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Stromata

“...a vehicle for scholarly expression,”

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Mark Hofman, Ben Austin, and David Sytsma
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Did Zurich and its Antistes Agree to all this? The Zurich Consensus and Calvin's First Defense Against Westphal

Agata Omelanczuk

It would be most interesting to seat ourselves along with the distinguished men by whom THE CONFERENCE was conducted, and follow it out into all its details; but we must content ourselves with a simple statement of the result. The respect which they had previously felt for each other soon rose to the warmth of friendship; all obstacles melted away, and an AGREEMENT was drawn up, consisting of a Series of Articles, in which all points of importance relating to The Sacraments are clearly and succinctly defined. The issue of The Conference gave general satisfaction, and CALVIN and FAREL returned home with the blessing of peacemakers on their heads.

It is scarcely congruous to talk of victory, when, properly speaking, there was no contest, and the only thing done was the establishment of peace; and yet it is but justice to CALVIN to remark, that if any who subscribed the Agreement must be understood by so doing to have changed the views which they previously entertained, he was not of the number, as there is not one of the Articles which he had not maintained in one or other of his Works.¹

Thus Henry Beveridge described, in December of 1849, the proceedings and result of the conference which took place in Zurich three hundred years and seven months earlier, when the *Zurich Consensus* was formulated. The importance of this statement on the doctrine of the sacraments lies in the fact that the main parties agreeing to it were John Calvin (1509-1564) and Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), regarding whose views scholars have noted clear differences, especially on the Lord's Supper. By 1549, Calvin was deeply involved in continuing the work of the Reformation in Geneva,

¹ Henry Beveridge, "Translator's Preface" to John Calvin, *On the Doctrine and Worship of the Church*, vol. 2 of *Tracts and Treatises*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849; reprint Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1958), xxiii-xxiv.

and Bullinger had already been serving for more than fifteen years as the Antistes, or chief minister, in Reformed Zurich. While each of the men could be described as “Reformed,” their association with these two cities means each was well-established within a different branch of the emerging Reformed tradition. Furthermore, Bullinger seems to have reached his view of the Lord’s Supper independently not only of Calvin, whose conversion to the Reformed faith was later than his own, but also of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), whom he succeeded in his position in Zurich.² Thus, the agreement should be described as between the Calvinist and the “Bullingerian” view of the sacraments.³

The meeting in Zurich was due largely to Calvin’s efforts to unite the Reformed groups in and around the Swiss territories. One of the motivations behind this move was Luther’s increasingly hostile and vocal opposition to the Reformed views on the Lord’s Supper; in the 1540’s, he was polemically classing the Reformed together with Anabaptists.⁴ However, there were matters beyond the theological debate with Lutherans which made union between the various Reformed cities imperative. The political situation during this time was also becoming increasingly precarious for this group of the Reformed states. By 1547, there was a very real threat from the

² Paul Rorem, “Calvin and Bullinger on the Lord’s Supper. Part I. The Impasse,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 2 (1988): 163-164, cites Hans George vom Berg, “Spätmittelalterliche Einflüsse auf die Abendmahlslehre des jungen Bullinger,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 22 (1976): 221-233, and presents a very convincing argument, based on clear evidence from primary sources, regarding the origin and independence of Bullinger’s view.

³ Thus, while the *Zurich Consensus* was supported by more than simply Calvin on one side and Bullinger on the other, it is rather inaccurate, and somewhat anachronistic, to describe it as between Calvinist and “Zwinglian” parties. However, the Bullingerian side is often presented as Zwinglian, especially in older scholarship. For historically, if not always substantively, helpful selections from mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century writings, see John Theodore Mueller, “Notes on the Consensus Tigurinus of 1549,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20 (1949): 894-907.

⁴ Ian D. Bunting, “The *Consensus Tigurinus*,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 44 (1966): 46; Rorem, “Calvin and Bullinger, Part I,” 167-168; Gordon, 173-174. See also, Mueller, 897 (quoting Paul Christ, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* [New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1912], 12:535ff.), which shows that this aspect of the motivation behind the *Zurich Consensus* has long been recognized.

Catholic armies of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.⁵ In 1548, the situation became even more grave as the Augsburg Interim was being imposed upon the Lutheran territories in Germany.⁶ However, the defeat of the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League and the German territories' acceptance of the Interim also meant that the efforts to unify Protestants could be focused only on the Reformed groups.⁷ While it shows how deep the divisions between the two branches of the Reformation were becoming, the limiting of the scope of the work towards unity perhaps also made the goals more realistic. The attainment of the *Zurich Consensus* can be seen as evidence of what achievements became possible.

For these kinds of reasons, since 1545 Calvin and Bullinger had been discussing their views of the sacraments in general. They exchanged several volleys of correspondence on the subject, among which was Bullinger's *Absoluta* of late 1545, and Calvin's response to it.⁸ This writing later formed the basis of sermons six and seven in the fifth of Bullinger's *Decades*.⁹ In addition, in 1549 Calvin wrote a set of twenty articles on the Lord's Supper, which, although originally meant for the clergy of Bern, became the basis of the *Zurich Consensus*. In late May of 1549, Calvin traveled from Geneva to Zurich, and met with Bullinger, in the presence of others. The actual meeting lasted only two hours, and resulted in the *Consensus*.

⁵ Rorem, "Calvin and Bullinger, Part I," 177.

⁶ Paul Rorem, "Calvin and Bullinger on the Lord's Supper. Part II. The Agreement," *Lutheran Quarterly* 2 (1988): 358, 365; Bruce Gordon, *The Swiss Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 162-163.

⁷ Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 56.

⁸ Heinrich Bullinger, *Absoluta de Christi Domini et Catholicae eius Ecclesiae Sacramentis tractatio... Cui adiecta est eiusdem argumenti epistola, per Ioannem a Lasco... scripta*. London: Imprinted by Stephanus Myerdmannus, 1551. This work is also known as *De Sacramentis*. See Rorem, "Calvin and Bullinger, Part I," 170-171.

⁹ Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades*, ed. Thomas Harding, vol.2, originally vols. 3 and 4 (Parker Society, 1849-1852; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), decade 5, sermon 6, 4:226-292; sermon 7, 4:293-351; and sermon 9, 4:401-478. The relationship between the *Absoluta* and 5.6-7 is attested by Joachim Staedtke, ed., *Heinrich Bullinger Bibliographie*, vol. 1, part 1 of *Heinrich Bullinger Werke*, ed. Fritz Büsser (Schaffhausen: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1972), 91. Also, Rorem, "Calvin and Bullinger, Part I," 170-171.

Later, most of the other Reformed Swiss cities also affirmed the document.¹⁰

While the *Zurich Consensus* was seen as a positive development by Geneva and within the Protestant Swiss cantons, it further intensified Lutheran opposition to the Reformed regarding the understanding of the Lord's Supper. The Gnesio-Lutheran Joachim Westphal (1510-1574), then minister in Hamburg, attacked the Reformed views in various publications. Eventually, Calvin wrote a response in 1554, entitled *Defense of the Ancient and Orthodox Teaching concerning the Sacraments*.¹¹ However, Westphal is not explicitly named in the treatise. This work is structured as an exposition of the *Zurich Consensus*. However, a quick reading of this treatise seems to indicate that the understanding of the sacraments presented here is not exactly the same as described in the *Consensus*. If that is the case, what becomes of even more interest is that not only was this treatise published in the Swiss cities together with the *Zurich Consensus*, but the Zurich edition of this compound work also included a statement by Bullinger indicating his subscription to it.¹²

Given the apparent divergence of the views on the sacraments presented in the *Zurich Consensus* and Calvin's *Defense*, it is worth investigating the nature, or depth, of the agreement between Calvin and Bullinger by examining Calvin's work and the *Consensus*. Such an analysis will help understand how Calvin's view relates to what was discussed in Zurich, and thus how Bullinger might have understood Calvin's *Defense*.

Method

In order to compare and contrast different understandings of

¹⁰ Ian D. Bunting, "The *Consensus Tigurinus*," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 44 (1966): 45-47; in Rorem, see esp. "Calvin and Bullinger, Part II," 366-367.

¹¹ *Defensio senae et orthodoxae doctrinae de Sacramentis*. Beveridge's translation entitled "Exposition of the Heads of Agreement," found in Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, vol. 2, 221-244, was used in this paper. It seems to be the only available English translation.

¹² Joseph N. Tylenda, "The Calvin-Westphal Exchange: The Genesis of Calvin's Treatises against Westphal," *Calvin Theological Journal* 9 (1974): 182-195; Rorem, "Calvin and Bullinger, Part II," 379-381; Gordon, 176; Beveridge, xxv-xxvi.

the sacraments, specific and valid criteria must be selected. The quote from Beveridge included above seems to suggest that the fact that the ideas seen in the *Zurich Consensus* also appear in Calvin's writings mean that it fully expresses his views. However, merely noting recurrence of similar ideas is not necessarily helpful. Scholars have noted that the *Zurich Consensus* does not fully represent Calvin's understanding.¹³ However, the nature of the document is such that it has to include matters which do not contradict the position of either party. Furthermore, perhaps what Lyle Bierma found to be true in an overview of the history of trying to identify the *Heidelberg Catechism's* understating of the Lord's Supper as "Melancthonian, Calvinist or Zwinglian" applies as much to trying to understand whether the *Zurich Consensus* is more Calvinist or Bullingerian. If merely phraseology, motifs or separate ideas are sought out, the same elements within a writing can be interpreted differently by different scholars.¹⁴ Bierma then follows B.A. Gerrish, who has perhaps best articulated the difference between Calvin's and Zwingli's or Bullinger's understanding of the sacraments. Gerrish argues that the divergence between Calvin and Zwingli occurs when they discuss the nature of the symbolism of the sacraments. For Calvin, the Lord's Supper was a "means of grace" because through it God does indeed

¹³ See especially Calvin's letter to Bucer quoted in Rorem, "Calvin and Bullinger, Part II," 379, which, although might have been partly influenced by what Calvin knew of Bucer's own view, shows his unwillingness to fully endorse the view of the *Consensus* as his own. Cf. P. E. Hughes, ed. "A Mutual Agreement Concerning the Sacraments between the Ministers of the Church in Zurich and John Calvin," in *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1966), 115 n.50.

¹⁴ Lyle D. Bierma, *The Doctrine of the Sacraments in the Heidelberg Catechism: Melancthonian, Calvinist, or Zwinglian?*, Studies in Reformed Theology and History, New Series, no. 4 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1991), 7. For examples of varied interpretations of terminology used in the *Zurich Consensus*, see Mueller's quotation of John T. McNeill reference to "sharply Zwinglian phraseology of some of these clauses" (899; quoting from *The Journal of Religion*, 7 no. 3 [July 1928]: 424ff.), and of F. Bente, "Even where he paraded as Luther, Calvin was but Zwingli disguised (and poorly at that) in a seemingly orthodox [Lutheran] garb and promenading with several imitation Lutheran feathers in his hat" (901; quoting from *Triglot Concordia* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1920], 174ff.).

confer benefits on the believer through the Supper.¹⁵ For Zwingli, however, the sacrament was merely a figure of what God was doing in the believer's life, and there was no temporal, much less causal, relationship between the two.¹⁶ Likewise, although Bullinger was willing to understand Christ as having an active role in offering the sacraments, so that our faith was truly receiving from him at that time, he did not see the sacraments as instruments through which Christ or his benefits are given.¹⁷ Thus, the main difference between Calvin and Bullinger that one needs to pay attention to in this connection is whether the sacraments are presented as instruments through which Christ's benefits are given us, or whether they are merely symbolic of the giving and receiving of this grace.¹⁸ Certainly, picking out the themes recurrent in each author's writings could result in identifying this dimension as part of the divergence between them.¹⁹ However, the approach Gerrish's work suggests seems more focused and thus able to yield more reliable results.

Because the approach of Gerrish and those who follow him allows for the independent assessment of a given document, it will be best to analyze each part of the evidence separately using the above criteria, and then compare the results. In order to understand the relationship of Calvin's positions to the *Zurich Consensus*, first the *Consensus* itself will be analyzed. Then, the *Defense* will be discussed in a similar manner, especially in terms of what is

¹⁵ B.A. Gerrish, "Sign and Reality: the Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions," in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 122.

¹⁶ Gerrish, 121. It seems that the strongest statement Zwingli was able to make regarding the relationship of partaking in the sacrament and one's spiritual condition comes from "An Exposition of the Faith" which he wrote in 1531 to Francis I of France, where he says that "sacramental eating" occurs if one both eats Christ spiritually, that is, trusts in him, and takes part in the sacrament at the same time (Ulrich Zwingli, "An Exposition of the Faith," in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G.W. Bromiley, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 24, 245-279 [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953], 258).

¹⁷ Rorem, "Calvin and Bullinger, Part I," 164, 169-170; Gerrish, 124;

¹⁸ Gerrish, 128; Rorem, "Calvin and Bullinger, Part II," 372; see also Bierma, 23-24.

¹⁹ For an example of a description of Calvin's view similar to this, see Paul Christ, quoted in Mueller, 898.

discovered in the *Consensus* and where the two works might diverge. The analysis will conclude with a comparison of what has been learned regarding each of the sources.

Analysis of the *Zurich Consensus*

In line with the stated methodology, the focus of the analysis of the *Zurich Consensus* is the relationship between the sacrament and God's actions. Thus, primarily, the places where the document says something about this relationship between sign and signified need to be identified. The first explicit mention of the sacraments is found in article 6, where their use is mentioned parallel to the preaching of God's Word as a way in which God testifies to our union with Christ.²⁰ The following article asserts that the primary purpose of the sacraments "is that through them God may testify, represent and seal his grace to us." The presentation and sealing of God's grace in the sacraments is done in a way that is not qualitatively different from what is done by the preaching of the Word, but does impress what God makes known in a "deeper way."²¹

Article 8 proceeds to affirm that what is signified by the sacraments is truly offered and given to us by God's Spirit. However, the benefits are presented as being related to the cross of Christ in the past and to our daily appropriation of them, so that here they are not even limited to the time when we take part in the sacrament.²² Article 9 strives to affirm a distinction between the sign and the reality without making the sacrament superfluous. Therefore, it states that the promise is offered in the sacraments, and that by embracing the promise by faith, one "receives Christ spiritually."²³ Article 10

²⁰ Bunting, 51-52. This paper relies mostly on Bunting's translation, which helpfully includes the traditional numbering of the articles. Other available English editions include "A Mutual Agreement Concerning the Sacraments between the ministers of the Church in Zurich and John Calvin," in P. E. Hughes, ed., *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva*, 115-123, and "Mutual Consent in regard to The Sacraments," in Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, vol. 2, 199-220.

²¹ Bunting, 52.

²² Bunting, 52-53.

²³ Bunting, 53: "the promises there [i.e., in the signs of the sacrament] offered." On the importance of the emphasis on faith rather than the sacrament itself as being more in agreement with Bullinger than Calvin, see Rorem, "Calvin and Bullinger, Part II," 372.

further emphasizes that it is the promise attached to the sacrament, and not the elements themselves, that should be our focus. The promise can “lead us to Christ by the true way of faith, which makes us partakers of Christ.”²⁴ Without Christ, the sacraments “are nothing but empty masks” (article 11).²⁵ Thus, sharing in the benefits of Christ is by faith. Faith is not limited in its existence to the time of the sacrament, although it does respond to the promise presented in the use of the sacraments.

It is also clear here that the “promise” is not something that makes the sacraments effectual; it is rather what God communicates about himself through them. Articles 12-15 state emphatically that the sacraments are merely a means God uses, and he is the one who is actually active.²⁶ Thus, “it is Christ alone who truly baptizes within and who in the Supper makes us partakers of himself” (article 14), and “in the proper sense the Spirit alone is the seal” (article 15).²⁷ Likewise, according to article 16, it is only the elect who profit from God’s actions.²⁸ In the following article, the reality and sign are likewise separated, in that “the signs are administered to the reprobate as well as to the elect, but the reality only reaches the latter.”²⁹ Even so, the signs signify Christ’s offer to all, and it simply is not received by unbelievers, as article 18 explains.³⁰

Similarly to the way the offer and reception of Christ’s benefits differ between believers and unbelievers, the signs and the reality are distinct in their temporal duration. “[E]ven outside the use of the sacraments, the reality which is figured remains firm for the faithful” (article 19).³¹ The continuation of what is signified also means that faith precedes the fruitful use of the sacrament. The same article, however, speaks of the usefulness of the sacrament in

²⁴ Bunting, 53.

²⁵ Bunting, 53.

²⁶ Bunting, 54.

²⁷ Bunting, 54.

²⁸ Bunting, 55.

²⁹ Bunting, 55.

³⁰ Bunting, 55. However, Rorem reads this to simply mean the non-elect do not receive grace through the sacraments, so that the issue of the relationship between the sign and reality for the elect is not touched here (“Calvin and Bullinger, Part II,” 374).

³¹ Bunting, 55.

confirming us in the grace of God by increasing faith.³² Thus, the sacraments are useful, but it is faith that makes them useful. Finally, article 20 gives a decisive argument for the temporal separation of the sacrament and its benefits by noting that those baptized as infants are not regenerated by God until later.³³

This summary and analysis of the relevant section of the *Zurich Consensus* shows that the agreement between Calvin and Bullinger did not represent the sacraments as instruments through which God gives us grace. Rather, even though the sacraments are means God uses and help our growth in faith by pointing us to his promise, it is by faith, often independently of the use of the sacraments, that we are united to Christ. Thus, according to categories Gerrish suggests, here the sacraments are presented more as parallel to the benefits of Christ than as instruments.

Analysis of Calvin's *Defense*

Given the understanding of the *Zurich Consensus* arrived at above, Calvin's exposition of it, in the *Defense of the Ancient and Orthodox Teaching concerning the Sacraments*, will now be examined using the same criteria. However, here the context will have a greater bearing on understanding the document. Calvin acknowledges that the purpose of the treatise is to show how his view and the view of the other Reformed ministers is much like the Lutheran view, and how therefore many of the charges brought against them are untrue. However, also because of this context, he will consciously present his position in a way that makes it acceptable to Lutherans. Calvin's concern is to show that the Reformed view does not detract from the value of the sacraments. In fact, he strives to show that the Reformed give the sacraments the highest significance one can without taking away from God as the only one who works our salvation.

Part of Calvin's answer is to show that the *Zurich Consensus* assigns to the sacraments a very high value as one of the means that God uses. In answering his opponents, Calvin affirms that the goal of the sacraments is to be "helps and means" by which we are brought

³² Bunting, 56.

³³ Bunting, 56.

closer to Christ and pointed to God.³⁴ He agrees with Luther that one should be sure that the sacraments are not presented merely as signs without meaning, and contends that the *Zurich Consensus* handles this matter correctly.³⁵ However, he also proceeds to state that he concurs with Luther that “the signs are not devoid of the things, as God conjoins the effectual working of his Spirit with them,” and affirms the Augsburg Confession that the “the true effect is conjoined with the external figure, so that believers receive the body and blood of Christ.”³⁶

As he advances in the exposition of the *Zurich Consensus*, quoting from article 8 that God accomplishes by his Spirit what he signifies by the sacraments, Calvin also quickly points out that, in the following article, the ministers emphasized that although they were “distinguishing between the signs and the things signified, [they] disjoined not the reality from the signs.”³⁷ However, he then goes further, and seems to add to the intention of the *Consensus* as much as he adds to its words, when he states, “...they [the sacraments] are not only badges of all the blessings which God once exhibited to us in Christ, and which we receive every day, but that the efficacy of the Spirit is conjoined with their outward representation, lest they should be empty pictures.”³⁸ Here, although the Spirit is central for the sacraments to be effectual, Calvin explicitly states that they are more than representations of benefits received outside the time of the sacrament. Rorem rightly points out the importance of the use of the idea of “instruments” and “means [...] of [...] grace” throughout the treatise, here attributed equally to God’s Word and to the sacraments.³⁹ Thus, the understanding of how the sacraments are used by God leads to them acting much more as instruments here than they seemed to in the original text of the *Consensus*.

However, although this text was written for a specific audience, Calvin cannot be said to compromise his view in order to

³⁴ Calvin, 222-223.

³⁵ Calvin, 224.

³⁶ Calvin, 225.

³⁷ Calvin, 226.

³⁸ Calvin, 227.

³⁹ Calvin, 227; Rorem, “Calvin and Bullinger, Part II,” 379, and 388 n.70 (through a misnumbering, referenced as 175 in the text of the article).

appease his Lutheran opponents. When discussing the idea of promise which the signs present, Calvin follows very closely the idea of the *Zurich Consensus* regarding sacraments pointing to Christ.⁴⁰ He also insists, as the *Consensus* does, that God alone effects anything through the sacraments.⁴¹ The argument is that God actually uses the sacraments as means, but his use of means does not take away from the fact that it is God alone who works.⁴² On the other hand, the fact that sacraments are non-effectual for unbelievers stems from their own unbelief, so that it is not the nature of the sacraments that is changed, nor do they have less dignity because of this.⁴³ Faith must be present in order for a person to receive Christ in the sacrament.⁴⁴ This point arose as part of the discussion because one of the clearer differences between Calvin and the Lutherans was whether unbelievers also received Christ in the Supper. Because of the belief that Christ's body was present in the elements, Luther affirmed that even those who do not have saving faith receive him, but the result for them is judgment rather than salvation. Calvin consistently denied this idea, as he does here. It is clear from Calvin's exposition that he was not accommodating his views for the sake of his Lutheran opponents.⁴⁵ Here, he seems to strictly follow the *Consensus*.

Likewise, Calvin maintains the same temporal separation as the *Zurich Consensus* between taking part in the signs and enjoying the benefits. He affirms the idea that the reality can be present without the sign, as in the case of imprisoned Christians who do not take part in the Supper, or persons such as Cornelius who was regenerated before being baptized.⁴⁶ However, the fact that they are not absolutely necessary for sharing in Christ's benefits does not

⁴⁰ Calvin, 228-229.

⁴¹ Calvin, 229.

⁴² Calvin, 230-231.

⁴³ Calvin, 231-232, 234.

⁴⁴ Calvin, 234, 238.

⁴⁵ Although Tylanda quotes a letter in which Calvin is apologetic that he "sometimes granted [...] more than [he] should" to Lutherans (Tylanda, 192), in light of the actual content of the *Defense*, this should not be taken to mean that he was disingenuous in writing the treatise.

⁴⁶ This example is found in article 19 of the *Zurich Consensus* as well (Bunting, 55).

mean that the sacraments have no use.⁴⁷ Furthermore, he also repeats the example given in the *Consensus* of a person baptized in infancy being regenerated later in life to show that the effects are not temporally bound to the sign.⁴⁸ Thus, it cannot be said that Calvin does not separate the sign from the reality, because he holds some of the same distinctions that the *Zurich Consensus* does. However, unlike the *Consensus*, he does see the sacraments as instruments.

Comparison of the Results

In light of all this, Calvin's understanding of the sacraments in his *Defense*, which follows the *Zurich Consensus* by only a few years, includes both the instrumental relationship, which Gerrish sees as characteristic of his sacramental theology, and some elements of temporal separation which do not seem to fit very well with this instrumental idea. Not only does the reality not have to accompany the sign, as in the case of unbelievers who take part in the sacrament, but the sign does not need to accompany the reality, as when people who are baptized as infants are regenerated later. Thus, this work by Calvin not only affirms ideas characteristic of his sacramental theology, but it also includes ideas which are usually seen as typical of Bullinger. Yet, it was precisely this "Bullingerian" separation of the signs and the reality that was affirmed in the *Zurich Consensus*.

At least three explanations could be given for Calvin's simultaneous affirmation of two understandings of the symbolism of the Lord's Supper. First, it could be dismissed as an accommodation to the various audiences and an attempt to appease those who share Bullinger's views. Furthermore, if the *Consensus* is a sincere agreement, the content of the *Defense* could be indicative of a shift in Calvin's own thought. Finally, it could simply be that there is actually no contradiction between the sacraments being means of grace and them giving grace at a time other than participation in sacrament. Given the fact that he affirms both in the same document, this last seems to make the most sense. However, more research into Calvin's writings on the Lord's Supper before and after this agreement would have to be done in order to be able to state this as a firmer conclusion.

⁴⁷ Calvin, 236.

⁴⁸ Calvin, 237.

Because the analysis above has revealed that some of the ideas in the *Zurich Consensus* normally considered Bullingerian were accepted by Calvin in his *Defense*, it might not be too great of a surprise that Bullinger too was willing to accept some of the stronger statements regarding the sacraments as instruments and have both works published with his official approval. Furthermore, the Zurich church did make suggestions regarding improving the treatise.⁴⁹ Because Bullinger and his associates were able to offer suggestions and yet the final form of Calvin's *Defense* remained the same, it is all the more likely that the differences were not seen as too great by Zurich's Antistes. Thus, as has been noted by historians, from this time on Zurich and Geneva were able to work more closely together, and Calvin and Bullinger were very charitable regarding each other's views.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Tylenda, 194.

⁵⁰ Benedict, 57.

Calvin's Election and Reprobation: *Not an iron scepter, but a shepherd's crook*

Jay Knochenhauer

"We may see not only the utility of this doctrine, but also its most pleasant fruits."

- John Calvin¹

Was Calvin a Cold Hearted Determinist?

Many Christians find *election* embarrassing. To some it seems like the black sheep in the doctrinal family, the obnoxious brother they would like to hide in the back row of the family portrait. For others it is worse; election is a horrible decree that Calvin invented and it is opposed to everything evangelical and Christian. "The biblical idea of election is the ultimate anti-humanistic idea,"² writes Jeremy Cott. "Election is really an idolatry of identity and a perversion of grace."³

For Calvin election was the opposite. It is an awe inspiring⁴ decree that displays God's love and glory. Contrary to popular contention, predestination was not Calvin's central focus. He used election pastorally and repudiated mere philosophical speculation. For Calvin it fit with practical theology, and he used it as a shepherd's crook to tend the flock. While not *the* central doctrine of our faith, it is integral to the *good news* of Jesus Christ. Calvin's application of this teaching leads to a better grasp of Christ and redemption. Election and reprobation are important and useful doctrines with deep pastoral implications. In Calvin's hands, predestination safeguards the glory of God and fences out human pride. *Calvin's writings and practice reveal that his use of election was primarily*

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), III.xxiii.1 (vol. II, 226).

² Jeremy Cott, "The Biblical Problem of Election," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21/2 (Spring 1984): 204.

³ Cott, 225.

⁴ This is a better translation of the oft quoted French: "décret horrible" (*Institutes*, III.xxiii.7).

pastoral and it promoted rather than hindered gospel proclamation and Christian piety. Far from being a stumbling block, Calvin's view of election and reprobation proved a vital pastoral force for tremendous church growth.

Calvin's Definition

Considering the distortion that so often surrounds the issue of predestination it is worth beginning with Calvin's definition. The current form of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* places the doctrine of predestination in a section of Book III subtitled "the mode of obtaining the grace of Christ and the effects resulting by it." It follows repentance, justification, and prayer, areas concerning the active life of the redeemed. Calvin is clear:

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 eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death.⁵

Admittedly this statement is a mix of terror and grace. North American evangelicals react the same way Caleb's detractors did when he returned from Egypt carrying a huge bunch of grapes from Eschol. "But there are giants in the land!" they cried. In a similar way reprobation follows in the shadow of election in Calvin's world, but faith in God allows us to move forward following Calvin's lead. Since Calvin was a primary source for the distillation and shaping of doctrines of the Reformed faith, it is worth examining *how* Calvin himself was able to escape the "inextricable labyrinth" of election and retribution to feast on "its most pleasant fruits."

Calvin Navigates the Abyss

Some become shipwrecked needlessly. "Though the discussion of predestination is regarded as a perilous sea, yet in sailing over it the navigation is calm and safe, nay, pleasant, provided we do not voluntarily court danger," Calvin suggests. He offers two

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xx.5 (206).

warnings before proceeding. First, a warning goes out to those who draw back and fail to inquire at all. Since all Scripture is inspired by God and in wisdom He has revealed to us something of His eternal plan, He wants us to *know* our election. Secondly, a stern warning is sounded toward anyone who attempts to penetrate into the *hidden* recesses of the divine mind, because doing so he “plunges headlong into an immense abyss, involves himself in numberless inextricable snares, and buries himself in the thickest darkness.” But following Calvin in this direction will not shake our faith, but confirm it. Our pastoral use and our inquiry must be humble and quick to admit our limitations. “Let us not decline to be somewhat in ignorance in regard to the depths of the divine wisdom.”⁶ “Let our method of inquiry then be, to begin with the calling of God and to end with it.”⁷

Calvin was squaring off against the meritorious grace preached by Rome that historically taught against assurance.⁸ In addition, he had no indulgences to sell, his people were tormented by Rome, and the Protestant cause seemed a meager thing. The apprehension of the typical Protestant parishioner was palpable, so for Calvin this was not mere theological exploration. His preaching of the law brought conviction of sin, the Gospel brought life and hope, and election assured proper humility and ascribed glory to God. This doctrine *humbles* and *assures*: “there being no other means of humbling us as we ought, or making us feel how much we are bound to him. Nor, indeed, have we elsewhere any sure ground of confidence.”⁹ For Calvin, predestination was useful to mortify human pride while useful to buttress the faith of the weary. God had begun a good work and He will finish it. At the heart of the matter was nothing less than the glory of God revealed in the gospel, because redemption followed a plan orchestrated by a divine decree. It was a decree that guaranteed that no sheep is lost. Upon this rests the foundation of Christian comfort. Calvin’s purpose in arguing vociferously for election is pastoral:

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiv.14.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiv.4 (243).

⁸ Anathematized at Council of Trent (sess. 6, ch. 9).

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.1 (203).

This matter is not a subtle and obscure speculation...For it builds up faith soundly, trains us to humility, elevates us to admiration of the immense goodness of God towards us, and excites us to praise this goodness.¹⁰

For Calvin, election was never an end in itself doctrinally. It should lead us to Christ. He knew that this is what manifested glory to God and brought joy to the life of the Christian.

Calvin as a Wise Pastor

The *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was written as an introductory textbook for the newly minted Protestant faith. It was the “green pasture” of Psalm 23 for which Protestants had prayed their Lord to lead them. It was published prior to the significant confessions of the Reformed faith and thus became a touchstone for the systematizing of essential doctrines. It instructs the faithful and it acts to counter the errors of Rome, Anabaptists, enthusiasts and heretics.

For Calvin, predestination was never a central focus. Even in his polemic work defending it¹¹ his object was practical. God’s glory was at stake and Christian comfort was threatened. It is significant that he was comfortable placing the discussion of predestination virtually anywhere in the theological spectrum. In the 1537 edition of the *Institutes* Calvin situated election with his treatment of providence. Subsequently, as he developed his commentary on Romans he moved providence in the *Institutes* to the section on the doctrine of God. In his catechism he treated it differently yet. His treatment was primarily genre driven rather than an issue of soteriology.¹² Election was God’s whisper that answered the difficult mystery of how and why God does what He does. Election and reprobation were useful tools not to terrorize, but to instruct God’s people in grateful humility and assurance.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Concerning the Predestination of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961), 57.

¹¹ Calvin, *Concerning Predestination*.

¹² Richard A. Muller, “The Placement of Predestination in Reformed Theology: Issue or Non-Issue?” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40/2 (2005): 209.

We shall never feel persuaded as we ought that our salvation flows from the free mercy of God as its fountain, until we are made acquainted with his eternal election, the grace of God being illustrated by the contrast—viz. that he does not adopt promiscuously...but gives to some what he denies to others.¹³

Did Predestination Kill Calvin’s Missionary Zeal?

“He displayed no trace of missionary enthusiasm,” charges A. Mitchell Hunter.¹⁴ Hunter joins a chorus of critics suggesting that a Reformed doctrine of predestination creates apathy and squelches missionary efforts. Numerous modern critics lament the Reformer’s lack of mission focus. “Where are the officers of the church exhorted to open their tired, blurry eyes and behold the fields white unto the harvest?”¹⁵ They charge that a Reformed view of election is anti-evangelical as it throws water on the fire of the gospel. History proves otherwise.

It is true that Calvin would never countenance a ministry aimed at the “unchurched.” There was no such a species. Everyone Calvin knew was already baptized! Geneva had no untold masses ready to be plugged into a demographically matched “seeker service.”

Church membership was assumed for every legal citizen of the land. There weren’t foreigners or pagans to evangelize. Prior to his birth and arrival Jewish citizens had been expelled from France and Geneva respectively.¹⁶ Mohammedans would meet him only with a sword in hand. Therefore, to criticize a lack of a twenty-first century mission mindedness is misguided. Reformers saw gospel need nevertheless. The Reformers understood the field was ripe for harvest *in Geneva itself*, for on April 3, 1550, the ministers enacted an annual visitation plan “to discern between the ignorant, and hardened

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xx.1 (203).

¹⁴ A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin, A Modern Interpretation* (Glasgow: Maclehose, Jackson, and Company, 1920).

¹⁵ R. Recker, “An Analysis of the Belgic Confession as to its Mission Focus” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7/2 (1972): 158-180, citation on p. 178.

¹⁶ Mitch Glaser, “The Reformed Movement and Jewish Evangelism” *Presbyterian* 11/2 (1985): 101-117.

sinners, and true Christians.”¹⁷ Similarly Calvin saw that he need not go far to seek out the lost. Any region where Roman Catholicism existed needed to hear the gospel anew. Rome had “abolished the teaching of the Gospel,” resulting in an apostate membership. Clearly Calvin did not feel he needed to go far to find the lost:

What difference there is between the chaste bride of Christ and the disgusting harlot of Belial, between the sanctuary of God and the brothel of Satan, between the spiritual household of the godly and a pig-sty, and finally, between the true Church and the Roman Curia.¹⁸

“Mission” was not a concept that had been coined yet in the Reformers day. Yet, in spite of this, and in spite of a definite predestinarian understanding, they worked diligently. From 1555 to 1562 between 88 and 150 preachers were sent into Roman Catholic dominated France from Geneva. These numbers are very conservative as the inherent danger caused the Geneva city council to oft times bar naming those sent for fear for their safety. These were not vain fears, as nine of these men were martyred in this service. (The name of Christ is doubly impugned by the suggestion that these who sent men to risk life and fortune had no missionary zeal. Their blood still speaks.) Their efforts were enormously effective as the number of Reformed churches in France went from a handful to over 2150 in these seven years.¹⁹ In addition, Calvin played a small role in the failed attempt to evangelize South America.²⁰ And this was before anyone knew the term “missionary.”

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), V, 286.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles, 1-13*, trans. J. Fraser and W. McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 7.

¹⁹ Frank A. James, “Calvin the Evangelist,” <http://www.rts.edu/quarterly/fall01/james.html>, accessed 28 April 2007. John Calvin's enterprise in the evangelization of France is described by Jean-Marc Berthoud in a carefully researched treatise of 53 pages, Westminster Conference Papers for 1992 obtainable from John Harris, 8 Back Knowl Road, Mirfield, WF14 9SA, UK £4.00 including postage.

²⁰ R. Pierce Beaver, “The Genevan Mission to Brazil,” in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. J. H. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 55-73.

It is instructive to observe the serious effort to spread the gospel to France in light of the historical setting. Election and reprobation did not hold the Reformers back, but rather inspired them in the face of many obstacles. Calvin's Geneva consisted in large part of exiles that faced obstacles from within and without. Political, theological, social, and medical challenges swirled about them. The waters of persecution rose amid revolutionary foment, growing scientific skepticism, and a rise of numerous heretical sects. War tore apart loyalties. Plague devastated many. Roman Catholicism's persecution and its *Vanity Fair* licentiousness packed a double threat. Radical Anabaptists' pietistic perfection worried the weak. Theologically, there were challenges as to how one *comes* to faith, how one *stays* in the faith and the *grounds* from which faith arose. Issues that defined the Arminian controversy addressed by the Synod of Dort 70 years hence were already at hand. Yet, Calvin and his fellow Reformers dutifully preached the gospel. Why? They knew as did the apostle Paul, "God has many souls in that city."

Faux Calvinism: A Modern Problem

Calvin had his detractors: "Teaching is vain and exhortations empty and useless, if the strength and power to obey depend on the election of God."²¹ Some accused him of holding a doctrine that prompted apathy, while others suggested it prompted pride. Then as now, criticism is not wholly unfounded. Indeed, many a twenty-first century neophyte has come to blows wielding a Five Pointed TULIP aimed at Arminians. Like sons of thunder they ask, "Shall we call down fire from heaven?" But this is not Calvinism as Calvin taught it. This kind of caricature of Reformed faith²² does not engender love for the lost. "If you believe in election and reprobation you don't need missions," has become the standard charge, but it is aimed at a straw man.

On the contrary, a survey of Calvin's writings demonstrates a deep love toward his parishioners and fellow ministers not at all

²¹ Calvin, *Concerning Predestination*, 137.

²² For a helpful discussion on the inadequacy of a "Five Points" summation of the Reformed faith see Richard A. Muller's "How Many Points?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 28/2 (1993), 425-433.

muted by his view of predestination. In his major published works we would hardly expect him to betray an anti-gospel bent. But do his preaching, private correspondence, or his prayers reveal a different man? Is there a secret John Calvin who yawns at gospel proclamation because, “after all, only the elect will believe anyway?”

Personal Piety Ruined by Predestination?

Calvin attempts to do no more than emulate the Apostle:

Paul preaches the doctrine of free election: is he, therefore, cold in admonishing and exhorting? Let those good zealots compare his vehemence with theirs, and they will find that they are ice, while he is all fervor.²³

Personal piety and “friendship evangelism” often reveal the true measure of a man more than words. Did the concept of reprobation stifle Calvin’s zeal for the lost? His work among Anabaptists is telling. Being born a few centuries too early for Willow Creek’s church-growth sensitivity training he writes in a 1534 pamphlet, “If animals could talk they would speak more wisely.”²⁴ Admittedly he sounds unlikely to preach to them. He derides Anabaptists as “harebrained” people with a “cock-and-bull story” who “froth at the mouth”²⁵ and were fools, dreamers, and rascals. They are stupid, blind and ignorant, scum and clowns who “spew Satan’s guile.”²⁶ We wrongly assume this is a group Calvin would relegate to the reprobate set. Behind these polemical words (suitable to the times) was a man with a heart full of love for those lost or erring. It was Calvin whom the Strassbourg city fathers sent to work with the French-speaking Anabaptists and Heugonauts in 1539. After several months a half dozen households were instructed in the truth and Calvin officiated at the baptism of their infants. Truly he loved these people as he carried evangelism to the next step. In August of the next year, when plague brought death, Calvin married Idellette de Bure, the widow of John

²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxiii.13 (236).

²⁴ John Calvin, *Treatise Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1982), 98.

²⁵ Calvin, *Treatise Against the Anabaptists*, 99.

²⁶ Calvin, *Treatise Against the Anabaptists*, 257.

Stordeur, one of the Anabaptists whom he instructed. Calvin hardly deserves the portrait of a cold and stern Calvinist.²⁷ It is no wonder he was so effective. His sermons reveal a deep understanding of the fears that assault the soul of the sinner and the power of the healing balm offered by assurance of God's sovereign work. God is building His church in spite of the obscurity and smallness that may be presented before our eyes. Election offers that hope.²⁸

Personal Correspondence Unmasks Calvin the Man

Private letters often betray another face behind the public mask. In private he is no public pastor, perhaps here he might let down his guard and show how *election* brings lethargy. Instead his letters reveal the opposite. This is a man energized to see the kingdom of Christ enlarged, thrilled at what we would call "church plants," and a staunch defender of the faith and proponent of the gospel. Numerous letters reveal the fruit of deep humility and pastoral sensitivity emanating from a Spirit-led understanding of the gospel of Christ. He is a world correspondent, writing to King and pauper alike with the sole concern for the furtherance of the Gospel and care for Christ's people. The sheer volume suggested by the several thousand letters from his pen suggests that election only *ignited* his zeal rather than snuffed it. To a Seigneur of Jersey (the neighboring Isle of Normandy) Calvin sends a minister with a letter of recommendation to advance the gospel:

We praise God for having inclined your heart to try if it will be possible to erect, by your means, a small church on the place where you reside...that the poor wandering sheep may be put under the protection of the sovereign Pastor...And you know that it is a sacrifice well pleasing to God to advance the spread of the gospel by which we are enlightened in the way of salvation.²⁹

Calvin's view of election *encourages* his hopes for the lost. In one case he writes to a man he has never met and solely based on the

²⁷ Calvinist was not a term invented yet, nor a moniker he would happily wear.

²⁸ John Calvin, *The Gospel According to Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 23.

²⁹ Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, V, 453.

man's willingness to read the statement of the Reformed faith, pronounces that it "gives me good hope that you have the true seed of God in you, which only needs to be cultivated in order to sprout and produce fruit."³⁰ Calvin understood that the gospel flowed out of God's electing love, but it was the Gospel that was Calvin's main thrust, not the *proclamation* of election. Here his pastoral wisdom comes to the surface. In a revealing letter to Melancthon (scolding him for compromise) Calvin offers his perspective on election and reprobation, noting that he does not include election in elementary Scripture instruction. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent. He is pastoral. He writes,

The gospel is addressed to all promiscuously, but that the Spirit of faith is bestowed on the elect alone, by peculiar privilege. The promises are universal. How does it happen that their efficacy is not equally felt by all? For this reason, because God does not reveal his arm to all. Indeed, among men but moderately skilled in Scripture, this subject needs not to be discussed.

Was He Shy to Offer Salvation to "Whosoever?"

Some "Calvinists" conclude that election and reprobation constrain the ability of a pastor to honestly and earnestly offer the gospel of Christ to the lost. They suggest Calvin never did.³¹ The Scriptures say, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of Jesus shall be saved," a verse that has been difficult to fit into many tight systematic theologies. Here Calvin shows his real wisdom and piety. Where other men wrap themselves in convoluted explanations or simply hide, Calvin simply and humbly bows to the voice of God.

We must observe the word, 'whosoever'. For God admits all men to Himself without exception...Therefore since no man is excluded from calling upon God the gate of salvation is set open to all. There is nothing else to hinder us from entering, but our own unbelief. It is, I say, to all men, to whom God reveals Himself through the Gospel.

In Calvin's schema, the doctrine of election is intended for the

³⁰ Calvin to Monsieur de Saint Laurens in *Tracts and Letters*, V, 253.

³¹ Ronald Hanko, "Calvin the Preacher" *Standard Bearer* 80/2 (2003): 43.

encouragement of the weary pilgrim. It offers hope. Since it was by grace that the sinner's name was recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life, the indelibility of the writing is secure. The hand that wrote the name guards the Book. Christ guides the lamb through the valley of the shadow of death and carries the little one who is with young. Election is the voice of the Savior promising the trembling sinner, "No one shall snatch you out of my hand."

Let us learn that the election of God is confirmed by faith for this purpose, that our minds may be turned to Christ, as the earnest of our election, and let them seek for no other certitude that that which is disclosed to us in the Gospel. Let this, I say be a sufficient sign to us, that 'whosoever believes in the only –begotten Son of God has eternal life.³²

A Prayer Heard Around the World

Calvin stood before his congregation as a pastor and as a preacher of the word of God. As he looked down from his pulpit he saw Geneva, but when he prayed, he saw the world. Every sermon followed with essentially the same prayer:

May He bestow this grace not only upon us, but upon all peoples and nations of the earth, calling back all poor, ignorant folk from the blind captivity of error and ignorance to the straight path of salvation. And for this reason may it please Him to arouse the true and faithful ministers of his word not to seek their own advantage and ambition, but the exalting of His name and the welfare of His flock.

May our hearts be as "cold" as his and may his prayer be ours. Far from stifling gospel proclamation, Calvin's view of election and reprobation and his pastoral wisdom in applying them were a vital force for tremendous growth of Christ's church.

³² Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1-13, 394.

The Cross of Christ in Ephesians

Zeke Nelson

The significance of the cross in the letter to the Ephesians is overlooked for two reasons. First, Ephesians mentions the cross only once, in 2:16. Other letters of Paul, such as Galatians or 1 Corinthians, speak about the crucifixion much more explicitly than Ephesians. Second, many scholars believe that Paul was not the author of the letter, instead theorizing that a later disciple borrowed from Colossians to compose the letter in his name.¹ While in theory the authorship of the letter need not affect one's reading of its theology, it does seem that many scholars feel more liberty to be critical or even dismissive of the theology of Ephesians.²

The lack of attention given to the cross of Christ in Ephesians is unfortunate because the letter confirms teaching on the atonement and shows the importance of the cross for daily living. Its most important contribution to our understanding of the cross, however, is the beautiful way in which it speaks on reconciliation and peace between Jew and Gentile. The teaching on the cross in the book of Ephesians has profound implications for current issues of racial reconciliation and unity, marital relations, and personal hostilities.

Although the cross is explicitly mentioned only once in Ephesians, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are implicit throughout the book. References to Christ's blood (1:7, 2:13), resurrection from the dead (1:20, 2:5-6), and self-sacrifice (4:32-5:2, 5:25) appear throughout the letter, in addition to the dense passage in which the blood, flesh, body, and cross of Christ are prominent as instruments of reconciliation (2:13-16). Three major teachings on the cross emerge, forming the backbone of the letter. 1) *The cross of Christ is the means by which God redeems, forgives, and sanctifies sinful humans.* 2) *The cross is at the same moment the means by*

¹ I personally find the evidence in support of Paul's authorship more compelling than the evidence against.

² See, for instance, Nils Dahl, "Gentiles, Christians, and Israelites in the Epistle to the Ephesians," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986): 1-3.

which Jew and Gentile are reconciled to one another and to God. 3) The cross is the basis and means of ongoing peace and unity in relationships. I will develop these three theses in order.

The Cross of Christ is the Means by which God Redeems, Forgives, and Sanctifies Sinful Humans

The Blood of Christ. The letter to the Ephesians begins by blessing God, “who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (1:3). Numbered among those blessings is the fact of God’s election of those who now believe. The way in which God’s loving, gracious election is expressed is in “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (1:7). With such a phrase it is easy to move directly into its theological significance, losing sight of the fact that *blood* speaks of violence and death. The blood of Christ is no abstraction; it is the substance of life, taken from the body by violent force. One scholar even feels that *blood* is a more graphic way to describe the death of Jesus than even the word *cross*.³

Keeping in mind that blood speaks of death, the significance of the phrase is not in the violence itself, but the *effect* of the death of Christ. In the Old Testament, of course, the blood of sacrificial animals was poured out as a way of neutralizing sins before God. Though some claim that the blood of Christ in Ephesians is never to be interpreted in OT sacrificial terms, it is difficult to avoid making the connection;⁴ 1:7 does bring to mind sacrificial offerings, but more to the point is the concept of *redemption*.

Redemption. Behind our English word *redemption* is the Greek ἀπολύτρωσις. Outside the NT, the word means “‘setting free for a ransom’ and is used of prisoners of war, slaves, and criminals condemned to death.”⁵ The basic meaning of deliverance or liberation carries into the NT well. Peter O’Brien points to Israel’s deliverance from Egypt as important background to the use of the

³ Behm, *TDNT* 1:172-177. However, Martin Hengel notes the immediate horror the mention of the cross would have inspired, “For Paul’s preaching, the words σταύρος/σταυροῦν still retained the same original cruelty and abhorrence which was also obvious to the ancient world outside the Christian tradition.” Martin Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 112.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Buchsel, *TDNT* 4:328-356.

word here.⁶ Looking forward to 2:1-10, we may conclude that in Ephesians it is prisoners of the power of death who are redeemed. Though in 2:1-10 no mention is made of the death of Christ, it is implicit in the statement about Christ's resurrection from the dead in 1:20, which carries into 2:1-10.

In general, scholars shrink from the idea that Christ paid a ransom for the redemption of those who believe, even though the idea of a ransom is implied by the word ἀπολύτρωσις. For one thing, there is the difficulty of discerning to whom the ransom was paid. Andrew Lincoln believes that the blood of Christ should not be interpreted as a ransom price; rather, it introduces sacrificial imagery. While the idea of sacrifice does fit with the parallel phrase, "the forgiveness of sins," it leaves the concept of redemption unclear. It is typical of the NT, however, to position a variety of concepts and images around the death of Christ without explaining exactly *how* the death of Christ achieves the many aspects of salvation (Rom 3:25, Heb 2:14-18). The fact of atonement takes priority over theories of how atonement works. When blessing God leads Paul to mention redemption through the blood of Christ, one can hardly expect him to explain how it works. The best we get are allusive connections to OT concepts of sacrifice and deliverance, both of which clearly apply to salvation in Christ.

It is worth noting that redemption in Ephesians is seen as both a present and future reality. In some passages, such as Luke 21:28, "the whole glow of eschatological expectation is in the word."⁷ In Ephesians 1:7 believers currently have redemption. The word occurs again in 1:14, however, in what is clearly a future hope. The difficulty is that it is not clear if redemption applies to the inheritance of believers, or to believers themselves. The TNIV opts for the latter: "[The Holy Spirit] is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession." 4:30 similarly links the Holy Spirit and future redemption, warning, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." What emerges from these three passages is that

⁶ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 105.

⁷ Buchsel, *TDNT* 4:328-356.

redemption has been accomplished in the blood of Christ, while believers still long for the full experience of that redemption. Though the passages that focus on future redemption do not make mention of the blood or cross of Christ, the completion of our deliverance in the future rests on what Christ has accomplished in his death just as much as our current redeemed state.

Forgiveness of Sins. “The forgiveness of sins” directly follows “redemption in his blood” so as to give fuller explanation. The word for “sins” here carries the connotation of trespasses or transgressions. It is used in 2:5 as well, where Paul writes that “we were dead in transgressions.” The reference in 2:5 makes the connection between redemption and forgiveness clear. Since sins bind one to death, redemption from death must involve the forgiveness of those sins. The salvation achieved in the blood of Christ is comprehensive – our sins are wiped clean and we are delivered from the powers that populate the realm of death: the world, the devil, and the flesh (2:1-3).

The fact of our forgiveness in Christ becomes an imperative to forgive others in 4:32. “Just as in Christ God forgave you” of course reminds the reader of the death of Jesus. Redemption and forgiveness are tied to the blood of Christ in only one place, but when redemption and forgiveness are mentioned in other places, the death of Christ immediately comes to mind.

Christ’s Self-Sacrifice. The two explicit references to the death of Christ that remain (besides the main passage, 2:11-22) strengthen the case that the cross is foundational to the theology of Ephesians. 5:2 refers to Christ’s giving of himself (in death) as “a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Offering and sacrifice are nearly synonymous. The two words also appear together in Hebrews 10:5-10, which says the sacrifices and offerings made by the Levites have been replaced by “the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” In Ephesians Christ’s offering of himself for the benefit of others is considered to be pleasing to God, even fragrant. The sacrificial imagery cannot be missed, though Paul does not develop the thought.

Sanctification. The final reference to the death of Christ is found in 5:25-27, in the midst of the discussion of the relationship between husbands and wives. Husbands are told to love their wives,

“just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.” Christ’s love of the church was expressed in his giving himself to death for her sake. In 1:7 the death of Christ was equated with the grace of God; here it is an expression of love. The result of Jesus’ death was a holy, cleansed, radiant church, “without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish.” In other words, the death of Christ not only achieves redemption and forgiveness, it also sanctifies. Salvation through the cross is multi-faceted. Believers are set free, forgiven, and set on the path of holiness. And we have not yet arrived at the central passage on the cross, where reconciliation takes center stage.

The Cross is at the Same Moment the Means by which Jew and Gentile are Reconciled to One Another and to God

The Reversal of the Gentile Situation. 2:1-10 has illustrated salvation in personal, moral terms. Both Gentiles and Jews were described as dead in sin, locked in the power of the world, the devil, and the flesh. But God in his grace made them alive with Christ. Salvation is described in more communal terms in 2:11-22.

Paul begins by portraying the miserable situation of the Gentiles. He notes the disdainful stereotype (literally “the foreskin”) applied to them by the Jews, then lists five things that Gentiles were lacking: the Messiah, citizenship as God’s people, the covenants of the promise, God, and hope. The Gentiles had none of these privileges. Instead, they were “separate,” “excluded,” “foreigners.” In verse 13 the dramatic change in the situation of the Gentiles is described in terms that echo Isaiah 57:19, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” Verse 19 gives a fuller description of the “now,” the present state of Gentiles who are in Christ: “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” The previous state of the Gentiles has been completely reversed. 3:6 adds even more, saying that the Gentiles are “heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” The Gentiles have been incorporated into God’s people and promises. Not only so, but the status of the new unified “person” consisting of Jew and Gentile exceeds the privileges that belonged to Jews before

Christ. Jew and Gentile – the church – “are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (2:22).

The Key Passage. We can now zero in on the dense discussion of the cross in vv.14-18. 2:11-13 describes the Gentiles “before,” and vv.19-22 describe the Gentiles (together with the Jews) “now.” The remaining verses, 14-18, describe *how* this change occurred. Many scholars believe that 2:14-18 is a fragment of a hymn, adapted by Paul or the pseudonymous author to suit a new situation.⁸ In any case, verses 14-18 give a marvelous description of Christ and the peace he has created through his cross. The person of Christ, his death, and peace are keys to the passage. Though personal pronouns replace the personal name Jesus, the Messiah Jesus is the central figure of the passage. “Blood,” “flesh,” “body,” and “cross” all appear (if we begin in verse 13), making for an intensely physical portrayal of Christ and his death.

It is helpful to observe a structural layout of vv.13-17:

For he himself is our peace,
 who made both one
 and destroyed the dividing wall of the barrier
 - that is, the hostility -
 in his flesh
 and abolished the law of commandments in
 regulations
 in order that
 he might create the two into one new person
 in himself,
making peace,
 and that he might reconcile both to God
 in one body
 through the cross.
 killing the hostility in himself.

⁸ The reasons for this assessment are the “unique words, the use of participles, the intensely Christological content, the parallelism of the lines, and the ‘we’ style which interrupts the ‘you’ style.” O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 192. Also Lincoln, 126-129. Ralph Martin assumes that the author has adopted an earlier Hellenistic Christian hymn of “cosmic transformation.” Ralph Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

Peace. The passage portrays Christ as peacemaker, who makes peace by both creating and destroying, reconciling and killing, all of which takes place in his flesh and body on the cross. The result is that Jew and Gentile are reconciled to God and to each other. The phrase “he himself is our peace” carries the weight of the entire passage, as everything else is a description of the Messiah “who is our peace.” The word “peace” is used four times in this passage, making it the classic Pauline statement on peace.⁹ Besides the main verb “to be” in verse 14, the passage contains five participles and two verbs in the subjunctive mood. Four of the five participles are aorist, but still very active: made, destroyed, abolished, created. The one present participle, ποιῶν εἰρήνην (“making peace”), stands out as central to the passage. It is as if the aorist participles set the stage for the final intent of Christ’s death – so that he might, making peace, create the two into one and reconcile both to God.

Creation and Reconciliation. The language of creation and reconciliation is notable, as these two terms are also related in 2 Cor 5:16-21, where Paul’s ministry of reconciliation is linked to individuals becoming a “new creation” (καινὴ κτίσις) in Christ.¹⁰ Here in Ephesians Christ has “created the two into one new person” (τοὺς δύο κτίσῃ ἐν αὐτῷ εἰς ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον). In vv.14-17 Christ is twice said to make or create the two (Jew and Gentile) into one. This creation is the counterpart to “destroying the dividing wall” and “abolishing the law.” “Reconcile” is then the counterpart to “killing the hostility.”

The Dividing Wall. The parallelism of “the dividing wall” with “the law of commandments in regulations” lends weight to the argument that the dividing wall *is* the law, or Jewish observance of the law. The wall may also refer to the fence in the temple which separated the court of the Gentiles from the rest of the temple area. The temple imagery used to describe the church in 2:19-22 would support this interpretation.¹¹ Perhaps these two possibilities are not

⁹ Cf. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 193.

¹⁰ Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 229.

¹¹ The other good possibility for the meaning of the wall is the A pillar of the temple was found in 1871 on which was inscribed, “No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the Temple. Whoever is caught will

mutually exclusive. In any case, it seems likely that Paul had such specific regulations as circumcision in mind here. Circumcision drove such a wedge between Jew and Gentile that their collective names were “the circumcision” and “foreskin.” Paul made a point of defining the excluded party as “Gentiles *in the flesh*,” while the Jews are those “called the circumcision, which is done *in the flesh* by hands” (2:11). It therefore seems fitting that the law which divided Jew and Gentile – the hostility between them – was abolished *in the flesh* of Jesus. The meaning may be that Jesus absorbed in himself the curse of the law.¹²

The Means of Reconciliation. There is something appropriate about way in which the flesh, blood, and body of Christ are said to be instrumental in effecting a change in the relation between Jew and Gentile. As the hostility created through regulations such as circumcision is abolished in the *flesh* of Christ, so also the Gentiles are brought near “in the *blood* of Christ” (2:13). At this point Paul has just stated that the Gentiles were “foreigners of the covenants.” Given the relationship between the blood of Jesus and the new covenant (1 Cor 11:25), it may be that Paul is alluding to the fact that the Gentiles are now included in God’s covenant people – brought near – through the blood of Christ. It is also fitting that Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God “in one *body*.” I take the body of Christ in v. 16 as having a dual reference to Christ’s physical body and his spiritual body.¹³ His spiritual body, of course, is the church, composed of Jew and Gentile. Jew and Gentile are reconciled to God in the one body of Jesus, and together become the one body of Christ.

Some interpreters think that it is only in verse 16 that the “vertical” element of reconciliation is introduced.¹⁴ Up to this point the discussion has centered on the horizontal relationship of Jew and Gentile, though the vertical element is never out of the picture. We must keep in mind that no chronological distinction can be made between the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, and the reconciliation of humanity to God. The point is that reconciliation in both directions

have only himself to thank for the death which follows.” Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 141.

¹² Cf. Martin, *Reconciliation*.

¹³ For an opposing interpretation, see Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 145.

¹⁴ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 145.

takes place in a single event, the death of Jesus on the cross. As to which aspect of reconciliation is primary, it must be our reconciliation with God.¹⁵ When God reconciled both Jews and Gentiles to himself through the cross, Jews and Gentiles were of necessity reconciled to each other. This must be the case, for Christ created a new entity through his death on the cross. They are reconciled to each other because they have both been reconciled to God by the same means.

That means by which God reconciles the world to himself is the cross. It is noteworthy that the preposition ἐν (in) is applied to the elements of reconciliation (in his blood, in his flesh, in himself, in his body), but the preposition διὰ (through) is applied to the cross. The cross encompasses the other elements of “he himself” who is our peace, and therefore stands as the center point of our reconciliation to God. Reconciliation is achieved *in* the blood, flesh, and body of Jesus, *through* the cross. The cross is the place where the blood, flesh, and body of Jesus were violently spilled, torn, and broken for our redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

The cross in antiquity was known as a shameful, humiliating method of torture and execution for the lowest and most despicable elements of society. It was reserved for slaves, criminals of the lower classes, traitors, and rebels. Martin Hengel’s study of the crucifixion points out that the cross was “a means of waging war and securing peace,”¹⁶ but the peace that the cross established for the empire was achieved through terror. The most famous use of the cross to terrorize imperial subjects into passivity was the mass crucifixion of Spartacus and 6000 rebel slaves. Understanding this background, one can appreciate the radically altered application of the cross as a means of establishing peace in Ephesians. Instead of terrorizing subject peoples into submission, the cross of Christ reconciled hostile peoples to one another. Their enmity was absorbed and put to death on the cross together with Jesus. One wonders how Neil Elliott can conclude, “The pseudo-Pauline letters already began to modify Paul to serve the churches’ agenda in the post-apostolic period, and to an extent to accommodate the word of the cross to the interests of

¹⁵ Cf. Martin, *Reconciliation*, 176ff.

¹⁶ Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God*, 138.

empire.”¹⁷ The message of the cross is hardly accommodated to the interests of the empire in Ephesians. Rather, what was a horrific method of establishing peace through fear becomes in Ephesians the means of establishing peace through unity and reconciliation. What Caesar was unable to do with the cross, Jesus has done, and much more.

The Cross is the Basis and Means of Ongoing Peace and Unity in Relationships

The comprehensive salvation that has been achieved through the cross is worked out in the daily life of the church. In typical fashion, the indicative “You have been reconciled,” becomes an imperative, “Be reconciled.” All believers are called to follow the example of the cross in 4:31-5:2. Christians are told to “forgive one another, as God in Christ forgave you...and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” This and the call for husbands to imitate Christ’s sacrificial love in 5:25f provide a key link between the theologically rich chapters in the first half of the book and the numerous ethical exhortations of the latter. Because they have been forgiven in Christ, Christians are able to forgive others, and are urged to do it. Because they have been loved by Christ, they can and should love others. The pattern is set forth in the formula καθὼς καὶ ὁ θεὸς/καθὼς καὶ ὁ χριστὸς (just as God/just as Christ), which Paul uses in 4:32, 5:2, 5:25, and 5:29. As Lincoln summarizes, “What God has done for believers, which has been the theme of the first half of the letter, now provides both the norm and the grounds for believers’ own behavior.”¹⁸

Although Michael Gorman’s book on Paul’s spirituality of the cross avoids Ephesians because of its disputed authorship, he still provides a useful excursus on the pattern of “cruciform love” found in Eph 5:25f. He notes that all believers are called to imitate the “cruciform love” of Christ – the self-sacrificing love of Christ that sent him to the cross. Gorman then shows that Paul applies this

¹⁷ Neil Elliott, “The Anti-Imperial Message of the Cross,” ed. Richard Horsley, *Paul and Empire* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press Intl, 1997), 178.

¹⁸ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 310.

pattern “to some of the most complex relationships within the believing community; husband-wife, father-children, even master-slave.”¹⁹ Husbands are told to love their wives in the same way that Christ loved the church. In other words, men are told to give themselves up to death for the sake of their wives. Cruciformity is a formula for ongoing unity and peace in the church and the family.

Conclusion. The numerous references and allusions to the cross of Christ show how foundational the subject is to the book. Paul uses the verb “walk” seven times in Ephesians to describe the lifestyle of believers (plus once in reference to their former lifestyle). The foundation on which they are to walk is the cross of Christ, through which they are reconciled to God and one another. As followers of Christ follow the pattern of his cross, unity and peace flourish in the church, and we hope also the world.

Applications of the theology of the cross in Ephesians to the situation of our world today are numerous. We have in the cross both the basis and the means of addressing the continual plagues of racism and ethnic strife, religiously inspired violence, disintegration of marriages, and personal animosity. These hostilities continue to shatter communities and nations.

Let us remember that unity is still an imperative (4:3, 13), made possible by the fact that God has created one new person through the cross of Christ.

¹⁹ Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 261-266.

A Forward-Looking Fall: Eden as Typology in Classical Rabbinic Literature

John Lee

A strange incident happened just after the dawn of creation. A snake spoke. Adam and Eve ate. The world changed. The content of that tale of the serpent in Genesis 3 is a momentous mystery, giving an account of death's entrance into the world yet leaving no further trace in the books of the *Tanakh*. Classical rabbinic literature fills in the gaps, developing an extensive treatment of Genesis 3 in the apocryphal literature and in the *Haggada* that finds in the particulars of Eden the universals of reality. While not read as myth or allegory, they did find in Genesis 3 a typology that adumbrates Israel's nationalistic narrative, in particular, and humanity's universal experience, in general.

The Setting

Classical rabbinic sources place the events of Genesis 3 spatially in the Garden of Eden and temporally in the sixth day of creation. Rabbi Judah ben Bathyra, doing *midrash* on Psalm 49:13, develops a chronology for the events of Genesis 2-3:

How was Adam created?...in the eighth [hour] Eve was joined to him; in the ninth he was brought into the Garden of Eden; in the tenth he was commanded; in the eleventh he sinned; in the twelfth he was banished and made to leave the garden, confirming what is said, But man doth not lodge overnight in honor (Ps. 49:13).¹

In such a compressed chronology, only one hour elapses between the receiving of the command and its transgression. The punishment follows in the next hour, leaving Adam and Eve exiled from the Garden of Eden by twilight of the sixth day of creation, just as the first Shabbat was beginning. Yet in those three hours between

¹ *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, trans. Judah Goldin (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 11.

entry and exile, the rabbis heard whispers of Oral Torah in the silence of the Written Torah. Central to those whispers are reverberating insights into the command of God, the violation of that command, and the consequences of that violation.

Command

Adam and Eve entered the garden with tasks to accomplish (Genesis 1:28; 2:15) and a command to obey (Genesis 2:16-17). Yet for the rabbis, the accomplishment of the task and the obedience to the command formed an integrated whole. The positive acts of “being fruitful” and “filling” and of “subduing” and “ruling,” found their complement in the negative test of “not eating” from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Rabbi Jacob of Kefar Hanan makes that linkage explicit in his exposition on Genesis 1:28. Playing with the consonants, he notes “If [man] merits, ‘Rule’ (רָדָה), and if not, ‘Go down’ (יָרַד).”² Thus, R. Jacob finds in the command to “rule” a divine establishment of two possible destinies: “The ones ‘in our image, after our likeness’ will rule, and the ones not ‘in our image and after our likeness’ [that is, those who sin or do not have merit] will go down.”³ Righteousness results in rule. Rebellion results in ruin.

Implicit in such recognitions in the minds of Chazal, was an understanding of Torah and its place in the creation event. Rather than being an isolated package received on Sinai, Torah was “the foundation upon which the world was created.” As a consequence, Torah permeates the primordial narratives of Genesis 1 through 3, eventually making its first explicit appearance in Genesis 2:16 in the verbal form of “commandment” (מִצְוָה).⁴ For classical rabbis, such as R. Levi, that command formed part of an eventual core corpus of six commands common to all humanity: “He [God] made him

² *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*, Vol. 1, New American Translation by Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 8:12a.

³ *Genesis Rabbah*, 85.

⁴ Chazal’s transition from verb (רָדָה) to noun (מִצְוָה) is key, transforming Haggadah into a halakhic mode by “reifying the overwhelming experience to a quantifying numeral.” See Gerald J. Blindstein, *In the Rabbis’ Garden: Adam and Eve in the Midrash* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1983), 66-67.

responsible to keep six commandments... ‘Of every tree you may eat’ indicates that he commanded him concerning theft.”⁵ Yet in such a reading, the LORD’s command in Genesis 2:16 moves beyond natural law and into a role as synecdoche for the coming corpus of commandments that Adam’s descendents would later receive at Sinai. Bearing the fundamental status of “commandment,” God’s instruction concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thus adumbrates the 613 eventual commandments of the Pentateuch.⁶ In so doing, it also anticipates God’s relational pattern of covenant-making and circumscribes Adam’s relation to the land of the Garden. Although the Hebrew word for “covenant” (בְּרִית) does not appear, key elements of one do: with God as King (cf. royal plural of Gen. 1:26) entering into a conditional relation with His human vassals, defined by a blessing and curse formula.⁷ The continued enjoyment of God’s gift of the garden was thus conditional on continual obedience to God’s command in the garden. Occupancy depended on obedience.

Such conditionality qualified the Garden of Eden’s dual role of gift and task. It was a place to be *worked* and a place whose continued enjoyment had to be *worked for*. Such a dynamic issued from Adam’s ontological relation to the Garden of Eden. Chazal note that Adam was not a native to the Garden. Rather, he was a transplant into it, formed from the dust of some undisclosed location and only later “planted” (נטע) into Eden’s environs (Gen. 2:8). As such, Adam was a guest in God’s garden. He was an exotic interloper, not an endemic species. His occupancy was of the temporary, dependent, conditional sort.

R. Jose b. R. Hanina sees in that relation a foreshadowing of Israel’s national experience. Adam and Israel are both foreigners to God’s gift of land. As Adam was formed from the dust of an external locale and then brought into the Garden (Gen. 2:8); so Israel was

⁵ *Genesis Rabbah*, 16:6a.

⁶ A linkage strengthened by *Avot D’Rabbi Nathan’s* parallels between Adam’s hedging God’s words and hedges around the Torah, in *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, pp. 8).

⁷ C.f. Genesis 2:17, וַיִּמְעַן הַדְּעַת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת:

delivered from the externality of Egypt and brought into the Promised Land: “Just as I led Adam into the garden of Eden and commanded him...so also did I bring his descendants into *Eretz* Israel and command them.”⁸ As such, both are guests in a location the gift of which is conditional upon their merit. Torah piety – obedience to God’s command – is the key to living in His holy presence, whether in the Garden of Eden’s paradise or the Promised Land “flowing with milk and honey.” Consequently, neither Adam and Eve, nor their descendents, have any claim in themselves to the land they occupy. Entry holds the possibility of exile. They have been brought into the land. They can be taken out of it. As such, the land becomes a significant, yet secondary backdrop to the real action of both narratives. Obedience to the dictates of Torah undergirds life in God’s presence for God’s people. It is an obligation regardless of location. Interestingly, both the Garden of Eden saga and the Pentateuch end with God’s people outside the land of promise. It is a prize that must constantly be won, a home that is always at risk and from which one may be torn, a symbol of divine approval that must be merited.⁹

Violation of the Command

It is exactly here that Chazal note a further parallel with the experience of Israel. Both the narrative of Eden and the narrative of Israel’s experience in the Promised Land are bracketed by the “outside.” Entry into a land of promise and a divine commandment, give way to temptation, sin, and banishment in both stories. Eden’s events thus forebode the national experience of the Jewish people.

Chazal unfold the events of Genesis 3 with such a typology in evidence. A starting point is Hosea 6:7 – “Like Adam, they [Israel] have broken the covenant – they were unfaithful to me there.” The geographic movement of both stories is understood, for Chazal, in the context of covenantal language. Returning to Rabbi Jose b. R. Hanina: “...he [Adam] transgressed My commandment...and they [Israel] transgressed My commandment.”¹⁰ Again, Eden stands as forerunner

⁸ *Genesis Rabbah*, 19:9b.

⁹ Blindstein, *In the Rabbis’ Garden*, 100.

¹⁰ *Genesis Rabbah*, 19:9b.

of the Jewish experience in Israel, anticipating the pattern of rebellion and sin that characterizes the national narrative in relation to God.

Yet for Chazal, the transgression of Adam and Eve was especially weighty in its stark simplicity. In the chronology of revealed Torah, they had willfully transgressed the only *mitzvah* they had: “‘And they knew that they were naked....’ Even of the *one precept* which they had possessed, they had stripped themselves.”¹¹ As that primordial commandment stood as synecdoche for all commandments, its violation bears on all.¹² A corollary point for Chazal, underlined by the story, is the inherent difficulty of living righteously. If Adam and Eve could not obey one command, how could their descendents be expected to obey 613? Such a question probes the heart of the quality of humanity’s relation to God as well as its core characteristics. For Chazal, the resulting human anthropology is complex. While refuting, at times actively, any notion of Original Sin, Chazal did note weaknesses in human character. Adam was made in God’s image. But he was also made of dust. Humankind thus reflects a mingling of the best and the worst. Humanity is divine dirt. Thus on the positive side, A. Said R. Hoshiah maintains that “When the Holy One, blessed be he, came to create the first man, the ministering angels mistook him [for God, since man was in God’s image] and wanted to say before him, “Holy, [holy, holy is the Lord of hosts].”¹³ Conversely, Rabbi Simeon, doing *midrash* on Job 25:6, taught that man “comes from a place of darkness and returns to a place of darkness: he comes from a putrid drop and...[is destined to be] dust, worm and maggot.”¹⁴

Running through such anthropological extremes, Chazal denied a notion of inherent pollution for all time, references to a “contaminating lust” notwithstanding,¹⁵ “God made Adam upright.”¹⁶

¹¹ *Genesis Rabbah*, 19:6b.

¹² Cf. 1st century C.E. Jewish thought expressed in the New Testament: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” James 2:10.

¹³ *Genesis Rabbah*, 8:11a.

¹⁴ Avot D’Rabbi Natan, *The Fathers* 93.

¹⁵ *T.B. Shabbat*, 145b-146a; see Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: The World and Wisdom of the Rabbis of the Talmud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 427-428.

Rather, they developed a doctrine that an “Evil Inclination,” not created by the Lord, drove evil: “He [God] put ‘the evil leaven in the dough’, but for the fermentation of the leaven man alone is responsible.”¹⁷ Yet that Evil Inclination was pervasive, and persistent. Exploring the wake of Adam’s initial disobedience, Rabbi Abba revocalizes Adam’s response to God “and I did eat” (*We-okalti*) to read “I did and I will eat” (*wa-okel*).¹⁸ Standing accused by his God, Adam promises, frankly, that he will continue to sin. In a moment of honest self-realization, Adam realizes that he cannot stay in the Garden and remain obedient. Given his weakness of character, Adam thus “fundamentally gives God permission to exile him from the Garden...Exile, then, is God’s answer to Adam’s request.”¹⁹

Consequence of Violation of Command

Such a banishment, for Chazal, was the culmination of a variety of consequences issuing from Adam and Eve’s act of disobedience. It also serves as a harbinger of those consequences in its dual character as both an expression of divine judgment and divine mercy. In the wake of humanity’s treachery, God responds with a parental measure of resolved firmness and intimate love. His response is terrible and tender, and as such, it sets the pattern for all of His subsequent interactions with Adam and Eve’s descendents, particularly the nation of Israel..

Central to the negative consequence, according to Chazal, was the entrance of death into human experience as the covenantally proclaimed penalty for disobedience. Chazal further noted the scope of that penalty extended far beyond the immediate guilt of Adam and Eve: “[Since the verb, “you shall surely die,” uses the root “die” more than once, what is indicated is] the death penalty for Adam, for Eve, and for coming generations.”²⁰ The wreck of Adam’s ruin thus made a big wake, and part of Adam’s punishment was the realization of the

¹⁶ Ecclesiastes 7:29, cf. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzk, eds. *The Book of Legends* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 20.

¹⁷ Sifre Num. 11; see *Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, Noah 7, p. 30; quoted in Urbach, 482.

¹⁸ *Genesis Rabbah*, 19:2a.

¹⁹ Blindstein, *In the Rabbis’ Garden*, 114-115.

²⁰ *Genesis Rabbah*, 16:6d.

enormity of his sin's consequence. Chazal illustrated that with a parable of a villager who destroyed the work of a glass maker as a *midrashic* explanation of Genesis 3:7 "And the eyes of them both were opened." In the parable, originally attributed to R. Akiba, the glassworker responds to the catastrophe by seeking to open the peasant's eyes: "I know that I cannot obtain redress from you, but come and I will show you how much valuable stuff you have destroyed." Chazal then apply that motive to God: "Thus He [God] showed them how many generations they had destroyed."²¹ In the divine pedagogy of the parable, God not only brings death in sin's wake, but He also "teaches humankind to mourn and to feel guilt."²² It is not enough that humanity be punished with death, they must also be reconciled by pain – of guilt and lament over their disobedience.

Yet even in imposing death and guilt, God manifested mercy. Chazal found that mercy in the deferment of Adam and Eve's punishment. Explaining why the sentence of death was not immediately executed, Chazal has God engage in a type of *midrashic* interpretation of His own threat: "Lo I shall give him [Adam] a day by my reckoning, which is a thousand years by your reckoning. So he will live for nine hundred and thirty years and leave seventy years for his children to live in their time."²³ The lines of Psalm 90:4 and Psalm 90:10 are therefore the *midrashic* keys to Genesis 2:16. God's threat that man would surely die if he ate the forbidden fruit did come to fruition, but on a timetable set by grace and on a timeline that made provision for future generations. God thus made continued space for Adam and Eve, and especially for their descendents through Abraham.

And once again, then, those consequences have a typological expansion to the national Israelite narrative. Chazal signaled the typological linkage through another revocalization. Repointing God's question "Where are you?" (אַיִנְךָ) to "How are you?" (אַיִכָּה), Chazal reframed God's response to humanity's sin from one of location to one of condition. Subtly and powerfully, that revocalization also called up a similar moment of judgment in

²¹ *Genesis Rabbah*, 19:6a.

²² Blindstein, *In the Rabbis' Garden*, 61.

²³ *Genesis Rabbah*, 19:8a. See also *Midrash Tehillim* 25, 8.

Israel's national experience. אֵיכָבָהּ is the first word of the book of Lamentations. Just as Adam and Israel entered the land by God's act of grace, they are now compelled into exile from the land as an act of His judgment. Lament is a proper affective. Exile is a terrible thing.

Yet that exile is mutual, and not understood by Chazal apart from a longer narrative of mercy. R. Abba b. Kahana explores these dynamics through another revocalization, reading "God [the *Shechinah*] walked" (*mehallek*) instead as: "God [repeatedly] leaped and ascended" (*mithhallek*).²⁴ In such a reading, God's response to sin is not to come down to explore it, but to take one step away from the pollution of earth into the sanctity of Heaven. R. Abba's subsequent history thus proceeds to focus on the people of Israel, with seven stages of God's self-exile in response to human sin finding reversal in seven righteous persons, beginning with Abraham and ending with Moses. Redemptive history is the story of God's exile and return, a gracious "making space" of a Holy God for an unholy people. It is a dialectical journey whose first steps began with the first stumbles in Eden's garden and continues in force in the later journey of Israel through their own entries and exits in the presence of the same holy *Shechinah*.

Conclusion

The story of the Garden of Eden in rabbinic sources is thus a microcosm of Israel's history. In its details and narrative scope, Chazal found in the echoes of an ancient event adumbrations of the guilt and redemption of Abraham's decedents. Yet more than that, they found echoes of the broader story of humanity. In addition to being prefigurations of the chosen nation, Adam and Eve were first of all universal figures whose experiences of sin and punishment, of obedience and rebellion, of life and death are encoded in the lives of all humankind. At its essence, the Genesis 3 narrative recapitulates normative human experience: "Adam and Eve have clearly served as symbols for all humanity thus far. We all recapitulate their experience in one way or another: their hopes, temptation, and sin are the stuff of life."²⁵ Finding in that narrative's symbols and stylistic

²⁴ *Genesis Rabbah*, 19:7b.

²⁵ Blindstein, *In the Rabbis' Garden*, 98.

gaps a typology for Israel subsequent experience, Chazal uncovered the treasures of that “stuff of life.” In so doing, they illuminated the story of a sometimes belligerent nation before an always bountiful God. And they did something else. They illuminated the stories of all humankind.

The Emerging Kingdom of God: The Emerging Church's Understanding of the Kingdom of God

Brian McLaughlin

Understanding the Mission of the Church

Every Christian agrees that Jesus Christ gave the church a mission. Arthur Glasser observes “at no period in its history has the church either totally forgotten its missionary task or failed to engage in a measure of serious reflection on the basic questions which this has raised.”¹ But Glasser is quick to note that “Christians in every generation have debated” the exact nature of this mission.² In the midst of this debate,

evangelicals are still chided for a mission theology that ignores the kingdom of God and focuses almost exclusively on eternal life. Catholics have been charged with triumphalism, allegedly because all they had to advocate was a theology with a single focus: the expansion of the church... Conciliar Protestants are accused of being so captured by the immediate social and human issues that they take unwarranted liberty with the Bible and bend its texts until evangelism is reconceptualized to mean politics, the church's obligation to evangelize “unreached peoples” is dismissed as irrelevant, and religious encounter is confined to the sort of friendly conversation that eschews all thoughts of conversion and church planting.³

It is no surprise, then, that the Emerging Church Movement (ECM) has engaged, if not advanced, the contemporary debate on ecclesiology and the nature of mission in the twenty-first century.

The ecclesiology of ECM is a missional ecclesiology. That is, ECM believes that the very nature of the church is the people of God sent on a mission and that the primary activity of the church is engaging in mission. Specifically, ECM believes that the mission of

¹ Arthur Glasser, “Missiology,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 725.

² Glasser, “Missiology,” 725.

³ Glasser, “Missiology,” 726.

the church is to promote the community of Jesus to all people so that all people experience the kingdom of God in their present lives.

The objective of this chapter is to develop ECM's understanding of the mission of the church, with special attention to its understanding of the kingdom of God. This will be accomplished through a review of ECM sources describing the kingdom, especially Brian McLaren's *The Secret Message of Jesus*. This will be followed by an analysis of how ECM's understanding of the mission impacts its practical ecclesiology in terms of how one becomes a part of the kingdom.

The Mission and the Kingdom of God

In order to understand the Emerging Church Movement's interpretation of the church's mission, it is essential to understand ECM's interpretation of the kingdom of God. For ECM, the kingdom of God is not only *related* to the mission, but the kingdom of God *is* the mission. The kingdom of God is the mission because the kingdom of God is the gospel. "Primarily through the work of Anglican theologian N. T. Wright, emerging churches retrieved an ancient understanding of the gospel that dramatically transformed church practice. What is this gospel? Simply put, Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was arriving."⁴ Through the recent scholarship of N.T. Wright and a renewed focus on the Gospels rather than the Pauline epistles, ECM believes they have rediscovered a revolutionary gospel. "In Jesus, they [emerging churches] discovered a long-forgotten gospel, the idea that we have an invitation to participate with God in the redemption of the world. Emerging churches accepted this offer, and they joined the *missio Dei*, God's outward movement to humanity. Jesus announced the kingdom of God, and this is the message emerging churches seek to proclaim in their newly formed missional communities."⁵ Brian McLaren makes this connection abundantly clear: "'Mission of God' is a metaphor

⁴ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community In Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 53.

⁵ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 64. Interestingly, while Gibbs and Bolger claim that this Kingdom emphasis comes from a renewed study of the Gospels, Ray Anderson bases his entire emerging theology on the Pauline mission and writings.

for the kingdom of God.”⁶

Although viewing the mission as the kingdom of God begins to define the church’s mission, it is still dependent upon defining the kingdom of God. Unfortunately, while nearly everyone agrees that the kingdom of God is a central motif in biblical theology, the precise nature of the kingdom of God remains a debate. Over twenty years ago Robert Recker outlined “several interpretations of the Kingdom of God which have been widely held.”⁷ These seven historical interpretations can be categorized into three primary categories. First, some believe that the kingdom of God is *future*. This includes those who believe that the kingdom of God is inaugurated at the creation of the new heavens and the new earth and those who believe the kingdom of God is inaugurated at the millennium.⁸ Second, some believe that the kingdom of God is *present*. This includes those who believe the kingdom of God is the church of today⁹ and those who believe the kingdom of God exists in the hearts of Christians today.¹⁰ Finally, some believe that the kingdom of God is *progressive*. This includes those who believe the kingdom of God is ushered in through the transformation of human society and those who believe the kingdom of God is a redemptive rule that is already present but not yet completely present.¹¹

⁶ Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), 143.

⁷ Robert Recker, “The Redemptive Focus of the Kingdom of God,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 14 (November 1979), 156.

⁸ This view is commonly held by most Classical and Revised Dispensationalists. For example, see Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 460-462.

⁹ This view is most commonly associated with Saint Augustine. For example, see Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, abridged version with a foreword by Etienne Gilson, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, Demetrius B. Zema, Grace Monahan, and Daniel J. Honan, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Image Books, 1958).

¹⁰ This view is most commonly associated with several parachurch organizations, including Campus Crusade for Christ. For example, search “Kingdom of God” at the “Campus Crusade for Christ International” Home Page, <http://www.ccci.org/index.html>, accessed 12 March 2007.

¹¹ This latter view is most commonly associated with George E. Ladd. For example, see George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); George Eldon Ladd, A

ECM also believes that the kingdom of God is a central theological motif. In fact, ECM believes that reclaiming a proper understanding of the kingdom of God is absolutely necessary for reclaiming the church in the postmodern era. McLaren boldly proclaims that reclaiming a proper understanding of the kingdom of God is “the truth that could change everything.”¹² An extended quote makes this point well:

What if the problem isn't with our accepted stories of Jesus (the stories given us by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in contrast to these alternate accounts) but rather with our success at domesticating them and with our failure to see them in their native wildness and original vigor?...These unsatisfied people – and I'm one of them – have this unshakable intuition that both [Jesus] and his message are better than anything they've heard or understood or figured out so far.¹³

ECM believes that the church throughout the ages has failed to grasp the true meaning and significance of the kingdom of God. McLaren lists at least eight reasons why this is, including “the early church's divorce from Jewish roots,” its “marriage with Constantine's empire,” and “alliances with the secular state.”¹⁴ But while most of the church has failed to grasp the kingdom of God, McLaren believes that he and ECM are “right on the verge of it.”¹⁵ ECM believes that this recovered understanding will change the course of the church and enable it to successfully accomplish its mission in the postmodern era.

What the Kingdom of God is Not

As usual, ECM begins its explanation of the kingdom of God with an explanation of what it is not. Specifically, much of ECM's

Theology of the New Testament, rev. ed. Ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 54-67; and George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

¹² Notice the subtitle to McLaren's book: *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything*.

¹³ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, xii-xiii.

¹⁴ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 211-214.

¹⁵ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, xiv.

discussion of the kingdom of God outlines how the modern evangelical church has misunderstood the kingdom, rather than exactly what ECM believes about the kingdom. However, what makes a discussion of the kingdom of God unique is that ECM does not merely believe that the modern evangelical church has misunderstood the kingdom of God, but that the church throughout most of history has misunderstood the kingdom of God. Contrary to the many historical and contemporary misunderstandings, ECM believes that the kingdom of God is not atonement for sin,¹⁶ salvation,¹⁷ church,¹⁸ future,¹⁹ heaven after death,²⁰ or even Christianity itself.²¹

Having a basic understanding of what the kingdom of God is not, it is appropriate to understand what ECM believes the kingdom of God is.

What the Kingdom of God Is

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS PRESENT NOW

One of the primary complaints voiced by the Emerging Church Movement against the modern evangelical church is that it emphasized salvation in terms of a future promise rather than a present reality. According to McLaren, modern evangelicals proclaim a gospel of forgiveness from sin resulting in an eternity in heaven. In other words, the application of redemption is primarily a future application. However, McLaren and ECM believe that they have discovered a new kingdom emphasis: “Here’s the scandal: not just that Jesus speaks of the new kingdom...but that he says the kingdom is *at hand*, available to be grasped, knocking at the door –

¹⁶ See McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 91.

¹⁷ See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 63, 91, 128-129.

¹⁸ See Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 111. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 42 and 95.

¹⁹ See McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 24.

²⁰ See McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 14 and 184.

²¹ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a missional, evangelical, post-protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, catholic, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 282.

not just someday in the future, but *here and now*. Here and now!”²² Therefore, “*an emergent theology is kingdom coming*. An emergent theology proclaims a new order of God’s reign already present as a transforming spiritual, social and economic power of liberation and rehabilitation of humankind.”²³ So strong is this emphasis on the kingdom of God as a present reality that some within ECM have posited that its antithesis, hell, is a present reality as well. Rob Bell believes “poverty, injustice, suffering – they are all hells on earth, and as Christians we oppose them with all our energies.”²⁴ Therefore, both heaven and hell are kingdom realms that are present today.

Although the temporal description of the kingdom of God is not a complete description of the kingdom, it is necessary to emphasize first because, in ECM’s mind, it establishes a primary point of discontinuity from the gospel of modern evangelicalism.

THE KINGDOM IS BIGGER THAN THE CHURCH

Ray Anderson says that any discussion of the kingdom of God must begin with George Ladd.²⁵ Just as Ladd is quick to distinguish the kingdom of God from the church, so the Emerging Church Movement is quick to make the same distinction.

The relationship between the church and the kingdom is a complex one. The two cannot be exhaustively defined, and there is a significant overlap. The reign of God existed before the coming of the church, and it will replace the church at the consummation of all things, when Christ will reign supreme and unchallenged. The church, for its part, is a servant and a sign of the coming kingdom, which was inaugurated with the coming of Christ and was established, in its provisional form, with his ascension into heaven and the imparting of his Spirit. The church, as a servant of the kingdom, constantly points beyond itself to the Lord who is its head and who requires unreserved and

²² McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 24. See also, Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*, 237.

²³ Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 16. Mark Scandrette believes that this line of thinking within ECM is “related to the emerging global narrative of the deep ecology movement” in “Growing Pains,” 27.

²⁴ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 148.

²⁵ Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 96.

comprehensive submission.²⁶

While many ECM leaders believe that the modern church made the mistake of making the church the center of God's intentions, ECM believes "the church is not necessarily the center of God's intentions. God is working in the world, and the church has the option to join God or not. This third approach focuses more on the kingdom than on the church."²⁷ This is why, according to Anderson, "the Spirit of Christ calls us to be disciples of the kingdom rather than of the church. Discipleship is not a religious vocation."²⁸

Brian McLaren broadens Ladd's definition of the kingdom of God by making the kingdom of God larger than Christianity itself.

I believe a person can affiliate with Jesus in the kingdom-of-God dimension without affiliating with him in the religious kingdom of Christianity. In other words, I believe that Christianity is not the kingdom of God. The ultimate reality is the kingdom of God, and Christianity at its best is here to proclaim and lead people into that kingdom, calling them out of smaller rings, smaller kingdoms. Christianity at its worst, using the definition in this paragraph, can become a sin when it holds people within its ring and won't let them enter the kingdom of God.²⁹

Therefore, according to ECM, the mission of the church is not about promoting the church because Jesus' "gospel was a gospel of the kingdom of God, not of the church."³⁰ But neither is the mission of the church about promoting Christianity. Rather, the mission of the church is the promotion of the kingdom of God and the transformation of the entire world, including the church.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Because the Emerging Church Movement believes the kingdom of God is larger than the church or even Christianity itself, ECM believes that the kingdom of God is larger than individual

²⁶ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 90.

²⁷ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 42.

²⁸ Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 111.

²⁹ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 282 n. 141.

³⁰ Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 111.

redemption. As Gibbs and Bolger summarize, “the gospel of emerging churches is not confined to personal salvation.”³¹ Furthermore, ECM believes that the kingdom of God is larger than religion or spirituality because “in the original workplace – the habitat of humans – there was no polarity or tension between the sacred and the profane but only between God and the created order.”³² Therefore, ECM believes that the kingdom of God is a manner of living Ray Anderson calls *kingdom living*: “human life is a sacrament of grace by which the whole of life as distinguished from God becomes a blessing to God and receives the blessings of God... This is kingdom living in the created order, where daily life and work constitute a secular sacrament of the kingdom of God.”³³

This secular sacrament of the kingdom of God involves living life in the manner intended by God, but does not necessarily include personal salvation in the process. ECM practitioner Brad Cecil summarizes his church’s mission: “Axxess is missional but *not* in the sense that we are trying to save all the individuals we are engaged with in the culture so that the kingdom will advance and Christ can work. Instead, we are trying to make our community a place where you can feel the kingdom of God, and we don’t think we need to save everyone for this to happen.”³⁴ Similarly, “Emerging churches focus on changed lives rather than changed beliefs. People do not want to be converted, but experiencing the life of the kingdom may be welcomed by many. The focus is to create cultures of the kingdom and to allow God to do the work.”³⁵ Therefore, the mission of God’s people is to be a kingdom blessing to the world, not necessarily a soteriological blessing. Rob Bell makes this point with his commentary on Genesis 12.

³¹ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 63.

³² Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 103.

³³ Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 104-105.

³⁴ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 129. Brad Cecil is the pastor of Axxess, originally intended to be a service targeting young adults. However, through his interaction with other ECM leaders at conferences in the mid-1990s, Brad led Axxess to become an emerging church. See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 257-258.

³⁵ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 128-129.

All kinds of people all over the place are going to be blessed by God through Abraham. God has no boundaries. God blesses everybody. People who don't believe in God. People who are opposed to God. People who do violent, evil things. God's intention is to bless everybody. Jesus continues this idea in many of his teachings... We reclaim the church as a blessing machine not only because it is what Jesus intended from the beginning but also because serving people is the only way their perceptions of church are ever going to change.³⁶

In other words, ECM believes that the mission promoting the kingdom of God is a mission promoting social transformation. To complete the previous quote from Gibbs and Bolger: "The gospel of emerging churches is not confined to personal salvation. It is social transformation arising from the presence and permeation of the reign of Christ. Emerging churches are no longer satisfied with a reductionistic, individualized, and privatized message."³⁷ According to many within ECM, the kingdom of God promotes social transformation through the promotion of justice. Sherry and Geoff Maddock state

our principle desire is to see God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. We believe that this happens when God's people are renewed around God's mission of love and justice in the world... Through practices such as caring for AIDS sufferers, feeding the homeless, protesting the wanton destruction of the environment, or welcoming newly arrived refugees, we find salvation that is closer to the *shalom* of Scripture.³⁸

Understanding the kingdom of God as the promotion of justice in the world is a major theme of Emergent Village's *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*.³⁹ Deborah and Ken Loyd's conclusion accurately

³⁶ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 165-166.

³⁷ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 63.

³⁸ Sherry and Geoff Maddock, "An Ever-Renewed Adventure of Faith: Notes from a Community," in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 80, 82. Sherry and Geoff lead a missional community, *Communitality*, in Lexington, KY and are recognized as exemplary ECM practitioners by Emergent Village.

³⁹ For examples, see Maddock and Maddock, "An Ever-Renewed Adventure of Faith," 80-88; Rodolpho Carrasco, "A Pound of Social Justice: Beyond Fighting

summarizes this theme, “the very existence of Christianity as a viable force in the Western world hinges on our response to injustice.”⁴⁰

This should not be read to indicate that ECM is promoting *only* social action. Rather, ECM seeks to find a balance of evangelism and social action in its mission. McLaren says “both [“evangelism” and “social action”] are integrated in expressing saving love for the world.”⁴¹ However, ECM does recognize that this belief creates a radically different church than its modern evangelical counterpart: “The focus of emerging churches on the “gospel of the kingdom” as distinct from a “gospel of salvation” has produced a new ecclesiology. More accurately, it has signaled a return to an ancient ecclesiology in which mission is integral to church.”⁴²

This emphasis on social transformation seems to be a reaction against three perceived errors of modern evangelicalism. First, ECM believes that the modern evangelical church is dualistic in its theology. This dualism results in a lack of concern for creation and the social order of today.⁴³ Second, ECM believes that the modern evangelical emphasis on personal salvation is individualistic and does not capture the full extent of the kingdom of God.⁴⁴ Finally, ECM believes that a dualistic, individualistic worldview leads to an “in-versus-out” mentality that is foreign to the kingdom of God. But this leads to the final and most important aspect of the kingdom of God.

for a Just Cause,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 248-257; Deborah and Ken Loyd, “Our Report Card in 2057: A Reflection on Women’s Rights, Poverty, and Oppression,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 270-277; Anthony Smith, “Practicing Pentecost: Discovering the Kingdom of God amid Racial Fragmentation,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 280-289; Randy Woodley, “Restoring Honor in the Land: Why the Emerging Church Can’t Dodge the Issue,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 292-301.

⁴⁰ Loyd and Loyd, “Our Report Card in 2057,” 273. Deborah and Ken lead The Bridge Church in Portland, OR and are recognized as exemplary ECM practitioners by Emergent Village.

⁴¹ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 108.

⁴² Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 91.

⁴³ See Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 103-105.

⁴⁴ See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 63.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS INCLUSIVE

Perhaps the most important description of the kingdom of God is “inclusive.” As McLaren emphasizes, “‘Jesus’ secret message in word and deed makes clear that the kingdom of God will be radically, scandalously inclusive.”⁴⁵ This inclusiveness may be described from a variety of angles.

First, “Many pioneers of emerging church groan at the idea of strict membership criteria. They fear that rigid boundaries will produce a “them and us” attitude, which cuts church off from non-believers. They prefer an “open source” church, which crashes through the boundaries between one person and another.”⁴⁶ Feeling that exclusion and conformity are values of the modern era, the Emerging Church Movement seeks to eliminate such distinctions.⁴⁷ The emphasis in inclusiveness leads to the common ECM practice of belonging before believing.⁴⁸ ECM believes that perhaps the most powerful way to reveal the kingdom of God and help people participate in the kingdom of God is to *allow* them to participate in the kingdom of God.⁴⁹

Second, ECM believes that the Kingdom of God involves following God wherever He may be found, particularly outside the confines of the institutional church. Doug Pagitt states this explicitly when he says, “my presupposition is that the gospel calls us to

⁴⁵ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 94.

⁴⁶ Michael Moynagh, *Emergingchurch.intro* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2005), 147. Kimball concurs and writes that it is most often the attitude of exclusion, rather than the act of exclusion itself, that discourages people from Christianity. See Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 166.

⁴⁷ See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 133.

⁴⁸ For examples, see Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNEXT: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 193-216; Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 33-59; Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 84; Sawyer, “What Would Huckleberry Do?” 49-50.

⁴⁹ See McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 84. See more in Chapter 6.

participate in the things of God wherever we find them.”⁵⁰ Spencer Burke provides a practical example of how this inclusiveness is lived out:

Burke’s community is prepared to learn from faith traditions outside the Christian fold. There is a Buddhist family in their church. As a community, the church visited a Buddhist temple. They participated in a guided meditation with this family. Burke celebrates the many ways God is revealed. He recognizes that the Spirit has been with these people all along. The community celebrates other traditions. They reach out to other traditions, and see them as beloved children of God.⁵¹

Since “the church, or self-professing Christians, hold no special right to speak for God,” ECM seeks to find and develop the kingdom anywhere in God’s creation.⁵² In fact, ECM believes that seeking God’s truth in other places is an integral part of evangelism.

Christians cannot truly evangelize unless they are prepared to be evangelized in the process. In sharing the good news, people are enriched by the spiritual insights, honest questions, and depth of devotion demonstrated by those of other faiths. Including others involves listening to them and, in so doing, learning from them. Much of what exists in other faiths may not necessarily be hostile to the kingdom. Christians can learn much from other walks of life.⁵³

This leads to the third aspect of kingdom inclusiveness, ECM’s understanding of the role of other religions. Because the mission of the kingdom of God is more about social and communal transformation rather than personal salvation, ECM is very open to peoples of other faiths. “They include both Christians and non-Christians in the same groups. This avoidance of differentiation is another common characteristic of emerging churches. They do not

⁵⁰ Doug Pagitt, “The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 131.

⁵¹ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 132.

⁵² Pagitt, “The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology”, 133.

⁵³ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 131.

want to create “us” and “them” distinctions, which they feel would be both discriminatory and destructive to group participation.”⁵⁴ Gibbs and Bolger studied several emerging churches who illustrate this view, including Apex in Las Vegas: “My pagan friends are church for me as well. While with them, I spend time with Jesus because he is with me. My community with these Las Vegas actors is just as strong as my Christian community, and I am slowly introducing Jesus to them.”⁵⁵ Samir Selmanovic recounts the story of Chomina, an Algonquin chief, who decided to follow Christ but not become a Christian: “Moved by the Holy Spirit, people like Chomina reject the idea of allegiance to the name of Christ and, instead, want to be like him and thus accept him at a deeper level.”⁵⁶ These two examples illustrate a central feature to ECM’s understanding of the kingdom of God: “there is no salvation outside of Christ, but there is salvation outside of Christianity.”⁵⁷

Stanley Grenz has probably developed this understanding more fully than most within ECM. However, his theology of community accurately represents what is often lived out in ECM churches. He believes that the evangelical conclusion that “Christianity is the only legitimate expression of special revelation” is biblically inaccurate.⁵⁸ Rather, he believes that “human religious traditions may indeed participate in some meaningful manner in the divine program for creation, even if only in the present penultimate age.”⁵⁹ This statement reveals two very important features of his theology of community. First, God has providentially given other religions a “role in fostering community in the present.”⁶⁰ In other

⁵⁴ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 109.

⁵⁵ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 108.

⁵⁶ Samir Selmanovic, “The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness: Finding Our God in the Other,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 190-191. Samir serves on the Emergent Village Coordinating Group. See “Emergent Village Coordinating Group,” <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/emergent-village-coordinating-group>, accessed 17 April 2007.

⁵⁷ Selmanovic, “The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness,” 195.

⁵⁸ Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 275.

⁵⁹ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 275.

⁶⁰ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 276.

words, since “God’s ultimate purpose is the establishment of community,” any religion that promotes and fosters community is positive.⁶¹ Grenz quickly acknowledges that the Christian community “constitutes a more complete appraisal of the human situation and divine intention,” but this does not undermine the value of other religious communities.⁶² But the second important feature of Grenz’s theology is that the benefit provided by other religious communities is limited to the present day. In other words, the benefit provided by these other communities is limited and is not salvific. Therefore, Grenz concludes “we must engage in the task of evangelism to the end of the age,” otherwise, these communities will miss out on the ultimate communal experience with the Triune God.⁶³

In this sense, Grenz, along with the great majority of ECM leaders, express an appreciation and openness to other faiths but stops short of supporting soteriological universalism.⁶⁴ However, so important is openness and inclusivity that ECM believes that the kingdom only excludes exclusive people: “to be truly inclusive, the kingdom must exclude exclusive people; to be truly reconciling, the kingdom must not reconcile with those who refuse reconciliation; to achieve its purpose of gathering people, it must not gather those who scatter. The kingdom of God has a purpose, and that purpose isn’t everyone’s cup of tea.”⁶⁵ According to McLaren, the kingdom of God seeks to avoid two potential dangers, the “dangers of hostile exclusion and dangers of naïve inclusion.”⁶⁶ Rather, “the kingdom of God, then, seeks a third way: not exclusiveness and rejection on the one hand, and not foolish, self-sabotaging inclusion on the other hand,

⁶¹ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 277.

⁶² Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 285.

⁶³ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 285.

⁶⁴ An extended quote from Kimball illustrates this point well: “In our diverse culture, I would want my children to know about the origins and basic practices of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and so on. But I know I must also teach them the origin and distinctiveness of Christianity. I must tell them why I choose to place my faith in Jesus and why I trust the Bible as being inspired. I need to teach them why I believe in one God and in Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).” See *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, forewords by Rick Warren and Brian McLaren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 72-73.

⁶⁵ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 169.

⁶⁶ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 165.

but rather *purposeful inclusion*. In other words, the kingdom of God seeks to include all who want to participate in and contribute to its purpose, but it cannot include those who oppose its purpose.”⁶⁷

Interestingly, some within ECM have realized the difficulty of such a position. Tony Jones acknowledges the paradox found within ECM’s understanding of the Kingdom of God: “In any case, one of the strange paradoxes of this pluralistic, postmodern, politically correct time is that the accepted pluralism embraces everyone except those who claim exclusivity. So while postmodern people are open to exploration of faith, the exclusivity that evangelical Christians claim will rub up against the deconstructionist ethos of postmodernism. In this way, politically correct pluralism is itself exclusivistic.”⁶⁸ Not only have some ECM leaders recognized this theoretically, but some ECM practitioners seem to be practicing such a paradox. Gibbs and Bolger report two interesting comments that were made in the context of discussing church community, but illustrate the paradox experienced. First, one stated, “church for me consists of my twelve friends with whom I spend most of my time. Many of our relational communities engage in everyday life together. We operate as an organic extended family.”⁶⁹ Second, “those at Quest (Seattle) do not want their group to grow any bigger than it currently is. In fact, they would like it to decrease in size a bit. They now have twenty regulars, but Dwight Friesen believes fifteen would be ideal. Some in the community live together...”⁷⁰ Seeking to balance community and openness remains a difficult task.

Due to the difficulty in finding a “third way” for the kingdom of God, ECM leaders and practitioners have been accused of promoting a veiled form of soteriological universalism. Unfortunately, this is an accusation that has been leveled against an entire movement without taking into consideration the diversity of voices and theologies within the movement. For example, many agree with Dan Kimball who explicitly states, “If you raised the

⁶⁷ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 167.

⁶⁸ Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Youth Specialties Books, 2001), 67. See also 31 for postmodernity as pluralistic.

⁶⁹ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 103. Quoting Joe Boyd.

⁷⁰ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 110.

common question, “Do all religions lead to God?” I would say no.”⁷¹ Others offer the more guarded view of Karen Ward: “I affirm no other Savior than Jesus Christ, yet at the same time, I feel no need to know with certainty the final destination of those of other faiths who either have no knowledge of Christ or who do not accept the Christian claims of the atonement.”⁷² Ward’s unwillingness to answer this question with certainty results from ECM’s rejection of foundationalism and its belief that it is not possible to know things with absolute certainty. Still others, however, seem to have moved to the position of soteriological universalism. Spencer Burke, who claims to be “a universalist who believes in hell” states, “When I say I’m a universalist, what I really mean is that I don’t believe you have to convert to any particular religion to find God. As I see it, God finds us, and it has nothing to do with subscribing to any particular religious view.”⁷³ In context Burke is arguing against institutionalized religion rather than arguing for universalism, but his theology of “we are already in unless we want to be out” is the equivalent to soteriological universalism.⁷⁴

The Mission in Practice

A final aspect of the Emerging Church Movement’s understanding of the kingdom of God is how one enters the kingdom. Although this discussion moves into the area of practical theology which is the subject of Chapter 6, it is worth reviewing the foundation laid by Brian McLaren.

⁷¹ Dan Kimball, “The Emerging Church and Missional Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 101.

⁷² Karen Ward, “Response to Mark Driscoll,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 46.

⁷³ Spencer Burke and Barry Taylor, *A Heretics Guide to Eternity*, foreword by Brian D. McLaren (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 196, 197. As mentioned previously, I am hesitant to include Spencer Burke as a legitimate member of the Emerging Church Movement because of his unique views against the church. However, because Burke and his website are regularly mentioned and endorsed (Brian McLaren wrote the forward to *A Heretics Guide to Eternity*), he must be mentioned in brief.

⁷⁴ Burke, *A Heretics Guide to Eternity*, 61.

According to McLaren, there are five primary “moves” to entering the kingdom of God. “The first move is to hear from the heart and to think deeply about what you hear... It doesn’t mean everything changes all at once, but it means you open up the possibility that everything may change over time. It involves a deep sense that you may be wrong, wrong about so much, along with the sincere desire to realign around what is good and true.”⁷⁵ Related to this first move of repentance is the second move of faith.

“The second move – the move of faith, of believing, of trusting – flows so naturally within and from the first that it’s hard to tell where one stops and the other starts.”⁷⁶ In context, McLaren believes that moves of repentance and faith include a movement toward both a proper understanding of God and a proper life reflecting the community of Jesus. Although ECM often emphasizes the latter due to its emphasis of orthopraxy over orthodoxy, belief does remain an important component in ECM’s understanding of conversion.⁷⁷ McLaren makes this evident when he describes a disciple as one who believes “Jesus is alive... Jesus is right about everything... what Jesus said about himself was true.”⁷⁸ McKnight confirms this when he states “I know of no one in the emerging movement who believes that one’s relationship with God is established by how one lives. Nor do I know anyone who thinks that it doesn’t matter what one believes about Jesus Christ.”⁷⁹

After these first two moves, “the third move, which itself grows out of rethinking and faith, is out of your control, really, yet it requires something of you. If you repent and believe, you must stay open to receive.”⁸⁰ McLaren defines this receptivity in terms of the

⁷⁵ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 105.

⁷⁶ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 108.

⁷⁷ Orthopraxy refers to “right living,” and orthodoxy refers to “right belief.” See Chapter 6 for a discussion of ECM’s understanding of orthopraxy and orthodoxy.

⁷⁸ McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 164.

⁷⁹ Scott McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” *Christianity Today* (February 2007), 37-38. Though I do not contest McKnight’s experience with ECM, which is much more extensive than my own. However, I wonder if Spencer Burke is becoming an exception.

⁸⁰ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 109.

Holy Spirit and “everything you need to live in the kingdom of God.”⁸¹ Again, this receptivity emphasizes a receptivity leading to orthopraxy, as does the fourth move. “The fourth move flows naturally from the first three. It is a move of going public with your repentance, faith, and receptivity. In Jesus’ day, the way you went public was through baptism.”⁸² Interestingly, going public does not necessarily include the church. Though most within ECM emphasize the importance of belonging to the community of Jesus, most also deemphasize the role of church membership. In this regard, ECM’s ecclesiology is much more kingdom oriented than church oriented.

McLaren completes his five moves of entering the kingdom of God with yet another emphasis on right living. “These four moves are really preparations for the fifth and most comprehensive move, a move in which you will be engaged for the rest of your life: to learn to follow Jesus every day over the whole course of your life. In other words, you don’t simply move into a new *status* like becoming a member of a club. No, more – you move into a new *practice*, like a doctor entering the practice of medicine.”⁸³ Therefore, the result of entering the kingdom of God is not simply a declaration from God, as many modern evangelicals claimed through their emphasis on the substitutionary atonement. Rather, the result of entering the kingdom of God is a transformed life that “you become a person capable of doing new things you couldn’t do before.”⁸⁴

Conclusion

The ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement is a missionary ecclesiology. ECM defines this mission as a mission to promote the community of Jesus to all people so that all people experience the kingdom of God in their present lives. This mission is dependent upon ECM’s understanding of the kingdom of God as a present reality that is bigger than the church, involves everyday life and social transformation and, above all, is radically inclusive. It is evident that this understanding of the kingdom of God is heavily

⁸¹ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 110.

⁸² McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 110.

⁸³ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 111.

⁸⁴ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 111.

influenced by its understanding of the postmodern culture, particularly its rejection of individualism and theological dualism. This has resulted in a theology of the kingdom that resembles many evangelical interpretations, but deviates particularly on the issue of inclusivity. Gibbs and Bolger's extended summary captures ECM's mission well and is worth repeating:

Modernity teaches its inhabitants to exclude and to conform. Members of emerging churches, however, display the hospitality of Jesus and include and welcome others into their midst who are different from them. Emerging churches hold to Christian orthodoxy, affirming the uniqueness of Christ. This understanding, however, rather than being a reason to exclude, empowers them to include those of other faiths, cultures, and traditions. Because of their confidence in Jesus, members of emerging churches venture out and truly listen to those of other faiths and even seek to be evangelized by them. They no longer feel that they need to argue for faith. Instead, they believe their lives speak much louder than their words. They do not believe in evangelistic strategies, other than the pursuit to be like Jesus in his interactions with others. They do not target people or have an agenda but rather seek to love all those whom God brings them. They do not hope for a belief change for their conversation partners as much as a life change. Because of their high level of engagement with other cultures, the sacred/secular split is overcome as they practice the kingdom in their midst, in community.⁸⁵

ECM also believes that people enter the kingdom of God through five movements that include repentance, faith, receptivity to God's Spirit, a public display of baptism, and a life characterized by kingdom living. While these five movements are very similar to those found in modern evangelicalism, ECM deemphasizes the role of church membership and emphasizes the role of right living.

An Analysis of ECM's View of the Kingdom of God

The Emerging Church Movement's tendency to overstate and misrepresent modern ecclesiology carries over into a tendency to overstate and misrepresent modern views of the kingdom of God. As

⁸⁵ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 133-134.

stated above, McLaren outlines eight reasons why the historic church has misunderstood the kingdom of God.⁸⁶ Contrary to the rest of the church, McLaren believes that he is “right on the verge” of retrieving a correct understanding of the kingdom of God.⁸⁷ In many ways I heartily “amen” much of what McLaren and the rest of ECM say about the kingdom of God. However, I have two concerns regarding ECM’s understanding of the kingdom of God. First, I’m not convinced that ECM’s understanding of the kingdom of God was ever lost. Second, some of what ECM proposes for the kingdom of God should be lost quickly.

When ECM seeks to correct the modern evangelical understanding of the kingdom of God, it emphasizes its belief that the kingdom of God is not atonement for sin, salvation, church, future, heaven after death, or even Christianity itself. In my former years as a Classical Dispensationalist, I would have been outraged by such claims. I would have claimed that the kingdom of God is exactly equivalent to atonement for sin, salvation, church, future, heaven after death and Christianity itself. However, when I broadened my reading and studies beyond Classical Dispensationalism, I came to many of the same conclusions that ECM proposes today. For example, George Eldon Ladd helped me understand that the kingdom of God is not equivalent to the church and that the kingdom of God is both present and future.⁸⁸ Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock helped me understand the errors of Classical Dispensationalism and introduced me to Progressive Dispensationalism.⁸⁹ But more than anyone, Mike Wittmer introduced me to the rich tradition of Reformed theology and its balanced understanding of the kingdom of God in creation,

⁸⁶ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 209-218. See also Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 64.

⁸⁷ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, xiv.

⁸⁸ See George E. Ladd. For example, see George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. Ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 54-67; and George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

⁸⁹ Progressive dispensationalists make many of these same corrections in understanding the kingdom of God. See Craig A. Blaising, and Darrell L. Bock. *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993).

fall, redemption, and consummation.⁹⁰ While it is true that many evangelical churches and some popular authors continue to promote an understanding of the kingdom of God that resembles Classical Dispensationalism, ECM is incorrect in stating that its understanding of the kingdom of God is new.⁹¹ This is yet another example of ECM leaders and practitioners narrowly focusing on modern fundamentalism which causes them to overstate and mischaracterize the majority of the Church.

Although ECM's understanding of the kingdom of God was never lost, some of its own understanding of the kingdom of God should be lost. Specifically, ECM's emphasis on social transformation and radical inclusion tends to overlook the redemptive aspect of the kingdom of God. It is not that redemption does not lead to social transformation. It most certainly does. Christians must always promote social transformation for all just as God extends His common grace to all. But real and lasting social transformation is a result of individuals and communities entering the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ, not simply through changed behavior. And it is not that the kingdom of God is not inclusive. The life of Jesus clearly demonstrates that the kingdom of God is available to all types of people, especially the overlooked and disenfranchised. Christians are commanded to love their neighbor, regardless of what this neighbor believes. But real and lasting inclusion is a result of individuals of all faiths, nationalities, and backgrounds entering the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Ultimately, those without faith in Jesus Christ will be excluded from the kingdom of God, a fact that many within ECM seem to minimize.⁹²

ECM's understanding of the kingdom of God is a necessary

⁹⁰ Mike challenged me to read historical theology and modern authors such as Anthony Hoekema, Abraham Kuyper, Richard Mouw, and Al Wolters. My personal favorite remains Michael E. Wittmer, *Heaven is a Place on Earth: Why Everything You Do Matters to God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

⁹¹ The most popular Christian book of the century, Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*, continues to promote a dispensational view.

⁹² It is likely that one of the reasons ECM minimizes this is because ECM generally minimizes human sin. Very few ECM books discuss the sinfulness of humanity to any great extent and most seem to deemphasize the substitutionary atonement of Christ as the means of overcoming this sin.

correction to many in the modern evangelical church. However, ECM's understanding of the kingdom of God is not new. Furthermore, ECM appears to be losing the most important aspect of the kingdom of God, namely, that the kingdom of God is a redemptive kingdom. While God is sovereign over all and extends His common grace to all, the kingdom of God is God's redemptive kingdom. As Ladd aptly summarizes: "Our central thesis is that the Kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of God dynamically active to establish his rule among men, and that this Kingdom, which will appear as an apocalyptic act at the end of the age, has already come into human history in the person and mission of Jesus to overcome evil, to deliver men from its power, and to bring them into the blessings of God's reign."⁹³

⁹³ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 91.

Arminianism in England and Richard Baxter's Doctrine of Justification

Jordan J. Ballor

The relationship between theology on the European continent and the British Isles during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has often been a fruitful area for scholarly debate and exploration. This is certainly the case with regard to a particular historical phenomena identified as "Arminianism" and the corresponding theological movements both on the mainland and in England. Arminianism takes its name from Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch theologian who taught at the University of Leiden in the first decade of the seventeenth century.¹ As a historiographical label, however, it is often used with respect to trends in England that predate Arminius' rise to prominence at Leiden, and refers to a variety of theological positions diverging from Reformed Protestant orthodoxy.²

In the discussions concerning Arminianism in England, the name of Richard Baxter is consistently invoked, and a number of conflicting positions have been taken concerning his theological status as a Calvinist, an Arminian, or some *tertium quid*. This is

¹ For Arminius' works in English translation, see Jacobus Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

² For the discussion of Arminianism in England in and beyond the latter decades of the sixteenth century, see Peter White, "The Rise of Arminianism Reconsidered," *Past and Present* 101 (Nov. 1983): 34–54, and White, "The Rise of Arminianism Reconsidered: A Rejoinder," *Past and Present* 115 (May 1987): 217–29; William M. Lamont, "The Rise of Arminianism Reconsidered: Comment," *Past and Present* 107 (May 1985): 227–31; P. G. Lake, "Calvinism and the English Church 1570–1635," *Past and Present* 114 (Feb. 1987): 32–76; Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: the Rise of English Arminianism, c. 1590–1640* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and Tyacke, "The Rise of Arminianism Reconsidered: Debate," *Past and Present* 115 (May 1987): 201–216; David G. Mullan, "Theology in the Church of Scotland 1618–c. 1640: A Calvinist Consensus?" *Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 595–617; and R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997).

especially true with respect to his doctrine of justification, espoused in his first published work in 1649, *Aphorismes of justification*.³ J. I. Packer and William Lamont, albeit from rather different starting points, consider Baxter to hold an Arminian view of justification.⁴ Others, such as Hans Boersma and Alan Clifford, in one way or another consider Baxter to occupy a position differing from both Arminianism and high Calvinism.⁵

³ Richard Baxter, *Aphorismes of justification with their explication annexed* (London: Printed for Francis Tyton, 1649). See also Baxter, *Reliquiæ Baxterianæ* (London: Printed for T. Parkhurst, J. Robinson, F. Lawrence and F. Dunton, 1696).

⁴ J. I. Packer, "Arminianisms," in *Through Christ's Word*, ed. W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd III (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1985), 121–148, and Packer, *The Redemption & Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003); William M. Lamont, "Richard Baxter, the Apocalypse and the Mad Major," *Past and Present* 55 (May 1972): 68–90; Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millennium: Protestant Imperialism and the English Revolution* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979); and Lamont, *Puritanism and Historical Controversy* (Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

⁵ Hans Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn: Richard Baxter's Doctrine of Justification in its Seventeenth-century Context of Controversy* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1993); Alan Clifford, "Geneva Revisited or Calvinism Revised: The Case for Theological Reassessment," *Churchman* 100 (1986): 323–34, and Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology, 1640–1790: An Evaluation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 20–31. For those who generally advocate for this understanding of Baxter, see also George Park Fisher, "The Theology of Richard Baxter," *Bibliotheca Sacra and American Biblical Repository* 9, no. 33 (January 1852): 135–69, and Fisher, "The Writings of Richard Baxter," *Bibliotheca Sacra and American Biblical Repository* 9, no. 34 (April 1852): 300–29; J. L. Neve, "Arminianism in its Influence upon England," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 88 (1931): 145–65; N. H. Keeble, *Richard Baxter, Puritan Man of Letters*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); J. Wayne Baker, "Sola Fide, Sola Gratia: The Battle for Luther in Seventeenth-Century England." *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 115–33; Carl R. Trueman, "Richard Baxter on Christian Unity: A Chapter in the Enlightening of English Reformed Orthodoxy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 53–71; and Tim Cooper, *Fear and Polemic in Seventeenth-Century England: Richard Baxter and Antinomianism* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001). Boersma notes, "In modern research, most statements that Baxter is an Arminian are carefully qualified," *A Hot Pepper Corn*, n. 144, p. 21. He goes on to cite as examples C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Barth: Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer der verkiezing in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme* ('s-Gravenhage: Boeckencentrum, 1987); John F. H.

Simply noting that Baxter's stance differs from so-called "high" Calvinists does little to prove that he falls outside the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy, however. As Richard Muller notes, the controversy over Baxter's doctrine of justification was one of the "bitter battles among the Reformed," but it was not one of the controversies that caused Reformed churches to "rupture into separate confessional bodies or identify a particular theologically defined group as beyond the bounds of the confessions."⁶ The lines of demarcation between "high" Calvinism and other theologies are not necessarily identical with the lines defining confessional orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, those who argue that Baxter is an Arminian, at least with respect to justification, do have much support from Baxter's contemporaries, many of whom questioned the orthodoxy of Baxter's view. One such figure is George Kendall, who in the midst of an attack on the views of John Goodwin criticizes Baxter's stance on justification on a number of points.⁷ Baxter replies to Kendall's criticisms in a somewhat longer treatise the following year (1654), *The reduction of a digressor*.⁸

New, *Anglican and Puritan: The Basis of Their Opposition, 1558–1640* (London: Black, 1964); and F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, vol. 9, *Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1965); See also Neve, who writes that "in Baxter's independency of theological inquiry there was the unconscious courting of the Arminian attitude of mind," in his "Arminianism in its Influence upon England," 153.

⁶ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 76. See also Muller, "Covenant and Conscience in English Reformed Theology: Three Variations on a 17th Century Theme." *Westminster Theological Journal* 42, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 308–34.

⁷ George Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ, or, A vindication of the doctrine commonly received in the reformed churches* (London: London: Printed by Tho. Ratcliffe and Edw. Mottershed, 1653); Kendall is responding to Goodwin's *Apolytrosis apolytroseos, or, Redemption redeemed* (London: Printed by John Maccock for Lodowick Lloyd and Henry Cripps, 1651).

⁸ Richard Baxter, *The reduction of a digressor: or Rich. Baxter's reply to Mr George Kendall's digression in his book against Mr Goodwin* (London: Printed by A.M. for Thomas Underhill, 1654). Baxter's response is roughly ten times longer than Kendall's original digression. For more on Goodwin, see Herbert D. Foster, "Liberal Calvinism; The Remonstrants at the Synod of Dort in 1618," *Harvard Theological Review* 16, no. 1 (Jan. 1923): 1–37; and Ellen More, "John Goodwin

As perhaps the fundamental doctrine of the Protestant reformation, the view of justification is a key point in any system of theology, and so Kendall's digression against Baxter provides an excellent opportunity to examine this important aspect of Baxter's theology. And since justification is such an important doctrine the conclusion of this survey will have some broader implications for the proper historical characterization of Baxter's theology. The survey of the debate between Kendall and Baxter will mirror the threefold topical arrangement of their exchange, which is first set by Kendall and followed by Baxter: the eternity of immanent acts of God, the conditionality of the covenant of grace, and the instrumentality of faith.

We will find that Baxter's insistence on an understanding of justification as a temporal act is at the heart of his dispute with Kendall. Baxter finds that Kendall's doctrine conflates any number of important distinctions, not the least of which is the difference between the eternal decree and temporal justification.

Indeed, Kendall's seems to read the conditionality of the covenant in Baxter as a denial of the unconditionality of election as had been articulated in the Canons of Dort and the Lambeth Articles, for example, and as being in agreement with Arminius' own contention that election is conditional.⁹ As such, Kendall accuses Baxter of teaching a doctrine of justification by works. But when Baxter talks about faith being a condition of the New Covenant, he is making a fine terminological and theological distinction between a condition and a cause.

This is also underscored by Baxter's denial of faith as an instrument of justification. Baxter is in fact attempting to guard against a synergistic doctrine of justification, which for seventeenth-century Calvinists is considered the hallmark of Arminian heterodoxy. The state of the dispute between Kendall and

and the Origins of the New Arminianism," *Journal of British Studies* 22, no. 1 (Autumn 1982): 50–70.

⁹ See, for example, Article IV of "The Apology or Defence of James Arminius," in Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, vol. 1, 745–50, which states, "Faith is not an effect of election, but is a necessary requisite foreseen by God in those who are to be elected: And the decree concerning the bestowing of faith precedes the decree of election," 745.

Baxter conflicts with any facile characterization of Baxter as holding an Arminian doctrine of justification.

Introduction to the Dispute

The immediate context for George Kendall's criticism of Richard Baxter is Kendall's engagement of the views of John Goodwin. Boersma describes why this is so important when he writes, "Baxter did not know Kendall, but was impressed with the scholarly nature of the latter's treatise. Not only was it carefully construed in theological respect, it also had serious potential for damaging Baxter's reputation by including him in the same school of thought as a well-known Arminian."¹⁰ While Foster contends that "Goodwin was accused of Arminianism, but always denied it," More writes that Goodwin "is rightly considered the leading exponent of the new Arminianism."¹¹

Indeed, the weight of scholarly opinion seems to regard Goodwin as an Arminian. James Nichols calls Goodwin's *Redemption redeemed*, the work occasioning Kendall's reply, "a most admirable defence of Arminianism."¹² Baker and Lamont identify Goodwin as an Arminian, and Packer writes that Goodwin was "the only Arminian Puritan of ability," and characterizes him as "a stormy petrel."¹³

Goodwin's status as an Arminian may be an area for further research, but whether or not Goodwin actually considered himself to be an Arminian is not germane to this discussion of Baxter. The important point is that within the theological context of mid-seventeenth century England, Kendall's accusation would be clear. Kendall was implicitly linking Baxter with Arminianism. Baxter himself understands this to be the case, when he writes of Kendall, "He thought to get an Advantage for his Reputation, by a triumph over *John Goodwin* and me; for those that set him on work would needs have him conjoin us both together, to intimate that I was

¹⁰ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 47.

¹¹ Foster, "Liberal Calvinism," 25; More, "John Goodwin," 52.

¹² See editor's note in Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, I.696.

¹³ Baker, "Sole Fide, Sole Gratia," 119; Lamont, "Richard Baxter, the Apocalypse, and the Mad Major," 86; Packer, "Arminianisms," 134.

an Arminian.”¹⁴

Boersma writes, “It was, therefore, imperative for Baxter that he lay Kendall’s charges to rest, especially where they concerned the simplicity and immutability of God.”¹⁵ These latter issues are dealt with primarily in the first section of the dispute, concerning the understanding of the eternity of immanent acts of God.

The Eternity of Immanent Acts

Kendall begins his digression against Baxter by enjoining the latter on the question of whether it is possible to conceive of there being any new immanent acts of God. Kendall defines an immanent act as “such as is terminated in the *agent*, and not in anything without it.”¹⁶ Kendall notes that Baxter does not absolutely assert that there are new immanent acts in God, but does not hesitate to explore the issue since Baxter confesses his ignorance on the matter in his *Aphorismes*; “Now that there can be any *new immanent* act in God, Master *Baxter* doth not venture to affirme; only he is pleased to say this, *that all immanent acts in God are eternal, he thinks it quite beyond our understanding to know.*”¹⁷

The problem as Kendall sees it is that to express doubt as to whether all immanent acts in God are eternal is to question the immutability of the divine. As Boersma writes of Baxter, “When he makes some comments on the eternity of God’s immanent acts, however, he gives potential opponents the opportunity to call his orthodoxy into question, not only with regard to justification, but also with respect to the very doctrine of God.”¹⁸ Indeed, Kendall raises this very issue. Wondering at what Baxter could possibly mean by questioning the eternity of immanent acts, Kendall writes, “if the meaning be that *any transient* be *eternal*, that is a mystery beyond all that hath been heard, then somewhat was *made from* eternity; if the meaning be, that no *immanent act* is *eternal*, that’s after the same rate. The *first* made the *creature* eternal, the *second* denies God to be

¹⁴ Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, I.110. See also Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 47.

¹⁵ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 47.

¹⁶ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 134.

¹⁷ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 134. See also Baxter, *Aphorismes*, 173–74.

¹⁸ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 99.

eternal.”¹⁹ Either implication is one that will have serious consequences for Baxter’s theology.

Baxter’s defense begins along the lines of an apology for theological circumspection. He quotes lengthy passages from a variety of church fathers, which discuss the limitations of human knowledge of God. Baxter writes, “*In generall*, I am very strongly perswaded that it is one of the greatest sins that a great part of Pious Learned Divines are guilty of, that they audaciously adventure to dispute and determine unrevealed things; and above all others, about the Nature and Actions of the Incomprehensible God.”²⁰ This is the form of his defense regarding his confessed ignorance in general, not only with regard to whether all of God’s immanent acts be eternal.

It is on the latter more particular point that Baxter engages a variety of opinions to subvert Kendall’s objections, particularly relying on sources such as Suarez, Scheibler, Keckermann, and Burgersdijk. As Boersma notes, “Throughout his reply to Kendall, Baxter relates the arguments of numerous scholastic theologians, both Thomists and Scotists.”²¹ The difficulty for Kendall is that Baxter himself refuses to side with any of these many and various opinions, but simply offers them as alternatives to Kendall’s explanations. The burden of proof is on Kendall to show his doctrine to be true in the face of such opposition. Says Baxter, “Remember that I say not that your Doctrine is *Untrue*, but *Uncertain*. It may be possibly as you say; but whether you can tell that it is so, or prove it to be so, I doubt.”²²

So, for example, the authorities that Baxter cites will say, “If God may have new relations without any real change, then, for ought you know, he may have new immanent acts without a real change: But the Antecedent is unquestionably true.”²³ So it may well be that the following conclusion is also true. But Baxter is quick to point out that he does not himself argue thus. He writes, “I must again intreat you, and every ingenious Reader, to fasten no opinion on me, but what I own, at least none which I disclaim. If I must be of one side in

¹⁹ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 135.

²⁰ Baxter, *Reduction*, §3, p. 7.

²¹ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 101.

²² Baxter, *Reduction*, §5, p. 16.

²³ Baxter, *Reduction*, §5, p. 21.

this Controversie, I will be of Mr. *Kendals* side, and say, that God hath but one act immanent, and that is Eternal. But my thoughts are, that we known not what we talk of when we speak thus, and therefore I will not be of any side in this.”²⁴

In one sense, then, the discussion about the immanent acts of God’s is seemingly superfluous. Boersma writes, “By his admission that he doubts whether all of God’s immanent acts are eternal, Baxter allows himself to be side-tracked.... The discussion on the eternity of God’s immanent acts is, in a sense, chimerical: Baxter defines justification as a transient act, makes some comments in passing in which he questions the eternity of some of God’s immanent acts, and then allows himself to be dragged into a lengthy argument with Kendall on the latter point.”²⁵ But as we noted above, since there are implications for Baxter’s doctrine of God, Baxter feels compelled to address the question once it has been raised.

But there is another sense in which the dispute over the immanent acts of God gives insight into the fundamental point of disagreement between Kendall and Baxter. Baxter consistently argues that justification is a transient act of God and is therefore temporal. But the relation between this transient act, properly called justification, and the immanent act (or will) in God is precisely the main point of dispute. We can see the distinction between the transient and the immanent act that Baxter makes in the analogous case of creation. He writes,

The Existence is more than the meer *Eße Volitum*, or Will that they shall exist: And it is not all one to know the Thing it self in it self, and to know it in its Cause. Though God therefore did from Eternity intuitively know the *Eße Volitum*, and know the Creature in himself its Cause, and know its futurity, and so fore-know all things: yet it follows not that he intuitively knew the Creature in it self, as existing, (Unlesse we assert the co-existence of all things in Eternity with God.²⁶

In this case, the immanent act is the “will that they shall exist,” while the transient act is the actual act of making the creatures to exist. This

²⁴ Baxter, *Reduction*, §5, p. 29. See also Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 101.

²⁵ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 99–100.

²⁶ Baxter, *Reduction*, §27, p. 69.

distinction will come to the fore much more explicitly in the following sections, as Kendall and Baxter refine the points of their dispute.

At this point, however, it is important to observe the tension that Boersma observes in Baxter's theology regarding acts of justification, "The very fact that these immanent acts are said to originate *de novo* and that this has *fundamentum in re* means that there is an irreconcilable tension between Baxter's unwillingness to deny eternity to immanent acts and his position that some immanent acts do originate *de novo*."²⁷ It is unclear, however, that Baxter is actually arguing that some immanent acts do originate *de novo*, or whether it is simply the transient acts that originate *de novo* when the eternally determined condition for their actualization has been met. Thus, it is disputable whether Baxter means that "God's will to justify a believer arises in him *de novo*" or whether he means that God's actual justification, his transient act of justifying, arises *de novo*.²⁸ The resolution to this issue will become clearer as we examine the following topics of the debate.

The Conditionality of the Covenant

Kendall's next point of dispute with Baxter is over the covenant of grace, and whether it can be considered to be conditional. Kendall defines justification as "*a remission of our sins, and accepting of us as righteous,*" and identifies it as both an immanent and transient act, since "an *immanent act* there must be confessed, if there be a *transient one*."²⁹

Indeed, since justification as an immanent and transient act are so closely related, argues Kendall, it is acceptable to call either act by the name justification. He writes, "I contend that *immanent act* there can be no other then the decree of God to *pass* his transient act; and that *this decree of God to pass the transient act of justifying carries in it as much as concerns Gods remission of sinnes, and acceptance of us as righteous;* and therefore hath *much* in it like to

²⁷ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 103.

²⁸ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 135.

²⁹ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 138.

justification; and may be stiled so without *blasphemy*.”³⁰ For Kendall, the eternity of immanent acts means that justification is most properly identified with the eternal decree. As Boersma writes, “Kendall lacks Owen’s clear denial that he teaches justification from eternity.”³¹

In this way, the transient act of justification is what is often called justification *in foro conscientiae*, or God making known the eternal justification to the believer in time. Kendall writes of justification, “therefore whatsoever it be, it is no such *distinct immanent act* in Gods *understanding*; and though we use to say, *Now a man is justified in Gods sight*, yet doth not this put any *new act of knowledge in God*, but signifies only a *testimony given by God*, whereby he makes us *know* that we are *justified before God*, or in *his sight*.”³² We can see that in Kendall’s understanding justification has two aspects, as both a transient and immanent act of God.

This is why Kendall takes such offense to Baxter’s contention that the covenant of grace is conditional. For Kendall, whatever is predicated of the covenant of grace can also be predicated of the eternal decree, since the two are so closely identified. A doctrine like this would have terrible results, and gets at the heart of Kendall’s true concern regarding Baxter’s doctrine: it teaches a form of justification by works. Kendall writes, “*Man shall properly be said to justify himself*, (a thing which Mr. *Baxter* looks on, as well as he may, as *monstrum horrendum*,) for where there is a *promise* of a *reward* made to *all*, upon a *condition* of performing such a *service* he that obtaines the reward, gets it by his *own service*; without which the *Promise* would have brought him never the nearer to the *reward*.”³³ Synergism is thus the key error of the Ariminian heterodoxy and the reason that the Arminian and Papist errors are so closely identified by Baxter’s contemporaries.

In this way, the heart of Kendall’s charge against Baxter’s understanding of the covenant of grace as conditional is that it is a synergistic doctrine. Kendall acknowledges that such an

³⁰ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 138.

³¹ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 110.

³² Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 138.

³³ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 140.

understanding is the implicit entailment of Baxter's position, so that "That ~~first-born of abominations~~ in Mr. *Goodwins* phrase, is unluckily laid at Mr. *Baxters* own door; and it may appear, it is not wrongfully fathered upon him by that very argument which he undertakes to answer, and doth well enough for so much as is *express*; but there is more *implied* in it."³⁴ Kendall fears that in viewing the covenant as conditional, man can be said to be the primary actor in justification. Justification is accomplished "not so much by Gods promulgation of the Covenant, as the man *Covenanter* his performing the *Condition*, which is the *immediate cause* of it, and therefore he *justifies himiself*, and that more than God in the New Covenant."³⁵ Kendall goes so far as to say that there is a necessary relationship between holding a form of justification by works and viewing the covenant as conditional. He writes, "Truly whoever makes faith the *Condition* of the *New Covenant*, in such a sense as full obedience was the condition of the old, cannot avoid it, but that man is justified chiefly by himself."³⁶

Packer's identification of Baxter's doctrine of justification as Arminian clearly rests upon a line of reasoning similar to that of Kendall. Packer rightly identifies that "Calvinism affirms a concept of predestination from which conditionality is excluded," while Arminianism denies this.³⁷ But for Packer's view of Calvinism, conditionality is not only excluded from election but also from justification under the New Covenant. Packer writes that one of the fundamental denials of Arminianism contra Calvinism is "that the covenant of grace is a relationship which God imposes unilaterally and unconditionally, by effectual calling."³⁸ Since Baxter clearly does not hold to this view, Packer interprets his doctrine of justification to be Arminian. And since the "inescapable logic" of Arminianism revolves around the "basic denial that the individual's salvation is wholly God's work," Packer reaches the same conclusion as Kendall: Baxter must teach some form of synergism.³⁹ Boersma relates a more sympathetic and ultimately more responsible approach

³⁴ Kendall, *ΘEOKPATIA*, 140.

³⁵ Kendall, *ΘEOKPATIA*, 140.

³⁶ Kendall, *ΘEOKPATIA*, 141.

³⁷ Packer, "Arminianisms," 122.

³⁸ Packer, "Arminianisms," 133.

³⁹ Packer, "Arminianisms," 133.

to understanding the dispute when he writes, “Baxter’s argument that he gives a less significant role to faith than his high Calvinist opponents must be taken seriously. Whether or not he is correct in this evaluation, his argument is that man does not effect his own justification. Faith is only the condition without which God does not justify.”⁴⁰

Baxter certainly cannot abide the charge of synergism, and engages Kendall’s criticisms directly. He denies the validity of Kendall’s identification of justification with both the immanent and the transient act of God. Baxter writes, “Immanent acts pass not into the extrinsic objects and make no change on them, and therefore are not causal: and therefore cannot well as causals be denominated from their effects: therefore no immanent act of God can be called Justification, or part of Justification, or a justifying act.”⁴¹ He contends instead that it is the transient act that is properly called justification, since “it is the transient act only that effecteth Justification (Passive:) therefore it is the transient act only that is to be called Justification.”⁴² We can see that the previous point of debate over the nature of immanent and transient acts has bearing on the respective understandings of Kendall and Baxter on justification.

For Baxter, the immanent act of God is something like the divine decree, or the eternal will to justify. But this is not absolutely identical with the actual transient act of justification. Thus Baxter writes to Kendall, “When you say [God decreed to Justifie] do not you plainly make [Decreeing] and [Justifying] two things? and denominate only the transient act which is in time [Justification?] So of other acts; as when we say [God decreed to create:] you do not say, His Decreeing was Creating.”⁴³

It is because of his distinction between the immanent decree and the transient act of justification that Baxter can hold to the conditionality of the covenant of grace without lapsing into a denial of the unconditionality of the decree. Since the two are not identical, what is predicated of one is not necessarily predicated of the other. In

⁴⁰ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 194.

⁴¹ Baxter, *Reduction*, §29, p. 81.

⁴² Baxter, *Reduction*, §29, p. 81.

⁴³ Baxter, *Reduction*, §29, p. 81.

Baxter's view, the difference is primarily that the decree has to do with creatures as future realities (yet to be created), while the covenant as an instrument of actualizing justification has to do with present created and fallen creatures. So Baxter writes, "And thus I conceive, Decree respecting the future, and [Accepting and Approving] being acts that connote a present object, and so may not be said [to be such acts] till the object exist, therefore God may well be said to Decree to Accept us, and Approve us, and Love us, and Delight in us &c. though all be Immanent acts."⁴⁴ Baxter finds Kendall's tendency to conflate the separate immanent and transient acts highly problematic.

With respect to Kendall's charge that the teaching of the covenant of grace as conditional results in man's self-justification, Baxter refuses to accede to the conclusion. He writes, "I deny that there is any other Cause doth intervene between the Covenant, and the Effect. A condition on mans part must be performed before the Law or Covenant of Grace will *Actu Causare*, i.e. *Justificare*. And this condition hath its Causes: But Remission and Justification have no intervening Causes."⁴⁵ Man cannot be said to be a cause in his justification because faith is simply a condition and not a cause.

This distinction is an important key to Baxter's doctrine. He writes of Kendall, "It's a pity that he cannot distinguish between a Cause and a meer Condition: Where he saith [he that obtains the reward gets it by his service] I say, it is here *By it*, as a Condition *sine qua non*, but not *By it*, as by a Cause."⁴⁶ Faith is the occasion for the execution of the decree to save in time, but is not the basis or the foundation for God's decree to save in eternity.

In defense of his doctrine of the conditionality of the covenant, Baxter employs another distinction, between the covenant as conditional and as absolute or actual. This distinction is conceptually analogous to the common "sufficient for all, efficient for the elect" view of the atonement codified by the Synod of Dort. Baxter writes, "*Conditionally* God Justifieth *All* by his Covenant, at least *All* to whom it is Revealed. *Actually* he Justifieth only them that have the

⁴⁴ Baxter, *Reduction*, §31, p. 94.

⁴⁵ Baxter, *Reduction*, §35, p. 102.

⁴⁶ Baxter, *Reduction*, §37, p. 104.

Condition. I oppose *Actually* to *Conditionally*, because that while it is but *Conditional*, it is not *Actual* in Law sense, that is, Effectual, though it is *in Actu*, so farre done as it is.”⁴⁷ If Baxter’s view of justification were to be put into a similar construction, he might say “conditional for all, actual (or absolute) for the elect.” Clifford rightly interprets Baxter’s view to be in accord with the teachings of the Synod of Dort on the extent of the atonement, as indeed Baxter confessed himself to be.⁴⁸

Regarding Kendall’s equation of the conditions of the New and the Old covenants, Baxter writes, “Where you talk of [faith being a condition of the New Covenant in the same sense as full Obedience of the Old.] I say your words [in the same sense] are ambiguous: *Quod rationem formalem Conditionis in genere*, it is in the same sense a Condition. But it is not a Condition of the same *species*.”⁴⁹ Baxter goes on to outline a number of differences between the conditions:

It differs in the matter; one being the humble thankfull Acceptance of Christ and Life freely restored and given; the other being a perfect fulfilling of a perfect Law: the ends are different: One is to obtain part in Life purchased by Christ, when we were undone by sin: the other to maintain continued interest in the felicity first given by the Creator: One is to abase the sinner by self-deniall, and to extoll Free-grace; the other was to obtain the Reward in a way as honourable to man, as he was capable of. More differences might easily be added.⁵⁰

While the condition under the Old Covenant was one which was based on righteousness by works, the condition of the covenant of grace is founded upon justification by faith. Faith is the analogous condition in the New Covenant but it is not itself a work.

Boersma notes that this is a common point of conflict between Baxter and other high Calvinist predecessors to Kendall. He writes, “Faith may not have the role of a condition, because – as

⁴⁷ Baxter, *Reduction*, §36, p. 103.

⁴⁸ Clifford, “Geneva Revisited or Calvinism Revised,” 325. See also Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 217.

⁴⁹ Baxter, *Reduction*, §44, p. 110.

⁵⁰ Baxter, *Reduction*, §44, p. 110–11.

Pemble had already maintained – faith is a work. It is part of sanctification. If faith were a condition, it would mean that we are justified by works.”⁵¹ Pemble and Twisse had been criticized in Baxter’s *Aphorismes*, and Kendall actually writes that the occasion for his digression is that “I had not the patience to see so worthy Divines so unworthily handled.”⁵² But while Kendall thinks that Baxter’s doctrine leads to a form of synergism or man’s self-justification, Baxter levels a reciprocal charge against Kendall. And he does so in his refutation of Kendall’s view that faith is an instrument of receiving justification.

The Instrumentality of Faith

The final point of the dispute between Kendall and Baxter revolves around the issue of conceiving faith as an instrument in justification. Kendall writes, “Mr. Baxter objects against *Faiths* being an instrument of our *Justification*, and that it is *neither mans nor Gods instrument*. I shal make it appear to be both Gods [and] mans in some sense, though in *different* respects, notwithstanding all he hath said to the contrary.”⁵³

With respect to viewing faith as God’s instrument, Kendall argues that it is only improperly called such: “I do not say *it is* properly, but it is his *work*, and by *giving* us faith he justifies us, as shall be shewed anon, he giving us that which is our instrument, whereby we receive the righteousnesse of Christ.”⁵⁴ So the instrumentality of faith is most properly understood to refer to its human use. Even so, writes Kendall, “I *alone receive*, but these are Gods *acts*, and though God be not said to *believe*, he truly may be said to be the *author of my belief*, my *belief*; is an *immanent* act in *me*, and so denominates me the *believer*, a *transient* act as from God, and denominates him only the *author of my beleiving*.”⁵⁵ Faith is God’s instrument insofar as he is the author and originator of faith.

In the proper sense, then, faith can be said to be man’s instrument. Kendall emphasizes that this does not result in a form of

⁵¹ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 117.

⁵² Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 144.

⁵³ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 141.

⁵⁴ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 141.

⁵⁵ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 141–42.

self-justification, however. He writes, “*Man may not be said of his believing, to justify himself, but to believe to his Justification, and to receive Justification by believing; for that by faith, as it is Gods work, God doth justify him.*”⁵⁶ Here Kendall has preemptively attempted to address what Baxter will in turn criticize: that viewing faith as an instrument results in a form of synergism.

Kendall himself finds that Baxter places too large an emphasis on faith, who by making it a condition of receiving the covenant has elevated it to the status of efficient cause. He writes of Baxter, “according to him it hath more then the *influx* of an *instrumental*, that of the *principal* efficient upon our Justification as being that which makes this a *conditional* grant, in the Covenant to become *absolute*; and all the benefit we receive by the Covenant is more to be ascribed to *our faith* then Gods grace in the Covenant.”⁵⁷ Boersma notes that “Kendall clearly does not accept Baxter’s assessment of the controversy: it is Baxter who teaches self-justification.”⁵⁸

Indeed, this is Baxter’s own charge against Kendall’s doctrine of the instrumentality of faith. As we have seen, Baxter rebukes Kendall for not properly accounting for the difference between a condition and a cause. Baxter’s intent is to avoid a doctrine of synergism, which is why he describes faith as a condition rather than an instrument. Baxter writes, “the thing which I deny is, that faith is an Instrument in the strict Logical sense, that is, an Instrumental efficient cause of our Justification: and that I expressly disclaim contending *de nomine*, or contradicting any that only use the word Instrument in an improper larger sense, as Mechanics and Rhetoricians do: so that the Question is *de re*, whether it efficiently cause our Justification as an Instrument? This I deny.”⁵⁹

Kendall criticizes Baxter for describing faith as a condition because it means that faith becomes an efficient cause of justification. Baxter levels a similar charge at Kendall for describing faith as an instrument because it means that faith acts as an efficient cause of

⁵⁶ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 142.

⁵⁷ Kendall, *ΘΕΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ*, 142.

⁵⁸ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 177.

⁵⁹ Baxter, *Reduction*, §47, p. 112–13.

justification. Clearly both want to avoid describing faith as an efficient cause. Boersma writes of Baxter, “He is deeply convinced that his opponents’ accusations of justification by works are wrong, and that they are guilty of the very errors which they erroneously attribute to him.”⁶⁰

In this way, Baxter accuses Kendall, “I conclude therefore contrary to your Conclusion, that if you make faith the proper Instrument of justifying, you make man his own pardoner, and rob God of his Sovereignty.”⁶¹ For Baxter, the term instrument in its proper sense denotes the instrumental form of efficient causality. He is willing to let someone he calls “a mechanick, a Rhetorician, or *Vulgariter*,” speak in this improper and loose way, but not one like Kendall who deigns to speak “Logically.”⁶²

Baxter uses this dispute as an opportunity to more fully explore his view of the origin and source of faith. This is a potential source of ambiguity, for even Arminius himself can affirm that faith comes by grace. It is the nature of that grace as resistible or potentially inefficient that functions characteristically for a synergistic soteriology. He writes, “The Gospel hath a promise of Faith it self to some: and this Faith is Caused by the holy Ghost: Therefore it is still God that provideth for the Elect, better then they provide from themselves, however such disputers may talk.”⁶³ Faith is thus primary in his temporal order of salvation: “The Spirit gives us Faith first, which is our Condition, and makes us capable objects or subjects of Justification: which being done, the new Law of Grace doth immediately Pardon, Justifie and Adopt us.”⁶⁴ Baxter does his best to dispel the possibility of a synergistic view of justification when he wonders, “Faith is the act of an humbled soul accepting of Christ as he is offered in the Gospel. And can any humbled soul give thanks to his own Acceptance, more then to Gods Gift? yea when the power and act of Accepting is his Gift also?”⁶⁵ It is not simply that the power of choosing has been given and grace is resistible, but the “act

⁶⁰ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 187.

⁶¹ Baxter, *Reduction*, §53, p. 117.

⁶² Baxter, *Reduction*, §64, p. 133.

⁶³ Baxter, *Reduction*, §37, p. 105.

⁶⁴ Baxter, *Reduction*, §37, p. 105.

⁶⁵ Baxter, *Reduction*, §43, p. 109.

of Accepting” itself is the work of God.

Baxter does discuss works that can be undertaken by the unbeliever which in some sense prepare them for faith. He writes, “That [without faith, such can no more do ought towards the receiving of Christ, then a dead man can walk or speak] is a dead doctrine, like the rest of Antinomianism, tending to licentiousness, and to subvert the precepts of the Gospel, and the salvation of men, and unfit for any man that shall use the Name of Christ, much more unfit for a Divine.”⁶⁶ He queries pointedly: “[*What can the creature do?*] To go out of an Alehouse or Whorehouse, and to go to hear the Gospel preached, is somewhat *towards* receiving Christ: for faith comes by hearing; and can no man do this without faith? Cannot the Eunuch read a Chapter and ask help of an Interpreter without faith?”⁶⁷ But in each of these and other like cases, the move of the unbeliever is made possible through the common work of the Holy Spirit, and is an occasion for faith and not a meritorious cause.

He asks, “Is there not a common Grace of the Spirit, drawing men *towards Christ* that were farre from him, which goes before the special Grace (at least sometimes) whereby they are drawn to *Christ*?”⁶⁸ He goes on to attribute the denial of this doctrine to the “Libertines and Antinomists,” asserting that it is in agreement with Hooker, Rogers, Bolton, Perkins, the Synod of Dort, and “any Protestants that I know.”⁶⁹ Boersma writes that in this, Baxter “dissents from the Arminian view of common grace. He argues, that, ultimately, it does not depend on man’s disposition, on his preparation, whether or not he receives saving faith. God is not tied to the *materia disposita* in giving special grace.”⁷⁰

Here the dispute between Kendall and Baxter has finally come into fullest relief. Both men want to maintain a doctrine of justification that eliminates faith as an efficient cause. Where Kendall tends to identify the eternal decree with the temporal act of justification, Baxter sharply distinguishes between the two. For Kendall, this means that if the decree is unconditional then the

⁶⁶ Baxter, *Reduction*, §64, p. 131–32.

⁶⁷ Baxter, *Reduction*, §64, p. 132.

⁶⁸ Baxter, *Reduction*, §64, p. 132.

⁶⁹ Baxter, *Reduction*, §64, p. 132.

⁷⁰ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 159.

covenant of grace must be as well. For Baxter, this means that he can maintain that the decree is unconditional while at the same time asserting that its actualization in time through the covenant of grace is conditional. The divergences on these points come to a head over the question of the instrumentality of faith. This is why Boersma writes of Baxter, “his opposition to the instrumentality of faith is of vital significance to his position on justification. With his rejection or acceptance of the instrumentality of faith Baxter’s entire position on the role of faith and works in justification either stands or falls.”⁷¹

Conclusion

We have seen that Richard Baxter’s dispute with George Kendall is rooted in the former’s distinction between the immanent decree of God and justification as the temporal transient act of God. At each point in the dispute, Baxter criticizes Kendall for not appropriately understanding the terminological distinctions that are necessary to properly regard his theology. Kendall sees any argument for the conditionality of the covenant of grace as a hallmark for Arminian synergism. In such a case, he says, man will be necessarily seen to justify himself.

But from Baxter’s perspective, his emphasis on distinctions is intended to avoid any form of self-justifying synergism, and he finds that Kendall’s lack of precision runs the risk of committing the same error. In his view, Kendall comes dangerously close to asserting that justification is an eternal immanent act of God. For Baxter, this is simply a conflation of necessarily distinct concepts and a fundamentally antinomian error.

Kendall’s implicit linkage of Baxter with Arminianism is part and parcel of his explicit claim that Baxter teaches a synergistic doctrine of justification. Such is the nature of polemic in the seventeenth century. For Kendall and other so-called “high” Calvinists, to speak of the covenant of grace as conditional is tantamount to admitting Arminian, Papist, and synergistic heterodoxy. For his part, Baxter too could respond in kind, accusing anyone who hinted at a doctrine of justification from eternity as complicit with antinomianism.

⁷¹ Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 177.

While such labels and categorizations were certainly effective rhetorical devices in the polemics of the era, their value as historical labels must be critically examined. Packer tends to obscure rather than clarify the doctrinal situation of the seventeenth century when he describes Baxter's doctrine of justification as Arminian. Under such an interpretation what Cooper observes would still hold true: "In the context of mid-seventeenth-century English polemic, the *Aphorismes* could only ever be seen to be an Arminian document, and its author an Arminian. The conceptual space of the middle way was fragile, vulnerable and ultimately untenable. The harsh reality of religious polemic dictated the terms."⁷²

Rather than calling Baxter's theology Arminian, Clifford and others prefer the term Baxterian. This is generally a better approach than fitting Baxter's theology into some bifurcatory scheme which does not adequately reflect the historical evidence. Baxter's theology is simply not identical with either the "high" Calvinism of a George Kendall or the Arminianism of a John Goodwin.

Clifford argues that "*Baxterianism* was the seventeenth century expression of *Calvinism*, rather than a heterodox theology. Of course, judged by the criteria of high Calvinism, it was bound to look like a compromise with Arminianism, as surely as the Arminians thought Baxterianism to be too Calvinistic!"⁷³ Whether or not Baxter represents the only true strain of Calvinist theology in seventeenth-century England as Clifford claims is beyond the scope of this paper, but it should be apparent that some variety of theological perspectives can be accommodated under Reformed confessional orthodoxy.

The exact nature of Baxter's unique theological position is yet to be fully explored. There is some disagreement, for example, whether Baxter truly represents a mediating theology between high Calvinism and Arminianism, as Keeble claims, or whether, as Trueman contends, his theology is an indictment of the speculative nature of both theological perspectives.⁷⁴ But an important place to

⁷² Cooper, *Fear and Polemic*, 98.

⁷³ Clifford, "Geneva Revisited or Calvinism Revised," 331.

⁷⁴ Keeble, *Richard Baxter: Puritan Man of Letters*, 148; Trueman, "Richard Baxter on Christian Unity," 69.

begin a proper assessment of Baxter's theology is to break through the obfuscation of polemical labels and engage Baxter's work on its own terms. It is clear that a simple historiographical scheme absolutely identifying high Calvinism with Reformed orthodoxy and any averring theological positions as Arminian heterodoxy is simply inadequate to the task.

Humble Beginnings: Luke 2:1-7

Preached at Bridgeway Community church on New Year's Eve of 2006¹

Rev. Benjamin Spalink

It's funny how many of our life changing events are often set into motion by the inconspicuous. The Journey, a church plant in Manhattan, used to have advertising campaigns using free gifts. They would attach a little note on it that said, "From the Journey. Come to worship at 10:00 am." Well, what do Manhattanites need on their way to and from work? In the summer, they gave out free bottles of water with the note on it. Other times, they gave out pocket-size subway maps—very convenient by New York standards. They also handed out granola bars to people rushing through the streets with no time for breakfast. Eventually, they gave up this terribly unsuccessful campaign. For every one thousand "touches," maybe five people would show up. But then one day, a woman appeared up at the Journey, and she recognized the pastor. She said she came to the Journey because *five* years ago, he'd given her a granola bar on her way to work. True story.

If you read the story of Jesus' birth the way Luke portrays it, you will be surprised by how unimpressive the story seems. But to do that, you have to be able read it as if for the first time, and to allow that Luke is entitled to his own take of what happened. It's sort of like *007*. There's the Sean Connery versions. There's the Pierce Brosnan versions. Now, the twenty-second Bond film stars Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale*. Many think this is the best one yet. My point is you can't take the beginning of *Casino Royale* and mix it with a terrible Bond film like *Tomorrow Never Dies*. Each film is entitled to its own telling of the story. Well, it's the same with the birth of Jesus. The stories have become so mixed up with the other gospels, the

¹ Bridgeway Community Church is a multiethnic church in Haledon, NJ which was birthed out of an old and dying Dutch-American congregation, First Christian Reformed Church of Paterson. It is now a vibrant congregation, focusing most of its ministry efforts in the surrounding blue collar neighborhoods.

traditions, the mass marketing, and the Christmas trees that we often lose sight of the simplicity of Luke's story.

So, there are two things we have to try and do: let's strip away the glitz that surrounds Christmas, and let us see *Luke 2:1-7* for what it is, the beginning of a long story which starts out very small and ends very large. *Luke* is only one third of this long story. There's another part to *Luke*, and that's called *Acts*. *Luke* and *Acts* are actually meant to be read together. But the real story doesn't end in *Acts* either. *Acts* has no end. The final chapter is one which you and I are still writing. So, to get a feel for the whole story, let's start from now and work our way backwards.

As of right now, approximately thirty-three percent of the world's population considers itself "Christian." In 2001, that was 2.1 billion people.² In 2006, that would be about 2.2 billion people. This number is high because this includes nominal Christians, people who check the "Christian Box," but who aren't really owning their faith. Let's say that just half of the thirty-three percent were the real deal. That would mean that there were one billion real Christians in 2001. The entire Bible has been translated into over three-hundred-eighty-three different languages.³ There are over two hundred thousand missionaries in the world.⁴ As we speak, Christianity is the largest religion in the world.⁵ Christians are on every continent. They live in hundreds of countries and territories. That's just a snapshot of the chapter that we are writing.

Now, let's jump back to 61 A.D. Paul is preaching the gospel in Rome, about one thousand four hundred miles from Jerusalem (the distance from New York to Colorado). Jesus has only been gone for twenty five years and the gospel has already spread one thousand four hundred miles. This happens without modern technology, without

² Adherents.com, "Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents." http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html, accessed April 17, 2007.

³ Patrick Johnston and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World* (London: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001), 2.

⁴ Johnston and Mandryk, *Operation World*, 4.

⁵ Adherents.com, "Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents." http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html, accessed April 17, 2007.

automobiles, without email, without phones, without an organized postal service, without electricity, without typewriters, etc...

Let's jump back even earlier to 36 A.D. Peter preaches to a crowd at Pentecost and three thousand people are added to the faith. Let's go earlier still to about 35 AD. Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples in twos (Luke 10:1). But, before Jesus sends out the seventy-two, he sends the twelve (Luke 9:1-2). And before Jesus even has twelve disciples, he has just three: Simon Peter, James and John, fishermen from Galilee. And before Jesus even starts his ministry, he is a bratty twelve-year-old who really knows his theology. And before he is twelve, he is five, three, two, and he is one, and in the beginning, he is a newborn baby. That brings us to the text of *Luke 2:1-7*.

You've heard this story a hundred times. But what does this story look like when you strip it of all the Christmas glitz and read it the way it was supposed to be read: as the very beginning of an unfolding drama in which the gospel becomes so pervasive that two millennia later, two billion people consider themselves Christians?

You have a census, seemingly at the whim of Caesar, the ruler in Rome. In New Jersey, you have State Car Inspection. Besides taxes and root canals, State Inspection is about the most enjoyable thing in the world. Imagine the utter inconvenience of having to drop what you're doing to go and register in your home town. On a whim, the emperor of Rome wants to know how powerful and mighty his empire is. Somebody should have saved him the trouble: "Sir, your empire is huge. There's tons of people in it. Just let it go."

Pictures show Mary nice and cozy on a mule, but the text says nothing of a mule. What the text does tell you is that Mary and Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of seventy miles as the crow flies. Can you imagine walking seventy miles? And while you're pregnant? Without Nike shoes?

In vs. 4, we have Joseph going to Bethlehem because, it turns out, Joseph is related to King David. In vs. 5, Mary goes with him because she's pledged to be married to him, but the text tells us she is already pregnant. The description of what happens next is very uninteresting, at least in my opinion. There's no drama. Mary is pregnant. She gives birth to a boy. It's her first child. She wraps him up. She places him in an animal's feedbox because there is no room

for them at the inn with the other travelers.

When you compare the birth of Christianity to the “*mega-*religion” that Christianity is today, you realize that *Luke 2* is just not all that impressive. You have normal people doing normal things. The pregnancy is uneventful. They’re poor and there’s no room for them in the inn. It doesn’t even say that they slept in the manger. It just says that they placed him in a manger. There’s nothing extravagant, there’s nothing interesting. This just doesn’t seem like an appropriate beginning for a new king.

But, brothers and sisters, the inconspicuousness, subtlety, and the lack of glamour in this event is precisely the point. We covered two thousand years of history not in order to impress you, but to show you that big world change doesn’t start big. In fact, if anything, God could not have picked a less impressive way to bring salvation to the earth.

God starts off his campaign to save the world as a human baby. Of all ways the Savior of the world could have made his debut, you’d think God would have arranged something a bit more charismatic, something a little fancier. When President Bush lands, he does so in style with the Air Force Brass Band. He comes down the steps from the door with businesslike determination, a wave and a grin. When kings, queens, and presidents make their debut, we expect fireworks, fanfare, and parades. Not so with Jesus.

The irony of this picture is that Jesus is no ordinary child. The astounding and impossible message of the gospel is that this baby is God in the flesh. If you find this hard to stomach, that’s okay. It is hard to stomach. Most people, when they think about God tend to imagine a force or being that is large and impressive—but inscrutable. Sometimes you hear people use the words, “higher power.” But here you have it: the higher power coming to earth as a little crying and pooping baby.

So what does all this say about God? God is not afraid of humble beginnings. God doesn’t need pomp. He doesn’t need flare. When he makes his entrance it can be under such insignificant circumstances that you might not even notice it. The beginning of the Gospel has a lot to do with humility. Humility means not demanding what the world owes you. Surely, if any king deserved a parade and a band, it was Jesus. But God knew that when he made his appearance,

most people would not even notice.

None of this was by accident. God knew Mary would simply wrap him up, making him barely visible in the world he had created. Of all the inns that Jesus could have been born at, he was born at one which would have no room for him. What are the chances? God knew that this would happen. In fact, he planned it that way. God uses humble beginnings. Not always, but sometimes it is the case that when God decides to change your world, he'll do it with a granola bar.

And so tonight, as we think about Christmas, I want to bring it home like this: I want to tell you that God can begin a new work in you with something as small as a baby's cry. The beginning of your faith journey might be something as mundane as a hunch that there's more to life than what meets the eye—or a wink from someone you like—or a song you heard on the radio. What we see in the birth of Jesus can be true in your life too—that a humble beginning with God could have an unprecedented impact on your life.

If you are waiting for God to do something truly amazing before you'll believe, I have bad news for you. God's mighty works are a lot more like the circling of the earth around the sun. Standing outside, you cannot feel or see that you are moving at the colossal speed of 67,000 mph around the sun. So it is with God. You can't always see what he does, but it makes sense if you pay attention to the seasons.

I did some calculations. If there are one billion real Christ followers today, but the church started with only three thousand members in 36 A.D., guess what the average rate of growth has been over the past one thousand nine hundred sixty years? Only .65 of a percent!⁶ That's minute! If you want to see the miracle, you have to train your eyes to see the big picture.

This is not to say that God doesn't make big splashes, but, only that the biggest splash of all, the tidal wave of Christianity, which covered every continent and people, began with a little tremor underneath the surface—one which almost no one felt. It began at the NJ state inspection. No, it began with a census, a seventy mile hike,

⁶ 3000 (original members) multiplied by 1.00651 (average growth rate) ¹⁹⁶⁰
(number of years of growth) = 999,401,463 people.

and a terribly uninteresting story about a baby named Jesus. God ushered salvation into the world through a baby's cry.

God is a God of humble beginnings. When God breaks into the world, he doesn't always do it with a lot of fanfare. The most significant "breaking in," the birth of Jesus Christ, is a story which leaves much to be desired. But that is just the point, that the most insignificant occurrences can be God's way of ushering salvation into your heart. This Christmas, pay attention. Listen. Look around and wonder. It could just be that something new is beginning. Something small. But something terribly important.

Confession: Worshipping with Integrity
Zechariah 3:1-10

Craig Hoekema

The story of Cinderella is unquestionably one of the most well-known tales ever told. Our society is so familiar with the story that we'll even hear Cinderella's name ascribed to real life experiences. When a poor inner-city child fights her way to becoming a multi-million dollar recording artist, we call it a Cinderella story. Or when a baseball team goes on a late season tear to climb out of last place and win the pennant, we call it a Cinderella story. The reason this fairy-tale became and has remained so popular is because it gives expression to the human desire in all of us to become more than we currently are.

But there's at least one terrifying scene in the story. Cinderella's out on the deck with the handsome young prince when all of the sudden she hears the ominous drone of the clock-tower bell. She remembers the words of the fairy-godmother who had explicitly given her a 12:00 curfew. Cinderella desperately dashes through the ballroom as the spell begins to lose its effect. She must get out of sight before the illusion of luxury crashes down around her. Her glorious carriage turns back into a pumpkin and her beautiful stallions dissolve into the rodents they really are. Worst of all, Cinderella's beautiful dress begins to fade away, exposing the tattered rags of a slave-girl, threatening to betray Cinderella's real social condition.

Exposed for us, in today's passage, is the real condition of Israel's priesthood. Zechariah's vision of a high priest dressed in filthy rags leaves no façade, but gives full disclosure to a shameful corporate identity.

Zechariah became a prophet immediately after the Babylonian exile. Despite numerous prophetic warnings, Israel's continued rebellion against God led to its own captivity. But the nation that had once conquered Israel had now been conquered by Persia, and Persia's King Cyrus was allowing the Jews to return to

their homeland across the Jordan River. But things were different now than they were before. Only a handful of Jews actually went back, the monarchy was no longer in place, and the city of David, including the temple, had been leveled by their Babylonian captors. The people began to reconstruct the temple, but the work was thwarted after only the foundations had been laid. Israel was becoming disheartened and depressed over their inability to restore Zion's former glory.

God told their forefathers, all they way back at Mt. Sinai that Israel was to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, and a treasured possession. But the historical reality of the Babylonian exile now stood between them and that ancient dream. The glorious temple was gone; the rebuilding had stopped. The dignity of Israel's priests was far diminished compared to what it had been before the exile. If Israel was a kingdom of priests, then at very best, she was a priesthood with her tail between her legs, still sheepish from the pain of rebuke at the time that Zechariah has his vision.

There stood Joshua, not the Joshua from the book of Joshua, but the lesser known Joshua who was Israel's high priest at this time. He stood there as a representative of the people before God. But it was a miserable sight. Gone were the sacred garments once given to Aaron when the priesthood was first instituted. Gone was the ephod and breast-piece made of colorful finely twisted linen; gone was the blue robe with the shimmering bells; gone was the embroidered sash and the golden plate that read "Holy to the Lord." And gone were the dignity and honor that these garments were meant convey. In their place were filthy stinking rags. Zechariah, a priest himself, must have been horrified at the image of his high priest in such despicable attire. Joshua's sullied rags that left no illusion of splendor, but instead exposed the people's sin and shame. God had instituted the priesthood for the purpose of his own glory, his own worship. But how could God be honored by such a loathsome image?

But there was one present who was celebrating the tarnished priesthood. Satan, or literally, "the accuser," stood before God and highlighted Joshua's wardrobe. "Look at your high priest, God...your HIGH priest! This is the representative of your people!? This is the people from whom you have ordained worship!?! Look at him...smell him! He's no more fit to bring you glory than a sewer

rat...” Even Satan knew that getting in trouble with God was the worst kind of trouble. Joshua says nothing...Zechariah says nothing. What could they say? Satan was right. Israel had brought this condition upon itself. What glory and honor could God possibly receive from such filthy sinners?

It’s a question we must ask ourselves as we gather in divinely centered worship. If we’re really honest with ourselves and with God, then we have to admit that all of us enter God’s presence looking a lot like Joshua. We come into God’s presence clothed in the filthy rags of our own sinfulness, with the stench of selfishness wafting off our souls. “No, not really...not us! That’s an overstatement; we’re not really that bad are we?” God is infinitely worthy of our obedience, dedication, love and worship. His law is infinitely binding, which means that any violation of that law whatsoever is absolutely and infinitely evil. It’s a hard thing to admit about ourselves; it’s easier to ignore, and unfortunately, there’s a trend in Christian worship that seems to want to do just that...ignore our sinfulness.

I grew up in a church where the confession of sin was a mandatory part of Sunday morning worship. But as I got older, and moved away from home, and began attending other churches, I realized that not all churches hold to this practice with such unwavering dedication. A lot of brothers and sisters in Christ, as their worship style changes, simply throw the ancient practice of confession. Maybe they think it’s boring; maybe they think it turns seekers away; or maybe they simply think it’s unnecessary.

If we come into worship covered in rags and reeking of sin, if we think about sin with the same visual imagery of Zechariah 3, then it makes no sense to ignore it. It makes no sense to stand before God in filthy stinking rags and think nothing of it. It would make no sense for Cinderella to scurry off to the ball in the tattered apron she wore while scrubbing floors. It would make no sense for Joshua to expect God to simply ignore the condition of his high priest. And it doesn’t make sense to gather in worship, in the presence of the Most High God, and say nothing about our sinfulness. Avoiding confession not only ignores the seriousness of sin, it ignores the very character of God. If we ignore who God is, and we ignore who we are in comparison to God, then the very integrity of our worship lies in serious jeopardy.

And that's exactly what was at stake in Zechariah's vision. Satan knew that if the priesthood was tarnished, if God's people were tarnished, then so was their worship. Satan stood accusing the high priest because ultimately he wanted to take a shot at God's honor. Joshua stood silent, Zechariah watched silently, but God would not remain silent. "The LORD rebuke you Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?" In other words, "didn't I snatch my people out from exile?" And God did not bring his people back from Babylon just so that Satan could destroy them.

Yes, God's people had earned their exile. Yes, his people fell far short of the kingdom of priests that God intended them to be. But God still valued his priesthood, and he would not allow Joshua's unworthiness to keep him from bringing relief. Satan was silenced and could only watch in horror as Joshua got reinstated. Gone were the filthy rags of sin and corruption. Gone was the stench of unbelief and rebellion. Gone was the shame that hung around Joshua like sullied clothing. And these rags were replaced with rich, dignified, priestly garments. When no one else was able, God would protect the honor of his own worship. The same God who sat in judgment of a tarnished priesthood was also the God who stood in irresistible defense of his priesthood.

And as Zechariah's vision continued, things got even worse for the accuser. The dramatic priestly make-over was followed by a messianic prediction. "Listen up, everyone," said the angel of the LORD. "This is what the Lord Almighty says: This priesthood is merely symbolic of something yet to come. I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. I have set my stone with seven omniscient eyes. I will remove the sin of this land in a single day."

The entire Old Testament priesthood—with its sacrificial system—was merely a symbol of the one who was yet to come, and that one was Christ. Zechariah's vision ends with a promise that one day the accuser's defeat would be permanent. One day, the ultimate high priest would come and take over the role of representing the people before God. One day, the ultimate high priest would atone for the sins of the land in one perfect sacrifice. The reinstatement of Joshua, as encouraging as it would have been to Zechariah and his listeners, was only a glimpse of what the people could expect. One

day, God would send his own son to a cross, to cleanse his people, and to protect the integrity of his worship.

And it's that same sacrifice that purifies our worship. It's that same sacrifice that takes filthy rotten sinners like us and our broken, hypocritical worship, and gives it new integrity.

A couple years ago, a friend and I had the privilege of spending a weekend at a maximum security prison. This particular prison is home to the most severe criminals in the state. No one calls this prison home unless he's earned a lengthy sentence, which means most of the inmates are repeat offenders, aggravated rapists, or most commonly murderers.

After spending some time with the Warden, we found him to be a wonderfully hospitable man, but not surprisingly, he's also a man of very firm conviction. He runs his prison with the highest of standards and the strictest of enforcements. His motto is, "I'm as nice and you'll let me be, but I'm as mean as you make me." And boy does he mean it.

But I got to see a softer side of the Warden one afternoon as we sat around his dinner table. "Sometimes I worry about my salvation," he said. "I look at the sin in my own life, and I just can't believe that God would forgive someone like me." I'll never forget how my friend responded to the Warden's sudden self-disclosure. "You know, Warden," he said, "It's an amazing thing to consider that the God who judges us, is the same God who defends us." I don't know how comforting the Warden found these words, but my friend hit the nail on the head, and perhaps he had Zechariah 3 in mind.

The God who judges us is the same God who defends us...the God who sits at the judge's bench is the same God who silenced the prosecution and took the sentence upon himself. When we confess our sins we are merely letting go of the filthy robes of our own righteousness and being clothed with the righteousness of Christ. Churches that don't do confession are missing the chance to proclaim the most wonderful news that humanity has ever known. The confession of sin is followed by the best news we could ever receive...the assurance of pardon. Once we are assured that our sins are forgiven, that we have been clothed with the righteousness of Christ; then we can bring our God the honor and the glory he deserves; then we can worship with integrity.

There's one other thing going on in this vision that deserves our attention. After Joshua gets reinstated, he receives a charge from the LORD. "If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here." Joshua's forgiveness was entirely a gift of grace. Joshua's reinstatement was entirely a gift of grace. But this incredible grace was not without responsibility. Joshua was also charged to live a life that reflected the renewed identity that he had been given.

And Christian liturgies have been following this pattern for many years. First we are called to confess our sins, then we respond in a prayer of confession, then we hear God's grace proclaimed in the assurance of pardon, and then we read God's law. We read God's law as a reminder of what God has called us to be. Part of worshipping with integrity is striving after a lifestyle that conforms to God's law, a lifestyle of gratitude for the grace we have received.

When we gather in divinely centered worship, it is only fitting that we are reminded of the ultimate rags to riches Cinderella story...our own. It's only fitting that we remember who we are, remember who God is, confess our shortcomings and hear the good news of grace calling us to be more than we already are. God has defended his honor. He has clothed us with the righteousness of Christ so that we might forever worship him with integrity.

Following the Shepherds:
Luke 2:1-20

Darrin Compagner

Ah, the long and lonely hours of the one who has to keep watch at night.

There you are, a shepherd, keeping watch over flocks by night. The other shepherds have wrapped themselves in cloaks and wool blankets, trying to get some shut-eye in their makeshift beds. And the sheep are scattered about. Most sleeping, a few wandering about for a bit of midnight munching.

Ah, but not you. It's your turn to keep watch, to keep a wary eye out for the occasional predator, to make sure none of the sheep wander off. But mostly, to just try and stay awake, to stay alert. In a couple hours you can wake the next shepherd and get some sleep. But not now...now just the waiting, the keeping watch.

Perhaps words from the Psalmist come to your mind:

My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises (Ps. 119:147-148).

Not a bad way to pass these next few hours, meditating on the promises of God.

You look up at the stars...the stars. Of, course, your great-great...grandfather Abraham had stood under these same stars and God had made promises to him:

He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be a great nation, that he would bless him, and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. Amazing promises. And how odd, how funny that God would make this promise to Abraham, an old, old man with an old, old wife unable to have kids. It didn't look

very promising. And yet, after much waiting, God had done it. A son had been born. A miracle birth! And this is your story; without God's promise you and your people, the Jews, wouldn't exist. But here you are...and you wonder about those old promises to Abraham...

Off to your left you hear a noise...just one of your fellow-shepherds stirring in his sleep.

Shepherds...of course, you remember, God had made promises to another shepherd, and he had become a king! David, the greatest king Israel had ever had, he had been a shepherd as a boy, too, and on these same fields. Probably he had meditated on God's promises while trying to stay awake, just like you. And God had promised that another king, one of David's descendants would come someday.

As was written in Isaiah the prophet:

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:7)

And you wonder about this old, old promise...

And the prophet Micah had foretold that this king, the promised Messiah, would be born in the little town of Bethlehem!

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."
(Micah 5:2)

Bethlehem...There it lies in front of you. A quiet little town of no significance. You see just a few lingering lights on, surely everyone's been tucked into bed by now. Hard to believe anything exciting could come from there...but there was the promise...you wonder about that promise...

You catch yourself nearly drifting off. How hard to stay alert on these long nights. How long till your watch is over? How long till all these promises would come true?

Some day. Someday, you think, Messiah will come and will make everything right. Someday the new king of David, would come,

and all the nations would be blessed by it. Someday, but for now, just the waiting, trying to stay awake, trying to stay alert, the hoping, the wondering...keeping watch by night...

Are we there with them? With these poor shepherds, waiting, hoping. They hope, no doubt, for big things from God. For promises to come true. Promises of hope and a future, of protection and healing and forgiveness.

And so do we. Don't we want big things from God? Don't we still long for his promises to come true? We have the Bible, so full of rich and wonderful promises from God. And yet...well when we look around us, those promises seem...unfulfilled at best, hopeless at worst...things don't always look very promising...

Perhaps we'd rather not think about it, but its true. Even now, even on Christmas day, there's a lot of hurt still lingering around. Many of us miss loved ones deeply, especially this time of year. Again this year, Sarah and I will gather with her mother, our siblings and our nephews. And there will be one painfully empty chair. Sarah's dad passed away several years ago now, and each year we feel it again. Especially now, especially when we would so love to see our son sit on his grandpa's lap and rip open a Christmas present. We have these promises of God, promises of comfort for those who mourn, promises that death is not the end, promises that those who die in the Lord will rise on the last day...we cherish these promises...and yet, for now, we wait. We hope. We keep watch.

And of course, we're not alone. This whole world is still in waiting. There's so much that's just not the way it's supposed to be. There's so much that is unjust, so many suffering from sickness and disease, that is painful, that seems all wrong. And so, like the shepherds, if we don't give up and lose hope altogether, we're left waiting, and wondering. We're left keeping watch.

Let's go back to those fields, and follow that simple shepherd, fighting sleep, late into that dark night...

“And an angel of the Lord appeared to them.” Well if you're that shepherd you're awake now! And all your fellow shepherds squinting as they turn to look are waking up, too, though no doubt wondering if they were dreaming... and something more like a nightmare for they were “sore afraid.”

The darkness and quiet of the night is shattered by the brilliant glory of the Lord. The angel voice with its ringing message:

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

The town of David, a Savior, the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, born! Born! The long-awaited birth! Great joy for all the people! What news, what amazing news!

And then the whole army host of angels appears and their message is one of triumph – celebration on heaven and peace and blessing on earth! Amazing! Wonderful! Surely their hearts rejoiced!

And yet in all the angel's announcement surely one detail would have struck you as very odd: amidst all that talk of a joyful birth, a savior, Glory to God and peace on earth...did the angel really say, “lying in a manger?” In a feed trough? A glorified doggy dish? Is this a joke? The great promised king to rule the nations and fulfill God's promises...in a manger?!

Well this is something to see indeed. And there go the shepherds, hurrying off to Bethlehem. The shepherd's joy compels them to go and see Jesus. To find the king who's first bed was a manger. And we can say more...Jesus, as we sang earlier, God of God, light of light eternal.

The very Word of God which had spoken galaxies into existence, now a speechless babe. The very God on whom all things depended for their life, now utterly dependant for his very life upon these inexperienced new parents. It is, as one writer, suggests, as if the whole universe has been turned inside out, flipped on its head. The biggest and most powerful thing in the universe, is now dwelling in the form of the lowest and weakest.

Behold, brothers and sisters, this is how our God has chosen to work. When God chooses to do something very big, its beginning is very, very small. A baby in a manger. John Calvin suggested that when we imagine this baby in the manger we do not find the God we want – for we tend to want a God who will do big things – powerful magic, and fireworks displays – to wow us and overwhelm us with wonders.

But God often chooses to work in a different way, a surprising way, through things very simple and lowly. Consider the sermons we've heard in your lifetime. They've been spoken by very human people with flaws and failings. They've had nothing but a bunch of words, maybe some illustrations and stories, but words, to communicate God's message to us. This is how God chooses to work among us? Or consider the sacraments we celebrate – baptism just a bit of water and some words, or the Lord's Supper – just a bite of bread and a sip from a cup – this is how God presents himself to us? Wouldn't we prefer magic shows with mountains melting and the stars swirling through the sky?

But, no, a baby in a manger. As Calvin says, this is the way that God has chosen to communicate himself to us. This little baby is the fulfillment of many of God's big promises.

As the apostle Paul says...

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. (2 Corinthians 1:20)

Many big promises of the past are fulfilled in Christ's birth, and in Christ we have promise of an even more glorious future. As if becoming a baby were not humbling enough, this Jesus will humble himself even further, to death, even death on a cross. Here too, God is pleased to work through that which is humble – first a lowly birth, then a lowly death. But in the mystery of God, the Christ who lowered himself in his birth, is exalted in his death, and raised from the dead. And this becomes God's greatest promise for our future that is “Yes” in Christ. That in his death, we may have life. That because he died, we may live.

This is why, though we grieve those who die, those we miss so much especially this time of year, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Christ is our hope. His resurrection, a promise of our own if we give ourselves to him.

God has begun something very big indeed with this little baby in the manger. Like the shepherds gathering around, we marvel and we rejoice at what God is doing.

Let's follow these shepherds one step father. They go to see the babe in the manger, but the story doesn't end there.

Luke tells us that they:

“spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” [The shepherds] “glorified and praised God for all the things they had seen and heard.”

Off they run, telling anyone who will listen the good news of great joy because they know it’s not just for them, it is like the angel said, for all people.

The other day I saw online a video of a news report on a child-prodigy artist. The story told of a 12-year old girl who painted these amazing scenes. They showed a bunch of her paintings, and I mean, if you saw some of these hanging up in a fancy art museum next to Monets and Rembrandts, you wouldn't think them terribly out of place. They're incredible. Well I see this story as I'm sitting alone in the library and my first instinct is to look around for someone I know. They've got to see this. This is incredible.

There's no one around. But, they have this handy-dandy feature on the website that says “Email this.” Perfect. I click that button and type in my wife's email address and include a quick message saying, **“You've got to check this out, it's amazing.”**

That impulse, that gut-reaction that we all have, that good news is to be shared, must have been at the heart of the shepherds reaction. Sure they've got sheep to get back to. Sure they're just shepherds and who are shepherds to be the bearers of such amazing news? But they don't hold back. This is too good. They praise God and look for others to share the good news with. God is faithful to his promises! God is doing something big!

We've followed the shepherds in their keeping watch in the fields, we've followed the shepherds to the baby in the manger and their great joy. So let's follow the shepherds, too, in their example here. We do need time like Mary to just ponder and wonder about it all in the quiet of our hearts. And yes, we have our own sheep to get back to, our daily tasks and busy lives. And, of course, who are we, shy, broken, hurting, flawed people that we are to be bearers of good news? But this is just too good. This is too good of news to keep to ourselves.

Of all that can be said about techniques and strategies and theology of evangelism, of witnessing to the story of Jesus, perhaps the most basic and important is this: what God has done for us, we wish and hope he will do for others. The joy the shepherd's experienced they eagerly shared with others. The joy of Christ, the joy of Christmas, is ours to share. Not out of guilt, not first out of duty, and not ever out of fear. Let us tell the story of Jesus because it is the greatest story we know, and we long for others to know the same joy, peace, and hope for new life that we have received.

This is the story of Christmas. A story of a God who makes promises, and a God who keeps his Word. Following the shepherds, we wonder, and wait, and watch...

A story of a God who brings good news of great joy. A God who surprises us by doing mighty things through very humble means. Following the shepherds, we rejoice and glorify God.

It is a story of a God who does such great things that we can't wait to tell others. Not because we are so great, but because God is so great. Following the shepherds, we spread the story...

Our savior is born! Glory to God in the Highest!