, reading not only shapes your life, helps you escape this world, and connects you with the greater Self, but also bonds you with other women who take part in this religion. Oprah’s own connection with books is profound: “Books showed me there were possibilities in life, that there were actually people like me living in a world I could only aspire to but attain. Reading gave me hope. For me, it was the open door.”⁵¹ The recommended books play a part in rectifying the Self; “self-help” is undoubtedly one of the most recommended genres. Titles such as *Self-Seduction: Your Ultimate Path to Inner and Outer Beauty*, *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*, and *From Everest to Enlightenment: An Adventure of the Soul* grace the presence of the Oprah website and the Oprah Show. But the important role that reading plays manifests itself when one realizes what happens when one allows reading to be a discipline:

Books are seen as a relaxant. “Great novels” can make one “mindless” as they take a busy woman back to her “center.” In other places, great books are also said to “inspire” change and “comfort” women trapped in unhappy personal plots. The point: Reading is a practice, encouraged to be regular, strategic, and situational.⁵²

In Oprahism, books and reading play an important role in expressing

⁴⁸ Lowe, *Oprah Winfrey Speaks*, 124.

⁴⁹ Phil Rosenthal, "GUEST COMMENTARY: The church of Oprah preaches to the choir." *Electronic Media*, July 2000, 9.

⁵⁰ Lowe, *Oprah Winfrey Speaks*, 122.

⁵¹ Lowe, *Oprah Winfrey Speaks*, 21.

⁵² Lofton, “Practicing Oprah.”

commitment finding deep discipline to honour the Self.

But what becomes even more fascinating is the discipline of reading within the context of the *Oprah Book Club*. Claiming to be “the largest book club in the world,” Oprah invites her followers to participate in a monthly book reading and “discussion,” most of which are novels. After choosing a book for the month, she makes the “big announcement” and how and with whom it will be discussed; these novels often end up with their sales boosted in astronomical proportions. But these are not just any novels; they follow a particular pattern—one that fits well with her followers and their needs. These are usually tear-jerking novels that show some sort of victimization or hardship, almost always of a woman or other types of “oppressed” people. One reveals this pattern:

Sentimental novels are traditionally directed toward a female audience, and the Oprah books are no exception. Their preoccupation with dead and missing children and the continual exploration of difficult family ties (as opposed to job problems, say, or the frustration of ambition, or other more typically “male” concerns) reveals the crowd of women in Oprah’s audience.⁵³

The plot also often involves some aspect of spirituality or spiritual figures. Yet the repeated patterns in these novels is clear: there is only one way the protagonists can find their way out of their victimization: themselves. Just like Oprah’s story. Just like the story that can be that of her followers. It ends up being a very beautiful story, a story of the quest for the self-savior. “The sufferers, in the end, decide (entirely of their own volition) to open themselves to the rest of the human race... These sufferers are on their own, yet they are able to choose significance, to balance themselves between survival and sanity... It’s a neat and happy ending: self-created meaning, self-created prosperity, self-created connections to the rest of humanity, even a self-created divinity.”⁵⁴ This is something Oprah’s women followers can resonate with. Oprah’s Book Club allows for women to feel a connection with those others who have a sense of victimization and self-help—not only with the author and

⁵³ Bauer, “Oprah’s Misery Index,” 70.

⁵⁴ Bauer, “Oprah’s Misery Index,” 70.

the novel, but with those countless other Oprahites who read the book and discuss it. Lofton describes this mode of discipleship: “Obviously, Winfrey believes this paradigmatic plotline will not only resonate with her viewers, but also expresses a universal truth critical to her spiritual work: the suffering of women is universal, unabated, and endured only through solidarity with other women.”⁵⁵

In sum, in the Religion of Oprah, there are many ways to interact with the object. Through all interconnected forms of worship and discipleship that express personal commitment, this religion affects and involves many parts of human needs and aspects.

Benefits

One cannot have a complete understanding of the well-formedness of the religion of Oprah without one final aspect—the benefits of being committed to this religion.

In regards to the afterlife, there seems to be little stated regarding benefits. Because of the focus on the gratification of the Self, the here and now takes precedence. However, there does remain a sense of the afterlife; it is simply an afterthought. Oprah states, “I believe that life is eternal. I believe that it takes on other forms. And I believe that there’s so many different levels that the minds can’t even hold it all. So I believe, yes, life will continue.”⁵⁶ The sense of the afterlife is there; what will happen or become a benefit in the afterlife appears to be missing from Oprahism.

In terms of satisfaction and benefits in this life, Oprah reveals this in her mission for her television show: “To use television to transform people’s lives, to make viewers see themselves differently and to bring happiness and a sense of fulfillment into every home.”⁵⁷ This, then, becomes the premise for what the benefits are for following this religion. When one practices Oprahism, one hopes to receive transformation and ultimately, happiness and fulfillment of the home.

How is this happiness and fulfillment met? When one centers on the self, everything else falls into place. If you fix your problems,

⁵⁵ Lofton, “Practicing Oprah.”

⁵⁶ Adler, *The Uncommon Wisdom*, 232.

⁵⁷ Rosenthal, 9.

your relationships will improve. Her famous guest, Dr. Phil McGraw, who now has his own television concedes to this: “If you want to make your connection with someone else better... the first thing you need to do is make your connection with yourself better.”⁵⁸ More benefits occur with the focus on the self. If you ignore negativity of those around you, you find inner peace. If you work to please the Self, you can tune out the demands put upon you, relieving stress. If you journal about your Self, you will find less stress, courage to pursue your passion, understanding your past and thus understanding how you function in the present, acquiring a greater sense of peace, and simply having a general ‘awareness.’⁵⁹ Thus, blessings and benefits ultimately are both a responsibility and a result. Oprah writes,

I’m truly blessed. But I also believe that you tend to create your own blessings. You have to prepare yourself to that when opportunity comes, you’re ready. I think that the path of our spiritual involvement is the greatest journey we all take... I wanted to do good work. I wanted to do well in my life.⁶⁰

Oprahism seems to offer a solution to every problem and a benefit to every aspect of life. Mind, body, spirit, community, morality, emotions will all find harmony as one draws closer to the Ultimate: the Self.

A Well-formed Religion?

As we have journeyed through significant aspects of the religion of Oprah—the view of reality, the object of religious response, the personal commitment features of worship and discipleship, and the benefits—we have discovered a complex and relatively well-formed religion that attempts to address the whole range of basic human concerns and integrates life by involving and orienting every significant aspect of existence. In a culture which so values individualism and the Self, this religion fits in quite well with many different aspects of life for women in America.

⁵⁸ VanAntwerpen, Pat, "The Spirit of Oprah's Empire, *The Banner*, 31 July 2000, 14-15.

⁵⁹ Lofton, "Practicing Oprah."

⁶⁰ Adler, *The Uncommon Wisdom*, 232.

However, there are a number of questions that need to be raised before this discussion is finished, as we wonder about the depth of its well-formedness. First of all, is its complexity its very downfall? For Oprah and the other gurus and leaders of Oprahism, they have no problem with a tension between an Ultimate that is the Self and an Ultimate that is somehow beyond the Self. For her followers, though, such a concept may not be easily understood, not to mention a practice that is not easily carried out. Oprahites might find themselves disappointed when they look inside and only see themselves, not an Ultimate.

Another question to ask is whether Oprah's function as prophet truly fits in with her followers. Where most of her followers are middle-class spouses and/or mothers, Oprah is a rich, single, woman with no commitments or obligations to or dependence on anyone but herself. Oprah is individualism personified. Oprah *can*, in many ways, buy her happiness; everything is well in her world because of her wealth and her extreme focus on the Self—she can be her own savior. Her “parishioners,” however, can neither pretend like they have money, nor can they ignore the demands of the people that surround them—from their bosses to their children to their significant others. Things cannot be always be so peachy-keen when you are a middle class, working woman. (Not to mention, men in general seem to be specifically excluded from this religion.) One critic writes:

All is not well with the devotees in Winfrey's rose-colored world of the New Age. People fail to change. They frustrate themselves attempting to maintain the constant joy and happiness that is so sought after in the New Age universe. They're told it is completely their own fault they cannot achieve this state of bliss; but they should be gentle with themselves, since the emotion of frustration has such low “vibrational energy.” Obviously, they have more to learn. Why not buy another book?⁶¹

What this critic points out is important. What might happen to such followers of Oprah when they find themselves in a state of

⁶¹ Rosenthal, "GUEST COMMENTARY," 9.

disappointment that they cannot get out of, is that it is very much their own fault; the reason they cannot find fulfillment is because they are not in tune with their Self. Although many of the stories and novels within the realm of Oprahism are that of success, the stories of triumph still make someone wonder why she has not.⁶² Because of the reliance on Self and the apparent passivity of human of sin, a woman who cannot save herself has no place in the religion of Oprah and might find herself digging into a deeper hole of meaninglessness and disappointment.

The Religion of Oprah certainly contains many aspects that make a religion well-formed. Yet, these concerns cannot be overlooked. Can this religion truly work out for countless woman in America? And can a religion like Oprahism sustain itself for very long? Is it too complicated for a laywoman to even understand? Although I am confident enough to say that this religion is well-formed, I believe there are many holes and issues that Oprah and her followers cannot ultimately address in this religion, perhaps leaving room for a message that takes pressure off of the Self and grants Good News that their Savior lies beyond their incomplete, imperfect self.

⁶² Lofton, "Practicing Oprah."

The Power of Darkness *Sermon for Passion Sunday*

William Jensen

I came to appreciate the power of Lament Psalms while working as a chaplain at Pine Rest this past summer. There I saw the power of these Psalms to speak to the lives of hurting, desperate people. In these Psalms we found an opportunity to reflect on those times when we cry out to God, and he doesn't seem to be listening. Those times when we cry out with Jesus, O God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

We would read through a Lament Psalm and then take some time for them to write out their own Psalm as a prayer to God. The prayers they produced were stunning testimonies to the power of Lament.

Many of us are familiar with these Lament Psalms. They have a fairly predictable pattern, they begin with expressions of suffering, anger, and pain expressed to God. Then they move on to recount God's promises or look ahead in faith to what God will do.

They move from lament to faith; from negative to positive... But not our Psalm...

It is hard to find a single verse of Ps 88 which holds anything remotely positive, the Psalm seems darkness from beginning to end. It has been called the lowest passage in the Bible. Even the book of Job ends some response from God, but not Ps 88. We are left with just sorrow and solitude. We have just the power of darkness washing over us from its opening cry to its final gasp...

Why this Psalm?

Reading Ps 88 can be a rather unsatisfying experience. It is like hearing an unresolved cord or reading an intense mystery novel only to find that the last chapter is torn out. There is no closure. No answer. In Hebrew the very last word of the Psalm is darkness, *choshek*... You can hear the anguish in the word itself. *Choshek*. Darkness...

Darkness in Scripture refers to far more than a lack of physical light. It refers to the forces of evil at work in the world. It refers to the powers fighting against God, the powers of sin and death... The powers of hell and Satan. Light and darkness are at war, and the Psalmist is crying out to God because the powers of darkness are overwhelming him.

The Psalm is set in the context of a close relationship, like a child crying out to a parent. He calls out to the God of his salvation. There is trust there, there is a close relationship, yet a relationship that is deeply troubled... Three times in Ps 88, the Psalmist looks up to heaven and cries out to God... O Lord I cry-out before you... I call to you Lord... I cry to you for help everyday! Three times he cries, and three times he finds no answer...

He is persistent and he is persuasive. As we read it we're left with the question, where is God? Here is a man who turns to God in the midst of his desperation and God hides his face. Listen to his descent: My life draws near the grave, I'm counted among those going down into the pit, I'm set apart with the dead, like the slain in the grave, I'm in the lowest pit, the darkest depths, sinking, sinking, sinking.... Then, as though with his last breath he moans: Darkness is my closest friend.

No resolution, no light, the power of darkness.

The Psalm begins with a desperate cry for help and goes straight down hill from there... The Psalm is the cry of one crushed under the power of darkness. We are left with the cord unresolved, the story unfinished... We are left suspended over the pit...

Ps 88 does not fit well with the way we usually think about the Bible. It seems too dark, too morbid. It doesn't quite seem to fit... As bleak as the Psalm is, I am thankful we have Psalm 88. This Psalm occupies a very important place in Scripture and our faith is richer for its presence.

As one commentator said, "It's a good thing we have a Psalm like this, but it's also good we have only one..."¹ It's a good thing we have a Psalm like this... It is also good we have only one... How does it benefit us? So what good does it do? So why is it good we

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42-106*, vol. 2 (Baker Press, Grand Rapids, 1996), 716.

have a Psalm like this?

One thing Ps 88 clearly teaches us is that Christians don't always have to smile. This in and of itself is a powerful message. Martin Marty wrote that if anyone wants to argue from Scripture that everything always turns out well, they would have to begin by ripping this page out of the Bible. This Psalm is true to life... Sometimes we find ourselves sinking lower and lower under the power of darkness and we wonder if we will ever see the light of day again.

It is good for Ps 88 to be in the Bible because it reminds us that in the Psalter we find the whole range of human emotions, even those we are afraid to express. We Christians seem to have a difficult time showing life as it is. We have a tough time being honest; honest with each other and honest with God. As Christians we want that resolution. We want to show everything coming out alight in the end. Our theological conviction that God is working out his divine purpose in all of life drives us to gloss over the dark powers at work in the world.

But right here in Scripture we are given permission to give up this assumption. We are given permission to be honest with God about how we feel. To be honest about what we are going through. This Psalm has been called the lowest point in Scripture. A black hole from which no light can escape.

The theologian in each of us doesn't like this apparent challenge to God's goodness, but the broken, hurting heart in each of us sees its beauty. At one time or another all of us will respond to this Psalm with an Amen; for some of us it may be with a shout, others it may simply be a whisper, but at one time or another, this Psalm will resonate with everyone's heart. It speaks to our pain and suffering.

It speaks to those times in our lives when sorrow has the upper hand. Times when evil seems much closer than good. When darkness seems more powerful than light. Ps 88 would seem to make a horrible encouragement card. It reads as a page ripped from an abandoned child's diary. It reminds us of the darkest moments we can experience... It opens the door for us to open our hearts to God...

Why Today?

But does this passage truly contain no hope? Is it really a gaping, black hole, giving no light at all? I do believe that cracks of light begin to show through the bleak facade. The chord is resolved... The mystery solved. God does break through the despair and we are offered a ray of hope.

I think this hope can be found in the questions of verses 10-12 where the Psalmist writes, “Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the dead rise up to praise you? Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Destruction? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?”

When the Psalmist wrote these words, he assumed the answer no. No, of course God does not show his wonders to the dead... No, the dead do not rise up and praise him. These questions are written to spur God to action.

It is like the Psalmist is looking up to heaven shouting, “you know God, if you want me to praise you, you better hurry up and save me... If you want me to marvel at your love and mercy, you better rescue me soon or it will be too late!”

The questions are meant to remind God of what he has promised, and to get him to do it already! I don’t know if the Psalmist ever received the response he was looking for... But I know that we have.

Christ in the Garden

In Luke’s Gospel, when Christ had finished praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, he rose to the sound of men coming in the night. Though he could have resisted, Christ submitted himself to the soldiers who came to arrest him. He looked at the Jewish leaders and said, “This is your hour, and the power of darkness...” The power of darkness. Christ felt it too. At this moment Christ gave himself over to the forces of evil in the world.

God’s response to suffering and evil was not to snap his fingers and end it. God’s answer to our cries for help was not to explain theologically why our suffering was necessary or show why it is for our good. Instead of explaining our suffering, Christ came and shared it. He felt the power of darkness. God’s response to our suffering was to send his Son to suffer humiliation and torture. To suffer rejection and despair. To suffer to the point that Christ himself

cried out, My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

Through Passion week we open our hearts to the suffering and death of Christ. We watch as he responds to the cries of his people by going down into the Pit. By submitting to the powers of darkness. Through Passion week we also look forward to Easter Sunday, when he crushes the power of darkness with his resurrection.

Those painful questions the Psalmist asked are then transformed in the resurrection light. In Christ each no is transformed into a yes:

Yes, God does work wonders for the dead

Yes, the shades will rise up to praise him

Yes, his steadfast love is declared in the grave and his faithfulness in Destruction

Yes, his wonders are known in darkness and his saving help in the land of forgetfulness.

When the Psalmist found himself facing death, he felt lost and alone. He could find no trace of God's presence. But God takes humanity's no and in Christ's hands it becomes a yes.

Closing

It is striking that the Psalmist seems to present it Lament in the exact opposite order that we would expect. Normally the Psalmist begins with his complaint and then gradually moves to his statement of faith. Yet here he begins by crying out to the God of his salvation and ends in darkness and gloom.

As Christians we are often so conditioned to move to the hope of the resurrection, the hope of Easter, that we gloss over the reality of suffering in the world. We ignore the reality of the power of darkness. While it is true that our present suffering must be shaped by the very real, future hope we have in Christ. Sometimes, just sometimes, don't we have to just stay in the Lament? Don't we have to take the hours, or days, or months, or even years we need to express our pain to God? Even the pain of his silence?

Standing before you this evening I have no sense how this Psalm touches your life. Some may feel the crushing weight of the power of darkness right here tonight... Some may be questioning who God is and wondering why he has left them so alone. Others may still have vivid memories of past sorrow and grief. While some

may have never faced anything like this before.

Yet, no matter where you are, unfortunately we can all be assured that at one time or another, Ps 88 will resonate with our lives. But when it does we can also be assured that we will not go through it alone.

Even though we may face times in our lives when we are face down, praying desperately, or perhaps even unable to pray at all, we can be assured that we are not there alone. When we are desperate for God's salvation, wondering where he is, I wonder if he is right there beside us. Christ face down in the Garden of Gethsemane, so close we can't see him... He is the God of our salvation, is the God who went down into the pit.

Our Christian hope may transform our present suffering, but it does not wipe it away. In Ps 88 we find eloquent permission for us to grieve and struggle. To cry out to God. In Christ we find that our God has come to earth and felt the crushing power of darkness. He has entered the land of destruction.

You can be assured that when the cry of Ps 88 is the cry of your own heart, you are not alone. Christ is there beside you praying in the Garden and lying in the grave. And you can be assured that through this grief, Christ will bring you safely into his Easter Resurrection.

Amen.

Romans 7: “Where’s your story at?”

Brad Knetsch

Introduction

Recently, I took a class here where a Professor began the class with this statement, this confession, “Sometimes I wake up in the morning and wonder whether anything I have learned, Scripture, the Resurrection, God—is true.”

We all had to take a breath. You couldn’t hear a pin drop. I mean here is a seminary professor laying his concerns, his doubts, his cards right on the table for us to see—and it was moving. It was pretty vulnerable and honest situation for him and for us. I mean, we put trust in the words and actions of our professors, especially when they share their feelings, but what were we to make of this?

Since then, I’ve noticed a few things. I’ve noticed that some of the most powerful and influential Christians in the history of the church are open about their inner struggles between good and evil, sin and God. They have no mask. Their heart is laid bare—for all of us to see. I mean, sure, you have Paul, a guy with a fire in his belly but even Paul would ask the question, “Have we wrestled in vain?” “Are we putting our hope in false promise?” “Can God really be trusted?”

Trouble in the Text

At first glance our passage today seems as though Paul has a dual personality.¹ It’s as though we look at the page only to see two voices go at it, like an angel or demon on both shoulders. But we’re not really to blame. Many readers in Christian history have influenced us to see the passage this way.

No such influence was as great as Luther. When Luther was a monk and endlessly confessing to his superior, he believed Paul was consumed with his own agonizing questions: “All I have done in life has been nothing short of sin, am I actually forgiven?” “Am I really

¹ Thomas G. Long, “Preaching Romans Today” *Interpretation* (July 2004), 267.

justified, really?” “Sometimes I feel it, sometimes I don’t... am I truly saved?” Over the last number of decades, we Protestants have added to Luther’s take with an introspective psychological interpretation. We have taken Paul to be, “wracked with guilt, paralyzed by his sins, in desperate need of a heavy dose of Doctor Phil.”

But Paul had no sense of the Medieval Catholic system of Penance, let alone a modernist psychological view of the self. In fact, he makes the opposite point three times, “Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I... it is no longer I... it is no longer I who do it”—he emphasizes that something additional at work here. Something is added... there is another law at work within him.

Our writer today is not behaving according to the delights of God’s law because sin invades his life and we feel this stress and anxiety grab us. “Evil is right there with me...” wherever I go. Paul cries out and claims his body is affected by this cosmic, apocalyptic battle with sin and it leads the charge against the law of God and all of those who try to follow Him.²

He laments, who will rescue me from this universal battle with sin that all of I am caught in? This cry is hard and it hits. We feel it because we know exactly what he is talking about.

But we know that Paul’s cry is not new. In fact, his very question can be found on virtually every page of the middle of the Bible, in the Wisdom literature of Job, Psalms, Lamentations because the Hebrews asked the same question, “Who will rescue us from our bodies of death and sin?”

Trouble in our World

And People keep asking these questions today. Rock music is not always aware of a cosmic battle with sin, particularly, but over the last 50 years, it has raised prophets, prophets who keep asking the same question in sharp ways.

I grew up listening to London, Ontario’s best rock FM 96. I remember in 1999, they gave the top 500 songs of the millennium, which is ironic since rock music began in the 1950’s. I remember watching the online lists roll with high school buddies and waiting for

² Long, “Preaching Romans Today,” 268.

the top songs. We all noticed that posted in each of the top 10 lists was the 1965 Rolling Stones smash hit, “Satisfaction.” Here’s the well-known chorus,

I can’t get no satisfaction,
I can’t get no satisfaction.
’cause I try and I try and I try and I try.
I can’t get no, I can’t get no.

There is a pulse in rock music and beats powerfully today. Whether we have records or mp3’s—we are all aware of it. Rock music recognizes despair and longing, but it always responds in one of two ways.

On the one hand, since there is no satisfaction from our inner struggle between good and evil, Mic Jager makes the point, accept it, and enjoy doing whatever you please. Despair is the end, so rock it out while good times last.

On the other hand, since there is no satisfaction in this life, be angry, be thoroughly miserable, and be depressed. Over the last few years especially, countless rock genres have shattered out of Jager’s theme of inner frustration. One such growing genre is entitled, “sadcore.” It’s a growing genre, especially among today’s younger culture yet it centers completely on slow, mellow sounds with lyrics on loneliness, isolation, and nihilism. Despair is the end, so be dark, reject anything divine, and accept misery.

Mic Jager tapped into something true regarding the human condition of longing. His lament was popular and accurate. Jager pointed it out, countless genres and bands have reacted, but an even greater amount of people in the West today find the Rolling Stone dictum of discontent, of dissatisfaction, as their story.

Grace in the Text

Often we read Paul as one “wracked with guilt, trapped by his sins.” Sure, he was a successful missionary, but he was internally stressed out. But let’s take a step back, for a moment. In the first mention of Paul in the Bible, we find out that his name was Saul, he imprisoned Christians, Jesus appeared to him on a road to Damascus, and then called him to be God’s chosen instrument to bring good

news to the Gentiles. From that time and virtually every moment afterwards, he deals with his call to tell people about the “relationship between Jesus Christ and the Gentiles.” And as we see here, he wasn’t writing a personal FFM journal for an audience of one, but a letter—for Gentiles, for others. Perhaps Paul’s angst has less to do about himself and more to do with others.

When we shift emphasis from a non-introspective understanding of this passage, we begin to see what Paul was concerned with. Paul is giving a story about what God has done and is doing on behalf of not simply himself, but others, for Jews and Gentiles alike.

Paul opens up a window into his life, but it is unusual because there is little about Paul personally and very much about the God he serves. If anything, it is a dualography. Paul sings his song, “I can’t get no satisfaction” but then ends with only one phrase; a phrase that he claims gives his story life. “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul can not introduce his issues, his wrestle without referencing Jesus. Notice, every word, every sentence claims that Paul can not introduce himself without pointing to what his Savior has done for him and all of world. Are we doing that?

But, for Paul, it doesn’t stop there. Christ has saved him and the world. This is truly profound news. So much so that He is not ashamed of it! He has arrived at the point in his faith struggle that He is not embarrassed to be in Jesus Christ and he wants everyone to know, especially those in the most powerful, secular, pagan city in the world that when our story is in Christ, we will be saved!

Grace in the World

Each of us refers our lives to a story. Whether Mic Jagar or Paul, each one claims to live by a story and when we hear them out, they reveal something: we find out where their allegiance is at. A few weeks ago, I went to a Mennonite retreat center. I stayed in a cabin in the woods for a weekend to focus on God’s love and do some listening. In the cabin was a journal dating back to 1982. People coming from countless places with countless issues sharing there struggles and their stories... the following is one.

I came with a soul shivering like a great bell struck by a thousand, hard wooden mallets. The ringing slowly subsides into rest... stillness. I grieve the loss of a father and a sister. The world has changed... a pool of tears. I puzzle the meaning of greatest dreams coming to frustration. How do I live the second half of life pointing toward God's dreams? For do I empty myself of dreams to be that which I cannot conceive? I embrace the permission and grace to grieve in the night. But there this is a new thing I have learned. "O Rest in the Lord, and He shall give you your heart's desire." Everett Thomas, Sept 18, 1991.

This man, this stranger with a name, tells his pain, but like Paul's words, it is only until the last line of the passage, until we have heard the full story, that he gives it meaning... that he finds rest. And what is this story? It is a story not simply about who God is, but about what God has done, what God is doing, and what God continues to do for us. It is a story about God setting things right between Israel and the Gentiles, sinners and the self-righteous, about Him calling the lost unto himself. It is a story about God's promise of saving people from death. It is a story of rescue.

And central to the story is that we can not fix the problem that is so evident to our condition. We stand on the shoulders of Jesus' followers who have placed their lives on Jesus Christ not because we will set things right, but because He has set things right on the Cross. God has fixed it in Jesus.

We stand on this history of people who have asked the questions, "have we wrestled in vain?" "Are we putting our hope in false promise?" "Can God be trusted?" As we gaze through the past, we see many, like Paul, a seminary professor, or this stranger, who lament about their faith struggles—and do so piercingly—but who, more importantly, do so as people who neither feel ashamed nor falter in step to press on and persevere in following Christ because they know—they have assurance—that the story of our communal struggles with sin does not end in desolation but in the hope and promise and truth of the everlasting life, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord! Praise be to Him. Amen.

**The Imperative of Forgiveness:
Matthew 18:23-35 (NKJV)**

Kelvin Tarver

John Perkins, an icon of the war on racism, tells the story of being stopped on a road in the south many years ago. Being an African American in the south during the 1960s' and 70s' was all but criminal, and even punishable by imprisonment, at the very least. He tells of how he and two other men were harshly treated by officers in the heat of segregation. In their accosting, he recalls the horrific tale of how the verbally abusive Caucasian police officer became physical. The outraged officer took a fork and jammed it as far up Perkins' nose as his force would allow, sending Perkins into immediate shock and a surreal (state of) consciousness. In the moment of this most painful and life threatening ordeal, Perkins prayer was that he'd be able to forgive the officer and those engulfed in the bitter, relentless tentacles of racism. He knew at that moment he would have to embrace the totality of God's commandment for forgiveness or die in the throws of hatred and bitterness. Somehow, a significant move of grace enabled Perkins to recognize what was needed for that situation. By grace, he was able to begin a journey of forgiveness which has spawned 6 decades.

We are easily and justly outraged by the behavior that characterized the birth of what is now called the civil rights movement. Many voluntarily laid down their lives in abject protest against the evil of racism. Some declared that such a sacrifice was necessary for a better world for their children. Some met their demise with the words of the great preacher Stephen on their lips, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge". I am deeply suspicious that if it were me, in that situation, it would certainly take a supernatural act of God to keep me from retaliating at the expense of my own life. I consider myself to be "walking out" my Christianity the best I can. But without a supernatural infusion of a grace sufficient for the moment, I am certain that another would have to explain to my survivors the last accounts of my life.

“Lay not this sin to their charge.”¹ This is the marker which indicated the presence of grace upon Stephen, and the absence of grace in the servant from our text. Our servant experienced an enormous measure of grace. His debt is estimated to be in the millions. It would have been the equivalent of several lifetimes of wages. His children’s children would have had to work double overtime in order to make any significant dent in the debt. It was impossible for him to repay the debt. And justly, according to custom and provisions in the law, such a debtor could be thrown into the jail until the debt was paid. And because the debt was actually insurmountable, all of his assets would have been seized, his family scattered or dispersed into shame and impoverished conditions, and he would die incarcerated. Perhaps it was the fear of these repercussions which compelled this servant to say, “have patience with me, and I will repay.” The lord knows that his intentions are suspect at best, but yet he has compassion on his servant.

Not because he was persuaded by the empty promises of the servant, but because he is gracious, the lord extends to him a gratuity which is staggering. He does not put him on a never-ending repayment plan. Rather he releases him of the responsibility of the entire debt. He grants to him an immediate year of “jubilee”. We are moved to understand that such forgiveness has taken place in the story. Which of us would not find such news to be sufficient to change the course of our very lives?! Would we not hold our children just a little tighter that evening? Spilled milk would be an occasion for laughter at the dinner table; silliness would be celebrated and our spouse might detect an additional gleam in our eyes, or share our protracted, appreciative gaze across room. The point here is that such unmerited favor changes things; changes us! Even those around us are the beneficiaries when such grace is given.

“Lay not this sin to their charge”. I love Stephens’s words here. Somehow we identify that the Jews of that day were not the only intended recipients of grace. For we know that by nature, our sinful nature, we participated in the sin that required the blood sacrifice of Christ and many subsequent, executed martyrs. I love those words; until it comes to racism. Then something rises up in me

¹ Acts 7: 6, NKJV.

like the servant who has forgotten that he was forgiven a great debt. There is something in me that wants to take this person (read: race) by its collective throat and cry “Pay what thou owest”. The African American people and other minorities have experienced unnecessary massacre at the hands of those who have judged us by the way God has seen fit to make us. I want to say “God, give them what they deserve!” “Lord, does not the blood of our people cry out from the ground as did the blood of Abel?” And there are others from within the community who cry, “Give an account.” “Lord, hold them accountable in some way until they have paid the last mite.” But Caucasian children of racism are in the precarious position of being unwitting perpetrators and victims of the insidious system. While they have indeed lived large on the gains inherited through a system of intentional exploitation, they are also in the unsatisfactory position of holding the receipts of their parents’ possessions, purchased with blood.

God has blessed the people of this country, black, white and otherwise. We must never forget that. Certainly, and to be sure, there is much more work to be done. And there are forces at hand which work to undo that which has already been accomplished. Moreover, like the 1st servant in the parable, we have been forgiven a great deal. It is we whom the Lord has forgiven. In Christ, we have found redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins. We who were far off have been brought so close, that an adoption has taken place. Now, we must understand that being the recipients of such grace carries with it the imperative to forgive, just as we have been forgiven. This means we, as Christians, carry with us the imperative of forgiving our brothers and sisters who bear in themselves the residual effects of racism on many levels. Though there are many quantifiable categories in which “experts” say retribution must be made, we who are in Christ must resist the temptation to do what amounts to “taking a race by the throat” and demanding that which, in reality, cannot be repaid. Like the recipient in the parable, the debt is too great. It simply is not practical to think that such a debt as racism can actually be undone. It can’t! How does one put a price tag on the countless number of lives lost at sea in the slave trade which went on for centuries? And how does one account for the number of families destroyed? And what of the internal divisiveness which still lurks

among us from the practice of children being sired and abandoned through “bed warming” (*the practice of having young girls “warm” the bed before the master and spouse would occupy it*), and other such exploitive deeds. This is a debt that is insurmountable. This is a debt which overwhelms all involved. The shame of slavery, racism, prejudice remains as one of the darkest shadows in American and world history. The shame of it is like that of a relentless giant who calls out to both blacks and whites daily, “*Who can stand before me?*” or, in the vernacular, “*Who’s your Daddy?*” “Who can deal with me? Send me your warrior!”² But we are the recipients of a supernatural grace. We who are in Christ can resist and withstand the temptation to see the looming residuals of racism as “their” ought against “us”. When we fail to resist such a temptation, we align ourselves with the harmful activity of the servant when he deals harshly with his servant. We put ourselves in the elevated position of those who “demand,” though we have fully and graciously received. When respective races, in Christian identity, deny our mutual culpability in reciprocal grace, we short circuit our collective power to slay the giant and become a divided people who are soon and surely conquered.

Our Caucasian brothers and sisters are in a unique position. They are in the perfect situation to model humility. Their position allows them to recognize that, as national debts go, this one has them in over their heads. This is one problem which cannot be remedied by a program, a check, or a legislative act. While these all may be well intended efforts which do some good, nevertheless the total cost remains inestimable. Our siblings of a fairer hue need to recognize that they need forgiveness. God remains in the business of forgiveness. And he has placed our African American brothers and sisters in the unique position of facilitating God’s grace towards the rest of his children.

African Americans in particular are in the unique position to declare loudly and profoundly, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” We need not ignore all that has happened in the past, nor all that remains to be done. Certainly, much more needs to be done so that our children will know racism only as a historical fact. But we,

² 1 Samuel 17, NKJV.

like Stephen, and like John Perkins, need to make an on the spot decision against the momentum of racism and pronounce, “You are my brother.” And on behalf of my brother, my sincere request of my father is, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” “And help us, Father, not to judge him too harshly. Let him not be overwhelmed by the atrocity of this sin. Restore unto us all, what the locust and the worms have eaten.”

Our servant in the parable showed what happens when we don’t utilize forgiveness. The Lord of Lords, whose standard is much higher than ours, who gives us his mercy, love and forgiveness, is also the God that we sin against when we withhold forgiveness when we ought not. Will he not hold us accountable? Surely he will, as he shows in the parable.

Racism is not an undefeatable giant. He is but an uncircumcised Philistine who continues to taunt and intimidate Gods people, and the whole of humanity. But we are not with out a weapon against him. Of course, our weapons are not carnal, rather they are spiritual. Stephen modeled for us the proper use of the weapon of forgiveness. He used his sword mightily until his very last breath. John Perkins also employed the weapon of forgiveness properly, and it may well have saved his life. We also have the very Christ who says on the cross, “Father, forgive them, because they know not what they do.” What, then, ought our response be to the uncircumcised Philistine called racism?