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http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu
This past fall Chivas Brothers, makers of one of Scotland’s premier blended whiskies, carried out an advertising campaign on American television. A sixty-second video spot commended to viewers a code of conduct summed up as “chivalry,” with the pun on “Chivas” cleverly intended. Seemingly targeted to affluent, white males in their late twenties amid Wall Street’s numerous scandals, the ad features a middle-brow British voice intoning, “Millions of people. Everyone out for themselves. Can this be the only way? No!” These words are accompanied visually by a scene of a vast crowd in dark business suits jostling each other as they walk in lockstep and shoulder to shoulder. The camera finally focuses on one tall young man who abruptly stops in his tracks, turns around, and walks purposefully in the opposite direction, alone against the tide of his cohorts. The voice goes on to toast “honor,” “gallantry,” “doing the right thing,” and keeping one’s word and talking straight, all of which “set certain men apart,” before finally urging viewers to “live with chivalry.” The voice-over message is accompanied by a quickly moving video collage showing young, athletic, adult males, almost all white, carrying women on their backs through mud, pushing a bloke’s stalled sports car, and helping a fallen opponent up from the soccer field. Such modest sacrifices are also paired with images of freedom and power: the camaraderie of guys skydiving, horseback riding in the surf, and exuberantly jumping off piers into the water, before concluding with a scene of men in tuxedos strolling with aplomb into an elegant reception for the young and the beautiful. The official Chivas Web site also gives a fuller “manifesto” celebrating a “resistance movement” that will reinstate “the almost forgotten art of chivalry” focusing on “honesty,” “manners, etiquette and respect,” “giving a damn about others,” and, yes, even “holding doors for women, and for men.” Readers are quite literally called “to optimism and leaps of faith,” to chasing and sharing wealth, in short, to a “way of behaving that sets certain men apart from all others.”

Of course, it would be easy to see in such rhetoric a throwback to the “muscular Christianity” of early twentieth-century Christian colleges or to the Victorian-era icon of the “Christian gentleman,” both remythologized here for our postmodern world. With the manifesto’s talk of “gentleman warriors battling to preserve a different way of life” we may also hear more ominously an echo of the “crusader,” an almost stereotypical foil for predictable polemics against racism, sexism, and elitism. And despite all the talk of “honesty,” Chivas is after all trying to sell you its whisky by “branding” it to young men with style and verve. The visuals clearly help this message go down even more smoothly than words alone.

Still, in a time when “codes of conduct” are rarely inveighed or enforced anymore in our businesses, schools, and churches, not to mention the usual corridors of power, it is striking to find Chivas now urging on its would-be imbibers. Both the television ad and the Web site manifesto brim with everyday applications of the Golden Rule, and their rhetoric, both textual and visual, retrieves such classic Christian themes as election, calling, faith, fidelity, and freedom. We are further told that Chivas’s “spiritual home” is Strathisla, its 1786 distillery, flanked, appropriately for today’s consumers of spirituality, by two stone “pagodas” whose advertising hour has finally come. Despite the manifesto’s characterization of our time as “the Age of the Individual . . . when personal gain is worshipped above all else,” the television ad remains locked in “this Age” insofar as it too depicts the lone hero in his conversion moment when he turns around and begins to walk against the crowd. We are not given a clue as to what prompts or enables this conversion, and no adverse consequences are even contemplated for heroic deeds—only the high rewards of a good life. But the proffered bromides from the “ad men” at Chivas suggest that conversion and courage come by way of ethical exhortation—bolstered, to be sure, by a compelling video, if not by a shot of a great Scotch.

I do not want to dispute the contention of Chivas that our world needs young men and women who will go against the stream to do the right thing and just say no to heartless greed and cynicism. Nevertheless, in a fallen world controlled by market forces and secured by “enhanced interrogation techniques,” who among the young and the beautiful with all their stylish “chivalry” will be able to stand against such powers? If our recent experience with torture whistleblowers provides any evidence, the few who will stand are seemingly enabled to do so by wider communities of faith—and character.

Picture for a moment a crowd of people in business suits and uniforms representing the chain of military command responsible in varying degrees for the
facility, personnel, and interrogations at Abu Ghraib. Picture them all strolling en masse until one low-ranking specialist among them stops, turns around, and tries to tell the crowd to go in the opposite direction. If we follow the direct chain of military command at the time of the Abu Ghraib revelations (excluding the shadowy parallel chain of the CIA), we would have at its head President George W. Bush, and then descending to Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, Gen. John Abizaid, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, Maj. Gen. Barbara Fast, Maj. Gen. Walter Wojdakowski, under whom command divides into Military Intelligence and Military Police. Beginning with the former, command continues with Col. Thomas M. Pappas, Lt. Col. Stephen L. Jordan, Maj. David Price and Maj. Michael Thompson, Capt. Carolyn Wood, down to Specialist Arman Cruz and Specialist Roman Krol. Turning to the Military Police, command continues with Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, Lt. Col. Jerry Phillabaum, Maj. David W. Dinnena, Sgt. Maj. Mark Emerson, Capt. Donald J. Reese, First Lt. Lewis C. Raeder, First Sgt. Brian G. Lipinski, SFC Shanon K. Snider, SSG Ivan L. Frederick, SSG Santos Cardona, Sgt. Michael Smith, Sgt. Javal Davis, Corp. Charles Graner, Specialist Sabrina Harman, and Specialist Megan Ambuhl. At this point, and again excluding CIA command, we have a chain of at least thirty individuals. We may never know or be allowed to know who knew what and when, if anything, or who authorized what and when, if anything, in this long chain of command. We do know that some of these linked figures were reprimanded or court-martialed for the goings-on at Abu Ghraib. But the point here is that no one in this crowd ever blew the whistle. Not until we reach number 31, Specialist Joseph Darby, do we find an individual with the courage to reveal the abuses being committed at Abu Ghraib.2 His reward: Darby now lives under federal protection, with an assumed identity, in an undisclosed location, as a result of the death threats he received from his fellow Americans in his hometown of Cumberland, Maryland. Given the superiors that Darby was sworn to follow, and given the price he has had to pay for yanking on his chain of command, what prompted him, in the words of Chivas, to embark on a “way of behaving that sets certain men apart from all others”? The answer becomes even less obvious when we learn not only that medical personnel, whose Hippocratic oath enshrines something like a code of conduct, turned a blind eye to prisoner abuse, but that “a physician and

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2. For a chart indicating the chain of command, see http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2008/03/exclusive-wjpse-behind-abu-ghraib.
a psychiatrist helped to design, approve and monitor interrogations at Abu Ghraib, Iraq,” says Jeremy Hugh Baron. He continues: “The medical staff revived a detainee who collapsed unconscious; they then left and the abuse continued. Death certificates were falsified or delayed for months. There is little evidence that medical staff refused or reported such abuses.” Here, traditions against torture fostered by physicians and going back some two centuries to the European Enlightenment were inoperative in guiding medical practice, a situation also known to Nazi Germany.

In Darby’s case, the courage to challenge illegal and dehumanizing wrongdoing certainly did “set him apart,” but it did not spring from Chivas. It came through a conscience shaped by Jesus. As Steven H. Miles, MD, reports in his book *Oath Betrayed*, “Joseph Darby cited his Christian faith as the reason for slipping a disk with the Abu Ghraib photographs under the door to investigators.”

Similar testimony of Christian faith was recently documented by Eric Mount Jr. in *Theology Today* in the case of Lt. Col. V. Stuart Couch at Guantánamo. Couch, a Marine pilot and lawyer, was charged with prosecuting Mohamedou Ould Slahi, who was incarcerated at Guantánamo as a prisoner of “highest value.” Over time, Couch discovered that Slahi was in the “varsity program,” or Special Interrogation Plan authorized by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, whose regimens included “isolation, extreme temperatures, beating, sexual humiliation, death threats,” and, additionally in Slahi’s case, a false report that his mother was going to be incarcerated at Guantánamo among hundreds of male prisoners. Given this uncovered information indicating the use of torture, Couch became convinced that Slahi’s extracted testimony could not be introduced into a court of law. Couch, who had come to Christian faith in college thanks to the evangelical witness of the woman who became his wife, was deeply conflicted by his fervent patriotic desire to prosecute terrorists on the one hand and by his equally patriotic commitment to the rule of law and a Christian understanding of human dignity on the other. In May 2004, during a baptismal service at an Episcopal church in Falls Church, Virginia, when the priest asked the congregation if they would respect the dignity of every human being, Couch finally understood what he must do. After confronting

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chief prosecutor Col. Bob Swann with evidence of Slahi’s torture, Couch was immediately reassigned. Other superiors made sure Couch’s concerns did not reach the Pentagon’s general counsel, and he was also blocked from appearing before the House Judiciary Committee.5

Once again, another warrior turns around and acts in a way “that sets certain men apart from all others.” Couch’s story is not the story of a single, quirky individual randomly turning and walking alone against the “group think” of the anonymous crowd. It is the story of one whose conscience and character were shaped by high ideals inculcated by the Marine Corps, by his law school professors, by his family, and, decisively in this instance, by the baptismal liturgy of the church. When Couch turned to do the “right thing,” he did so in a tradition in which a Christian must reckon with the image of God in his or her treatment of every human being. As Christians, we can never underestimate what is proclaimed and enacted in baptism. In the power of the Word of God enlivened by the Holy Spirit, water is not as weak as is sometimes alleged! Apparently, no other spirit can bolster our courage or show us our duty more than the One invoked over the water of baptism.

If the world is to remain or become recognizably human, if we are to rediscover the Golden Rule in our time, Jesus and his everyday disciples remain a better bet than all the chivalry Chivas can muster. Only this rejected and vindicated One, who turned from the path of success to the path of the cross, can sustain us in doing to others what we would have them do to us. This is both a costly and a more excellent way, as the witness of Specialist Joseph Darby and Lt. Col. Stuart Couch make clear. Here social etiquette gave way to Christian ethics. Mercifully, we are not alone in our daily battles “to do the right thing.” We do not have to be forever in lockstep with “this Age.” Jesus Christ has valiantly come all the way down to accompany us on an ever new path we cannot always know in advance. To him we can ever lift our hearts and cups, with gratitude for all the saints, both known and unknown, who still turn and do the right thing. Thanks be to God!

Abstract: The Lord’s Supper, as a God-given means of grace, has implications for the church’s public witness. Rather than separate bodies from souls, and the secular from the sacred, the Supper holds together union with the heavenly Christ and communion with earthly bodies. Moreover, while union with Christ at the Supper is God’s gift, this gift exposes the sinful inadequacy of the church’s witness. In the eschatological tension between present gift and future promise, the Supper enacts the church’s identity as a people empowered to live into God’s promise in its public life, while avoiding both triumphalism and mere capitulation to social-political trends.

Questions about the political presence of the church are often framed in terms like these: Is there a distinctively Christian way to enter the public arena? Is there a need for a translation to “universal, rather than religion-specific, values,” to use the words of President Barack Obama? While one may agree with Obama that political positions should be argued on public terms, there are at least two questions that Obama’s comments raise for the American church: first, how does one avoid having the substance of Christian convictions “lost in the translation” into public discourse? Second, and more potent, is the American church even willing to use its “religion-specific” resources for thinking about public policy, or does the church assume that its voice is essentially apolitical, so that one is a Christian in church and simply an American in the public square?

For the church to avoid being “conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2) in its political presence, I believe it needs to draw on its own “religion-specific” sense of its own identity. Before the church seeks to speak the tongue of public policy,
it needs to be clear about its own convictions. Only then will the church know how to bear witness to the gospel and how to dissent from political trends.

In this context, reflecting on the Lord’s Supper can illuminate our understanding of the church’s identity and witness—an identity with an irreducible public character. The Lord’s Supper, as God’s means of grace to the church, holds forth and enacts the core identity of the church. In the Lord’s Supper, the church is nourished in its union with Christ by the Holy Spirit, participating in the sentness of the Son to love a world in great need.

In the first part of this essay, I explore how the Lord’s Supper holds together a partaking of the heavenly Christ and communion within the earthly body of Christ. The sign-act of the Lord’s Supper fuses mystical union with horizontal love and service, avoiding the dangers of a church that isolates one side from the other. Second, I explore how the church, as a sinful community that is often guilty of abuse, can come to see its true identity in God’s gift, actively awaiting fulfillment in God’s promise. Living between gift and promise, the church can avoid triumphalism in public life yet also be challenged to dissent from prevailing political forces in its public witness.

**Bringing Together Heaven and Earth**

While disagreements abound among Christians on the Lord’s Supper, most Christian communions agree that Jesus Christ himself is the gift that is received in the eucharistic meal. The Heidelberg Catechism, as an irenic sixteenth-century confession, provides an example of how this language gets incorporated into core Protestant documents. The catechism assures us that believers “share in the true body and blood of Christ.” It contains the usual qualifications for Reformed Protestants, of course. This is done “through the Holy Spirit’s work” when the Supper is received in faith. Yet when this happens, the Supper acts as a sign that makes present the signified, namely, the body and blood of Christ. When the catechism considers what it means to partake of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper, it speaks about receiving pardon from the cross and then moves to make an emphatic point: “It means to be united more and more to his blessed body by the Holy Spirit dwelling both in Christ and in us that, although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are nevertheless flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, always living and being governed by one Spirit, as the members of our bodies are governed by one soul.”

Note that the catechism moves seamlessly from talk of union to Christ’s body “in heaven” to the body of Christ on earth, a body “governed by one
The Lord’s Supper and the Church’s Public Witness

Spirit.” The Supper is not just about hearts and souls. It is about physical bread and wine; it is about being united to other flesh-and-blood believers, whom I did not choose (and may not even like). The Supper does not take place, then, in a purely nonmaterial realm. The Supper gives Christ’s body in heaven to Christ’s body, the church, on earth; it is at once a heavenly and an earthly, physical act. This connection is made directly from the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing [κοινόνια] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing [κοινόνια] in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

In the Lord’s Supper, God’s reconciliation with humanity and our reconciliation with one another are brought together in one sign-act. The curtain of the sacred and the secular, the soul and the body, the private and the public, is torn asunder. Thus, attempts to replace the curtain between sacred and secular will lead in one of two directions: either turning our back on the embodied, public character of our reconciliation with one another or turning our back on Jesus Christ, who is given in the sacrament and is the source of our Christian identity through the Spirit.

For those of us who seek to revive the social witness of the church, it is tempting for Jesus Christ as a gift in the Supper to be eclipsed in favor of a particular social agenda. Rather than receiving Christ in the Supper, the Supper can become little more than a huddle before a predetermined game plan. In his book The Secret Message of Jesus, Brian McLaren presents a needed call to recover the political dimensions of the church’s identity—to participate in God’s nonviolent and inclusive kingdom. But at times in McLaren’s account, God’s action in Christ can become overshadowed by our own acts of commitment. In his words, the Eucharist is a meal of “regular recommitment where people say, by gathering around a table and sharing in bread and wine, that they are continuing Jesus’ tradition of gathering in an inclusive community. ‘I’m still in,’ they’re saying. ‘My heart is still in this mission and dream. I’m still committed.’”

While our own commitment to the kingdom is imperative, Jesus Christ is neither received nor shared when our own acts of commitment become the “signified” of the Supper. We become the lead actors, and Jesus becomes the one who endorses our mission. While this vision may be effective at

mobilizing persons for a preestablished social vision, it is unclear how—in the long run—this community could be a countercultural community willing to dissent from the powers of the age. If the church is simply a group of people who try to motivate each other to do kingdom activities, then it is simply a group of like-minded individuals. Yet in the 1 Corinthians 10 vision of the Lord’s Supper, we are not united to one another because we share the same cause—like Greenpeace or Amnesty International—but because we share the same Christ. Turning our back on Jesus Christ as the gift of the Supper leaves us with shaky grounds for the forming of a countercultural Christian identity.

Yet there is no less danger in turning the other direction and focusing exclusively on a purely “spiritual” Christ—a Christ given in the Eucharist that is for souls but not for Christ’s body on earth. Just as early Christians faced the temptation of “disembodied” views of Christ in Gnosticism, so it is also a temptation today to see the reception of Christ in the Supper as a purely “mystical” act, one that does not implicate bodies and the earthy stuff of our world.

In his compelling book *Torture and Eucharist*, William Cavanaugh gives an account of how Roman Catholic bishops initially supported the brutal Pinochet regime of torture and oppression in Chile in the 1970s. According to Cavanaugh, the failure of the Roman Catholic Church to dissent was not just a pragmatic problem but a theological one. Through groups like Catholic Action, the movement of “social Catholicism” was spread, which empowered laity to participate in the kingdom, but it was a kingdom not of this world, one severed from politics. Catholic Action was seeking to present a new, modern Catholic faith—one that met the spiritual needs of people but did not meddle in the realm of politics. For Roman Catholics at the time, this was seen as an enlightened position, one that moved away from the past abuses of “Christendom.” Yet Cavanaugh argues that in making these dichotomies, Catholic Action helped the church turn over the bodies of Chileans to the nation-state, while Catholicism ministered only to souls.

Thus, when torture and disappearances took place under the Pinochet regime, the Roman Catholic hierarchy sought to reason with the nation-state but refused to withdraw its support. The mystical body of Christ, it said, transcends political affiliation; by refusing to break ties with the Pinochet regime, perhaps the church could have an influence for good. The Eucharist was seen as that which could unite torturer and victim, oppressor and oppressed, because both were part of the mystical body of Christ. Thus, they believed that religion goes deeper than politics but is also on a completely different plane from politics.
The concrete implication of this theology was that the Roman Catholic Church in Chile ceased to be a locus of discernment and dissent against the ruling authorities of the age. Sharply dichotomizing a political realm from a spiritual realm meant that the spiritual realm needed to do its best not to intrude into politics, including providing refuge to political dissenters. Cavanaugh writes:

In the early days of the military regime, Chile was driven indoors. Behind some doors, champagne corks popped; behind others, there was only an anxious silence. In the streets the military patrols sped by on their hungry search for enemies. Those labeled as enemies faced a terrible dilemma. They could stay at home and await capture, or they could attempt to flee, a choice which would take them out into the streets ruled by the regime.\(^2\)

Cavanaugh writes about political dissenters who show up at the doorstep of priests in Santiago. “They were received, but they were not allowed to stay,” Cavanaugh says. Later that evening as the preparations for the Mass were being made, a seminarian spoke up. “He said Christ had been turned away at the door of the residence,” Cavanaugh recounts. “Communion in the body of Christ had already been denied in the denial of the two seeking asylum.”\(^3\) The mystical Christ—isolated from the body of Christ on earth—had become like a phantasm.

In turning their backs on the social and political presence of the body of Christ to face the mystical Christ alone, they had torn Christ apart. The seminarian recognized that the Christ of 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 must not be torn from the Christ of Matthew 25:31–46—Christ in the bread and wine, and Christ in the hungry and the prisoner. The body of Christ is heavenly, but the body of Christ is also earthly—in the earthly community that receives the Supper and the embodied ones in need whom this community is called to serve. The earthly body of Christ sees Christ in “the least of these” and expectantly prays for God’s “kingdom [to] come on earth as it is in heaven.”

At this point, we should consider an objection to my account. Congregations around the world celebrate the Lord’s Supper together, yet we still struggle with division, with failure in our attempts to be the body of Christ. The church is made up of sinners; the Lord’s Supper doesn’t seem magically to solve our problems and lead us into being a Christ-centered, countercultural community in the world. Why am I advocating that we pay attention to the Lord’s Supper?

These questions lead us to the final part of this essay. The church is the body of Christ on earth, but saying “church” is not the same as saying “Christ.” The

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3. Ibid.
church receives its true identity from God, but this identity is not yet fully formed, and the church commits many offenses in the meantime. What does it look like for a sinful church to be living into its God-given identity as the body of Christ? This question leads us to the biblical images of gift and promise.

**Living between Gift and Promise**

The eschatological tension of living between gift and promise can become apparent by considering the Pauline language of “union with Christ.” In Romans 6, Paul speaks about the baptized being “united with him in a death like his” as well as being “united with him in a resurrection like his.” The Christian life itself is a matter of dying “with Christ” and coming alive again “to God.”

Note that God is the key actor in this process of union with Christ. People do not unite themselves to Christ—God unites people to Christ. Ephesians 2 makes this explicit: “God, who is rich in mercy . . . made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” This is an accomplished fact. Done. Finished. Thus salvation is by grace, “the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” Yet after asserting that we have already died and been raised with Christ, Paul urges his hearers to live into the promise of this reality, which is not yet fully consummated in the lives of the community. “So if you have been raised with Christ,” he says in Ephesians 3, “seek the things that are above, where Christ is.” Haven’t we already been raised with Christ? If so, why does this passage admonish us to “seek the things that are above”? A few verses later we are told to “put to death” our evil desires. But haven’t we already been united to Christ in his death?

These questions are very similar to the question of how the church can be Christ’s body yet be so full of selfishness, division, and injustice. In a sense, the community has already received the gift of union with Christ; it is already Christ’s body that has died to evil and lives “in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” The righteousness and unity of the church is not something the church manufactures; it is God’s gift. Yet, simultaneously, this is not just an accomplished fact but a future hope based on God’s promise. In the present state, according to Colossians, “your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.” Our identity in Christ is both a present gift and a future hope grounded in a divine promise.

The recognition of the gap between what the church is and what the church is called to in its true identity as given from God can help to avoid triumphalism.
and rigidity in its public witness. The church is a community of sinners, and members of the church have often been on the wrong side of history in their public witness—in supporting slavery, apartheid, sexism, and class privilege, for example. The affirmation of union with Christ as a gift is precisely what reveals the wrongheadedness of such approaches. In creating divisions and perpetuating injustice based on race, gender, and class, these Christians were seeking to deny the gift that is at the heart of their identity—that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). The recognition of the gift unveils our disobedience. Yet God’s promise is that we are not left to ourselves; we will be “revealed with him [Christ] in glory.” Our union with Christ will be consummated. This gives us hope to act and live into our God-given identity, in spite of our many failures.

The Lord’s Supper, as a meal that both points to and enacts Christian identity, lives into this tension between gift and promise. The Supper is a meal that nourishes us with the gift of union with Christ. In John 6, Jesus as “the bread of life” proclaims that “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (John 6:48, 56). But the Lord’s Supper also makes us even more hungry—hungry to live into God’s promise until Christ returns. “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes,” Paul says (1 Cor 11:26). The Supper makes us desire a promised future in Christ, hungry for the feasts of the kingdom Isaiah 25 prophesies, where “on this mountain the L ORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food[,] ... will swallow up death forever[,] . . . [and] will wipe away the tears from all faces.” This banquet imagery is taken up in the Gospels as a way to speak about the kingdom and in Revelation to speak about the final, promised end. Our meal at the Lord’s Supper is a gift we have received from God but also a promise that leads us to hunger and thirst for our identity in Christ, until he returns.

This longing for a “feast” is a particularly powerful image in our present moment, in which the gap between rich and poor has become great both nationally and internationally. Jeffrey Sachs is among the recent writers who have written proposals for addressing the needs of the world’s poor—the over a billion in the World Bank’s category of “extreme poverty,” with less than a dollar per day as income.4 Proposals like those of Sachs require the action of affluent nations and peoples to address world poverty. But as we rub up against

the costliness of this action amid an economic downturn, I wonder whether the
language of “universal values” can really lead us where we need to go. Indeed,
if the church’s own self-understanding on global poverty sticks to the terms of
public discourse, it may be betraying the pursuit of the God-given call rooted
in its identity.

Those who see their identity as the body of Christ, united to Christ as a
gift and trusting in God’s promise, can bring much to the table that persons
restricted to the language of the “public arena” cannot. This is a people hungry
for anticipations of a final, great banquet. The church’s identity as a feasting
and hungering community leads not just to handouts that keep the poor alive
but to a vision of mutuality and wholeness—where the last shall be first and all
shall feast together at the table. Rather than arguing for minimal amenities for
the poor on the basis of guilt, this eucharistic vision is one that seeks to include
the outsider for the sake of the conviviality and enjoyment of the banquet. In a
eucharistic vision, we approach those in need not out of pity but because cloth-
ing the naked and visiting the prisoner is tied up with our identity in Christ.
“Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,
you did it to me” (Matt 25:40). In opposing the forces that continue to perpetu-
ate injustice, we are not making an idealistic attempt to force the reign of God
upon the earth. Rather, we are simply living into our true identity in Christ.

In the Supper we receive our identity as a community united to Jesus Christ
in heaven to be the body of Christ on earth—a community sent into the world
to love embodied persons in need. We gratefully receive this identity as a gift.
Yet this gift also reveals our own sinful acts of injustice and division, our sinful
refusal to enter into reconciled oneness in Jesus Christ. In light of this recogni-
tion, the church can avoid triumphalism, always aware of her shortcomings in
light of the gift of union with Christ received in the Supper. But this gift also
points to our true identity in Christ as recipients of God’s promise to consum-
mate the union and communion anticipated in the Supper. In active trust in
God’s promise, the church, in its public witness, is called to anticipate the final
banquet: always hoping, always feasting, yet always dissenting from the pow-
ers of the age until that final feasting-day arrives. Come, Lord Jesus!
Abstract: Some years before his death Søren Kierkegaard wrote a number of theological treatises on Holy Communion. In these texts he presented a view of the Eucharist that joins his existentialist emphasis with classical Christian doctrines in a way that provides fresh insight into this Christian sacrament. In Communion, the paradox of eternity-in-time is embodied in bread and wine through which communicants are made one with God-in-time. Kierkegaard seemed to understand Communion as a cure for the existential angst of the individual communicant, but this cure always remains an absurdity to outside observers.

Søren Kierkegaard’s (1813–1855) writings about Holy Communion have received surprisingly little attention from scholars. The reason may be that his Communion discourses do not seem to contain anything of philosophical value but rather are more theologically oriented. Especially given that his understanding of Christian spirituality is sometimes seen as hopelessly grim and even suicidal, it is no wonder that his spiritual advice has attracted very few adherents. However, if one reads Kierkegaard’s writings on Communion,
it is somewhat surprising that his ideas have been so completely forgotten. In many ways, his treatment of the subject contains several elements of lasting influence for the church today.

The purpose of this article is to examine different aspects of Kierkegaard’s understanding of Communion as the foundation for a spiritual life. This idea may seem strange if Kierkegaard is regarded as a severe critic of organized religion, which unquestionably he was, especially in his later life. However, shortly before and during his late “Attack upon Christendom” Kierkegaard produced a number of discourses on Communion (known as *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*), which offer rich and profound treatment of Holy Communion.\(^2\)

In Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen, worshipers were able to attend a voluntary eucharistic service on Fridays in addition to the regular Sunday service. Friday service was not a full Mass; it consisted only of confession and the Eucharist. What caught Kierkegaard’s interest about these Friday night services was the fact that they were voluntary. On Sundays, everyone was seen going to church (basically every decent citizen went to church on Sundays), but if a person was seen walking in the streets of Copenhagen on a Friday evening, no one could possibly know that the person was going to attend the Eucharist. This made the Friday service more inward, because the intention of the person was known only to God (*KW* 17:269; *SV* 10:276). This perspective fits well with Kierkegaard’s general emphasis on inwardness.

Kierkegaard stressed that his discourses were not sermons; they do not impress “doctrinally” but rather were meant to lead the listener to private and secret confrontation with God. Despite this rhetorical caveat, Kierkegaard used classical doctrines creatively in his discourses. For him, the Communion table is not the right place “to speak about God” because God himself is present in person there (*KW* 17:271; *SV* 10:278). Of the twelve discourses, at least two or three were actually delivered by Kierkegaard himself during the Friday night service.

I will first discuss briefly Kierkegaard’s criticisms of the abuse of the Eucharist. Then I will consider his affirmation of classical Christian doctrines.

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as embodied in eucharistic practices. Finally, I will make some remarks about how Kierkegaard joined philosophical and existential themes to classical doctrinal claims regarding the meaning of Communion.

**Criticisms**

In nineteenth-century largely Lutheran Denmark, people usually attended Communion only once or twice a year. Kierkegaard was no exception. According to church records from 1838 to 1852, Kierkegaard received Communion twice a year, usually close to or on August 9, the date of his father’s death. Kierkegaard’s last recorded Communion took place in 1852, three years before his own death.3 A well-known incident took place at Kierkegaard’s deathbed, when he was offered Communion by his good friend, Pastor Emil Boesen. Severe critic of Christendom that he was at the time, Kierkegaard said he would accept Communion from a layperson but not from a priest. When this was impossible, he died without receiving Communion.

The previous year, in December 1854, Kierkegaard had called for a boycott of public worship in the Church of Denmark. After his withdrawal from public life, he wrote a piece reiterating the opportunities for abuse of Communion as well as for its correct use, if only through negation:

> Every man’s a thief in his business. . . . As for religion—well, really his religion is this: Every man’s a thief in his business. . . . So two or four times a year . . . this man puts on his best clothes and goes to communion. Up comes a priest, a priest (like those that jump up out of a snuffbox when one touches a spring) who jumps up whenever he sees a large offering. And thereupon the priest celebrates the Eucharist, from which the businessman, or rather both businessmen (both the priest and solid citizen), return home to their customary way of life, only that one of them (the priest) cannot be said to return home to his customary way of life, for in fact he had never left it, but rather had been functioning as a businessman. And this is what one dares to offer to God under the name of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the communion in Christ’s body and blood! (SV 14:246)4

Although Kierkegaard turned his criticisms to the Church of Denmark, he did not criticize the sacraments themselves but rather their abuse. Quoting Pascal, Kierkegaard claimed “Christianity . . . is a society of men who, with the help of

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a few sacraments, exempt themselves from the duty of loving God” (*JP* 5047; *Papirer* 11-1:A556). Commenting on the Lutheran confessional document, the Augsburg Confession, which states, “The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered” (art. 7), Kierkegaard claimed that although the doctrine is correct and the sacraments are correctly administered, it is easy to drop the first part of the definition, namely, the description of the Church as the communion of saints. If this is forgotten, we have “a communion of indifferent existences,” which is “really paganism” (*JP* 600; *Papirer* 10-4:A246).

**Affirmations**

In 1851, four years before his death, Kierkegaard considered his authorship as a journey from *Either/Or*, written under a pseudonym, through *Postscript*, which appeared as “edited” by him, ending “at the foot of the altar” (*KW* 22:5–6; *SV* 13:494). Why such a statement? What exactly did Kierkegaard think of Communion in a positive sense?

First and foremost, Communion is an event in which forgiveness of sins is given. This theme was closely linked to Communion through previous confession and absolution. Kierkegaard readily preached or wrote about the passages in the Bible that concerned forgiveness, such as Luke 7:47, “To Whom Little Is Forgiven, the Same Loveth Little” (*KW* 18:167; *SV* 12:271), and 1 Peter 4:8, “Love Shall Hide the Multitude of Sins” (*KW* 18:181; *SV* 12:281).

Communion itself is a concrete picture of God’s love. In principle, anyone can approach the Communion table, and no one is hindered or judged. Similarly, God does not judge anyone; judgment is “self-inflicted.” If someone does not accept God’s love, the person has only himself or herself to blame (*KW* 18:165–66, 173; *SV* 12:267, 275). From the individual’s point of view, everything starts from confession. The point of confession, however, is not to burden people with their sins but to “unburden” them. The purpose of confession is to help Christians lay aside their burdens (*KW* 17:287; *SV* 10:299). Kierkegaard gave examples of true confession in two of his discourses.

The first is about the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). While praying in the temple, the Pharisee saw the tax collector and was happy not to be like him. However, the tax collector did not see the Pharisee. He was turned inward and had insight only into his own wretchedness. The Pharisee gazed upward, but the tax collector cast his eyes downward. The story begins with the Pharisee standing near the altar, the tax collector standing far off; it
ends with the Pharisee standing far off and the tax collector near the altar. The
downcast gaze sees God, and “the downcast gaze is the uplifting of the heart”
\((KW\ 18:128;\ SV\ 11:265)\). The other discourse is on the woman who was a sin-
ner, who becomes \textit{annihilated} in the act of confession \((\text{Luke \ 7:36–50})\). She
forgets herself completely and rejects every disturbing thought. Although she
is present, “it is almost as if she were absent.” “She has forgotten herself in
her Saviour” \((KW\ 18:140;\ SV\ 11:277)\). The act of confession begins with an
insight that is transformed into a vision of God. The confessor goes beyond her
wretchedness to Christ.

In the Eucharist, forgiveness itself is based on the presence of Christ in the
bread and wine. According to Kierkegaard, “In and with the visible sign, he
gives you himself as a cover over your sins” \((KW\ 18:188;\ SV\ 12:290)\). Here
we touch on the issue of the mode of Christ’s presence in Communion. The
outward appearance of Communion is similar to Christ himself. Just as it was
difficult for Christ’s contemporaries to regard him as God, it is equally hard for
the participant to see the spiritual, inward essence of the Eucharist. Thus, true
reception requires faith. Consequently, Kierkegaard’s notion of contemporane-
ity finds its culmination in the Eucharist. The receiver of the sacrament becomes
a true contemporary of Christ, which as an idea offers an interesting interpreta-
tion of the Lutheran doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

But how is it that Communion enables forgiveness? The answer is amaz-
ingly classical—through substitutionary atonement:

\begin{quote}
What is the Redeemer but a substitute who puts himself completely in
your place and in mine, and what is the comfort of Redemption but that
the substitute, atoning, puts himself completely in your place and in mine!
Thus, when punitive justice here in this world or in judgment in the next
seeks a place where I, a sinner, stand with all my guilt, with my many
sins—it does not find me. I no longer stand in that place; I have left it to
someone else who stands in my place. I stand saved beside this other one,
beside him, my Redeemer, who put himself completely in my place—for
this accept my gratitude, Lord Jesus Christ. \((KW\ 18:123;\ SV\ 11:258;\ see
also\ KW\ 17:280;\ SV\ 10:290)\)
\end{quote}

In another words, Communion is about clothing oneself in Christ. Kierkegaard
used the classical metaphor of a mother hen covering her chicks. The chicks,
however, are still in mortal danger, although covered by the mother. When the
mother has given her life for the chicks, they are deprived of their hiding place.
Mortal creatures cover with life, but Christ covers with death, and Christ’s
death becomes the hiding place for the sinner that can never be taken from her. Christ, who had no place to lay his head in this world, has now become the hiding place for sinners (KW 18:181; SV 12:283). According to Kierkegaard, “From the pulpit it is essentially his life that is proclaimed, but at the Communion table it is his death” (KW 18:186; SV 12:288).

A third important theme is effectiveness of the Communion and the new life:

This is why the Lord’s Supper is called communion with him. It is not only the memory of him, it is not only as a pledge that you have communion with him, but it is the communion, this communion that you are to strive to preserve in your daily life by more and more living yourself out of yourself and living yourself into him, in his love, which hides a multitude of sins. (KW 18:188; SV 12:290)

This is the burning classical question: Which comes first? Is the effectiveness of Communion dependent on the internal state of the receiver? Or is there an independent and preexistent reality waiting for the communicant, which functions as the effective cause? According to Bernt Gustafsson, the outward effectiveness of Communion comes from the internal confession: what a person brings to the table, he or she also receives from the table. Although this interpretation finds some support from Kierkegaard’s text, it is, nevertheless, too narrow.

This is evident in another passage from his journals:

It is told that after his resurrection, Christ once came through locked doors into a room where his disciples were assembled. This picture has often been misused to show the zeal with which Christ seeks souls, that he even goes through locked doors (the indifferent or the hardened). But this is untrue. He stands at the door and knocks. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I shall come to him and sup with him and he with me. To be sure, the Eucharist is a visible event, these actual people kneel at the altar and each one receives the bread and the wine—but it still does not necessarily follow that Christ sups with every such person. No, only with him who hears Christ’s voice[,] . . . only with him who opens the door (the door of the heart, for the door of the Church stands open to all and can be opened only by the single individual himself). I shall go in to him (it certainly is true that in the Eucharist, following the invitation, “Come,” you come to Christ, but it is truly the Lord’s Supper only when Christ comes to you who sup with Christ), but Christ first sups with you, and only then do you sup with him. Grace is everything. (JP 3936; Papiroer 10-2:A50)

5. See Gustafsson, “Kierkegaard und das Abendmahl,” 317.
Naturally, Kierkegaard emphasizes inwardness (“Living thyself out of thyself” means subjective inwardness), but it is clearly not the person who is able to create such an inward state of repentance. The historical acts of Christ, his incarnation (KW 18:116–17; SV 11:253), suffering, and death, are the contents of the Eucharist, which either bring forth faith or harden the heart. Hence, the Eucharist has a christological foundation that is actualized in the words of the liturgy. The words function as a pledge; they are not only an outward symbol but also an effective means of grace. The sacrament establishes an actual communion with Christ. To be sure, the question of voluntarism in Kierkegaard is one of those perennial questions that cannot be settled here. Still, it can be noted that the Communion discourses offer valuable material for this discussion as well.

What about the grimness? Kierkegaard’s Discourses include a sermon that I consider one of the bleakest texts I have ever read:

Never has anyone been so fortunate that he could not become unfortunate, and never anyone so unfortunate that he could not become more unfortunate! I will remind myself that even if I should succeed in having all my wishes fulfilled, in having them erected in one building—that still no one, no one, will be able to guarantee to me that the whole building will not at the very same moment collapse upon me. . . .

Yes, in good days, in fair weather when good fortune smiles, then it does indeed seem as if we lived in association with one another, but I will call to my mind that no one can know when the news will come to me, the news of tragedy, or misery, or horror, news that along with the terror will also make me alone or make it evident how alone I am, as is every human being, will make me alone, abandoned by my nearest and dearest, misunderstood by my best friend, an object of anxiety that everyone shuns. (KW 17:255–56; SV 10:259)

This goes on for pages and pages. Fortunately, after pages of tragedy, misery, and horror, the tone changes:

Oh, there is indeed only one friend, one trustworthy friend in heaven and on earth, our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . No friend has ever been able to be more than faithful unto death, but he remained faithful in death—his death was indeed my salvation. And no friend can at most do more by his death than save another’s life, but he gave me life by his death; it was I who was dead, and his death gave me life. (KW 17:258; SV 10:261)

Christ drives out anxiety and bestows joy and blessing (KW 17:284; SV 10:297). Furthermore, faith does not rest on human powers. “We know very well that
fundamentally we are faithless and that at every moment and fundamentally it is you who are holding on to us” (KW 17:286; SV 10:299). While Kierkegaard sounds quite morbid in some of his Discourses, the overall tone is encouraging and positive.

The fourth important question is the communal character of Communion. Evidently, although Kierkegaard wrote for the church, his focus was on the individual: we stand before God not as a body but as individuals. The genuinely communal aspect of religious life is something that appears here and there but never actually comes to the fore. The communion of saints is subsequent to existing as an independent being. “You can be a worthy and contributing member only insofar as you in yourself and with yourself are assured of your reconciliation with God” (JP 450). The Eucharist, however, should contribute to genuine communal life, that is, to loving others.

Assimilations

Previous studies have ignored one significant aspect of Kierkegaard’s eucharistic theology. This deficit is substantial, since Kierkegaard makes a bold statement in his Discourses. For him, Communion is the place where the deep existential questions of the truth, the way, and the life are answered and where peace is found:

Since he [Christ] is the Truth, you do not find out from him what truth is and now are left to yourself, but you remain in the Truth only by remaining in him; since he is the Way, you do not find out from him the way you are to go and now, left to yourself, must go your way, but only by remaining in him do you remain on the way; since he is the Life, you do not have life handed over by him and now must shift for yourself, but you have life only by remaining in him—in this way he is also the hiding place. (KW 18:188; SV 12:290)

For Kierkegaard, Communion seemed to answer not only religious questions but existential questions as well; actually, existential questions are religious questions, and therefore existential questions are answered christologically. Kierkegaard’s description of the function of the Eucharist draws together both theological and philosophical reflection. In a way, the doctrine of the Eucharist forms the summa of his thinking.

But this is no cheap and easy answer, for the Eucharist is the paradox par excellence. G. E. Lessing’s famous discussion of the “ugly broad ditch” illustrates the impossibility of leaping from historical, contingent, and finite events
to universal meaning. All of this is more than familiar to the readers of Kierkegaard’s *Postscript*: eternity entering time, finitude meeting with the infinite, and so on. Interestingly, this is what takes place in the Eucharist. Receiving the (finite!) bread and the wine gives a solution to infinite existential questions. Thus, the receiving of the sacrament establishes an existential revolution. It joins finite and temporal human being to the life of the infinite and eternal God. For this reason, it is clear why Kierkegaard elevated Communion to the center of religious life. As he himself put it, “[At] the communion table you are closest to God” (*KW* 18:133; *SV* 11:269).

Yet this inward closeness is thus not something others can perceive. What the truth, the way, and the life mean is open only for a person seeking communion with God. The answers are communicated only to the individual, not to a wider audience. Likewise, the individual is not able to communicate these answers directly to others. Instead, he or she can only point to Communion as the source and utter the way of proper approach. Communion, and everything it signifies—forgiveness, communion with God and neighbor, joy and blessing—functions as an icon pointing beyond itself, while at the same time being the thing to which it refers.

### Concluding Remarks

Kierkegaard’s interpretation and reformulation of Lutheran eucharistic theology is interesting and creative, and it offers new ways to discuss the theme in a modern context. The uplifting style and sublime beauty of his texts and his ability to touch the deepest corners of the soul have created one of the most psychologically astute treatments of humankind’s interaction with the divine. This existential-aesthetic approach can also function as common ground in ecumenical dialogue. In principle, the members of all Christian communities can agree with Kierkegaard’s remarks about Communion. Last but not least, in pastoral work Kierkegaard’s insights into the human subject and existence have proven to have lasting value, of which his treatment of Holy Communion is a good but sadly neglected example.
"Hypocrites" is the term many people would use to describe those who appear committed to their religious beliefs while at worship but who act contrary to those beliefs upon leaving that arena. This behavioral shift is neither a new trend nor an unobserved one. It is what some modern scholars have termed the “Sunday-Monday gap.”¹ This term refers to the commonly occurring disconnection between one’s faith and one’s daily life, especially one’s work. That is, for many Christians (and religious people in general), it seems that the lessons acquired at church on Sunday “disappear” from their lives once the workweek begins—and not necessarily unintentionally.

We know this Sunday-Monday gap is not a new phenomenon, for it is discussed in the work of Søren Kierkegaard. While of course he does not use Kierkegaard’s *Purity of Heart* and the “Sunday-Monday Gap”

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the term “Sunday-Monday gap,” Kierkegaard does in fact appear to be one of the first writers explicitly to approach this problem in detail. As we shall see, in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard, through the mouth of his pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, attempts to provide specific reasons for why the Sunday-Monday gap occurs. Then in Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing, his first work following the Postscript, Kierkegaard, in his own voice, attempts to explain how to overcome it—namely, by adopting a confessional perspective.2

Johannes Climacus on the Sunday-Monday Gap

Kierkegaard felt that his fellow Christians had become complacent and had made Christianity “comfortable.” But while some modern writers’ primary concern is with alleviating the Sunday-Monday gap in the workplace, for Kierkegaard the issue is much broader. Kierkegaard sought to eliminate the Sunday-Monday gap in one’s everyday living and thereby, of course, also remove it from the workplace.

Most commonly, it seems that this “gap” can occur in two ways. First, the “gapper” may see the ethical demands pronounced on Sunday—such as to “love one’s neighbor”—as irrelevant to his weekday career. Second, he may see Sunday as the only appropriate day for spiritually connecting with God and thus ignore his relationship with God throughout the workweek. Unfortunately, as Kierkegaard noticed, these two types of gaps often occur in tandem. In other words, a spiritual disconnection typically entails an ethical one as well. Naturally, Kierkegaard thought that if the spiritual connection with God could be reestablished, so too might the ethical one.

Through the writing of the pseudonymous Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard first considers the matter of a Sunday-Monday gap. Anyone remotely familiar with Kierkegaard knows that the relationship between Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms is an intricate one. Sometimes they seem to speak for him, sometimes to speak against him, and sometimes to provide questions Kierkegaard feels he must answer later. I believe that this latter situation is what we find here. Although there are clear differences between Climacus and Kierkegaard, C. Stephen Evans says that Climacus, “more than any other pseudonym (except Anti-Climacus), seems to express views that lie at the core of Kierkegaard’s

2. All in-text notes, except where otherwise indicated, refer to Purity of Heart as found in Howard and Edna Hong’s edited and translated volume Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
own thought.”3 It must be noted, however, that in the portions of the Postscript under consideration here, Climacus is discussing Religiousness A. In the Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Climacus explains how to become a Christian, which involves moving from Religiousness A to Religiousness B. For simplicity’s sake, it is enough to say here that Religiousness A is non-Christian religiousness, but it is a type of God-dependent religiousness that provides the psychological and ethical foundation for movement into Religiousness B. Furthermore, “non-Christian” may be too strong. As Climacus explains, “Religiousness A can be present in paganism, and in Christianity it can be the religiousness of everyone who is not decisively Christian, whether baptized or not.”4 Religiousness B is “decisive” Christian religiousness. Though Religiousness A and Religiousness B are interconnected, for clarity’s sake, Climacus describes them separately.

In the portions of text relevant to our discussion, Climacus is explicating the most basic foundations of Religiousness A, and thus by association Religiousness B. First and foremost, an individual must obtain a relationship with God and an understanding of the importance of that relationship. This is possible only once the individual possesses the proper “conceptions,” or understandings, of himself and of God. Moreover, Climacus seems to feel that one’s relationship with God supervenes upon these conceptions. In good Lutheran fashion, through Climacus, Kierkegaard tells us that the essence of this relationship with God is a trust of God. And trust develops only after an individual accepts the self-conception that she is “capable of nothing” without God. But alongside an understanding of one’s inability develops an understanding of God as absolute and without whom nothing can be achieved. These correlative conceptions must be kept in mind “always.”5 Climacus explains what effect that God-conception should have on the religious individual:

The effect that a person’s conception of God . . . should have is that it transforms his entire existence in relation to it. . . . This takes place

3. C. Stephen Evans, Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), 8. Though the early days of Kierkegaard scholarship saw many wrongly equating Kierkegaard with all of his pseudonyms, Evans’s approach of finding Kierkegaard’s greatest similarities with Climacus and Anti-Climacus is now commonly accepted as correct. Some even equate the three. See Alastair Hannay, Kierkegaard (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 228 (equating Kierkegaard and Anti-Climacus) and 231 (equating Kierkegaard and Climacus). In my view, one must be particularly careful before adopting Hannay’s approach.
5. Ibid., 467.
slowly, but then finally he will feel absolutely captive in the absolute conception of God, because the absolute conception of God is not to have the absolute conception *en passant* but is to have the absolute conception at every moment.\(^6\)

In short, one’s conception of God is overwhelming. It enters into every aspect of one’s life. As such, for Climacus, this also means that there is no “time off” from acknowledging and cultivating one’s relationship with God. Once an individual accepts his complete dependence *on* God, he then realizes the necessity of trust and will thereby seek to maintain an interminable relationship *with* God.

Although the demand is “always” to think this way, Climacus realizes the difficulty of maintaining this mentality during the workweek:

> Last Sunday, the pastor said, “You must not put your trust in the world, and not in people, and not in yourself, but only in God, because a human being is himself capable of nothing. . . .” On Sunday it is understood terribly easily *in abstracto*, and on Mondays it is so very difficult to understand that it is this little and specific thing within the relative and concrete existence in which the individual has his daily life, in which the powerful one is tempted to forget humility and the lowly one to mistake relative modesty toward people of status for humility before God. . . .

> Then the pastor added, “We should always keep this in mind.” And we all understood it, because “always” is a magnificent word. It says everything at once and is so very easy to understand, but on the other hand always to do something is the most difficult thing of all, and it is extremely difficult on Monday afternoon at four o’clock to understand this “always” as applying to a mere half hour.\(^7\)

Regardless of the difficulty, Climacus refuses to minimize the demand that one’s relationship with and dependence on God should be recalled at all times. He notes this to be the case even when one is involved in leisurely activities, such as going to an amusement park.\(^8\)

Even though one’s relationship with God should not be forgotten, it often is. And when this happens, the opening of the Sunday-Monday gap becomes possible, if not probable. Having provided a general discussion as to the

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6. Ibid., 483.
7. Ibid., 467.
8. Ibid., 477. It should be noted that Climacus’s demand that one incessantly remembers one’s dependence on God does not lead him to quietism. Climacus argues (471) that if one adopts this approach, then the individual “will not have the opportunity to understand” his own weakness.
importance of the God-human relationship, Climacus now moves on to providing several specific reasons why the God-human relationship is forgotten on a daily basis. As I understand it, it seems that from Climacus’s perspective the problems generally develop from cognitive and/or volitional flaws on the part of the individual. Put another way, the Sunday-Monday gap occurs because the agent has a problem in her understanding, or in her desires, or in a little bit of both. The difficulties Climacus adverts to are also very common and should be recognizable to many.

The first problem he cites is mentioned in the above quotation: it is a volitional misunderstanding of the word “always.” The individual intellectually comprehends the meaning of “always,” but deep down inside he neither wants to admit that he understands the meaning nor wishes to satisfy its demands, particularly during the workweek.

A second causative factor in the Sunday-Monday gap is a cognitive one. And it is an all-too-common one in the modern world: it is a matter of pride. More specifically, it arises after we see our abilities and the products of our endeavors. We then attribute those talents and successes to ourselves alone, rather than to God. The person who adopts this perspective of course has little reason to keep the proper conceptions of self and God in mind. As Climacus astutely observes:

And so it goes, for six days of the week we are all capable of something. The king is capable of more than the prime minister. The witty journalist says: I will show so-and-so what I am capable of doing—namely, make him look ridiculous. The policeman says to the man dressed in a jacket: You very likely do not know what I am capable of doing—namely, arrest him. . . . We are all capable of something, and the king smiles at the prime minister’s capability, and the prime minister laughs at the journalist’s, and the journalist at the policeman’s, and the policeman at the blue collar worker’s, and the blue collar worker at the Saturday-woman’s—and on Sunday we all go to church . . . and hear the pastor declare that a human being is capable of nothing at all. 10

The third factor Climacus cites is the misplaced belief that by going to church on Sunday, people are relieved of their obligation to acknowledge God and his demands during the rest of the week. Instead of adhering to the demands of their faith, people would rather act “childishly”:

9. Cf. ibid., 471.
10. Ibid., 470.
It is a childish form of religiousness, for example, to receive permission once a week from God, as it were, to make merry all next week, and then in turn on the following Sunday request permission for the next week by going to church and hearing the pastor say: We must always keep in mind that a human being is capable of nothing at all. . . . In other words, by going to church once a week, all such religiousness emancipates itself from having the relationship with God present every day in everything. On Sunday, it obtains permission—not quite like the child, to make merry all week long . . . permission not to think anymore about God all week long.\textsuperscript{11}

It is not particularly clear whether this is a cognitive flaw or a volitional one. Climacus’s description intimates that it may be a bit of both. That is, some persons wrongly believe that Sunday observance is sufficient, and some others simply \textit{want} to believe this to be true.

The desire for peer approval (or, conversely, the fear of peer rejection) is Climacus’s fourth reason for the Sunday-Monday gap. It is a volitional weakness too commonly seen today—a reluctance to express one’s faith outwardly for fear of being criticized, ridiculed, and ostracized. According to Climacus, this fear is often generated and allowed to fester because of a lack of support from within the individual’s own faith community. Indeed, as he explains, “When the pastor says it [that one is capable of nothing at all] in church, we all understand it, and if someone wanted to try to express it existentially in the six days of the week and showed signs of it, all of us would be close to thinking: he is a lunatic.”\textsuperscript{12}

The fifth and final reason Climacus offers for the Sunday-Monday gap is a cognitive one. And this one too is frequently heard. Many falsely believe that what they are doing, whether their occupation or a leisure activity, is too insignificant to be of any relevance to God’s plans, and as such there is no reason to see a connection between their daily activities and their relationship with God. In fact, some believe that relating themselves and their activities to God is insulting to God. But, as noted, even the person visiting the amusement park is to maintain his relationship with God. Climacus hears such a person saying, “On the other hand, it never occurs to me to bring such trifles as going out to the amusement park into connection with the thought of God—indeed, to me it seems to be an insult to God, and I know that it does not occur to a single one of the many people I know, either.”\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 473. \\
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 469. \\
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 477. 
\end{flushright}
by asserting, “But the more unimportant something is, the more difficult it is to join the God-conception together with it. And yet it is right here that the relationship with God will be known.”

*Purity of Heart* as a Response to Climacus

As I see it, Kierkegaard responds to Climacus’s dilemma in *Purity of Heart*. In this first work after the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard, in his own voice, returns to the topics of daily living, occupation, and the Sunday-Monday gap.

Following the lead of Climacus in the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard immediately seeks to make clear that the cloistered life is not to be adopted: “You are not asked to withdraw from life, from an honorable occupation, from a happy domestic life” (137). The everyday life is fine, says Kierkegaard—so long as one maintains the appropriate “awareness.” Specifically, he asks, “In the course of your occupation, what is your frame of mind, how do you perform your work?” (139). More broadly, Kierkegaard asks, “Are you now living in such a way that you are aware of being a single individual and thereby aware of your eternal responsibility before God; are you living in such a way that this awareness can acquire the time and stillness and liberty of action to penetrate your life relationships?” (137).

But such a significant question begs a further question: How is this awareness—or, in Climacus’s language, how is the God-human relationship—to be maintained during one’s daily work? Here, as in all other social situations, Kierkegaard argues that one must maintain a *confessional* state of mind. Recall that the full title of *Purity of Heart* is *An Occasional Discourse: On the Occasion of a Confession: Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. In this text, Kierkegaard addresses the broader topic presented by Climacus of maintaining one’s relationship with God and suggests a method for successfully doing so: the adoption of a confessional attitude before God. It is on “the occasion of a confession” that one encounters the ideal time for relating to God. And Kierkegaard explicitly notes that even when working, one should be “very vividly thinking of the occasion of this discourse,” for then one is “standing as an individual before someone even higher” (139).

One must immediately note that Kierkegaard is speaking of a confessional *perspective*, since Lutheran Kierkegaard is not envisioning a person permanently

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14. Ibid., 487.
sitting within a confession booth. This confessional perspective entails three fundamental and, for both Kierkegaard and Climacus, beneficial characteristics. First, Kierkegaard believes that at no other time is God’s immediate presence more acutely felt than at the time of confession. Time and time again, Kierkegaard acknowledges that the confessing individual is “before God” (145). Kierkegaard’s emphasis on being “before God” is especially important. As he explains, “The presence of God is the decisive element that changes everything. As soon as God is present, everyone has the task before God of paying attention to himself—the speaker during his speech has the task of paying attention to what he is saying, and the listener during the speech has the task of paying attention to how he is hearing” (125). The notion of seeing oneself as immediately in God’s constant presence (as compared to God as distant) is not new. It is especially common in mystical writings. However, most tend to emphasize a “union” with God that takes place in the afterlife (cf. 124).¹⁵ In Purity of Heart, Kierkegaard emphasizes being in God’s presence now.

Second, proper confession—more specifically, being in God’s presence—demands, inter alia, awareness of one’s ethical responsibilities to God. As would be expected from the founder of existentialism, Kierkegaard emphasizes individual responsibility throughout his corpus. Things are no different in Purity of Heart, where Kierkegaard reminds the reader that the confessing person is a “single individual” before God. Similarities with Ignatius of Loyola should be evident, such as the persistent examination of conscience and the integration of this mentality with everyday living. But there are dissimilarities too, such as Ignatius’s notion of “finding” God in things as contrasted with Kierkegaard’s concept of being in the presence of God—in short, on God’s finding you.¹⁶

Third, and perhaps most important, this confessional perspective is to be held at all times. Confession’s fundamental reason is repentance. For Kierkegaard, repentance is to be a daily activity, not only because God, though

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¹⁵. Some accounts of God’s presence emphasize a union in the afterlife, but not all. See, for example, Brother Lawrence’s (1614–1691) The Practice of the Presence of God, which stresses recognizing God’s presence by constantly talking to God, and A. W. Tozer’s (1897–1963) The Pursuit of God, which argues that while God’s presence constantly surrounds us, we will only be aware of it if we develop our capacities for “spiritual receptivity.” Cf. Frank Laubach’s (1884–1970) Letters by a Modern Mystic, which accents not actual presence but keeping God before the mind through constant conversation with God.

forgiving, does not forget one’s previous sins but also because one sins on a daily basis. This is in fact perhaps one of the most important reasons why Kierkegaard made this a “confessional” discourse. For Kierkegaard, the awareness of one’s sins and personal responsibilities should be maintained at all times. This awareness is strongest when one is “before God,” when one is in confession. In the midst of his discussion of work and occupation in the latter pages of *Purity of Heart*, Kierkegaard reinforces the importance of a daily confessional perspective:

> But the purpose of the confession is certainly not that a person should become aware of himself as the single individual in the moment of confession and otherwise live without this awareness. On the contrary, in the moment of confession he should as a single individual make an accounting of how he has lived as a single individual. If the same consciousness is not required of him for everyday use, the confession’s requirement [of repentance] is a self-contradiction. (151)

Given Climacus’s insistence that one’s relationship with God is something to be had “always,” it should not be surprising that Kierkegaard too insists that the confessional perspective—which entails a relationship with God—is to be permanent, no matter where one is or what one is doing. Similar to the directive to “pray without ceasing,” in *Purity of Heart*, Kierkegaard entreats the reader to *confess* without ceasing. Earlier I noted that the Sunday-Monday gap often occurs because people see Sunday as the only appropriate day to connect with God spiritually or they see God’s ethical demands as irrelevant for their occupation. By adopting a confessional perspective, both excuses are eliminated.

### Benefits of Kierkegaard’s Confessional Approach

Not only does the confessional perspective bring an end to the Sunday-Monday gap, but it also develops several personal traits that should prove beneficial in and out of the workplace. Kierkegaard argues that confession requires and fosters three attributes in particular: unity of thought and self, psychological “quietness,” and self-knowledge (19–24).

In order to repent correctly, Kierkegaard notes that there must also be a “time of preparation” before repentance (19). It is during his discussion of that time of preparation that Kierkegaard introduces the first of his two conceptions of personal unity. The second conception of personal unity is one
of the text’s central themes: single-mindedness, or purity of heart in willing the good. This type of personal unity comes through the act of confession and continues after that act. 17 However, there is a type of personal unity that precedes the act of confession, that must imbue the “time of preparation.” It is what Kierkegaard calls a “collected mind” (16). In other words, Kierkegaard says, one cannot truly be prepared to confess without a certain degree of personal unity, without having first “made up one’s mind” about what needs to be confessed:

Confession . . . the holy act that ought to be preceded by preparation. . . . It is indeed like changing one’s clothes to divest oneself of multiplicity in order to make up one’s mind about one thing, to interrupt the pace of busy activity in order to put on the repose of contemplation in unity with oneself. . . . In busy activity one can be concerned about many things, begin many things, do many things at one time and do them all halfway—but one cannot confess without this unity with oneself. (19–20, cf. 152)

This personal unity entails eliminating the distractions that interfere with the ability to recognize one’s sins accurately. More broadly speaking, this unity entails an accurate understanding of oneself in relation to the specific moral obligations that God has laid upon one (whatever they might be). As Kierkegaard explains later in the text, nearly repeating the above quotation, “Confession is a holy act, which requires a collected mind. A collected mind, that is, a mind that has collected itself from all distraction, from every relation, in order to concentrate on its relation to itself as the single individual who is responsible before God; a mind that has collected itself from all distraction and thus also from all comparison” (152, emphasis added).

This personal unity can be accomplished only when the individual has achieved some degree of inner “quietness.” Like a Zen master, Kierkegaard encourages the individual to be a part of the world while not being affected by its “busyness.” As was the case with personal unity, here too we find two types of quietness under discussion. First, Kierkegaard compares the quietness of confession’s preparatory time with that which a traveler in the woods often surprisingly finds: Quietness “is something like the murmuring of the brook. If you are walking deep in your own thoughts, if you are busy, you do not notice it at all in passing, you are not aware that it exists, this murmuring. But if you

stop, you discover it” (21). Second, there is the quietness that attends the actual time of confession. In this case, the one who is confessing achieves his quietness deliberately: “The quietness grips him also, yet not in misunderstanding’s pensive mood but with the earnestness of Eternity. Nor is he like the traveler, led to these quiet places without really knowing how” (21). Kierkegaard’s point is that quietness is essential and is something that must persist throughout the confession process.

However, the third required and developed attribute is self-knowledge. Of course, one cannot come to confession without first knowing oneself well enough to know what needs to be confessed. As Kierkegaard puts it, “God does not find out anything by your confessing, but you, the one confessing, do” (23). According to Kierkegaard, it is self-deception that is the worst kind of ignorance, and it strikes both the “learned one and the simple one” (23). Kierkegaard then makes the bold claim that “there is only one thing that can remove that ignorance, that self-deception—and not knowing that it is one thing, only one thing, that only one thing is needful, is still to be in self-deception” (23). Kierkegaard does not tell us the “one thing needful” until near the end of the text: “The awareness of being a single individual with eternal responsibility before God is the one thing needful” (137). And if the self-deceived person had achieved this awareness, he “would have won purity of heart” (24).

While Kierkegaard discusses these three qualities only in the explicit context of confession, because he seeks to make the confessional perspective a daily one, we can safely assume that he expects these qualities to impact our daily lives—work life included. And I think little needs to be said about how these three qualities would aid the everyday worker seeking to overcome the Sunday-Monday gap. Personal unity, as Kierkegaard notes, eliminates the “distracted” and “divided” mind, thereby giving clarity of thought regarding one’s tasks and how best to accomplish them (19–20). Though Kierkegaard’s focus is on improving the God-human relationship, one cannot ignore the fact that “quietness” entails a lack of psychological stress, which, though there are exceptions, tends to increase worker productivity and, if nothing else, makes for happier employees. In confession, self-knowledge is a matter of knowing one’s ethical responsibilities before God. But outside the boundaries of confession, self-knowledge also entails knowing one’s traits and abilities. Hence, self-knowledge too promotes productivity and happiness by making clear to the individual those tasks at which she is skilled and those at which she is not, hopefully ending time unnecessarily spent in frustration before it starts. Even though Kierkegaard does not discuss them, some of the other traditional
benefits of confession—the cathartic and healing properties, for example—may also prove salutary for the everyday worker as well.  

Conclusion

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, provides several reasons for why the Sunday-Monday gap occurs, and I have attempted to organize them as either volitional or cognitive flaws on the part of the religious individual. It is important to be clear about Climacus’s task here. He does two things: he first tells the would-be decisive Christian that she must obtain a relationship with God grounded in specific conceptions of herself and of God, and he then discusses what often causes that relationship to be lost during the workweek. Climacus assumes that these persons seek to obtain a relationship with God and are actually able to do so. Climacus nevertheless recognizes that they typically have difficulty maintaining that relationship. Indeed, this is why he speaks of a Sunday-Monday gap. For most, the connection is there on Sunday but then is lost on Monday.

In the light of the Sunday-Monday gap, Kierkegaard, in *Purity of Heart*, advocates that a person adopt a confessional perspective. The confessional perspective’s emphasis on a constant awareness of God and of one’s individual moral responsibility would do much to address the problem of the gap. We do not know whether Kierkegaard specifically intended to answer Climacus’s dilemma through *Purity of Heart*. Nevertheless, the facts are clear: If the directives of *Purity of Heart* are followed, then the God-human relationship is maintained at all times, and then, by necessity, the Sunday-Monday gap—spiritually and ethically—is also overcome. Furthermore, the confessional perspective aids the worker by developing and requiring at least three traits: personal unity, quietness, and self-knowledge. Modern scholars may have taken a renewed interest in the Sunday-Monday gap, but they have nineteenth-century Kierkegaard to thank for so clearly explaining its roots, problems, and for offering one very novel solution.

Missional Church, Missional Liturgy

Abstract: For the past half century, missiologists and theologians have given new attention to mission as a matter of Christian identity, grounded in the missio Dei, the “mission of God.” The term “missional” is used increasingly to express this notion of the church’s participation in God’s mission. This essay explores this approach to mission and considers how liturgy can be a locus of the missio Dei. Missional liturgy is not a matter of particular techniques but an approach to liturgy in which the worshiping assembly enacts and signifies God’s love for the world. The root meaning of “liturgy” as “public service” supports this understanding of liturgy as the church’s offering on behalf of the world.

In 1993, All Saints’ Episcopal Church, located in the Ravenswood neighborhood of Chicago, handed out bags of groceries to about twenty neighbors. From that cold winter night has grown a vibrant ministry that brings together members of the congregation, hungry neighbors, and volunteers from the neighborhood and beyond. Every week, a hot meal is served, neighbors and volunteers share stories and laugh and cry, and bags of groceries are distributed. Three or four times a year, the parish hall is transformed into a four-star restaurant, with waiters serving gourmet meals at elegantly decorated tables as live music plays in the background. In 2007, 16,255 bags of groceries were distributed, and 6,507 hungry neighbors shared a meal. In the current economic downturn, those numbers have grown dramatically.

As the outreach ministry has grown, so too has the congregation. In the early 1990s, membership and giving had dwindled to the point that the bishop decided to close the congregation. But when he met with church members to

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communicate that decision, the commitment he found convinced him instead to allow them to be reborn. From that meeting came a motto—“a rising church for a risen Christ”—and the image of a phoenix rising from the ashes. The bishop appointed a congregational development vicar. Today over two hundred people worship at one of three services celebrated each Sunday, a non-profit organization administers the pantry and community kitchen, and the parish has a vibrant link with a congregation in the Sudan.

Worship has been integral to this renewal. All Saints’ celebrates the Eucharist each Sunday. They use the 1979 Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church, along with the officially authorized hymnal and other supplemental resources. Within this framework of the tradition, All Saints’ has developed a dynamic liturgy that is at the heart of its congregational life.

Sit down with a few members of All Saints’ for a conversation about their worship. They are likely to tell you that worship is fun, that they don’t take themselves too seriously. They may tell you that worship connects them as a community or brings them closer to God. For one person, the eucharistic prayer with its recitation of salvation history may be especially meaningful. For another, the highlight may be powerful preaching that calls the faithful to action. At some point in the conversation, the members will probably begin talking about their pantry. Although outreach is seldom an explicit focus of the Sunday liturgy, members of All Saints’ cannot think of worship without also considering their service in the world. As one member explained, “It’s the engine that drives All Saints’, but it doesn’t come across in worship, and that is our outreach.”

What is it about worship, or outreach, or All Saints’ that links worship and outreach for so many? How do other Christians understand the relation between worship and ministry in the world? Are these distinct spheres of Christian faith and life, or is there an intrinsic connection?

**Worship and Outreach**

Lutheran scholar Thomas Schattauer identifies three approaches to the relationship between worship and mission: “inside and out,” “outside in,” and “inside out.” The first, “inside and out,” distinguishes sharply between worship that takes place inside the church and mission that occurs outside. Worship serves those within the church, nurturing individuals and building up the community. From worship, Christians go out into the world, where they engage in acts of...
mission, whether proclamation of the gospel to those who have not heard it or acts of justice or mercy.¹

Maintaining mission and worship as separate spheres of action preserves the integrity of each but, Schattauer argues, “bifurcates our understanding of Christian life and finally fails to grasp adequately their unity.”² A contemporary response has been to bring mission within the sphere of worship, an approach that Schattauer labels “outside in.” In this approach, the activities of mission become part of worship. For some congregations, this has meant the development of “seeker services,” in which worship serves as a means of evangelism. In other congregations, worship becomes a primary arena for social transformation. Here, preaching and other elements of the liturgy call worshipers to action, either through social or political transformation, or through serving neighbors. “Outside in” worship thus takes up the work of mission more directly than in the “inside and out” approach.³

Schattauer goes on to propose a third way, “inside out,” in which the worshiping assembly is the locus of the *missio Dei* (“mission of God”). In this approach, worship itself is mission, not in the instrumental sense of enabling mission activity, but as a place where God’s reconciling love for the world is manifest.⁴

The worship at All Saints’ Church does not fit neatly into any one of Schattauer’s approaches. For some, worship is formative, enabling them to grow as individual Christians and strengthening the community. Although this is suggestive of an “inside and out” approach, for most worshipers the connections between worship and mission are more fluid than the clear delineation between worship as an “inside” activity and mission activity as “outside.”

An “outside in” approach is evident in preaching that calls the assembly to acts of mercy and justice, but worship at All Saints’ does not function primarily to spur mission activity. The other “outside in” strategy, the use of worship for evangelism, is employed intentionally at times. For example, an annual pet blessing at the principal Sunday service has brought numerous visitors over the years, some of whom go on to become active members. Yet although there are several such creative liturgies each year with an explicitly evangelical purpose, this “outside in” strategy is not the sole or even the primary approach to worship at All Saints’.

². Ibid.
³. Ibid., 2–3.
⁴. Ibid., 3.
What of the third way, “inside out”? Certainly there is an inchoate sense among many members of All Saints’ that both worship and outreach, that is, mission understood as acts of mercy, are integral to life in this community. Is worship itself a locus of mission, enacting and signifying God’s reconciling love for the world? One worshiper explained that the God she encounters in worship is “very much a part of everything and very willing . . . to be there in all of these different sometimes humorous and sometimes sad and sometimes joyful occasions and ways.” Another described her experience in this way:

That God is . . . loving, and caring, and present and in the world around us. But I think more three-dimensional in terms of—I don’t know—if you have any thoughts of being angry at God, or struggling with this crazy world we have and what does it mean that there’s a God that created this. All of these big questions that have been around for a long time, but that kind of struggling with those questions and dealing with some of the more complex things that people struggle with about God. That it definitely feels like there is a place to do that; and that’s valued and valid.

Perhaps, then, by manifesting God’s fierce love for the world in all its complexities, worship at All Saints’ is itself mission, just as the congregation’s food pantry and relationship with a congregation in Sudan are also mission.

How does worship proclaim and celebrate God’s love for the world? Are there specific ways to proclaim the Word, or offer intercession, or celebrate the Eucharist, that enable worship to be mission? What are the characteristics of worship that is a locus of mission? Before turning to such questions, it will be helpful to define “mission” more fully.

**Contemporary Understandings of Mission**

Many Christians in North America today understand mission as an activity of the church—as bringing the gospel to the unchurched, whether through direct proclamation and efforts to grow the church or by establishing social services such as hospitals and schools. Missionaries, lay or ordained, travel, often to distant lands, to carry out this activity on behalf of a sending church. Missionary work in recent centuries has resulted in the growth of Christianity around the globe to such an extent that the majority of Christians today live in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. If we understand mission as a response to Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19), the efforts of recent centuries have been wildly successful. The gospel has been proclaimed “to the
ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Women and men who had never heard the good news responded enthusiastically, and Christianity is thriving in many places.

However, the model underlying this remarkable growth had significant flaws, despite the best intentions of missionaries and churches. Missionaries representing the dominant culture were sent to foreign lands, often accompanying social and political efforts to colonize those places. They brought with them not only the gospel but also their cultural norms, and all too often the gospel they proclaimed was bound up with those cultural values and expectations. In a study of historical models of mission, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder offer a sympathetic description of this approach:

Missionaries often found themselves in close relationship with colonialism and imperialism, which usually but not always . . . implied dependence and collaboration. The pervading spirit of manifest destiny and religious fervor instilled within them a desire to promote their culture and religion, a sense of responsibility for other peoples, a willingness to sacrifice and to trust, and a hope fueled by enthusiastic optimism. . . . In this way, proclamation and social “advancement,” Christianity and “civilization,” often went hand in hand. . . . Later generations would criticize them for their paternalism, superiority complex and collaboration with imperialism, but one should not overlook their dedication and sacrifice in proclaiming the gospel in the way that made sense to them as children of their time.5

Bevans and Schroeder maintain that this attitude of missionary dominance and corresponding dependence shifted over the course of the twentieth century to one in which Christianity is now “one religion among others in a pluralistic world.”6 While Christianity in the early twenty-first century is flourishing in many non-Western places, churches in Western countries are declining in membership and levels of participation, and their context in Europe and North America is described as post-Christian or post-Christendom. Christians in these countries are increasingly recognizing that if there is a mission field where the gospel is to be proclaimed, it is located not just in some distant land but in their own neighborhood.

Accompanying the global growth of Christianity and the emergence of post-Christendom in the West has been a resurgence of theological reflection on mission. At the Brandenburg Mission Conference in 1932, Karl Barth argued that mission should not be understood “as a human activity of witness and service.” Rather, explain Bevans and Schroeder, it is “primarily God who

6. Ibid., 242.
engages in mission by sending God’s self in the mission of the Son and the Spirit.” This concept has come to be understood as the missio Dei, and it has become widely embraced by Christians in many different ecclesial contexts.

Understanding mission as the mission of God places it in the sphere of trinitarian theology. Recent works on trinitarian theology emphasize a dynamic understanding of the Trinity. God’s nature as a trinitarian communion of persons is known in the sending of the Son and the sending of the Spirit. In Jesus Christ and in the Spirit, Christians experience God’s saving action—God’s love for the world—and the church is drawn into this saving action. Catherine Mowry LaCugna describes it in this way:

Ecclesial life is a way of living in anticipation of the coming reign of God. . . . The mission, the “being sent forth” of every Christian, is the same as the mission of Christ and the Spirit, to do the will and work of God, to proclaim the good news of salvation, to bring peace and concord, to justify hope in the final return of all things to God. 9

An early proponent of a trinitarian foundation for mission was Lesslie Newbigin, a British missionary who served in India beginning in the mid-1930s. Drawing on his experience proclaiming the gospel in a largely non-Christian context, Newbigin argued that the Trinity is the necessary starting point for preaching to non-Christians: “One cannot preach Jesus even in the simplest terms without preaching him as the Son. His revelation of God is the revelation of ‘an only begotten from the Father,’ and you cannot preach him without speaking of the Father and the Son.” An evangelist who is sensitive to those who hear the message will recognize that the Spirit has already been at work, preparing them to receive the gospel, and that same Spirit will continue to work in their lives after the evangelist departs. Newbigin encouraged his readers to recognize that the mission therefore is God’s:

We are not engaged in an enterprise of our own choosing or devising. We are invited to participate in an activity of God which is the central meaning of creation itself. We are invited to become, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, participants in the Son’s loving obedience to the Father. All things have been created that they may be summed up in Christ the

7. Ibid., 290.
8. Ibid., 291–92.
Son. All history is directed towards that end. All creation has this as its goal. The Spirit of God, who is also the Spirit of the Son, is given as the foretaste of that consummation, as the witness to it, and as the guide of the Church on the road toward it.\textsuperscript{11}

Upon his return to England in the 1970s, Newbigin began to challenge the churches to recognize their emerging post-Christendom context and attend to the missionary encounter of the gospel with their culture.

The reflection on gospel and culture that Newbigin spurred in Great Britain was taken up by missiologists in the United States and led to the emergence of the Gospel and Our Culture Network. In the 1990s, several leaders in that network collaborated on a study of mission in the post-Christendom context of North America. \textit{Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America} sets out an ecclesiology rooted in an understanding of \textit{missio Dei}. In the introduction the authors explain, “Bishop Newbigin and others have helped us to see that God’s mission is calling and sending us, the church of Jesus Christ, to be a missionary church in our own societies, in the cultures in which we find ourselves.”\textsuperscript{12}

To underscore the distinctiveness of this approach to mission—that is, mission is rooted in the trinitarian nature of God and is a matter of identity rather than an activity or program of the church—the authors introduced the term “missional.” Since the publication of \textit{Missional Church}, the term has come into widespread use, although it is not always employed in the same way, as another leader of the Gospel and Our Culture Network, Craig Van Gelder, notes:

It is clear that confusion still exists over what the term \textit{missional} really means. Some appear to want to use it to reclaim . . . the priority of missions in regard to the church’s various activities. . . . The concept of a church being \textit{missional} moves in a fundamentally different direction. It seeks to focus the conversation about what the church \textit{is}—that it is a community created by the Spirit and that it has a unique nature, or essence, which gives it a unique identity. In light of the church’s nature, the missional conversation then explores what the church \textit{does}.\textsuperscript{13}

Like Newbigin and his colleagues in the Gospel and Our Culture Network, Van Gelder understands mission as God’s reconciling work in the world, in which the church participates.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{12} Darrell Guder et al., \textit{Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 5.
\textsuperscript{13} Craig Van Gelder, \textit{The Ministry of the Missional Church} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 16–17.
Van Gelder and his colleagues link this missional perspective to the redemptive reign of God. In his person and his ministry, Jesus announced and inaugurated the reign of God, and Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection now offer to all creation the possibility of being reconciled to God. Though the redemptive reign of God is not complete, the Spirit moves all things to their eschatological fullness, God’s final consummation. Led by the Spirit, the missional church represents or bears witness to the reign of God that was manifest in Christ, as Newbigin explained:

The church represents the presence of the reign of God in the life of the world, not in the triumphalist sense (as the “successful” cause) and not in the moralistic sense (as the “righteous” cause), but in the sense that it is the place where the mystery of the kingdom present in the dying and rising of Jesus is made present here and now so that all people, righteous and unrighteous, are enabled to taste and share the love of God before whom all are unrighteous and all are accepted as righteous.¹⁴

An important aspect of the church’s proclamation of God’s reign is its concrete actions of justice and mercy.

Although Newbigin, Van Gelder, and others connect participation in the missio Dei to the reign of God, Bevans and Schroeder treat these as distinct strains in contemporary missiology. To this, they add “proclamation of Jesus Christ as universal Savior,” noting that this approach to mission is particularly strong in contemporary evangelical and Pentecostal theology. Pointing out strengths as well as limitations in each strain of missiological thought, Bevans and Schroeder propose a synthesis in what they term “prophetic dialogue”:

We believe that this rebirth in Christian mission commitment—with its elements of trinitarian vision, focus on the justice of God’s reign and witness to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ—might be best characterized in this new century as a commitment to prophetic dialogue. It must be prophetic because the Church is obligated to preach always and everywhere, “in season and out of season” (2 Tim 4:2), the fullness of the gospel in all its integrity. And it must be dialogue because the imperative—rooted in the gospel itself—to preach the one faith in a particular context. Without dialogue, without a willingness to “let go” before one “speaks out,” mission is simply not possible.¹⁵

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¹⁵. Bevans and Schroeder, Constants in Context, 350.
Bevans and Schroeder identify six components of mission as prophetic dialogue: witness and proclamation; liturgy, prayer, and contemplation; commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; the practice of interreligious dialogue; efforts of inculturation; and the ministry of reconciliation.\(^{16}\) Though distinct from one another, these activities are also interrelated dimensions of the one mission of God in which the church participates.

With regard to liturgy, Bevans and Schroeder turn to Schattauer’s models of the relation between liturgy and mission. While Schattauer argues that only an “inside out” approach is fully adequate, Bevans and Schroeder, though concurring with this assessment, suggest that each approach can make a positive contribution to our understanding of the relation between liturgy and mission. Liturgy on the “inside” does empower and equip the Christian community for mission on the “outside.” At the same time, what is “outside” in the world must be brought “in” to our celebrations in order to “enlarge our vision and challenge our often set ways.” Finally, liturgy must always be “inside out.” This latter encompasses not only a transformative encounter with the missionary God but also the witness of the liturgy to those who are not part of the worshiping community, as well as celebration that is mindful of those on the edges of the community, whether unchurched or dechurched.\(^{17}\)

Remembering that liturgy is but one aspect of participation in the mission of God, let us return to our earlier questions: How does worship proclaim and celebrate God’s reconciling love for the world? Are there specific ways to proclaim the Word, or offer intercession, or celebrate the Eucharist, that enable worship itself to be mission?

### Worship That Is Mission

For several years, I have offered workshops and classes on “missional liturgy.” A frequent response has been, “How can I make my church’s liturgy missional?” As I have listened to these questions and probed more deeply, it has seemed as though many people were asking about techniques. To be a liturgical movement parish in the Episcopal Church in the 1950s, the altar would be pulled away from the wall, a lay reader would read the Epistle at the Eucharist, the congregation would join in saying prayers usually said by the priest alone, there would be an offertory procession, and the bread would be “real” bread rather than wafers. What five things would characterize a missional liturgy? As

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 351.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 362–66; quotation on 364.
I struggled to answer the question, I began to realize that it was the wrong question. Missional liturgy is not about particular techniques but about an approach to liturgy and to Christian faith and witness in the world. In a missional liturgy, the assembly understands itself to be a lively Christian community, in dialogue with its contemporary context while also drawing deeply from the well of tradition, confident in the enlivening power of the Spirit, proclaiming and celebrating the reign of God. Missional liturgy takes place in a missional congregation, one that is “shaped by participation in God’s mission” and that “lets God’s mission permeate everything that the congregation does—from worship to witness to training members for discipleship.”¹⁸

An exploration of the root meaning of the term “liturgy” offers rich insights. The Greek word *leitourgia* is formed from *leitos*, “concerning the people,” and *ergon*, “work.” In the ancient Greek world, it was a technical political term used for services rendered for the body politic. One might build a road or an aqueduct or supply equipment for the armed forces. Gradually the term came to be used more generally for an act done in the service of another, and even in the cultic sense of service to the gods. When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, “liturgy” was used almost exclusively for the cultic worship of God performed by the priests and Levites in the temple. The thread connecting these various meanings is “service.” In the ancient Mediterranean world, liturgy was offered for the sake of another. To perform a liturgy was to serve.

The New Testament use of *leitourgia* builds on this earlier usage. “Service” is evident in Paul’s use of the term in reference to his collection for the church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:27; 2 Cor 9:12). In the cultic sense, *leitourgia* and its cognates appear several times in Hebrews as the author contrasts the ongoing service of the priests in the temple with Jesus’ own self-offering. Jesus has attained a “more excellent liturgy” (Heb 8:6; a phrase often translated as “more excellent ministry”), of which he himself is the “liturgist” (*leitourgos*, Heb 8:2). With the fulfillment of the priestly ministry, that is, the liturgy, in Christ, Christians can now enter confidently into the sanctuary (Heb 10:19). No longer needing priests, the new community itself is a priesthood (1 Pet 2:9).

A new, more spiritualized meaning of “liturgy” also begins to emerge in the New Testament. In his letter to the Romans, Paul describes himself as a “liturgist” (*leitourgos*, sometimes translated as “minister” or “servant”) to the Gentiles, performing a “priestly service of the gospel” in which the Gentiles are an

offering to God, accomplished through Christ (Rom 15:16). The language of
the priestly cult of the temple is now applied to the proclamation of the gospel.
A group of prophets and teachers at Antioch are engaged in a “liturgy” (leito-
urgounton, translated variously as “worshiping” or “serving”), resulting in a
missionary call that sends Barnabas and Saul on a journey.

Although “liturgy” eventually came to refer to Christian worship, particu-
larly the Eucharist, the appearance of the word in Romans and Acts offers only
a glimmer of this subsequent development. The term eventually fell out of use
in Western Christianity for many centuries. When it was revived in the twenti-
theth century, theologians and other church leaders eagerly explored its etymol-
gy. Virgil Michel, a Roman Catholic leader of the liturgical movement in the
United States, explained, “The word liturgy according to its etymology means
a public work or service. The original Greek word comes from leitos, public or
belonging to the people, and from the root of the word ergon, work.”

Many leaders of the liturgical movement took note of the original Greek
meaning of “liturgy” as a public work. But the phrase that took hold in popular
imagination, and that continues to be widely repeated, is “the work of the peo-
ple.” Massey Shepherd, the leading liturgical scholar in the Episcopal Church
in the 1950s and 1960s, emphasized that the entire congregation, not just the
ministers, participate in liturgy: “[Liturgy] is literally the ‘work of the people’
in their common life of prayer. It involves a responsible and active participa-
tion by all the worshippers, the congregation no less than the ministers.”

Even though Shepherd, like Virgil Michel and many others, presented the root
meaning of “liturgy” as “public service,” this concept has not entered the popu-
lar imagination as a way to understand liturgy.

Explaining liturgy as the work of the people, an activity that by its very nature
demands the “full, conscious, and active participation” of all the faithful, was
an important insight at a time when many Christians in different worshiping
traditions, lay and ordained, approached worship as the job of a few vested lead-
ers for a largely passive spectator congregation. But perhaps it is time to retire
the definition of liturgy as “the work of the people.” The phrase emphasizes
the people who gather, those who proclaim and respond to the Word and offer

19. Virgil Michel, The Liturgy of the Church according to the Roman Rite (New York: Mac-
millan, 1937), 1.
intercession, the assembly that celebrates a holy meal. By not also turning our attention outside and encouraging us to celebrate liturgy “inside out,” thinking of liturgy as “the work of the people” may impoverish our celebrations.

Aspects of Missional Liturgy

When liturgy is “public service,” an act performed for the sake of the world, Christ is the one true liturgy and the liturgist par excellence. Christians participate in Christ’s own liturgy, caught up in the paschal mystery of Jesus’ dying and rising, offering ourselves with him for the sake of the whole world. In our liturgical celebrations we can perceive the reign of God, as we glimpse both God’s judgment and God’s mercy.

Community

Bevans and Schroeder describe the aspect of community in this way: “The church community, participating in God’s life, is God’s special people[,] . . . a people convinced of its fundamental equality through its common baptism in the name of the triune God. . . . Christians baptized in the name of the Trinity are configured to Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom 6:1–11) and become one body with him through participation in the Eucharist (1 Cor 10:14–17).” The more that worship gathers the diversity of God’s people—young and old, of different races and ethnicities and different social classes, with different theological perspectives—the more worship can show forth the mystery of God’s reconciling love.

Hospitality

As God is self-giving, sending the Son and the Spirit for the life of the world, the worshiping community is also self-giving, welcoming those who are not already active members of the congregation. In the post-Christendom context of North America, growing numbers have never participated in Christian worship, and many have never even entered a church building. Additionally, new waves of immigration and other population shifts challenge congregations to attend to their context. Who lives in the neighborhood? Who is not here in the assembly? How can worship welcome and include them?

Symbol

In a missional liturgy, a community embodies and inhabits its liturgy in such a way that the ritual texts come alive through speaking and singing, in symbols

22. Bevans and Schroeder, Constants in Context, 299.
and actions. The liturgy must speak in the language of the people, drawing on images and idioms that are comprehensible in the contemporary context. Church of the Beloved, an Episcopal congregation in Charlotte, North Carolina, regularly incorporated video clips in its worship. Members of the congregation, including the pastor’s preteen children, were alert to theological themes in contemporary film and frequently proposed selections for use in worship. The symbolic world constructed by media became part of the symbolic reality of the liturgy, used alongside the primary Christian symbols of bread and wine, water and oil, to signify and enact the reign of God.

**Proclamation**

The three-year lectionary has brought more of the riches of Scripture into the assembly, offering a fuller picture of God’s judgment and mercy and the arc of salvation history. Beyond summoning worshipers to participate in the *missio Dei*, proclamation might also enable worshipers to discern how God is at work in the world.

The proclamation of Scripture may be difficult to comprehend for those unfamiliar with Christian worship. A pastor whose congregation had revitalized its worship in a way that was attracting many unchurched people reports a startling exchange with one of these newcomers: “Pastor, there’s one thing I don’t understand about your worship. What are they doing when they stand up and read from that book?” We dare not underestimate the need for teaching the basics of the Bible in our post-Christendom world, formation that is probably best done outside worship. This makes it all the more important that the entire liturgy, not just that element designated as proclamation and response to the Word, is a vivid enactment of the reign of God.

**Intercession**

The book of Exodus tells us that intercession was one of the responsibilities of the priests: “Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place” (Exod 28:29). The high priest literally carried the names of the twelve patriarchs on his garments, representing the whole people of Israel, as a sign of his intercession for them. For Christians, this work of intercession is taken up in perpetuity by Christ, who “always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25).23 As members of this priesthood through baptism, Christians are called into the work of inter-

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cession, bringing our own struggles and joys, and the sufferings and hopes of the whole world, to God, as Bevans and Schroeder note: “Prayer for those engaged in the church’s work of crossing boundaries, for peoples struggling with injustice and poverty, for fragile communities of faith, for victims of human-caused or natural disasters—this is a valid way of being caught up in the saving and redeeming mission of God in the world.”24 As our intercession extends beyond our narrow parochial concerns, it has the potential to transform us. Giving voice to our deepest yearnings, we may discover that these are part of God’s yearning for the world.

Reconciliation
“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor 5:19). Bevans and Schroeder propose that reconciliation be a new focus of mission, necessitated by the needs of the world in the twenty-first century, including reconciliation for those who have experienced violence or loss, as well as cultural and political reconciliation and reconciliation within the church.25 All of these dimensions require active ministry in the world. But they also have a liturgical component, for in liturgy God’s reconciling love is proclaimed and celebrated.

Offering
As the liturgical movement took root in the Episcopal Church in the mid-twentieth century, the offertory of the Eucharist received particular attention. Leaders of the liturgical movement encouraged congregations to develop offertory processions, with laypeople carrying bread, wine, money, and sometimes other gifts to the altar as the first action of the fourfold “shape” of the Eucharist. People were taught that in the symbolic action of this presentation they were offering their whole selves to God. While perhaps an overemphasis on what can be viewed as a simple preparation of the table, this teaching about the offertory fostered new understanding of God’s call to service. In the celebration of Eucharist, we are drawn into Christ’s self-offering, and even in a non-eucharistic liturgy, we join Christ’s self-offering as we offer our sacrifice of praise and our intercession.

Thanksgiving
The great thanksgiving prayer of the Eucharist recalls God’s work of creation and redemption. Recognizing what God has done and is doing in the world,

25. Ibid., 389–92.
members of the assembly acknowledge their dependence on God. “This dependence refers to the whole of life, and so thanksgiving embraces sacrificial participation in mission in dependence upon God,” writes J. G. Davies, “for it is an offering of the whole self through service in obedience to him from whom we have received everything.” Our thanksgiving does not deny the suffering and struggles of the world but rather locates them in the larger horizon of salvation history. Christian thanksgiving has an eschatological thrust, celebrating the inauguration of the reign of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus even as it yearns for the fullness of that reign yet to come.

**Missional Church, Missional Liturgy**

The public service that is liturgy is a community’s response to God’s self-giving for the life of the world. Gathered by the Spirit, the assembly is drawn into Christ’s liturgy, the paschal mystery of his dying and rising. Remembering God’s work of creation and redemption, the people of God offer praise and thanksgiving and pour out their intercession for a world still hungering for the fullness of God’s reign. In liturgy, public service performed for the sake of the world, the assembly enacts and signifies God’s reconciling love for all creation.

Such missional liturgy can only take place in a missional community, a congregation in which God’s mission permeates every aspect of its life. Missional communities engage their context, discerning how God is already at work in the world and open to transformation as they encounter God, sometimes in unexpected places and ways. A missional community that engages the world in service and in witness performs liturgy, public service, in the world. The community’s experiences in the world—the ways it has discovered the triune God at work, and the suffering, injustice, and oppression that continue to afflict humanity and creation—are then brought into the assembly, where the liturgy continues. Thus worship is a participation in the *missio Dei*, enacting and signifying God’s reconciling love for the world.

In *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Baker Academic, 2008), a collection of previously published essays, Bruce L. McCormack shares the fruits of his reflections on the theology of Karl Barth as they have developed since the publication of his first book on Barth in 1995. They “constitute a record” of how his thinking “has progressed and where it is headed now.” In these years McCormack has become increasingly interested in “Christology, election, and Trinity (in that order)” (15). The main point McCormack wishes to convey is that Barth is both orthodox and modern without being neo-orthodox. This means that Barth was “seeking to understand what it means to be orthodox under the conditions of modernity” (17). Relying on Kant’s epistemology and, later in the *Church Dogmatics*, on Hegelian ontology, Barth was able to offer an actualistic understanding of divine and human being that upheld all the theological values that were at work in the original formulations of Christian faith. Orthodoxy, as Barth understood it, did not refer to some “static, fixed reality” but to “a body of teachings which have arisen out of, and belong to, a history which is as yet incomplete and constantly in need of reevaluation” (16). Barth affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity, a two-natures christology, God’s immutability, the virgin birth, Christ’s bodily resurrection, and the visible return of Christ. To this extent he was “orthodox.” But according to McCormack he also reconstructed all such orthodox teaching “from the ground up” (16) in order to see what was at issue and whether

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or not the original formulations of doctrine did justice to their subject matter. McCormack is of the opinion that Anglo-American Barth scholarship mistakenly tends to read him as “neo-orthodox” and so tends also to reinvent a more orthodox Barth than Barth actually was. He writes that, as a Barth scholar, he is more at home in European rather than American ways of thinking, since it was Eberhard Jüngel’s *God’s Being Is in Becoming* that first shaped his understanding of Barth. And the influence of Jüngel’s thought can be seen at various points in these essays. Leading Barth scholars in Germany, we are told, do not think of Barth’s theology as neo-orthodox but rather as “a variant within modern theology” (10).

What then does McCormack mean by “modern”? In brief, for a theology to be modern it would have to demonstrate awareness of “historical consciousness,” namely, that “all human thinking is conditioned by historical (and cultural) location” (10). The first truly modern theologies, then, were those of Schleiermacher and Hegel, because they had to deal with the limitations of theoretical reason as recognized by Kant and with the emergence of “early romanticism” as in Herder and Hamann. Any truly modern theology therefore will be marked by a tendency toward “historicizing” but will also demonstrate other features, such as an acceptance of critical methods of biblical study, a recognition that philosophers have lost respect for “classical metaphysics,” a recognition of the breakdown of “the old Aristotelian-biblical cosmology,” and acceptance of the need to reconstruct the doctrines of creation and providence using more modern theological and philosophical resources. Not all modern theologians can be considered “foundationalists.” Within this descriptive set of indicators, Barth’s theology displays a notable “antimetaphysical stance” with regard to “theological epistemology” and is marked by his actualism as applying not only to epistemology but to ontology. Consequently, it is McCormack’s theory that the Barth of the later *Church Dogmatics* (volume 4 in particular) drew nearer to Hegel and thus established both the “relative validity” and “proper limits” of the “historicizing tendencies” of the last 150 years. The validity of historicizing “lay in God’s determination that God’s being should be a being in the becoming that is the history of Jesus”; the limit consisted in the fact that God’s “Self-determination was a free act on the part of God, not a necessary one” (13). In this sense the later Barth was much more modern than the early Barth. This thinking stands in contrast to that of Thomas F. Torrance, one of the leading Barth interpreters of the twentieth century in Great Britain who, strangely, is not even mentioned in this book. He held that God’s being is in becoming but that “His Becoming is not a becoming on the way toward
being or toward a fullness of being, but is the eternal fullness and the overflowing of his eternal unlimited Being.”¹ This means that God’s becoming God for us in the Incarnation fulfills God’s purpose of love for us but does not in any way fulfill who or what God is eternally becoming within his own eternal active and living being.

The book is divided into three parts. In part 1, four chapters map the development of Barth’s theology by relating him to Schleiermacher and to Alexander Schweizer (Schleiermacher’s student) and by exploring an example of Barth’s own theological exegesis. In part 2, McCormack presents a very long and interesting essay that attempts to move beyond both nonfoundational “postliberal” and postmodern readings of Barth. In that essay McCormack analyzes and criticizes the thinking of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Walter Lowe, and Graham Ward, showing how and why his own view that Barth’s thinking was critically realistic and dialectical does better justice to Barth’s thinking than these other approaches. There is some real substance here, and this material is well worth reading and pondering. I found myself agreeing with much of his analysis and critique. But even here, as McCormack ends the chapter with great praise for George Hunsinger and John Webster as scholars who do not fall prey to the various errors of the others treated in the chapter, one can see the beginnings of what later became a fully developed disagreement among Barth scholars over exactly how to interpret Barth’s “actualism.” By this I mean that McCormack agrees with Hunsinger’s description of Barth’s actualism as one motif among others that can be noted in Barth’s theology, but when applied to revelation, which McCormack thinks actually can function as a unifying category along with the problem of knowing God for understanding the Church Dogmatics, Hunsinger did not explore the implications for God’s being. Hence, according to McCormack, “God’s eternal being was/is/will be ‘constituted’ by the eternal decision for a being-in-revelation” (161). I will return to this observation in a moment. But first let me finish summarizing the content of the book.

After a brief essay discussing Barth’s theological epistemology, part 3 presents what could be termed the heart of McCormack’s own modern and orthodox critically realistic theology. In two important and challenging chapters, McCormack presents his views on just how Barth’s thinking about election determined his views about God and Christ and must therefore be seen as the

watershed event that changed Barth’s thinking radically from his earlier thinking. In this part of the book McCormack considers Barth’s “historicized Christology” and attempts to defend his position that God’s eternal triune being is somehow “constituted” by God’s decision to be God for us (161, 218, 223–24, 266). In part 4, McCormack presents several brief writings intended to assess American Barth scholarship in light of his belief that the later Barth’s actualism should have led him to revise his own theology in order to eliminate certain inconsistencies.

There is an intelligence and deep insight evident throughout this work. It is beautifully written, with attention to detail. And one feels the strength not only of Barth’s powerful thinking but of McCormack’s own sense of the freedom and possibilities inherent in the very exercise of systematic theology itself. Anyone reading this book will see why Bruce McCormack is widely regarded as a lively and forthright interpreter of Barth, a virtuoso in the world of theology. His writing is straightforward, always clear, and generally quite consistent. But that does not mean that one would want to read this book uncritically. What one sees above all in this work is that it is a risky business attempting to categorize Barth as a modern theologian in the way McCormack has. There is no space here to spell out a fully detailed argument to support this claim. But I will note several conclusions McCormack draws from his basic claim that God’s “decision for the covenant of grace is the ground of God’s triunity” (194) that will show why I think McCormack’s Barth does not square with the theology Barth actually espoused both earlier and later in his life, and why I think “historical consciousness” has gotten the better of McCormack, against his own intentions to avoid the pitfalls of historicism.

According to McCormack “the human history of Jesus Christ is constitutive of the being and existence of God in the second of God’s modes to the extent that the being and existence of the Second Person of the Trinity cannot be rightly thought of in the absence of this human history” (223). In this remark I believe that epistemology is confused with ontology. While we cannot rightly think of the Second Person of the Trinity in the absence of Jesus’ human history as the Word of God incarnate, that hardly means that Jesus’ human history constitutes his being as the Second Person of the Trinity. In my judgment, this statement fails to do justice to Barth’s insistence that Jesus’ sonship exists antecedently in God himself and that as Son or Word, he would still be this Word of God even if he had never become incarnate, a view Barth continued to espouse when he asserted, “Even as the divine essence of the Son it [the divine essence] did not need His incarnation, His existence as man . . . to become
actual.”2 Because McCormack has confused epistemology and ontology in his understanding of election as the ground of God’s triunity, he has set for himself the task of revising any of Barth’s previous statements that suggest God could have been triune without us or that God would have been the Word without becoming incarnate. I do not believe Barth ever would have wanted to revise these statements because by making them, he was acknowledging God’s freedom in se and ad extra. But if one views the Trinity through the lens of a christology that is determined by a doctrine of election thought to offer the key to understanding both doctrines, that is the problematic conclusion that follows.

And this is not just one isolated remark in Orthodox and Modern. In attempting to understand Barth’s view of God’s self-humiliation in the Incarnation, McCormack turns once more to the doctrine of election and concludes that God gives himself over to judgment and wrath “in fulfillment of that for which God has eternally determined himself.” That sounds to me like a reasonable interpretation of Barth. But McCormack continues by saying, “He [God] gives himself over to that in and through which his true being is realized” (225, 228). Yet if God’s true being is his eternal existence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as Barth certainly held to be the case, then God’s true being is realized in eternity, and it would be a mistake to claim that God’s being is realized in his self-humiliation on our behalf. I certainly agree with McCormack that for Barth God’s true being is disclosed on the cross and that God’s purposes for us are realized in this event. But that does not mean that his being is realized in that event.

These ambiguities in christology lead McCormack to collapse the immanent into the economic Trinity. A sure sign of this is his question: “For when has God ever been anything other than God the Reconciler?” (220). The answer to this, of course, is that God was not the reconciler in his pre-temporal eternity. As Barth himself put it, “The second ‘person’ of the Godhead in Himself and as such is not God the Reconciler” (CD IV/1, 52). This freedom of God must be acknowledged or else God’s eternal triune being inevitably will be confused with the beginning of his ways and works with us and then with what he does as Lord, Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer. The God who eternally elects us does not need to elect us to be the triune God that he eternally is. McCormack’s God, however, might not be triune, because for him election actually constitutes God’s being as triune, for in this act “God assigned to himself the being

2. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV/2, The Doctrine of Reconciliation (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 113.
God would have for all eternity” (216). McCormack’s historicism requires that he “bid farewell to the distinction between the eternal Word and the incarnate Word,” because for him an eternal Word that had “no regard for the humanity to be assumed” is a “metaphysical abstraction” (217–18). Hence for McCormack “there is no ‘eternal Son’ if by that is meant a mode of being in God which is not identical with Jesus Christ” (219).

According to McCormack there is “a substantive issue dividing Molnar’s understanding of Barth from my own which will not go away” (297). And indeed there is. When McCormack says that “Jesus Christ is the electing God,” he confuses history and eternity just because he has confused epistemology and ontology as noted above; he actually believes that God needs to assign himself his eternal being, while Barth believes that such a God would be limited by his need to assign a being to himself. When Barth says that Jesus is the electing God, he means that in light of God’s electing grace and in light of the fact that God actually becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ, therefore this man Jesus is both electing God and electing man mediating between us and the Father. McCormack says that he is as convinced as I am that God need not have created the world. But his thinking does not bear the mark of that recognition, because he contends that “we do not know how the divine being would have been structured had God not determined to be God for us in Jesus Christ” (297). The problem with this remark is the same problem noted above. Of course we would not know that God would be triune without us unless God determined to be God for us in Jesus Christ and thus revealed himself to us in and through him. But that does not mean that God would have been other than he eternally was and is even if he never decided to be God for us. Once the triune being and act of God is historicized, this statement no longer can be made. And McCormack’s thinking bears that out consistently. McCormack claims this remark represents unwarranted speculation. But in reality it is a statement recognizing God’s freedom that is made only on the basis of revelation and in light of who God actually is in Jesus Christ. McCormack is not wrong to hold that God could have been God without us, but he slips into unwarranted speculation when he proposes that God might not have been triune at all because we cannot know God without Jesus Christ.
Let’s Speak Plainly

A Response to Paul Molnar

BRUCE L. MCCORMACK

The beginning of a response to a review article is typically the place where an author expresses his thanks to his critic for the interest the latter has shown in the author’s work and where conciliatory notes are sounded whose goal is to lay a foundation for further conversation and interaction. Under normal circumstances that is what I would be doing here. But the circumstances are not, in this case, normal.

This is, if I am not mistaken, the fifth time Paul Molnar has critiqued my reading of Karl Barth. I won’t go so far as to say that Molnar has gradually made his career to be parasitic upon my own, since he publishes diatribes against other theologians as well. But I will say that this growing body of work suggests strongly that overcoming my “errors” has become something of an obsession with him, an obsession that now extends to my former students and friends.¹

To this point in time, I have been loath to engage Molnar directly—not because his criticisms were so effective as to drive me from the field but because just the opposite was the case. Molnar’s style is to lift a conclusion or two from my writings, to counter them with assertions of his own whose validity he then seeks to guarantee by reference to a passage or two culled from

Barth’s writings, all the while ignoring in its entirety the extensive evidence I have adduced in support of my conclusions. Readers are never given a sense of what led me to think what I do, how I have gone about defending my views, or what texts with which I have dealt. My arguments are simply not engaged. I have also been acutely aware that if I responded at all, I would be opening myself up to three or four more essays written in the same unfortunate style. And so, for the most part, I have kept silent where Molnar is concerned, preferring to respond to those critics whose engagement seemed to me to be more substantive. Recently, however, he has turned his attention to one of my former students (Matthias Gockel). Given this may presage a widening of the campaign to include others of my students (past and present), a more readily available response has now become a matter of necessity. The potential for damage to the reputations and, indeed, the careers of younger (nontenured) scholars is great.

For those unacquainted with earlier contributions to the debate, some background is needed—even to understand Molnar’s critique in this issue of *Theology Today*. The debate was sparked originally by my own contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. The essay in question took the form of what the Germans call a *Problemanzeige*, an “indication of a problem,” and a proposed solution.

The problem to which I tried to call attention was that of explaining how Barth could speak of “Jesus Christ” as not only the object of election but also as its “Subject.” Such language implied, at a minimum, not the eternal existence of Jesus Christ but rather an eternal determination of the second Person of the Trinity to become incarnate in time. Interpreted maximally, however, the determination in question was not merely to do something in time but to

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be that which would be done. Seen in the light of where this train of thought finally led, namely, to Barth’s later christology in *Church Dogmatics* IV/1ff., it struck me that the maximal solution had to be the correct one. After all, Barth does say in IV/1 that humility *and even obedience* are proper to God,4 that they belong to Him by nature, and, indeed, that they are *essential* to Him.5

What this claim seemed to me to rule out was an understanding of the divine “essence” in terms of unchanging *substance*. What it seemed to require was an understanding of the divine “essence” as *plastic* in nature, as susceptible of a “determination”—a word used by Hegel, especially, to refer to the making concrete of the Idea or Infinite Subject. For Hegel, the Infinite Subject is made to be real to the extent that it is given a concrete relation to something or someone *in this world*. Similarly, Barth holds that the eternal act of Self-*determination* that is election is a “determination” in this precise sense: it is God’s eternal act of Self-constitution through giving to Himself a concrete relation to the man Jesus. As such, it is the life-act of God, the act in which God exists, the act in which God constitutes Himself as triune through the establishment of a concrete relation to Jesus of Nazareth. All of this must be true if humility and obedience are “essential” to God. But here is where the problem arises. Barth often spoke of the second Person of the Trinity in ways which suggested that the Logos had an “existence” *prior to the eternal act of Self-determination*. This would create a situation in which the divine “essence” was one thing *before* this act and another *after* it. Expressed another way, Barth spoke, at times, of the Logos *asarkos* in abstraction from the humanity He would assume in time. But if it were possible to speak in this way, then mutability would have been introduced into the being of God at the point at which God gives to His “essence” the determination for Incarnation; to be sure, an eternal mutation but a mutation all the same. And that is something Barth wanted to avoid at all costs. For a mutation in God—even an eternal one—would mean that what is revealed in Jesus Christ is something other and different from what God is *in and for Himself, without respect to His relationship to human beings in Jesus Christ.*

My proposed solution was that we eliminate the thought of a state of existence in God above and prior to the eternal act of turning toward us in the covenant of grace, that we understand that covenant as the act in which God gives Himself His own being and, therefore, structures Himself as triune for the sake

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5. Ibid., 200.
of establishing a redemptive relationship with the human race. There is nothing behind this event, no “moment” in God in which God existed in another and different way from what God does in the event itself.

It is not the case, however, that all talk of a Logos *asarkos* disappears on this view. Taken in its most basic significance, the phrase Logos *asarkos* simply refers to the preexistence of the Son of God, an existence *before* His assumption of human flesh in the Incarnation. But if the reality of the Son of God is given in an *eternal* decision, then obviously He “preexists” the Incarnation. So preexistence is not an issue. What is at stake, however, is the nature of this Logos *asarkos*. What my proposal required was the understanding that the Logos *asarkos* was never *without* the “determination” to be incarnate. Election, so understood, was an act of “setting-in-relation” both inwardly and outwardly⁶—inwardly, in that it made God to be triune, and outwardly, in that it set the triune God in relation to human beings (and to the world). As such, it was an act of “ontological freedom,” to borrow a phrase from John Zizioulas.⁷ It was an act whose freedom consists in the fact that in it God made Himself “free for” the human race.

Molnar’s initial response to this proposal was that it undermined divine freedom. What was unclear in this claim was how he himself understood “freedom” in God. That it meant “independence” was clear enough. God’s “freedom” was conceived by Molnar as a freedom *from* the world such that God would be God with or without a world. That it also meant a freedom from want or internal lack is equally clear. Beyond that, however, Molnar seemed to suggest that God could have chosen to do other than what He did in election, that God had other possibilities from which to choose, and, therefore, that even now God has in Himself unrealized potentialities. If that is correct, *it is hard to avoid the impression that Molnar thinks of divine “freedom” in terms of the voluntarist conception founded in the Enlightenment*, that is, the projection onto God of the autonomous freedom of the human individual. And if that is the case, it is hard to imagine how he can escape the critique of Feuerbach.

I would myself say that freedom in God is not a choice among options. It is rather the power to do all that is in God to do. In God, there are no unrealized

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potentialities. God is what God does because in the beginning lies a decision—the decision to be God “for us” and to be God in no other way.

The essays contained in *Orthodox and Modern* were published in the years following the publication of my first book, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*. Though the essay that galvanized Molnar was not published until 2000, the line of interpretation it followed was not at all new for me. As early as June 1994, I read a paper at a Barth conference in St. Paul, Minnesota, in which I set forth the claim that the act of election is, for Barth, an act that has profound ontological significance. The subsequent “connecting of the dots” of election and triunity in my *Cambridge Companion* essay was a wholly obvious and very small step to take. The other essays contained in this new volume are exercises either in establishing the pedigree of Barth’s thinking in nineteenth-century German theology and philosophy or a teasing out of implications that follow from a line of interpretation from which I have never deviated.

I sincerely regret that Molnar has shown no interest whatsoever in my historical essays. Though my calling is that of a systematic theologian,

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8. As George Hunsinger rightly says, “What is real, possible, and concrete is what God has established in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ we see that God does not exist without humanity and that humanity does not exist without God. God without humanity and humanity without God are conceived as abstractions that do not really exist in the sense that they have no ultimate reality. God does not exist without humanity, because God has decided in Jesus Christ not to be God without us. Likewise, humanity does not exist without God, because Jesus Christ has decided in our place and for our sakes not to be human without God.” See Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 154.

9. The title of the lecture was “Radical Autonomy or Communicative Freedom? Divine Election and Human Freedom in the Theology of Karl Barth.” The lecture was never submitted for publication but kept back for possible use in a collection of essays precisely like the one now under review. I regret now the decision not to include it in this collection (due to limitations of space). Much would have been clarified had I done so, not least, how rightly to construe the concluding chapters of my first book, which appeared a year later. It would also have made clear just how close George Hunsinger, John Webster, and Katherine Sonderegger were to me at that point in time. All of them were present; none brought an objection against the line taken in this lecture. My own belief is that such tensions as now exist as a consequence of our differing ways of appropriating Barth’s theology for constructive work indicate the changes of mind that have occurred subsequently in each of these friends. For my part, I have simply stayed the course.

10. The closest Molnar has come thus far to engaging my historical work is to register his dismay by means of a rhetorical (and pejoratively slanted) question: “God, of course, determines himself to be the gracious Lord of the covenant in Jesus Christ. But that hardly means that this determination is what constituted his triunity in Barth’s mind. Yet that is the misguided conclusion Gockel draws in following the thinking of his mentor Bruce McCormack. Could it be that their common error stems from the attempt to read Barth through Schleiermacherian lenses?” See Molnar, “Review,” 485. The truth is that my interpretive line on Barth’s theological ontology was in place before I taught my first seminar on Schleiermacher at Princeton Theological Seminary (in the academic year 1995-1996). Prior to that time, I had no close knowledge of Schleiermacher. Moreover, most Schleiermacher specialists (in this country at least) would suspect that just the opposite is the case—namely, that I have read Schleiermacher through the lens of Barth’s theology.
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Bruce L. McCormack

my training was in the history of doctrine, and I have always tried to ground my systematic work in detailed historical investigations. That, to my mind, is all the more important when dealing with a theologian like Karl Barth, a man whose place and time, whose culture and its history, are not our own. The fact that I have consistently tried to engage European scholarship on Barth was not snobbery on my part. It was simply a recognition that context matters. Barth’s problems are, in the main, the problems of the nineteenth century. His concepts and his technical vocabulary have a history. And we will not understand his deepest-lying intentions if we overlook this history, if we hurry on to the task of culture-assimilation (with the goal of making him speak to our questions and problems). Understanding must precede use—or our use will be of something other than Karl Barth.

Molnar shows only slightly more interest in the essays found in part 2 of my volume. Interestingly, he expresses considerable agreement with my reading of postliberal and postmodern interpretations of Barth, which will put him at odds to some extent with his postliberal (I would say, “neo-orthodox”) friends.

But his real interest lies in two essays found in part 3. Though he does not name them explicitly, I am guessing he is referring to “Grace and Being” (which he already discussed on numerous occasions) and “Karl Barth’s Historicized

11. It would, however, seem to be a minimal requirement on the part of any scholar who aspires to the honorific of “specialist” in the theology of a great theologian like Barth, that he or she control not only the primary literature but also the secondary literature in the major research languages. But this requirement is intended not only to promote contextualization but also to overcome solipsism. Where one does not allow one’s own most cherished interpretive traditions to be challenged by those of others, the danger is great that interpretation becomes ingrown, self-protective, and self-referential. I mention all of this to say that Molnar has never, to my knowledge, referenced a single German title. The bibliographies attached to his three books are all English-language titles. He makes use exclusively of Barth’s Church Dogmatics in its English dress. I would hope, therefore, that readers might understand why I would entertain doubts as to whether Molnar is in a position to know whether my depiction of European scholarship is accurate or not.

12. “Culture-assimilation” in the American reception of Barth’s theology, especially, is not an unsubstantiated charge on my part. It rests upon a close analysis of the differences between the American reception and the German reception of Barth’s theology across many decades. See McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 23–28. It is also worth noting that it is a judgment with which George Hunsinger (Molnar’s closest ally in the current situation) concurred at the time he wrote his first Barth book. There he said of T. F. Torrance, “It is difficult to shake a nagging feeling about the way Torrance reads Barth. Barth’s early theology has been called ‘revolutionary theology in the making’ and the ‘theology of crisis.’ From Torrance, however, one cannot help but feel that one is somehow getting revolutionary theology without the revolution, and the theology of crisis without the crisis. The energy, dynamism, and sense of collision which enter Barth’s theology by way of the actualistic and particularistic motifs never quite come through on Torrance’s account. Instead of actualism and particularism enlivening the objectivism, the objectivism is allowed to mute and soften the actualism and particularism.” See Hunsinger, How to Read Karl Barth, 11. Unfortunately, that last sentence offers a reasonably good description of Hunsinger’s own interpretive tendencies in recent years. It is not accidental that his encounter with the theology of T. F. Torrance came after the writing of this book—or that his own reading of Barth has gradually been assimilated to that of Torrance.
Christology.” The critique offered here seems to have been drawn entirely from them and has two points, both of which are little more than permutations on the critique he originally offered in his book on divine freedom. There he argued that my reading of Barth is “Hegelian.”¹³ He said both that I “confuse” epistemology with ontology and that I “collapse” the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity. Neither allegation advances the discussion beyond what I have already addressed in previous essays, and neither is accurate as it stands.

The suggestion that I “confuse” epistemology with ontology makes the relationship between the two sound accidental, as though I had unwittingly stumbled into a muddle from which I could not extricate myself. On the contrary, I have held all along that revelation, for Barth, is an act of Self-interpretation (cf. John 1:18). And it can be this because God has constituted Himself in His eternal election for this act in time. Theological hermeneutics simply is divine ontology, and divine ontology is hermeneutical without remainder. That is why Barth can say, “What God is as God, . . . the essentia or ‘essence’ of God, is something which we shall encounter at the place where God deals with us as Lord and Savior, or not at all.”¹⁴ And again: “God’s being . . . is His conscious, willed and executed decision.”¹⁵ God can reveal what He is essentially because the divine essence is never without the determination given to it eternally in election, a determination for Self-revelation in time. So Molnar would have been correct to say that I closely identify epistemology and ontology, that I take each to be entailed by the other. But it is misleading to say that I “confuse” them.

That I “collapse” the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity is, however, not true in any sense. Talk of a “collapse” makes it sound as though there is only an economy of God, that there is no immanent Trinity “before the foundations of the world.” On the contrary, to say that God constitutes Himself as

¹³. Molnar, Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity, 63: “We cannot simply equate the immanent and economic Trinity in the manner suggested by McCormack, without actually making God dependent on the world in precisely the Hegelian way.” The relation of Barth to Hegel is, at most, one of similarity. Hegel is addressing a problem in philosophical epistemology (the subject-object dualism created by Kant). Barth is addressing a strictly theological problem (the relation of God’s eternal act of election to His being). Hegel takes as his starting point the postulated deep structure of the real (the Infinite Subject). Barth begins with the particularity of the narrated history of Jesus of Nazareth and asks, “What must God be if Jesus is?” Hegel is, therefore, an absolute idealist; Barth is a critical realist. In Hegel, the “necessity” that the Infinite Subject create and redeem is the necessity resident in the postulated Idea. It follows that “dependence” is also contained in the Idea. In Barth, however, the meaning of terms like “freedom” and “necessity” are defined by the act of an ontologically free Person. In truth, when it comes to the question of the relation of election to God’s being, Barth is actually closer to the later Schelling than he is to Hegel (for reasons which have to do with an emphasis on divine freedom and the reality of the Trinity in protology).

¹⁴. Barth, CD II/1, 261.
¹⁵. Ibid., 271.
the triune God in an eternal act is to say that God is already triune before He creates a world. Therefore, I can adopt as my own the statement Molnar quotes from T. F. Torrance, namely, that God’s “becoming is not a becoming on the way toward being or toward a fullness of being, but is the eternal fullness and the overflowing of His eternal unlimited being.” I have never said otherwise.

Nor is it the case that I have anywhere said, as Molnar claims, that “God needs to assign himself his eternal being.” The meaning of words like “freedom” and “necessity” as applied to God is controlled by the originating event that God is; it would be a crass error simply to say that God “needs” the human race. Rather, we must say that the work of God in redeeming the human race has been made “necessary” by the kind of God that God is in God’s free act of Self-determination. Trying to think past this eternal event is like trying to think past the big bang. It simply is the Origin. There is no other God than the God “for us.” To speak of a God “in and for Himself” is to speak of a wholly unreal abstraction. But none of this carries the note of “necessity” as we understand it. For on the human plane, “necessity” is the opposite of “freedom.” In God, the meaning of both is given in one and the same decision.

Does this then make the Son to be a “creature”? Molnar does not raise this question. But it is a more pertinent question than those he does raise, so I will raise it for him. The answer is no. Barth was right to speak of God’s triunity in terms of three “modes of being.” God is both exalted and lowly, the One who “commands” and the One who “obeys.”16 I do not make the Father and the Son to be different Subjects; therefore, I cannot be an Arian.

What I have done is to secure the full and complete deity of Jesus Christ without resorting to speculation. If there is no God behind God, no mode of existence above and prior to the eternal act of turning toward us in Christ, then God is what He does in that turning. God is Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, I would like to say a final word about style. My own criticisms can be pointed on occasion; I will immediately grant that. But their pointedness has to do with what I take to be the facts of the case. I studiously avoid sarcasm and ridicule. I wish that the same could be said for Molnar. I became aware of his tendency to mock others when I read his review of Matthias Gockel’s book. The first lines of that review read: “Who would think that one might appeal to Schleiermacher to understand Barth? That is exactly what Matthias Gockel does in this book.”17 Molnar might just as well have asked,

“Who would be crazy enough or stupid enough to appeal to Schleiermacher?” And in his “Critic’s Corner” piece to which I am responding here, Molnar writes, “McCormack actually believes that God needs to assign himself his eternal being.” Not just, mind you, “McCormack believes” but “McCormack actually believes”! Even leaving aside the fact that I do not believe what is here ascribed to me, it is clear that Molnar would like readers to draw the conclusion that I have somehow gone off the deep end. In the same vein is this comment: “I think ‘historical consciousness’ has gotten the better of McCormack.” And even when Molnar seems to be lavishing praise upon me, he is actually having a laugh with his friends. So it is when he describes me as “a virtuoso in the world of theology.” Molnar intends that those who know Barth well will immediately think of a sentence drawn from Barth—one he himself had just cited in his review of Gockel: “Schleiermacher did not speak as a responsible servant of Christianity but, like a true virtuoso, as a free master of it.”

If Molnar thinks that I am not a responsible servant of Christianity, he should say so openly. I can certainly live with that. But I do not think that sarcasm and mockery and sidebar conversations that exclude others serve any good purpose. In the long run, it is Barth studies that will suffer as students begin to ask themselves, “If Barth’s theology invites this kind of party strife, why should I read it?”

Polemics certainly have their place. There are times when they are needed. But polemics should always be respectful, never obsessive—and should never, under any circumstances, be allowed to subvert that awe before the subject matter which turns even the most learned theologian into a person filled with childlike wonder and the joy of discovery. For that was, finally, the key to Karl Barth’s theological existence. That is why I continue to be drawn to him.

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18. Ibid., 483.
In 1910, the encyclical *Editae Saepe* attacked Martin Luther and the Reformers as “proud and rebellious men” who allowed “unbridled licentiousness to run wild. . . . They called themselves Reformers, in reality they were corrupters.” But the encyclical itself had been corrupted by these slurs, which originated with a minor Vatican official, the anti-Semitic Umberto Benigni, spymaster of the anti-Modernist cabal and publisher-to-be of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. According to historian Owen Chadwick, “Neither Pius X nor his Secretary of State were pleased at the wording which the drafters had put into the pope’s mouth.”¹ The cardinal secretary of state said he first heard of the encyclical when it appeared in the *Observatore Romano*. “The Pope told the German bishops not to publish it.”²

The consternation that encyclical caused was a tsunami compared to the small waves stirred up by the June 29, 2007, decree from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), which was concerned mainly with the “Christian communities born out of the Reformation.” These communities were regarded as being deprived of “a constitutive element of the Church,” inasmuch as they did “not enjoy apostolic succession.” On the other hand, according to Vatican II, those separated communities still possessed the indispensable “elements of sanctification and truth that are present in them.”

It is to Leo XIII that we owe the term “separated brethren”—as distinguished from the “sinful brethren” of Acts 20:30—in recognition of what Vatican II would later call the “significance and importance in the mystery of salvation”

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² Rafael Merry del Val y Zulueta, in Ibid.

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enjoyed by the churches of the Reformation. So while the CDF decree may have the appearance of another “olive branch launched from a catapult” (Cardinal Newman), it can also be read as an opening to a deeper ecumenism that takes the form of a counterbalance to an authority that historically has sometimes subordinated gospel teachings to the preservation of imperial prerogatives. In this way, there can be seen a Reformation contribution to ecclesial equilibrium as another aspect of what Karl Rahner meant when he wrote that heresy “may be the occasion of development in Catholic doctrine and practice.”

To all this it may be added that to bother with redefining those earlier imperial prerogatives at the dawn of the twenty-first century is at best to ignore the urgent needs of the present era and at worst to revive the raise-the-barriers mentality that afflicted poor Pius IX. We are not living in a pre-Lisbonearthquake universe when rumors and then facts about a tragic disaster take a week or a month to reach the rest of Europe, so that by the time of their arrival the horrors have been blurred or attenuated to the point of acceptability. This is the age of instant communication, when the world knows by its own seen-and-heard experience of the periodic deaths of hundreds of thousands through natural or man-made disasters—the latter, too often including planned murders. In such a world, Christians cannot afford the luxury of debating which ecclesiastical system takes priority over the other.

The kind of thinking that went into Dominus Jesus in 2000, and that was more mildly displayed in the 2007 decree, unfortunately emphasized the most restrictive and negative view of the centrality of Roman Catholicism in worldwide Christianity. What is now called for is a fraternal clarification—at least as detailed and precise as the father-knows-best chastisement dispensed in Dominus Jesus—of the positive mission of the churches of the Reformation in preparing the way for a truly unified Christian assembly. “Preparing the way” has an obvious gospel resonance, and it is in that ultimate source that any clarification of the mission of the separated brethren must be found.

In Matthew 11 when John the precursor was in prison, he sent his disciples to Jesus with this question: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus did not reply with a set of rules to which John’s disciples should conform, nor did Jesus define himself—as he would of necessity on other occasions—as the anointed One. His mission did not then need defensive claims to a unique role; he left it to others, like John himself, to proclaim him the Lamb of God. Nor did he respond to the question as though he were staving

off threatening attackers. He let his works and words speak for him: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” The obvious lesson for today is that the Catholic communion is less in need of reassertions of its uniqueness than of greater commitment to the kinds of works described in this Gospel passage.

If the relationship of John to Jesus can be taken as analogous to the relationship of the rest of the Christian world to the world of Catholicism and Orthodoxy, one will see a providential role for adherents of the Reformation in both figuratively and literally testing the waters for the universal *ecclesia*. This testing, in which many churches are already engaged, can relate to such matters of governance as greater collegiality and diffusion of power between center and periphery. It can relate to such matters of ethics as the reassessment of life and reproduction as well as of death and termination. Lastly, it can relate to emancipatory issues such as the ordaining and consecrating of women, and the religious embrace of homosexuals and other persecuted minorities—the lepers of our society. While Jesus ministered to such people, his church today does not.

If the precursor mandate of these separated brethren is not respected as having a major role in the ongoing mystery of salvation, the effect will be comparable to that of the Jewish leaders who both derided John’s baptism and refused to answer Jesus’ question: “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” (Luke 20:4). Even worse would be the tendency, unfortunately still prevalent in Roman circles, to condemn the experience of the Reformation churches before it has been tested by history. This would be in effect to answer that John’s baptism was merely from men. Such a judgment would not only deny John’s earlier acceptance of Jesus as the promised One, but it would implicitly reject Vatican II’s declaration “that all who have been justified by faith in Baptism are members of Christ’s body . . . and so are correctly accepted as brethren.”

The experience of those brethren provides both a lesson and a program that must be honestly appraised by the sister churches of the Orthodox world as well as by the Catholic communion itself. Ignoring the witness of the Reformation churches would create the frustrating situation described by Jesus—also in the context of John the Baptist: “But to what will I compare this generation?” he asked, before telling a little parable about youngsters arguing over which game to play: “It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn’” (Matt 11:16–17). The Reformation churches’ testing of
the waters by undertaking whatever is possible, like John who “came neither eating nor drinking,” cannot but enrich the Petrine church. However, if the latter fails to reciprocate, it will be comporting itself like the priests and lawyers who said of John, “He has a demon.”

Rather than an illustration of the contribution that the churches separated from Rome can make to controversial matters relative to feminist or gay rights, it is preferable—partially by way of also gaining a foothold for larger issues—to point to the much neglected but richly symbolic subject of the rights of animals. This, of course, is not simply a matter of symbolism, since a basic measure of character in the post-Enlightenment era has always been how a person treats animals. Concerning the role of the churches in the latter, just as opposition to slavery by Christians was engendered in the nineteenth century by the evangelicals and William Wilberforce, so too in the twentieth century opposition to animal abuse by Christians has been identified with the Anglican communion, and preeminently with Andrew Linzey, a priest and founder of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics. (His twentieth book on the subject, *Why Animal Suffering Matters*, was recently published by Oxford University Press.)

In the language of the “little parable” above, these two representatives of the Reformation tradition in England, Wilberforce, and Linzey, call to the larger world of Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. They played their threnodies over slaves and animals, and they mourned the abuse of sentient life. It remains to be seen whether in the twenty-first century their companions in religion will reciprocate and from their laments make a concerted ecumenical effort.
Revelation: A Commentary

Brian K. Blount

Those familiar with Brian Blount’s earlier work on Revelation will know that he hears in the book a compelling call to Christian witness. That theme was featured in the title of his book Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture (2005), and it continues to be a key theme in this commentary on the Apocalypse. His reconstruction of the setting in which Revelation was composed builds on recent studies that have shown that persecution of Christians was not a widespread problem in the late first century. Persecution was an intermittent and local issue. The Roman imperial cult was widely accepted in Asia Minor at that time, and it was woven into the fabric of social and religious life. Christians involved in commerce would probably have belonged to trade associations in which certain rites honoring the gods were practiced. As long as Christians accommodated the dominant ethos, they typically got along, even though it meant accepting the deification of human force in the cult of the emperor.

Conflict would occur if Christians chose to stand out by professing and living out the implications of their faith in God and Christ the Lamb. Therefore, Revelation’s call for public witness was not so much a call to resist in the conflict that the Romans had started; rather, it was a call to overcome the accommodating tendencies of Christian communities, given with the knowledge that their witness would provoke conflict. Blount observes, “John wants them to self-declare that they believed not in the lordship of Rome, its gods, its social, political, and economic infrastructure, nor its emperor, but in the lordship of Jesus Christ, and that they would now fight to make that religious lordship of the future the governing principle of social, political, cultic, and religious practice of the present.”

The theme of witness is introduced in the opening lines of Revelation, where John says that his book is his witness to the word of God and the witness of Jesus Christ (Rev 1:2). Blount notes that the Greek word for witness is martys, which English speakers all too easily equate with “martyr.” Revelation certainly recognizes that one’s witness can lead to conflict and death or
martyrdom, yet witnessing cannot be identified with dying. Revelation is not calling for Christians to become victims but to show the courage of conviction in professing and living out their faith. This is a very helpful perspective that lifts up the dynamic quality of Christian life that is portrayed in the book.

Revelation’s portrayal of Christ as both Lion and Lamb plays an important role in shaping Blount’s perspective. Both aspects of Christ are understood together. Christ wields power, but not the destructive power of tyranny. Christ conveys love, but it is not anemic, sentimental love. Love is the way his power is expressed. It is active and engaged, working to overcome the forces of evil that oppress God’s world.

Those who begin reading the commentary with page 1 will find that the introduction depicts Revelation as a book that is mean but not mean-spirited, and John as a writer who is angry but who had reasons for his anger. Although Blount goes on to clarify what he means, the opening seems more negative than the remainder of the commentary. As one continues reading, one finds that Blount is sometimes resistant to the message of Revelation but regularly seeks to give it a fair hearing. For example, he notes that by depicting the imperial world as a whore in order to dissuade readers from accommodating to it, the writer uses imagery that might be taken to demean women. Yet he also asks why such a word picture might have been used, and he helps modern readers consider appropriate and inappropriate uses of the imagery.

It is in his central theme of witness, however, that Blount is most compelling. His engaged and engaging reading of Revelation’s message encourages others to give the book a fresh hearing and to let its witness to God and the Lamb find a voice in their own preaching and teaching.

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Calvin: A Brief Guide to His Life and Thought

Willem Van’t Spijker

This volume from the eminent Reformation scholar Willem Van’t Spijker is intended to be an introductory guide to Calvin with a particular focus on situating his life and thought in historical context. Perhaps the most distinctive
contribution of the book is its attempt to present the figure of Calvin on a more detailed background canvas than might be expected in such a short compass.

Although the subtitle suggests that this is to be a guide to Calvin’s theology as well as his life, the weighting is very strongly historical and biographical. The first chapter sets the historical scene, focusing on the complex, politically volatile situation as Protestant ideas begin to penetrate France. This is followed by two chapters on Calvin’s early years, one devoted largely to the first edition of the *Institutes* (dealing mainly with questions of purpose, method, and structure, with some reflections on Calvin’s ecclesiology and his understanding of the Lord’s Supper) and then five more chapters covering the remainder of his life. Although Calvin’s approach to particular issues and doctrines receives brief treatment within these chapters, there is only one chapter devoted to the contours of Calvin’s thought. A final chapter reflects on Calvin’s influence across Europe during his life and in the decades immediately following his death.

Those who have read other outlines of Calvin’s life will find few unfamiliar biographical details here, but some of the themes drawn out by Van’t Spijker are welcome. For example, he highlights Calvin’s strenuous attempts to promote intra-Protestant unity. Similarly, the influence of Martin Bucer and the significance of Calvin’s years in Strasbourg receive particular attention. With regard to Calvin’s theology, Van’t Spijker refers not only to the more usual doctrines (such as election and the Lord’s Supper) but also to the significance of the concept of union with Christ. In church matters, he draws attention to the four offices and the question of church discipline as well as to the importance of psalm singing for Calvin. Van’t Spijker succeeds in touching on an important range of themes and issues for such a relatively short introductory guide.

The volume is not without its problems, however. The selection and presentation of material on the wider historical background is not always as effective as it could have been. This is particularly evident in the descriptions of the situation in France and in the early stages of the Reformation in Geneva before Calvin’s arrival. On the one hand, too much knowledge is sometimes assumed of an introductory readership; on the other, too much detail is sometimes given on matters that are not central to enabling a ready grasp of the core of Calvin’s thought or particular phase of his life. Given the brevity of the book, this compounds the overemphasis on historical and biographical information at the expense of reflection on Calvin’s theology.

In the chapter devoted particularly to Calvin’s thought, Van’t Spijker attempts to cover Calvin’s attitude to scholastic theology, to situate his thought in relation to Erasmus, Luther, and Bucer, to place the *Institutes* in the context
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of Calvin’s other writings, and to offer a flavor of each of the four books in the final edition. The demands of contextualizing and summarizing Calvin’s theology in this way within the confines of a single chapter are too great; the chapter attempts to do too much too quickly, with the result that at times Van’t Spijker’s explanations are very compressed for a beginner but somewhat superficial for those with a little more knowledge.

As one of many books to appear for the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth, Van’t Spijker’s volume finds its place as a historically oriented introduction, but one that is unlikely to satisfy completely on its own. Particularly for those interested in an introduction to the specifics of Calvin’s theology, it will need to be read alongside other guides to his thought.

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Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed
Paul Helm

This reviewer had hoped—on the basis of the title—that the author would present John Calvin himself as a guide for all of us perplexed about God, life, and the universe. In actuality, the subtitle indicates that this book is part of a series of guides to various theologians and on several theological subjects. Helm’s stated intent is “to let Calvin speak for himself,” which would seem to be an encouragement to go to the sources instead of reading secondary literature. Nevertheless, he proceeds to set forth an exposition of Calvin’s theological and philosophical ideas, generally following the order of the 1559 edition of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, framing that with an introductory orientation to Calvin and with a concluding exploration of the relationship of Calvin to Calvinism.

Paul Helm, the J. I. Packer Professor in Theology and Philosophy at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada, has also authored *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford University Press, 2004) and *Calvin at the Centre* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). In the first chapter of this book, in the first footnote, he writes, “All quotations from Calvin’s *Commentaries* are from the Calvin Translation Society edition.” The bibliography indicates that these were published from 1843 through 1855. In the same chapter, in the fifth footnote, Helm cites Henry Beveridge’s 1845 translation of the *Institutes*: “All quotations from the 1559
Institutes use this translation.” Why does a twenty-first-century guide to Calvin use all nineteenth-century translations of these major works? If there are good reasons for the exclusive use of these translations—now more than 150 years old—would it not have been appropriate to share those reasons? If all English translations of these works of Calvin since then are in some way deficient, should not the author have made the case for that?

Helm helpfully presents Calvin as a preacher and a minister more than a theologian, promoting true religion more than correct theology as such. In this view, the Institutes is an occasional work promoting reform. Chapters 2 though 7 follow the order of the Institutes, exploring the knowledge of God and of ourselves, God in Trinity, the Son, grace and faith, the Christian life, and church and society. Helm may overstate his claim that Calvin uses his threefold description of the offices of Christ as prophet, priest, and king as “a way of organising his theological thought.” Helm organized the rest of his book around his exposition of these three offices, even while admitting that he is stretching Calvin’s distinctions artificially. It seems that Calvin himself noted these offices briefly in the Institutes and then did little more with them.

In his concluding chapter, Helm demonstrates that Calvin is not in total agreement with the Calvinists who developed covenant theology, that Calvin is more in agreement with the Puritans than R. T. Kendall realizes, and that Calvin is less supportive of Reformed epistemology than its proponents have realized. Helm ends by quoting B. B. Warfield: “When trust in ourselves is driven entirely out, and trust in God comes in, in its purity, we have Calvinism.”

The book appears to be written for seminarians, pastors, and professors—all of whom should find it engaging.

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Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin

Roland Boer


Roland Boer calls his book an “‘intervention’ in the good old sense of the term . . . [that] seeks to shake up some assumptions about Calvin.” Yet it also “reflects [Boer’s] own coming to terms with Calvin,” whose “ideas and legacy
run in [his] veins and capillaries.” As provocative and personal as the book is, one might ask if the author’s main goal is simply to tweak noses. Boer’s often flippant tone aside, he does raise some excellent questions. One wishes only for more attentiveness to the whole of Calvin’s thinking.

Boer aims to showcase his view of the foundational tensions in Calvin’s theology, demonstrate Calvin’s determination to restrain the revolutionary political implications of that theology, and then envision those implications being “let loose.” Boer writes:

Calvin struggles with a theological tension that has wide-ranging political implications. . . . [He] keeps opening up radical possibilities . . . , possibilities that he then sets out carefully to contain. . . . Calvin opens up the mouth of the [theological] bag . . . and the [revolutionary] cat glimpses daylight and makes a dash for freedom. Each time, Calvin manages to clasp the bag shut again before the cat can break out or even sink a claw or fang into those firm hands wrapped around the mouth of the bag. . . . What if we let loose the revolutionary strain in Calvin’s theology and politics?

While even Calvin’s rhetoric reveals this “struggle,” Boer finds key tensions in Calvin’s doctrines of Scripture (between removing interpretive authority from the Roman church and restraining radical idiosyncrasy), of grace (between the egalitarian democracy of depravity and the elitist aristocracy of salvation), of freedom (between the inner, spiritual liberation separating believers from law, external compulsion, and observances, and the outer, political restraint required by civil order), and of politics (between obeying all established authorities and disobeying all ungodly ones). Seeing the revolutionary implications of each doctrine, Boer finds Calvin’s restraint of those implications somewhat understandable but ultimately counterproductive and even maddening. Calvin is “too good a reader of the Bible” to avoid its revolutionary—even “communist”—messages. Seeing in such messages a decidedly Marxist sensibility, Boer prods Calvin to disentangle the Bible from all established or ecclesial interpreters, to celebrate the universality of grace, to see Christian freedom as truly “freedom from the law . . . [and] in favor or inner compulsion,” and to promote disobedience to all ungodly rulers.

Boer’s argument is clearly stated, carefully organized, and thought provoking. It points to some hard truths that Calvin scholars and Calvinist Christians need to confront (for example, the irony of Calvinist traditionalism, not to mention its legalism). Still, Boer’s reading of Calvin through Marxist lenses is insufficient. In this reading, psychic, spiritual, or political tension indicates only the repression of an authenticity seeking release. Boer’s metaphor makes this point explicitly: healthy theology, and by extension politics, lets the cat out of the bag.
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Pragmatic Calvin thus represses the “real” messages of the gospel. However, viewing tension in this way overlooks some key parts of Calvin’s thinking.

To begin, Calvin’s doctrine of predestination does not point to an “aristocracy of salvation,” as Boer suggests. Salvation is both independent of social rank and, from the human perspective, mysteriously and randomly bestowed. For Calvin grace is not—and cannot be—earned. Likewise, Calvin’s first part of Christian freedom is not freedom from the law (whether internal or external) but rather freedom from work’s righteousness (that is, freedom from guilt). Finally, seeing Calvin’s idea of the “popular magistrates” as being appointed by God to punish ungodly rulers misses his view of such persons as called to live up to their constitutional obligations when they have been given such responsibility by the populace. All three of Boer’s doctrinal summaries, then, miss Calvin’s insight that social institutions play a providential role in shepherding and canalizing the inevitable tensions of human experience. Releasing human tension through revolutionary politics yields not human authenticity and social justice but spiritual despair and societal chaos. Grace is thus the means by which God constructs personal identity within existing society, not a means to destroy existing societal institutions. Likewise, Christian freedom is not liberation from human or divine law but the celebration of God’s gift to humankind of his law. Finally, politics is not about godly people rebelling against ungodly political institutions but, if necessary, disobedience to ungodly rulers by means of established law and institutions.

In his preface, Boer says that he aims “to invite Calvin in for a couple of beers and a long talk on the balcony.” While I wonder if Boer has been listening carefully, I am intrigued enough to want to join the conversation.

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Triune Atonement: Christ’s Healing for Sinners, Victims, and the Whole Creation

Andrew Sung Park

Theologian Andrew Sung Park (United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio) accomplishes much in this compact work, assessing prevailing views of
atonement as backdrop to his own approach. Atonement, Park maintains, must be seen as a fully triune act that includes both cross and resurrection and affects victims and sinners differently.

Park’s discussion of various atonement theories covers familiar ground, yet he offers some helpful distinctions. He warns, for example, against confusing ransom theory (which envisions a ransom paid to Satan) with Christus Victor, which “depicts Christ as the military leader of a fight against the evil enemy of God.” Less helpful is Park’s discussion of satisfaction theory. For Park, the core of satisfaction theory is debt payment, a characterization that is easily confused with the penalty payment at the core of penal substitution theory. Park makes no reference to more positive contemporary interpretations of Anselm that suggest that “satisfaction” refers to Jesus’ “making whole” the human-divine relation through his utter self-offering and faithfulness to God, even when this leads to death. As it stands, Park finds limited merit in satisfaction theory, contending it supports a retributive, arbitrary view of divine justice and fails to include resurrection in God’s atoning work.

In his constructive project, Park addresses three central concerns. He draws a distinction between the liberating effect of atonement for the oppressed and the salvific effect of atonement for sinners. He treats the resurrection as integral to God’s atoning work along with Jesus’ death. He utilizes these perspectives to envision fully triune atonement.

Park’s discussion of atonement as liberation for victims is cogent and fresh. The Korean concept han becomes a richly nuanced lens through which to understand oppression. Since han is an experience of suffering shared by creation, it functions for Park as a bridge between spiritual and ecological motifs in Scripture and brings into view the efficacy of atonement for creation.

Park argues that Jesus’ condemnation to death by crucifixion is the result of his lifelong resistance toward oppressors. We need the dual lenses of cross and resurrection to appreciate that atonement includes divine solidarity with victims as well as their decisive divine vindication. We must read the role of Jesus’ blood in atonement symbolically, not literally, says Park: Jesus’ blood “cries out,” like that of Abel, on behalf of all victims.

The role of Jesus’ blood is again a prominent theme when Park turns his attention to atonement for sinners. Acknowledging biblical allusions to blood as a “cleansing” agent for sin, Park argues that the core requirement for atonement is not actually bloodshed but repentance. Jesus’ blood is not somehow imbued with supernatural powers; rather, for sinners, Jesus’ blood symbolizes the depth of divine care and forgiveness. Reformed readers may be less than
comfortable with Park’s conclusion that “the success of Jesus’ atoning work hinges on sinners’ repentance.” In general, Park privileges a moral influence view of the effects of atonement for sinners.

While Park’s separate development of atonement for victims and sinners is illuminating, one could perhaps retain the distinction—yet acknowledge the mixed condition of all human beings—by speaking instead of atonement’s impact on humans as sinners and as oppressed. Violent and victimizing behavior in adults often points to abuse in childhood, and oppressed persons are not sinless.

Park’s treatment of the role of the Spirit in atonement is thought provoking. Based on a close reading of John’s Gospel, Park argues that the term “Paraclete” specifically identifies the postresurrection Spirit, now having undergone death and resurrection. Oddly, Park fails to spend equal time on the role of the Father, leaving readers to wonder whether the First Person of the Trinity, too, undergoes cross and resurrection with a similarly decisive effect.

Park’s clear writing makes this an accessible book for seminarians, working pastors, and lay learners. Those seeking a more nuanced critique of prevailing atonement theologies will need to look beyond Park, but he offers a fresh view that prods us to reconsider the dynamics of triune atonement for human beings who are at once both sinner and sinned against.

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**Desire, Gift, and Recognition: Christology and Postmodern Philosophy**

**Jan-Olav Henriksen**

Taking note of the disconnect between systematic theology and philosophy of religion in general and between systematic theology and postmodern philosophy of religion in particular, Jan-Olav Henriksen’s exploration into christology is a welcome “surplus.” The Norwegian author acknowledges that while there is no necessary link between christology and postmodern philosophy, there “could be a link.” In contrast to writers who come to the task mainly from the side of postmodern philosophy (of religion), Henriksen wants neither
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to compromise the church’s traditional message about Christ nor to neglect dialogue with christological tradition. Indeed, this attempt toward a mutual linking and conditioning of postmodern—and postmetaphysical—thought and Christian tradition makes this book unique. “Hence,” writes Henriksen, “the project has a supplementary and exploratory rather than a strictly doctrinal aim.”

In the first part, Henriksen introduces the main concepts borrowed from postmodern philosophy, namely “desire,” “gift,” and “recognition,” engaging leading thinkers from Derrida to Ricoeur to Levinas to Marion to Mauss to Caputo. The second part looks at Jesus’ identity—a topic considered by postmodernists with a fair amount of suspicion. The author seeks to know something of Jesus’ identity by looking at how the Gospels present to us Jesus as human and how Jesus’ understanding of God in his life and practice emerges. What christological tradition, particularly the creedal and patristic tradition, attempted to achieve with the notion of “nature” and ontology, a postmodern non-ontological and nonmetaphysical approach calls “identity,” which it seeks to understand in terms of relationality. The relationship between Jesus, God, and humanity (anthropology) is thus in focus. In this respect, there is affinity with the method of another Lutheran christologist—namely, Pannenberg—with whom the Norwegian theologian interacts widely.

Parts 3 and 4 delve into the discussion of Jesus’ death and crucifixion as well as resurrection and incarnation, respectively. Not surprisingly, the nonviolent interpretations of Girard and others such as Weaver and Heim are engaged vis-à-vis traditional “theories of atonement,” particularly the Anselmian view.

Henriksen’s book breaks new ground in more than one way. Along with a thick and insightful dialogue with the best of postmodern philosophy, the Norwegian theologian provides the reader a careful engagement not only of New Testament materials but also of key creedal and patristic attempts at defining Jesus in terms of two-nature doctrine. The book contains a number of insights that invite further probing, such as that the cross is a “scandalous gift” or that the parable’s metaphor in Luke 12 of God as “burglar,” the one who “breaks in,” implies that we do not consider God as present. While not provocative in its style, the book also tests boundaries of Christian theology by playing with the idea that the existence of God can be imagined not to be necessary apart from language, or that the transcendence of God may only mean a “transcendent” human point of view. Apart from Henriksen’s stated claim to stand on received tradition, these claims could get wings!
On the formatting side, the book suffers a bit from hasty editorial work: while some of Pannenberg’s works are cited in English translation, his *Systematic Theology* is not (even though in one footnote an English translation is given); two books by J. Hicks are confused with each other; and an earlier published essay has been integrated poorly into the book.

Whether and in which ways the Chalcedonian and postmodern hermeneutical paradigms come to speak of the same “reality” of Jesus the Christ is the “$64,000 question.” Traditionalists may say that at its best, a postmodern hermeneutic in relation to philosophy of religions can come to the affirmation that Jesus the man “functioned” as God (as he pronounced the forgiveness of sins). This book offers a fascinating and methodologically promising invitation to such a reflection and debate.

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**Hugh of Saint Victor**

**Paul Rorem**


In an oft-cited passage from the thirteenth-century, Franciscan doctor and mystic Bonaventure set out the essential authorities for Christian theology. His list is divided into three parts—first, doctrinal truth founded in Augustine and advanced by Anselm of Canterbury; second, moral teaching based on Gregory the Great and continued by Bernard of Clairvaux; and third, the “ultimate end of both,” that is, the mystical teaching found in Dionysius (the Pseudo-Areopagite) and furthered by Richard of St. Victor. Bonaventure concludes his lists with an unexpected addition: “Anselm exceeds in reasoning; Bernard in preaching [i.e., moral instruction]; Richard in contemplation; but Hugh [of St. Victor] excels in all three.” Who was this Hugh, the paradigm of all the aspects of theological knowledge?

Hugh (probably of Saxon origin) was a canon, or priest living according to the monastic life, at the new abbey of St. Victor just outside Paris in the first half of the twelfth century (ca. 1115–1141). Little is known about his life—and little would he have cared. What is important about Hugh is the wealth of
writings he bequeathed to the tradition on such a wide variety of topics that only Albert the Great, a century later, can rival him as a medieval polymath. “Learn everything,” Hugh once said, and in terms of the knowledge available to him, he came close to achieving this goal. Hugh was the great schoolteacher of his time, as well as of much later medieval theology. Paul Rorem’s fine new introduction to Hugh rightly puts this pedagogical commitment at the center of the book. Rorem organizes his work according to a list of Hugh’s writings compiled by his abbot, Gilduin, not long after the canon’s death. This is helpful but perhaps not totally convincing, since Hugh’s productivity as a teacher (this despite many works having been lost) seems too varied to capture within any single pedagogical rubric. Nevertheless, there were consistent theological principles that guided this Victorine’s attempt to organize the full range of the forms of knowledge of his time, especially the distinction between the two essential moments of the divine plan for history (creation and re-creation) and the three modes of reading the biblical text: the historical sense of the biblical letter; the allegorical, or dogmatic sense, of its significance for Christian doctrine; and the tropological sense, or what the text means for the lives of believers. Rorem deals effectively with how each of these organizing principles was operative in Hugh’s works, though the diversity of the canon’s ouevre makes it difficult to bring all these perspectives into a single whole.

Much specialized academic literature on Hugh, both editions of texts and studies, has been produced over the past fifty years, but few general works. Paul Rorem’s book is arguably the best introduction to Hugh of St. Victor in any language. This is a balanced survey, demonstrating mastery of the sources and a judicious attitude toward the academic disputes that naturally attend someone who wrote so much. A longer review could take up issues where Rorem might have qualified or enriched aspects of his treatment (for example, on the relation between Augustine’s *Soililoquiae* and Hugh’s text of the same name), but there is little to fault in Rorem’s book as an informative, well-researched, and engaging access to this important medieval author. An introduction of this nature, however, can suggest a further question beyond its own announced scope—that is, to what extent is an author once so widely read still worth reading today, save as a witness to an important moment in European theological pedagogy?

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Pain and Suffering in Medieval Theology: 
Academic Debates at the University of Paris 
in the Thirteenth Century

Donald Mowbray
Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2009. 204 pp. $105.00.

Mowbray’s study, which seems to have begun as a dissertation at the University of Bristol more than a decade ago, treats a number of important thirteenth-century debates in the theology faculty at Paris in which ideas about pain, suffering, corporeality, and the afterlife were explored and refined. Chapters treat discussions of Christ’s suffering with attention to its implications for both soteriology and christology (especially the hypostatic union); the implications of understandings of pain—particularly the pain consequent to the Fall—for sex difference; the place of pain (especially the pain of contrition) in theories of penance; pain in the afterlife in its implications for both the emerging concept of limbo and treatments of corporeal suffering in hell; and discussion of how the so-called
separated soul (that is, the soul between the death and resurrection of its body) might experience purgatorial suffering. As treated by scholastic theologians, these are highly technical and sometimes quite opaque issues, which Mowbray manages to explain clearly by paraphrasing a large number of texts, for which he helpfully provides the relevant Latin in footnotes. This is no mean achievement, since these are complex issues and there is no quick or easy way through them. Mowbray’s concern is with the development of technical language, as, for example, in discussions of the separated soul, where a new concept of a soul-fire composite had to be developed to explain purgatorial suffering, since there is no soul-body composite in purgatory and hence no direct access of soul to sensory information. The definitions, connotations, and semantic fields of such key concepts as *corruptio* and even *passio* could, however, have received more analysis.

For those who can bring to it a sophisticated knowledge of scholastic theology, there will be much of use here. Although the familiar names of Bonaventure and Aquinas dominate, the book provides a guide to less well-known figures as well—for example, Gauthier of Bruges and Gervase of Mont-Saint-Eloi—and directs researchers to places where theologians differed in subtle and not so subtle ways. But for the general reader, the modern theologian, and the medievalist, there are limitations. All three will be put off by the fact that the book is poorly written and edited, with some grammatical errors, frequent misplaced modifiers, much repetition, and so many awkward, passive constructions that the frustrated reader is sometimes hard-pressed to figure out whether he or she is confronting a convoluted summary of Mowbray’s own argument or a paraphrase of a medieval position. Those conversant with modern but not medieval theology will become lost in an account that assumes theological and religious issues arise primarily because of what sources are available (Augustine, for example, or Aristotle); there is little here that explains or even describes the context for the growth, from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, of the religious significance of suffering and the body, about which scholars such as Rachel Fulton (not cited here) have written recently with such power. The medievalist too will have a sense that both context and bibliography are missing. Burning questions, such as why the good works of penance have to be painful, are placed against the background of scholarship from the 1970s or even the 1950s that characterized theological positions in terms of schools of affiliation, whereas the growth of increasingly ferocious ascetic practices, the challenge of “heretical” positions on the body, the emergence of literary genres such as the otherworld journey narrative, and new understandings of religious community and of personal responsibility for religious commitment receive little or no attention.
This is not a book that makes the most of what is, after all, a moment in which the best minds of Europe were engaged as never before with the spiritual and moral significance of that most inevitable of human experiences: pain and corruptibility. The problem is not, I think, that the theologians themselves were dry or pedantic, but rather that Mowbray does not manage to show how they were responding to contemporary religious concerns (although they were) or to make the urgency of their questions live for us. But readers who bring patience as well as knowledge to this study will find much to reward careful reading.

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The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther’s Practical Theology

Timothy J. Wengert, editor


Martin Luther is usually studied as a theologian and reformer. Yet in leading the people in congregations under his care, he was just as much a pastor—if not more so. In this volume edited by Timothy Wengert, Luther’s role as pastor and the practical theology stemming from his pastoral judgments and actions are creatively examined. As a compilation of essays drawn predominantly from articles appearing in Lutheran Quarterly over the past decade and sorted under the pastoral responsibilities of preaching, teaching, caring for piety, and engaging the world, these essays reflect the perspectives of a wide range of Luther scholars.

Wengert frames Luther’s practical theology as arising from his pastoral concern for the suffering of simple folk, for whom the gospel speaks comfort. Pastors deliver “real promises to desperate people in need of consolation and faith.” The essays in this volume bear witness to Luther’s pastoral judgments with regard to the principles of law and gospel, the theology of the cross, and justification by grace through faith that frees Christians for their vocation to love their neighbors.

Although Robert Kolb’s essay in part 1 does not necessarily break new ground, it casts the theology of the cross (oft cited apart from Luther) within Luther’s pastoral concerns for human trust of God. Kolb frames theodicy in the
twenty-first century as human justification of God’s indifference. Humans are bound to distrust and place themselves where God appears absent. However, the cross reveals this human effrontery through God’s faithfulness. Life as a new creature is living utterly dependent on God and liberated to trust.

A highlight of this volume is an essay by Vitor Westhelle, who persuasively argues that Luther’s use of the vernacular and images from folk life restored the people’s trust in God’s Word and liberated the people and their language from the regimes that silenced them. Westhelle contends that Luther’s use of folk language created space for the voiceless to be heard. Another compelling essay, by Jane Strohl, explores Luther’s adaptation of a medieval cultic practice in order to console the suffering of a beloved Saxon prince. Naming the suffering unto death so feared by the people as evil, Luther transfigured suffering and offered the consolation of God’s blessings through the means of Christ’s grace.

In part 3, Robert Rosin argues that Luther’s appreciation for education had theological roots in his articulation of Christian freedom and a life reoriented toward the world. The next five essays, which could be a book on their own, plumb the depths of Luther’s catechetical writings and reflections. Wengert notes that Luther delighted in expanding the Ten Commandments to show not only their prohibition but God’s intention for humanity as well. And Ronald Rittgers offers an engaging account of Luther and Andreas Osiander, two reformers who wrestled with their theological judgments in relationship to people’s practice of private and public confession. The other writers in this part include Charles Arand writing on the Creed, Wengert on the Lord’s Prayer, and Reinhard Schwarz on the Lord’s Supper.

Sitting in Wengert’s “Luther the Pastor” course in seminary seven years ago, I learned to pay attention to Luther’s appreciation for the deep piety of laity. I was drawn to the essays in part 4, for I have held the impression since then that Luther’s patience with practices of the laity is a skill that must be mastered by all leaders within the church. Devotional practices are the practical theology of laity. In her essay “Luther regarding the Virgin Mary,” Beth Kreitzer argues that the popular devotion around Mary was appropriate in Luther’s estimation as long as Mary was held in esteem not as an advocate or intercessor, which is the place of Christ alone, but as an exemplar of Christian virtues of faith, humility, and love. More than the Christ-bearer, Mary’s faith, trust, and complete reliance on God make her worthy of the people’s praise. Mickey Mattox similarly writes of the tension found within Luther’s writings about the role of women as proclaimers of the gospel. Neither the young Luther nor the older Luther can be cast as a supporter of women in publicly ordained positions.
within the church. Yet Luther supported marriage over celibacy, the household over the monastery or convent, and the common priesthood of all the baptized over the exclusively male priesthood. Mattox sits comfortably within Luther’s own tension as he describes the role Luther held tantamount for women and men as bearing the right and duty to announce God’s forgiveness through faith.

The other essays found in this volume are equally important accounts of Luther’s pastoral practice. In part 3, Eric Gritsch explores Luther’s humor as his bold living in Christian freedom. And according to H. S. Wilson, Luther insisted that preaching is simple and clear proclamation of God’s activity. Part 4 also contains essays on Luther and music by Robin Leaver and an essay addressing the use of images and Luther’s relationship with artist Lucas Cranach by Christoph Weimer. Luther’s understanding of the monastery is rendered more complex in Dorothea Wendebourg’s article in part 5. In the last essay of the book, James Estes explores the theological convictions that led to the critical role of the princes and others in secular authority during the Reformation.

In seminary, I craved evidence of Luther’s pastoral practice. In these essays, the pastor and scholar in me found deep satisfaction. On occasion, however, these writers make leaps to the contemporary context without describing their assumptions about the present. These scholars are at their best when they provide a glimpse into Luther’s normative judgments that arose from his concern for people and informed his pastoral practice. Even though Luther sometimes disapproved of certain practices, his theological convictions led him to trust above all that the people’s faith would indeed receive God’s word.

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Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode

Sylvia Walsh

What to do with Søren Kierkegaard? The nineteenth-century Danish polemicist himself first pressed the question. Writing as a gadfly of Copenhagen, a Christian Socrates asking troubling questions of the so-called Christians of Christendom, Kierkegaard feared little more than the possibility of becoming
easily appropriated by the reigning philosophical and ecclesial establishments of his day. Now approaching the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth, readers of Kierkegaard continue to wonder what to do with him. The burgeoning uses of Kierkegaard—not only in scholarship but also in the church’s preaching and teaching—often only beg the question.

In this clear and comprehensive examination of Kierkegaard’s theology in historical context, Sylvia Walsh contributes to the handful of monographs that treat Kierkegaard theologically and primarily on his own terms. Although the first English translations of Kierkegaard were by churchmen, and although Kierkegaard figures significantly in the theologies of Barth, Tillich, and others, the initial association of Kierkegaard with existentialism drew attention toward his early, “aesthetic” writings and away from the explicitly Christian writings of 1847–1851. Walsh helps refocus attention on his Christian thought.

Her first book, _Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics_ (Penn State University Press, 1994), began the redirection by reading Kierkegaard’s aesthetics in light of his ethical-religious concerns. Against romantic and postmodern efforts to idealize ironic play over ethical commitment, Walsh
argues that Kierkegaard could not have imagined one without the other. True
beauty is finally a beautiful life of integrity and commitment. Walsh’s second
monograph, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Christian Existence* (Penn State University Press, 2005), explicitly attended to Kierkegaard’s
theological phase. She saw a “dialectic of inversion” running through his the­o­logy, whereby all things essentially Christian (faith, forgiveness, love, and
joy) are expressed and encountered through their negative counterparts (sin,
the possibility of offense, self-denial, and suffering).

Walsh’s latest book builds on these earlier projects. What distinguishes it
might be what she leaves out. Gone here are the contestable claims that Walsh
once made for reading Kierkegaard religiously. Instead, she promptly declares
that “Kierkegaard was first and foremost a Christian thinker” before commenc­ing her task of “sifting out” his contributions to Christian theology. The theol­ogy throughout is unapologetic, without the usual epistemological negotiations
that characterize the philosophy of religion. This is surprising, since Walsh is a
scholar in residence at Stetson University, where she has taught philosophy of
religion, but not theology proper, since 1989.

Gone too is Walsh’s attention to the underlying logic of Kierkegaard’s writ­
ings. Her earlier books portrayed Kierkegaard as a “both/and” thinker, despite
the title of his influential book. In a culture (both his and ours) that would force
a choice between being poetic and being earnest, Walsh reads Kierkegaard as
requiring both. Among cultural assumptions that would divide faith from sin,
Christian joy from suffering, Walsh highlights the *coincidentia oppositorum* that
Kierkegaard perceived in authentic Christian living. Kierkegaard, by contrast,
appears only syntactically unified, moving quickly from topic to topic. While the
opening chapters explain Kierkegaard’s emphases, the rest gallops through major
doctrinal loci, corralling Kierkegaard within historical theological positions.

Chapter 1, “That Single Individual,” summarizes Kierkegaard’s religious
background, use of pseudonyms, and his famed, failed engagement to Regina
Olsen. There is not much here that cannot be found in recent biographies or in
the introductions to Kierkegaard’s writings. Happily, Walsh’s summary neither
ignores Kierkegaard’s biography nor becomes preoccupied (as Kierkegaard
was prone to be) on the fate of his psyche. The chapter is fair and accurate, and
I will recommend it to introductory students.

Chapter 2, “Christianity Is an Existence-Communication,” shows why
Kierkegaard’s Christian thought must work “in an existential mode.” Here
Walsh teaches the *Postscript*’s distinction between objective and subjec­tive
truth—and why the latter is paramount for “becoming a Christian in
Christendom.” Intrinsically, Christianity is an existence for living rather than a proposition for knowing; it becomes true only when a person appropriates it as a way of life. Here again, Walsh represents Kierkegaard justly, including her clarification that the subjective truth of Christianity does not displace the need for objective content. Even the most subjective, passionate faith needs something outside itself to believe in.

Less convincing is the way Walsh justifies her next four chapters on what amounts to a concession on Kierkegaard’s part and a clarification on her own. Having noted that personal appropriation must be supplemented with conceptual clarity, she has the reader “turn now to some basic Christian concepts which Kierkegaard sought to clarify for the sake of enabling a Christian awakening and upbuilding of the single individual to occur.” Chapters 3–6 (devoted to God, anthropology, christology, and Christian life, respectively) treat Kierkegaard’s theological positions with few reminders about how clarifying the “what” of Christianity helps only insofar as—to borrow Kierkegaard’s metaphor—it ties a knot in the end of the thread, enabling us to get on with sewing, with the “how” of Christianity.

These substantive chapters are not ineffective. Walsh succinctly teaches theological topics ranging from original sin to kenotic christology while drawing on Kierkegaard’s thirty plus works as well as over 300 secondary sources. She sometimes offers straightforward commentary, as when she follows The Concept of Anxiety and The Sickness unto Death almost section by section throughout chapter 4. Elsewhere, she amalgamates different pseudonyms, journal entries, and works signed “Kierkegaard” to derive his theological position vis-à-vis classical alternatives. Some will take issue with this blending of authorial perspectives. I will only note that her generalizations almost always serve to clarify the complexity, if not the multiplicity, of Kierkegaard’s theology. For example, within her discussion of atonement theory, Walsh shows that Kierkegaard points to the liturgy of Holy Communion as performing the work of the cross, exploding, it would seem, what one means by atonement theory. Chapter 7, on Kierkegaard’s cultural and political critiques, is particularly helpful. The book offers readers who are going deeper into Kierkegaard an extensive resource otherwise difficult to find aside from multivolume commentaries.

And that is how the book is best used—as practical resource rather than as provocative claim. Of course, resource books cannot tell us what to do with a theologian, especially one who emphasizes the “how” of Christianity to the point of redefining the scope and shape of theology itself. This is to say
that Walsh’s book gives us some sharp tools for doing something with Søren Kierkegaard, but it leaves the question of what to do largely up to the reader.

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In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance

Richard Horsley, editor

It has become almost de rigueur among biblical scholars to use the lens of “empire studies” in their work. I see this as a welcome change from twenty years ago, when my commentary on Mark (Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus, Orbis, 1988) was deemed by some academic reviewers to be “overly politicized” for taking precisely this approach. As Richard Horsley points out succinctly in the opening lines of this volume, “Americans have a special relationship with the Bible. They also have a special relationship with Empire. . . . Until recently, however, most of us may not have been aware of the second, and we had certainly not given it much critical thought.”

Empire-critical studies are predicated on ever more sophisticated work in the social history, political and economic culture, and anthropological modeling of Mediterranean antiquity. Increasing archaeological data is available for reconstructing material history, as are comparative studies of a wider array of ancient textual traditions. This work is not only an asset but is essential to any serious reading of either the Old or the New Testament today. Editor Horsley, recently retired from the University of Massachusetts in Boston, can legitimately be seen as the dean of the new political contexting of biblical studies, and many of the contributors to this collection were fellow pioneers. I am delighted to see such an excellent overview of and introduction to this rapidly growing field.

It is fitting that the first essay should be from Norman Gottwald, whose work changed the terrain for studying Israelite origins. The chapter is an accessible snapshot of his prolific (but sometimes dense) work. I agree with his concluding suggestion that “the present-day equivalent of ancient Israel might properly be relatively powerless countries like Cuba, Nicaragua . . . [and even] Palestinians of the West Bank.” First-world theologians who have
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unconsciously read biblical Israel through the analogical lens of British, German, or American colonial “success stories” have thus read the story exactly backward. Fortunately, a new generation of engaged scholars is following in Gottwald’s footsteps to correct this, such as Laurel Dykstra (Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus, Orbis, 2002).

Walter Brueggemann is the other North American giant of social readings of the Hebrew Bible, though he is more theologically oriented than Gottwald. His contribution is strongest in its exposition of three oracles from Isaiah concerning “YHWH who changes the calculus” of empire. He portrays the prophets as poets proclaiming both truth and hope in the face of imperial oppression. Brueggemann’s ambiguous title, “Faith in the Empire,” addresses a peculiarly American struggle: distinguishing between empire as the social location of a critically conscious church and empire as an object of belief about security and salvation.

Jon Berquist attempts to unravel the contradictions of the Persian period. Though longer on broad analytical points than textual work, his essay offers a helpful general portrait of how empires project military power and exercise ideological control in a region, and how they can promote either economic extraction or intensification. It then specifically portrays how Persian hegemony shaped the restorationist project of post-exilic Israel, particularly how the construction of the Second Temple served Persian interests and split Israelites along class and geographic lines. Without naming it, Berquist uses the postcolonial approach of discerning complex strategies of accommodation and resistance by communities under imperial domination.

John Dominic Crossan has been churning out “empire readings” of the New Testament for a decade. His essay provides an excellent summary of the literary, architectural, monumental, and numismatic evidence of Roman imperial politics as a religion. In my favorite line of the book, he concludes: “Before Jesus the Christ ever existed and even if he had never existed, these were the titles of Caesar the Augustus: Divine, Son of God, God, and god from God; Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, and Savior of the World. When those titles were taken from him, the Roman emperor, and given to a Jewish peasant, it was a case of either low lampoon or high treason.”

Crossan’s background essay is followed by another in which Horsley summarizes his argument that “Jesus, his mission, and his movement(s) must be understood in this context of persistent conflict between Roman domination and the Galilean and Judean people.” Drawing characteristically on the writings of Josephus, Mark, and Q, he shows how Jesus used various modes of peasant resistance to the dominant order that included healing and exorcism.
work among the poor, proclamation of an alternative authority, prophetic demonstrations and parables, and calls to covenant renewal. We are in debt to Horsley for all he has done over the last thirty years to move the “Jesus and politics” debate well beyond the simplistic options of withdrawal, collaboration, or armed struggle. Horsley also supplies an introduction and concluding summary to the anthology.

Neil Elliott has done similar service to Paul’s writing. His essay reviews the apostle’s political language, which reflected “the tensions between his fundamentally Israelite vision and the fantasy of imperial theology.” Aware of the long legacy of interpretive domestication of Paul, he includes a rereading of Romans 13. Elliott’s work in the “historical Paul” has been so refreshing (most recently in his compelling The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire, Fortress, 2008) that it makes two methodological moves all the more disappointing.

On one hand, Elliott opines that Paul’s eschatology was “wrong,” and he “paid for these miscalculations with his life.” On the other, he disdains how Paul was soon “repackaged” by Acts and the deuto-Pauline epistles, which he contends “effectively accommodated ‘Paul’s’ teachings to the dominant Roman imperial order.” I am not sure Elliott can lament both developments; after all, if Paul was so obviously wrong, why wouldn’t his successors retool his vision? But I think Elliott’s literalization of Paul’s eschatology and dismissal of a fifth of the New Testament is not only problematic but unnecessary for his political reading of the apostle. Indeed, Elliott leaves us with a rather tepid choice between the “realism” of empire and Paul’s “utopian fantasy” of liberation. That’s pretty thin (not to mention domesticated) broth for contemporary Christians trying to negotiate a very real American empire.

Warren Carter’s chapter recapitulates his recent groundbreaking work on Matthew, which he contends exhibits negative attitudes toward Rome’s imperial violence and oppression but also employs “a prominent theme from the prophets whereby various imperial powers act as agents of God’s punishment of the Jerusalem rulers.” I think Carter’s interpretation of Matthew 17:24–27 is overly subtle; he understands it to authorize disciples to pay taxes to Rome while still qualifying as a “hidden transcript of resistance.” I see it as a hilarious political parody that begs the question of allegiance along the lines of “render to Caesar” (see my Ambassadors of Reconciliation: New Testament Reflections on Restorative Justice and Peacemaking, Orbis, 2009). But Carter’s overall social portrait of the Matthean community’s struggle to embody an alternative to empire in Antioch in the wake of the disaster of 70 C.E. is reliable and compelling.
Brigette Kahl is not as harsh as Elliott in her assessment of Acts. It “does not have a consistently ‘pro-Roman’ stance,” but in her attempt to “try to do justice to the real-life circumstances and the restraints of his story” she notes a “puzzling ambiguity in Luke’s attitude toward the imperial order.” She seems to struggle to hold together her dialectical thesis that while Luke is critical of Roman claims, his intent was to write “a ‘safe version’ of the Christ (hi)story within the framework of Roman power.” She goes so far as portraying Paul as a client of Roman provincial governor Sergius Paulus and in the end agrees that Acts must be included in the “canonical betrayal of the apostle Paul.” The problem is that Kahl’s effort to “read Luke against Luke” provides too much inconvenient anti-imperial material that contradicts her main thesis. I would have liked her to pursue her own suggestion that Luke may have been presenting Paul as a “trickster hero who knows how to prevail in the most dangerous situations.” Indeed, Acts’ putative “happy ending” (“Luke simply . . . [lets] their story end before serious trouble sets in”) could just as plausibly be read as political parody as imperial apology. Kahl admits that most of Luke’s readers would have known very well what happened to Paul at the hands of Nero. Still, her suggestion that Acts omitted notable elements of Paul’s ministry (such as the prominent role of women and the collection) as too subversive is interesting, if an argument from silence. Kahl does point out that Acts has historically been used to legitimize both radical movements and conservative ones, so her focus on ambiguity in the text is justified. But her thesis would be more persuasive if she could point comparatively to another ideological narrative that manages to both sanitize and preserve the subversive legacy of a radical social movement.

Greg Carey’s essay brooks no such equivocation, situating the Book of Revelation firmly in the context of post–70 C.E. Jewish resistance literature. Carey focuses on John’s threefold symbolic caricature of Rome—the empire as “Sea Beast,” the imperial cult as “Land Beast,” and the imperial socioeconomic system as “Babylon”—which figures are contrasted throughout the book with the Lamb and his “witnesses.” Revelation encodes both passive noncooperation and active resistance to the empire but finds accommodation singularly anathema.

This last point raises interesting questions for the allegations of Kahl, Elliott, and (to a lesser extent) Carter concerning post-Pauline New Testament literary strategies of accommodation to Roman domination. It is clear that the violent imperial backlash against Jews—and thus Christians—in the wake of Rome’s crushing defeat of the Judean revolt in 70 C.E. made life dangerous for both throughout the empire. But if the steady drift of the postapostolic movement was toward accommodation in order to facilitate “safety,” why does
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Revelation—which if written during the Domitian persecution would have had more reason than Luke or Matthew to play down the subversive aspects of Christianity—intensify the critique of Rome, calling openly for resistance at the cost of martyrdom? Perhaps postcolonial analysis of, say, Mennonites under the Soviet Union or Dalits in India might suggest examples of how hard-pressed minorities can continue to resist yet survive, which could illumine later New Testament writings.

Aside from the issues raised above, I have three quibbles with this anthology. First, I wish it were more evenly weighted between testaments (two-thirds of the contributions address the New Testament). Second, it would have been nice if the authors had exhibited a little more concern for christology (a continuing weakness in political hermeneutics). Third is the matter of application. For some academics, the analysis of imperialism stops at antiquity (Bruce Malina’s work comes to mind), but the contributors to this collection rightly see it as crucial for reading both past and present. Yet while most of these essays draw connections to the current American empire and its discontents, little effort is made to suggest specific engagements. And I wish those who derogate accommodationism in the New Testament would turn their hermeneutic of suspicion on their own class and race privileges as professional scholars in the Pax Americana.

But these are minor criticisms. Empire-critical studies stand, in my view, as the most important development in biblical studies in our generation, for which this volume is a welcome and representative primer. It deserves wide use in our seminaries, sanctuaries, and streets.

Ched Myers
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Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice:
An Introduction

Mary Clark Moschella

In an 1897 editorial, Charles Dudley Warner remarked that “while everyone talked about the weather, nobody seemed to do anything about it.” The same could be said about the context of ministry. Everyone agrees it is important, but few say specifically how to learn about it and fewer still what to do with
the insights thereby gained. Moschella’s book is an effort to address that need. It therefore belongs to a small but growing number of texts that attend directly to the methods by which a ministry setting can be understood. The real aim for such work is not greater knowledge for its own sake, but the healing and transformation of Christian communities.

Following an introduction that neatly orients the reader to the focus, commitments, and structure of the book, Moschella presents a series of ten tasks that characterize her approach to using ethnographic tools in a pastoral setting. These tasks, one per chapter, unfold in a largely temporal sequence and reflect the structure of a typical academic semester, where each chapter would accompany the weekly experiential engagement with a given task. This sequence is not really a strict linear series, however. As the book progresses, tasks in later chapters echo topics raised in earlier ones, since ethnography is itself an iterative approach. Another way to view the book’s arrangement is to consider the first four chapters as preparatory matters, the next three as more directly about fieldwork, and the final three as issues of wider accountability. However one imagines the structure, though, the book is well suited to various kinds of learning, whether in a guided course or a self-taught situation.

It is important to note that the engine driving Moschella’s view of ethnography is that of narrative therapy. Her overarching rationale for using ethnography in ministry is for persons and congregations to surface their stories, both in self-recognition and for appreciating the narratives of others. This naturally leads to the aim for this entire ethnographic enterprise, since expressing such stories publicly in and beyond a church will, in this framework, foster healing and change (the topic that comprises the final chapter). While there is certainly a truth to this, the overall effect at times seems like an unchecked optimism that insight leads to improvement, which, for those who have ever tried to change their habits of eating or exercise on such a basis, will sound dubious. Placing ethnography within a therapeutic framework may also lend credence to the charge that practical theology tends toward methodological grave robbing—that is, relocating approaches from other fields and using them in ways for which they were never intended.

In many respects, this book is a compendium of various classic resources in ethnography and fieldwork. The notes and bibliography show that Moschella knows these varied materials well. Oddly enough, though, a few of the earlier chapters seem to presuppose the reader shares the author’s familiarity with a particular method, so that only the pastoral considerations about its use are
actually discussed. In order to learn more about a method only cursorily presented by Moschella, the reader must therefore consult the resources mentioned in the notes or have them summarized by an instructor. By contrast, a few of the later chapters are heavily committed to a secondary retracing of primary texts (for example, Mason, Swinton, and Mowat; Ammerman et al.; McDannell; and Hammersley and Atkinson in chapter 7). The simple point is that since this book is a compendium of useful materials found in scattered places (which is a laudable aim), the summary of those materials calls for even handling throughout.

In overall scope, Moschella leads the reader through the requisite stations of a thorough ethnographic plan. There are a few shortcomings, to be sure. Given the book’s title, one might expect a more sophisticated approach to “practice” than chapter 2 affords, especially in terms of a robust theory of action. Certain key concepts are also assumed but not closely examined. For example, what counts as “theology” amounts in some places to whatever ministers and churches discuss, in others to the ideas people have about God and faith, and in yet others to ethical positions and opinions. Similarly, although expressed stories can bring change, there likely would also be good reason to challenge the power imbalances that mark human groups, including churches. Addressing these might require setting aside a narrative goal for ethnography and giving greater attention to critiques, strategies, or interventions. The broad plan of this book left me wanting Moschella to show how ethnography could contribute to facing these more troubling contextual dimensions, for I am confident she would have much to say.

The book is clearly written and organized, something not to be dismissed these days as typical. Excellent examples support Moschella’s presentation and are in a few cases sustained throughout the book. Moreover, several chapters address important topics underdeveloped elsewhere, such as pastoral ethics, care for others, paying attention, and interpretation. These are the truly distinctive contributions of this book. Most important, this book is an introduction to the topic, especially suited for those needing basic guidance through valuable resources for ministry. Moschella provides this in a surefooted way, with the grace and wisdom of a patient teacher. Augmented with other texts more directly about fieldwork methods, this book can be a useful companion.

James Nieman
Hartford Seminary
Hartford, Connecticut
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Walter Brueggemann
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The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making

Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM


Elizabeth Liebert is obviously a thoroughly discerning person. Discernment is not simply a spiritual practice or set of practices for her, but one of the attributes of her character, the nature of her being. Consequently, there flows from her an entire process of discernment to enable others to enter into this way she describes for the sake of decision making.

True confession: I was interested in Liebert’s book to compare it with my own, Joy in Divine Wisdom: Practices of Discernment from Other Cultures and Christian Traditions (Jossey-Bass, 2006). To my great amazement, the two books, though they discuss the same general topic, are almost entirely complementary throughout.

This book comes from a person who is adept at praying, at making use of her imagination, at listening to her feelings, at responding to her intuitions. The prayer practices that ground each chapter, therefore, truly stretch the reader who is more oriented toward rational processes.

Liebert first introduces the spiritual practice of the “Awareness Examen,” a contemporary renewal of the classic discipline “Examination of Conscience.” Thus she initially focuses the attention of her readers on God and how God is working in their lives, and she gracefully maintains this accent throughout the main body of the book. Next, she sketches the foundations of discernment, especially stressing the importance of spiritual freedom during the process.

The central chapters of the book, then, highlight diverse entry points for undertaking discernment: memory, intuition, the body, imagination, reason, religious affections, and nature. For each, Liebert compiles the essentials of employing that entry point, provides practices or exercises to enable us to try on that method, presents biblical and theological grounding for its use, and displays its values and dangers. Everything is undergirded with diligent habits of prayer. And constantly we are urged to match our favorite entry points with others using opposite gifts or skills. The result is a comprehensive array of positive means by which we can become more confident (though never absolutely cocksure) that we are nearing God’s will for us.

Though Liebert writes as a Catholic trinitarian Christian, the practices and prayers she illuminates are beneficial for readers of all denominations and
suitable even for persons of other faiths. Her accessibility, however, does not dilute the compelling impact of her work for anyone of passionate trust.

The final chapter delineates steps for seeking confirmation and assessing one’s process of discernment. Especially noteworthy in this section is a repertoire of touchstones from the tradition by which we can ask God to confirm whether a decision leads to the Divine Majesty’s “greater service and praise” (Ignatius of Loyola).

Liebert is a superb guide. Though teachers in my past have taught me intensively not to trust my feelings, her prayer exercises and emphasis on balancing various entry points partially offset that training.

I am disappointed, however, that she includes using a Quaker-style “Clearness Committee” under the topic of intuition, whereas I have experienced several extremely profound and life-changing Mennonite “Meetings to Discern the Spirit” that were, contrastingly, primarily rational. It surprised me that a member of a Catholic monastic community would not highlight more the power of group discernment. Liebert mentions the value of community confirmation occasionally, but in general her book features private practices.

Of all the books that I have read on the subject of discernment, this is the preeminent one I would recommend to someone facing a critical decision. Liebert’s spotlight on God and God’s work as well as her delineation of a multitude of prayer practices make this book unsurpassed in value.

Marva J. Dawn
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Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ

J. Todd Billings
New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 218 pp. $120.00.

Billings teaches Reformed theology at Western Theological Seminary; this book is a revision of his doctoral dissertation. Its series title—“Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology”—accurately describes both its content and its intended audience. It addresses historical questions (concerning the language of “participation” in Calvin) and contemporary doctrinal
discussions (concerning the notion of “gift” in recent theology). Prospective readers need to be willing to parse fairly complex arguments, both among Calvin scholars and among theologians of the Radical Orthodoxy school.

Billings weaves the historical and contemporary elements together, variously addressing interlocutors in “sixteenth-century studies” and “theologies of the gift” as the occasions arise. Chapter 1 reviews the recent literature; chapter 2 examines Calvin’s historical background, particularly with respect to his patristic, scholastic, and humanist inheritances. The next three chapters focus, respectively, on Calvin’s language of “participation in Christ,” his accounts of prayer and the sacraments, and his understanding of the law. A final chapter briefly assesses the future promise of Calvin’s understanding of participation.

As a historical study, the book is relatively successful. Billings is familiar with a wide range of Calvin’s writings, including not only the successive editions of the Institutes but also the commentaries and a number of significant, but perhaps less well-known, treatises such as Bondage and Liberation of the Will. He also makes mostly judicious choices within the vast secondary literature. Calvin’s notions of “union with God” and “participation in Christ” help to nuance his well-documented emphases on legal and juridical metaphors for salvation and sanctification. His frequent use of the Eastern Fathers is noted, along with his (measured) appreciation for something like “deification.” The “third use of the law”—providing guidance for believers—is restored to its rightful primacy; obedience is rooted in our participation in Christ. Billings also offers a positive account of Calvin’s doctrine of the sacraments, joining those who seek to redeem Calvin from certain later Calvinisms. By reexamining the recent historiography, this study may contribute to the retrieval of a more “catholic” Calvin (as has occurred with Luther, with productive results, in recent studies of that theologian).

The book’s systematic claims are rather less persuasive. The short compass within which Billings attempts to defend Calvin against his critics among the “gift theologians” is simply not adequate to their complex, nuanced, and variegated scholarship, here corralled into a single category. Too often, the author’s counterclaims are simply not to the point. For example, in order to describe Calvin as more interested in “participation” than these theologians would allow, Billings notes that Calvin makes frequent use of the word “participation” (and its cognates). This, however, does not address the chief issue—namely, that a deep metaphysics of ontological participation, which reached its height in Thomas Aquinas, is largely absent from Calvin (a point that Billings
generally concedes). Similarly, the critics’ nuanced readings of Scotus and Ockham are hardly countered by citing Heiko Obermann’s views from the 1960s; nor is their reliance on the final version of the *Institutes* impugned by the “development” of Calvin’s thought, since Billings shows that he became more focused on participation over time.

As the book’s title suggests, Billings seeks to emphasize the activity of the believer, denying that Calvin sees us as merely passive receptacles of God’s fierce grace (who are thus unable to “return the gift”). Unfortunately, however, citations that advance this effort are quickly qualified: participation is mostly engrafting or adoption in which God acts and we do not; indeed, any good human action—obedience, faith, and even gratitude—is actually the work of the Holy Spirit. A survey of Calvin’s language, as quoted throughout this book, reveals his fondness for restricting the active voice to God and employing the passive for all positive human activity: God joins, grows, becomes, abides; we are joined, are gathered, are incorporated. Indeed, we typically do not “participate”; we are “made participants.” Much of this would seem to confirm, rather than refute, the critics with whom Billings contends.

In spite of these concerns, the historical advances of this study should not be overlooked. Moreover, my final word must be one of sympathy to the author and criticism of his publisher: Oxford’s decision to place a three-figure price on this small book, and to issue it only in hardcover, renders it inaccessible to practically all private purchasers (and to many libraries). That such practices are unnecessary is demonstrated by a survey of other publishers’ catalogues; that Oxford has done a tremendous disservice both to authors and to readers is beyond all doubt.

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**John Calvin: A Pilgrim’s Life**

**Herman J. Selderhuis**


Herman Selderhuis is professor of church history and church polity at the Theological University of Apeldoorn in the Netherlands and is among the Calvin scholars I most admire. I am also obliged to note that he has kindly
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included my own work in two of the volumes he has edited. This book reflects his impressive research skills and teaching ability. Though there exist many biographical studies of Calvin, including recent works, this one brings a more vivid sense of Calvin as a person than any I have seen.

It is common to note Calvin’s reticence to reveal personal and biographical details in his works, quite in contrast to Luther. Calvin had a stated preference for the secluded life of a scholar, no matter how much his calling put him in the public eye. Selderhuis has not accepted these assertions as facts. He has instead combed Calvin’s works, especially his letters, and found that the reformer revealed abundant details about his experiences and feelings. As well as his broad and detailed reading of Calvin, Selderhuis brings his own winsome style and humor, making the book enjoyable to read.

Without becoming psychologically speculative, mining the letters allows Selderhuis to say a great deal about Calvin’s emotional experience of life. The result is a clearer, more firmly grounded sense of Calvin’s personality than found in other biographies. Some of this is captured in the descriptions of the periods of Calvin’s life in the one-word chapter titles: He is spiritually a “pilgrim” traveling the road, a “stranger” living as an exile from his country, a “victim” suffering opposition. Some of these headings are a bit more of a stretch, as when Selderhuis considers Calvin a “sailor,” linking the term to trips across Lake Geneva and the metaphor of the *Institutes* as an “ark.” The events of each period, as well as Calvin’s inner experience of them, are often vividly illustrated in Calvin’s words.

The book is directed to a broader audience than academics. The entries in the index point almost exclusively to figures during or before the Reformation. There are almost no notes to other modern scholars, though Selderhuis does build on the work of others and offers answers to debated questions. However, like Calvin himself, he does not often explicitly name his conversation partners, even when it seems that he must have other scholars in mind—as when he discusses the metaphors of “abyss” and “labyrinth” made famous by William Bouwsma. Selderhuis sticks to his topic, which is Calvin as found in Calvin. Doing so makes the book a uniquely accessible biographical study.

Though this is not a theological study, Selderhuis appropriately weaves Calvin’s theology into the story as explanation of the person and his work—and one could hardly deal with Calvin’s life without discussing theology. This is a very helpful way to encounter Calvin’s teaching: it is rooted in historical context rather than abstracted into seemingly timeless doctrinal summaries.
This is an admirable introduction to Calvin as a person. It will prove useful for seminarians, ministers, and, one hopes, Christians in general. Arriving in the year when Calvin’s five-hundredth birthday has prompted so much interest around the world, the curious would do well to start here.

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John Calvin: Reformer for the 21st Century

William Stacy Johnson

Between the fall of 2008 and the first half of 2009, I had read and reviewed ten books on Calvin’s life and theology, mostly in the English language. This outpouring of books on the Geneva reformer was prompted by the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth on July 10, 1509. Hence, when I discovered subsequently that William Stacy Johnson, professor of systematic theology at Princeton Seminary, had published one more book on Calvin, I wondered what more could be said that had not already been said. Moreover, Johnson, a systematic theologian whose specialty is Karl Barth’s theology, to my knowledge had not previously published anything on Calvin. However, Johnson also has a pastor’s heart and apparently felt that someone should write an introduction to Calvin’s theology for a general audience with a special focus on the reformer’s relevance for today. One has the impression that he may have done this for a local congregation. In any case, he has accomplished his purpose admirably, and thus this modest volume makes a distinctive contribution to all of the Calvin literature that has appeared since 2008.

As Johnson states in his preface, “I argue that the best way to appropriate Calvin’s legacy is to recapture the reforming spirit that guided all his work.” Accordingly, Johnson concludes each chapter with a section titled “Always Reforming.” There is always a danger in trying to modernize a figure of the past and showing his or her relevance, but for the most part Johnson avoids that pitfall.

What makes this book particularly useful for study groups is the addition of questions for discussion after each chapter and a glossary at the end where
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Craig Detweiler, editor
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technical theological expressions are defined. I only question whether there is much evidence for the suggestion that almsgiving might be added as a fourth mark of the church and the Anglicizing of the *Consensus Tigurinus* as the “Zurich Consent.”

In the space of 142 pages, Johnson covers a lot of ground. He begins with a brief sketch of Calvin’s life and influence, followed by Calvin’s vision of God. After treating the “*solas*”—Christ alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone—the author has chapters on most of the key doctrines of Calvin’s theology: election and predestination, sin and salvation, the work of the Spirit, law and gospel, the church’s ministry and mission, worship and sacraments, politics, economy, and society. One important theme I missed was Calvin’s appreciation for the revelation of God in the created order, the “theater of God’s glory.” Additionally, in his discussion of the Servetus case, Johnson fails to note the important fact that all of the major Swiss Protestant cities gave their approval to the execution of Servetus, leaving the matter up to the Genevan Council.

The summaries of these key doctrines are often masterful and exemplify Calvin’s goal of *brevitas et facilitas*. Two examples: After discussing the “Five Points of Calvinism” arising from the Synod of Dort, Johnson concludes, “The common denominator in all five is the idea that God’s grace is completely invincible.” As to why Calvin discusses sanctification before justification, Johnson comments, “By discussing repentance and renewal first, Calvin seemed to want to avoid any implication of ‘cheap grace.’ We can receive the gospel in Calvin’s view only by obeying it.”

Here and there a Barthian bias appears. For example, in discussing predestination Johnson rejects Calvin’s view of double predestination—not unusual even among many Presbyterians—and then opts for Barth’s view that “God has reached out to say yes to all human beings in Jesus Christ.” In the discussion of law and gospel, the first heading reads, “The Law Is a Form of the Gospel.” That is Barth, not Calvin.

Other readers may have other quibbles about some of Johnson’s applications, but overall he is faithful to Calvin and exhibits an impressive mastery of Calvin’s theology. Moreover, few would contest the fine statement at the beginning of the last chapter, “Reformed and Always Reforming,” where the author concludes, “For Calvin, Christianity consisted of following the God who is for us by being with us in Jesus Christ who is always at work among us by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

This has been a banner year for the publication of Calvin studies, almost a superfluity, even for ardent Calvinians. However, Johnson’s book fills a
special niche in making the theology of Calvin live for us today in a fresh and challenging way.

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Preaching from Memory to Hope

Thomas G. Long

This is a brief but important book; more accurately, it is two or three very brief but very important books. Three of the volume’s five chapters were given by the author, Thomas G. Long, Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, as the Lyman Beecher lectures at Yale Divinity School in 2006. Those lectures focused on a pair of sharp questions in current homiletics: the history and future of what is broadly named “narrative preaching,” and the place (or lack of a place) for eschatology in today’s pulpit. These particularly homiletical concerns are taken up in chapters 1, 2, and 5. Chapters 3 and 4, which were not part of the Beecher lectures, are more generally theological and focus on the recent ascendancy of what Long aptly names “neo-gnosticism” among many inside and outside the church. Neo-gnosticism, as a contemporary theological drift that moves between the academy and the pew, is especially worthy of attention by today’s preachers because it informs the assumptions and the questions of many of the people to whom they preach.

In his first two chapters on narrative preaching, Long notes that the rhetoric of sermons has always been shaped not only by fashion but also, and blessedly, by what the church needs to hear at different times and how the church can best hear that word in given historical contexts. He traces the rise of narrative preaching back to the 1950s, picturing, perhaps too ideally, mainline Protestant congregations well-informed biblically and theologically but bored with the expositional, propositional (“three points and a poem”) preaching that had long been the standard. Hand in hand with the narrative theology movement, narrative preaching entered the sanctuary, a fresh voice to awaken biblically literate but slumbering congregations. Recently, Long says, the pendulum has been swinging back. Having heard too many obscure shaggy-dog sermon stories, some twenty-first-century Christians find themselves less than clear about which part of the Bible...
Moses is in and precisely what words like “righteousness” and “atonement” might mean. Thus, the current wave in homiletics is to dismiss narrative preaching as too fluffy and call for a return to the proclamation of theological ideas and ethics. While agreeing with some of this critique, Long offers wise cautionary notes. If the fashion swings too far away from the attraction of narrative, he intimates, it will only swing back again. Long reminds the reader that Scripture is, after all, itself mostly narrative. It is, in fact, this narrative nature of Scripture that ought to shape how preachers use narrative. Quite simply, the stories preachers tell in their sermons should move like Bible stories move.

The final chapter on eschatology and preaching notes that American preaching was loaded with eschatological themes until the theological- and biblical-interpretation crises of the late nineteenth century. Long offers a brief excursus into post- and premillennialism, emphasizing the way the former shaped so much mainline American preaching until about a century ago, at which time eschatology became the quintessential “awkward topic.” Long invites nonfundamentalist preachers to find a fit way to proclaim faithfully the ultimate things and God’s sovereignty over all time and creation.

The two chapters that were not part of the 2006 Beecher lectures target the rise of neo-gnosticism, as Long accurately names the amalgam of church conspiracy theories and disembodied spirituality associated with pseudo-scholars like Dan Brown and John Shelby Spong and real scholars like Elaine Pagels, Matthew Fox, Bart Ehrman, Karen Armstrong, and especially, Marcus Borg. Long identifies four themes in this contemporary gnosticism: “humanity is ‘saved’ by knowledge,” “an antipathy toward incarnation and embodiment,” “a focus on the spiritual inner self,” and “an emphasis on present spiritual reality rather than eschatological hope.” He uses an entire chapter to consider Marcus Borg, who has probably been the most influential of these neo-gnostics and perhaps the only one who would speak from inside, rather than outside, the church.

Long successfully makes all three cases: the clear, present, and perhaps dangerous reality of neo-gnosticism in pew, pulpit, and culture; moderation in the current reappraisal of narrative in preaching; and the importance of eschatology to proclamation. In his accustomed manner, he makes his cases with elegant prose, finely turned metaphor, and yes, well-told narrative—but not too much narrative.

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Sacred Schisms: How Religions Divide

James R. Lewis and Sarah M. Lewis, editors

Christianity has endured a long and often lamented history of schisms. What is less well known is that schism (one group breaking with another to form a new group) is a common phenomenon in other religions of the world. This book paints its landscape on a larger canvas than most Christian theologians consider, profiling schism in Islam, Buddhism, Shin Shukyo, the Unification Movement, and Satanism, to mention only a few of the groups examined. It proves especially enlightening because one is able to discern more clearly the sociocultural and historical dynamics that contribute to schism and to distinguish between certain positive and negative aspects of the phenomenon without being “distracted” by doctrinal issues of one party or another as would almost inevitably be the case if one were studying Christian churches or movements.
James R. Lewis, a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, and Sarah M. Lewis, lecturer in religious studies at the University of Wales, Lampeter, have drawn together a collection of essays from leading and emerging scholars examining splits in a variety of religious traditions. Perhaps most valuable are the variety of theoretical tools and lenses the authors provide in exploring the nature and significance of these schisms. These tools include a relatively simple taxonomy that distinguishes among the factors contributing to schism: membership subgroupings that lead to splits “along economic, ethnic, racial, national, or other fault lines”; schisms “set in motion by individuals with leadership ambitions”; schisms predicated on differences between “doctrinal/liturgical/behavioral norms”; splits in groups precipitated by the death of a charismatic founder; and divisions caused by the “availability of alternative means of legitimation.”

Among the more valuable tools the book makes available to readers is Colin Campbell’s concept of the “cultic milieu,” a theoretical window into the development of emerging religions, religious and quasi-religious groups, and religious identities that, like so much else in this book, is potentially useful to students of Christian theology and of the practices of Christian communities. Whether using Campbell’s “cultic milieu” to understand the schismatically inclined Theosophical movement (as Olav Hammer does), or (as Jesper Aagaard Petersen does) to comprehend contemporary Satanism, or whether employing Campbell’s “cultic milieu” (beyond the confines of this book) to explore any number of contemporary Christian movements that are explicitly anti-institutional, or anti-religious, or anti-clerical, or anti-intellectual, one discerns a sociocultural field sharing common elements that nourish and give rise to specific religious-communal expressions. As Petersen says in his observation of Satanism (and much the same could be said of other “spiritual” groups, including Christian movements): “The point is that new religious movements continuously crystallize from this cultural field. It works as both the substantive and functional context for group evolution—it is the cultic milieu and not the individual groups that are permanent.”

Many will find this book interesting, obviously, because of the careful studies it provides of schism in various religious groups beyond the Christian faith. Christian theologians and pastors, however, may find the book even more valuable because it allows us to step back from the doctrinal and ethical causes that divide Christians today and encourages us to see the social, cultural, and historical sources of schism itself. For example, the fine essay by Joseph Bryant—on
the “penitential crisis over mass apostasy” in Roman-era Christianity, which argues that in certain cases “schism” can contribute to the vitality of the body that suffers the “loss” of a dissenting group—left this reader wishing for more. Although one may wish this book had covered more extensively Christianity using these tools and insights, one finds it hard to begrudge this rich resource for what it might have provided.

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interpretation to turn us away from the search for external foundations and toward the theological context of a living community and its liturgical practices. Galbreath’s study provides an insightful discussion and is one of the few books within the context of theology and Wittgenstein that should be read.

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