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2 Timothy 2:2

*And the things that you have heard from me
among many witnesses, commit these
to faithful men who will be able
to teach others also.*

Preaching the Gospel in Acts and Today

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AMERICA'S NEED FOR THE GOSPEL

LifeWay Research surveyed 3000 adults to measure their agreement with a set of 47 statements about Christian theology to determine the state of American theology in 2016.¹ In the survey 586 adults claimed that they were evangelicals by belief. Here are some of the results of the study reflecting Americans' diverse views of theology:

God

69% of Americans said that there is one true God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. 20% disagree. 11% are not sure.

66% of Americans said that God answers specific prayers

65% of Americans said that God is perfect and cannot make a mistake

64% of Americans said that God accepts the worship of Christians, Jews, and Muslims

60% of Americans said that God knows everything but does not determine all that happens in the world

Jesus

61% of Americans agree that Jesus is truly God with a divine nature and Jesus is truly man with a human nature.

¹ See Bob Smietana, "Americans Love God and the Bible, Are Fuzzy on Details," Life Way Research, September 27, 2016, accessed October 16, 2016, lifewayresearch.com/2016/09/27/americans-love-god-and-the-bible-are-fuzzy-on-the-details/.

52% of Americans agree that Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.

64% of Americans agree that the biblical accounts of Jesus' bodily resurrection are accurate. 23% disagree. 13% are not sure.

The Holy Spirit

56% of Americans agree that the Holy Spirit is a force, not a personal being. 27% disagree. 17% are not sure.

28% of Americans agree that the Holy Spirit is a divine being but is not equal with God the Father and Jesus. 51% disagree. 21% are not sure.

The Bible

58% of Americans agree that God is the author of Scripture. 31% disagree. 11% are not sure.

52% of Americans agree that the Bible alone is the written word of God.

51% of Americans agree that the Bible was written for each person to interpret as he or she chooses. 40% disagree. 9% are not sure.

50% of Americans agree that the Bible has the authority to tell us what to do. 42% disagree. 8% are not sure.

47% of Americans agree that the Bible is 100% accurate. 43% disagree. 10% are not sure.

44% of Americans agree that the Bible is helpful, but not literally true. 45% disagree.

Sin and Condemnation

65% of Americans agree that everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature. 28% disagree. 6% were not sure.

57% of Americans agree that God would be fair to show his wrath against sin. 27% disagree. 16% were not sure.

49% of Americans agree that sex outside of marriage is sinful.

49% of Americans agree that abortion is sinful.

19% of Americans agree that even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation. 74% disagree. 7% were not sure.

Salvation and the Afterlife

79% of Americans agree that people have the ability to turn to God on their own initiative

77% of Americans agree an individual must contribute his or her own effort for personal salvation

69% of Americans agree a person obtains peace with God by first taking the initiative to seek God and then God responds with grace

60% of Americans agree that heaven is a place where all people will ultimately be reunited with their loved ones. 26% disagreed. 14% were not sure.

57% of Americans agree that God would be fair to give wrath against our sin

54% of Americans agree that only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation. 46% disagreed.

52% of Americans agree that by the good deeds I do, I partly contribute to earning my place in heaven. 35% disagreed. 13% were not sure.

40% of Americans agree that hell is an eternal place of judgment where God sends all people who do not personally trust in Jesus Christ.

Summary

These statistics show that Americans love God but are fuzzy on the details about the Bible, sin, salvation, and the afterlife. Many Americans are confused about the identity of Jesus as reflected that 61% believe that Jesus is 100% God and 100% man, but 52% of Americans say that Jesus was the first and greatest being created by God. Americans view themselves as basically good and therefore they do not see their need for Christ. Most Americans hold to universalism, believing that all people will end up in heaven some day. They are confused about how to get to heaven, thinking it is important to trust in Jesus Christ but also thinking that they must do something to earn their place in heaven.

THE STATE OF EVANGELISM IN AMERICA

Ed Stetzer shared about “The State of Evangelism” in his blog titled *The Exchange*. Stetzer writes,

In our study we found that 85% of all believers 18-29 agree that they have a responsibility to share the gospel with unbelievers and that 69% of those same people feel comfortable sharing their faith. However, only 25% of them look for ways to share the gospel and only 27% of them intentionally build friendships with unbelievers in order to do so. Millennials are more likely than other ages to feel comfortable sharing Christ, but this doesn’t translate to action as a decidedly lower percentage actually share the gospel.²

Using the Transformational Discipleship Assessment, Stetzer reveals the state of evangelism in America today:

A churchgoer’s beliefs, attitude and actions regarding the sharing of Christ improve over time as they mature as a follower of God. From the age of 18 to the age of 64 there is a distinct increase in the willingness to share and the act of sharing the gospel. As Christians mature in the faith over time, and perhaps, they become more aware of the brevity of their lives, they grow in the desire to share the gospel and do so as a result. Or, perhaps they know Christ better and feel more inclined to share him more faithfully. We don’t know for sure. Of those who believe that the only way to heaven is through Jesus Christ, 33% of people ages 18-29 have shared with someone how to become a Christian in the past six months. Of people ages 50—64, 49% have shared the gospel. So our data shows that older people share their faith more frequently than do younger—and Millennials are not a stand out generation in evangelism.³

² Ed Stetzer, “The State of Evangelism,” *The Exchange* (blog, May 2014).

³ Ibid.

Thom Rainer took an unscientific Twitter poll to see how church leaders and church members answered this question: “Why do you think many churches aren’t as evangelistic as they once were?”

Here are the top 15 responses listed in order of frequency:

1. Christians have no sense of urgency to reach lost people.
2. Many Christians and church members do not befriend and spend time with lost persons.
3. Many Christians and church members are lazy and apathetic.
4. We are more known for what we are against than what we are for.
5. Our churches have an ineffective evangelistic strategy of “you come” rather than “we go.”
6. Many church members think that evangelism is the role of the pastor and paid staff.
7. Church membership today is more about getting my needs met rather than reaching the lost.
8. Church members are in a retreat mode as culture becomes more worldly and unbiblical.
9. Many church members don’t really believe that Christ is the only way of salvation.
10. Our churches are no longer houses of prayer equipped to reach the lost.
11. Churches have lost their focus on making disciples who will thus be equipped and motivated to reach the lost.
12. Christians do not want to share the truth of the gospel for fear they will offend others. Political correctness is too common place even among Christians.
13. Most churches have unregenerate members who have not received Christ themselves.
14. Some churches have theological systems that do not encourage evangelism.

15. Our churches have too many activities; they are too busy to do the things that really matter.⁴

PREACHING THE GOSPEL IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

The book of Acts tells the history of the early church and emphasizes evangelism and missions. Here is a list of the texts in the book of Acts which emphasize preaching the gospel (εὐαγγελίζω).

Jesus told his disciples “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Acts 1:8 is the key verse of the book of Acts. It gives the outline for the book. The apostles were witnesses in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7), in all Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12), and to the ends of the earth (Acts 13-28). The “ends of the earth” looks to the city of Rome, the center of the empire, more than 1400 miles from Jerusalem. The book of Acts records the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. Acts 1:8 refers to a person (Jesus Christ), a power (the Holy Spirit), and a program (witness to the world).

Thomas writes,

They were now to be witnesses, and their definite work was to bear testimony to their Master; they were not to be theologians, or philosophers, or leaders, but witnesses. Whatever else they might become, everything was to be subordinate to the idea of personal testimony. It was to call attention to what they knew of Him and to deliver His message to mankind. This special class of people, namely, disciples who are also witnesses, is therefore very prominent in this book. Page after page is occupied by their

⁴ Thom S. Rainer, “Fifteen Reasons Our Churches Are Less Evangelistic Today,” February 23, 2015, accessed October 6, 2015, <http://thomrainer.com/2015/02/fifteen-reasons-churches-less-evangelistic-today>.

testimony, and the key to this feature is found in the words of Peter, 'We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.'⁵

The apostles preached the gospel in the temple and in homes in Jerusalem: "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and *preaching* Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42). The apostles defied the Jewish leader's ban on speaking about Jesus as they went into the temple in Jerusalem each day and into the homes of people in the city to teach and preach the good news that Jesus is the Messiah. Luke uses the word "to preach good news" (εὐαγγελίζω) for the first time here in the book of Acts.

Christians in Jerusalem left the city when Saul of Tarsus persecuted them, and they preached the gospel everywhere: "Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere *preaching* the word" (Acts 8:4; emphasis added). The martyrdom of Stephen led to a persecution of Christians in Jerusalem. The Christians were scattered like seed being sown in a field. Everywhere they went they preached the word or gospel. Luke gives specific examples of those who traveled and preached the gospel in Acts 8:4-11:18: Philip traveled to Samaria (Acts 8:5-13); Peter and John traveled through Samaria (Acts 8:14-25); Philip went to Gaza (Acts 8:26-39) and then to Caesarea (Acts 8:40); Saul went to Damascus, then Jerusalem and then to Tarsus (Acts 9:1-30); Peter traveled through the plain of Sharon to Lydda and Joppa (Acts 9:32-43) before going to Caesarea (Acts 10:1-48) and back to Jerusalem (Acts 11:1-18).

Philip preached the gospel to the Samaritans. "But when they believed Philip as he *preached* (εὐαγγελιζομένω) the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized" (Acts 8:12). Philip preached about God's eschatological kingdom and about the name of Jesus Christ. The apostles preached about the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 3:6, 16; 4:10, 30), and the Jewish leaders tried to

⁵ W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Acts of the Apostles: Outline Studies in Primitive Christianity* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1916), 21.

forbid them to speak in the name (Acts 4:17; 5:28, 40). The Samaritans believed Philip—that is they trusted in Jesus who was preached by Philip—and demonstrated their belief by being baptized (immersed) in water as a public testimony of their faith.

The apostles Peter and John preached the gospel to the Samaritans. “So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, *preaching the gospel* (εὐηγγελίζοντο) in many villages of the Samaritans” (Acts 8:25). Peter and John did what the Lord Jesus wanted them to do (Acts 1:8). Luke uses three different words to describe their communicating the gospel: they testified (διαμαρτύρομαι), preached the word of the Lord (λαλήσαντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ κυρίου), and preached the gospel (εὐηγγελίζοντο). Schnabel writes, “We know of 140 settlements in Samaria in the Hellenistic period and of 146 villages in the early Roman period.”⁶

Philip preached the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch on a desert road: “Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning at this Scripture, *preached* (εὐηγγελίσαστο) Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35). Philip preached Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch from Isaiah 53. He explained how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy about the sheep that was led to slaughter and who did not protest but remained silent during his unjust trials before the chief priests and elders of the Jews along with Pilate and Herod Antipas. The Ethiopian eunuch believed the gospel and then was baptized in water to publicly identify with Jesus.

Philip preached the gospel in all the cities along the coast of Israel: “But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he *preached* (εὐηγγελίζετο) in all the cities till he came to Caesarea” (Acts 8:40). The Spirit physically transported Philip close to 22 miles from Gaza to Azotus (the ancient Philistine capital of Ashdod). Philip was an evangelist who preached the gospel in the cities along the coastline of Israel and possibly later settled in Caesarea (Acts 21:8).

Peter told Cornelius that God was preaching peace through Jesus: “The word which God sent to the children of Israel,

⁶ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 415.

preaching peace through Jesus Christ- He is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36).

Christian men from Cyprus and Cyrene who left Jerusalem because of the persecution led by Saul of Tarsus preached the gospel to the Hellenists (Greek speaking people) of the city of Antioch: “But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν)” (Acts 11:20).

Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel to the Jews at the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia: “And we *declare to you glad tidings* (εὐαγγελιζόμεθα) that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second psalm: ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’” (Acts 13:32-33).

Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel to the cities in Galatia on their first missionary journey. They “fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia and to the surrounding region. And they were *preaching the gospel* (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι) there” (Acts 14:6-7).

Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel at Lystra: “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and *preach* (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι) to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea and all things that are in them” (Acts 14:15). When the people of Lystra tried to worship Paul and Barnabas, Paul told them that they were not gods come down from heaven but humans with the same nature as them. Paul told them to turn from these useless things (worship of idols) to the living Creator God.

Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel to Derbe: “And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had *preached the gospel* (εὐαγγελισάμενοι) to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch” (Acts 14:20b-21). Paul made preaching the gospel and fulfilling the Great Commission a priority in his ministry.

Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel in Antioch: “Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and *preaching* (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι) the word of the Lord, with many others also”

(Acts 15:35). When Paul returned from this first missionary journey he continued to preach the word of Lord to his home sending church of Antioch.

At Troas Paul received the Macedonian call to preach the gospel in northern Greece: “Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us *to preach the gospel* (εὐαγγελίσασθαι) to them” (Acts 16:10). Paul heard the Macedonian call on his second missionary journey. He obeyed and went to Macedonia and preached the gospel at Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

Paul preached the gospel to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens: “Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, ‘What does this babblers want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,’ because he *preached* (εὐηγγελίζετο) to them Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). The Greek philosophers thought that Paul was preaching about two gods: Jesus and the resurrection. Paul went to the Areopagus and explained to them that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and rose again.

In the book of Acts Peter and Paul preached the gospel to different groups of people. Marshall writes,

The variety in these missionary sermons and the speeches of Christians on trial before Jewish and Roman bodies is no doubt to illustrate the different ways in which the gospel was presented to different groups of people, Jews and Greeks, cultured and uncultured, and it is hard to resist the impression that the sermons are presented as models for Luke’s readers to use in their own evangelism.⁷

In the rest of this article I will examine the evangelistic preaching of Peter and Paul in the book of Acts and give some pointers from their example for preaching the gospel today.

⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 33.

THE EVANGELISTIC PREACHING OF PETER IN ACTS

Peter preached the gospel to Jews on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:22-39), to Jews in the temple after healing the lame man (Acts 3:11-26), and to Cornelius and his Gentile household (Acts 10:34-43). Peter also preached the gospel in Rome (1 Peter 5:13).⁸

The Evangelistic Preaching of Peter in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2:22-40)

Know Your Audience (Acts 2:22)

Peter addressed his message to the “men of Israel.” Peter knew his audience. He knew that the group who had gathered on Pentecost were Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. They came together when they heard the sound of the rushing wind. They became confused when they heard the apostles speaking in tongues. They heard them speaking each “in his own language.” Peter stood up with the eleven and told the Jewish crowd that the apostles were not drunk since it was only 9:00 o’clock in the morning. After quoting from Joel 2, Peter preached the gospel to the Jewish crowd.

Peter knew that his audience already had some knowledge of the OT. He knew that they believed in the one true Creator God, that breaking the law was sin and that sin led to death. He also knew that they believed in the importance of sacrifice. The Jews had celebrated the Passover where thousands of lambs were sacrificed to commemorate God’s deliverance of the nation from Egypt. Peter preached the gospel to a group who accepted the authority of the OT.

⁸ Clement of Alexandria wrote, “Mark, the follower of Peter, while Peter publicly preached the gospel at Rome before some of Caesar’s knights, and adduced many testimonies to Christ, in order that thereby they might be able to commit to memory what was spoken, of what was spoken by Peter, wrote entirely what is called the gospel according to Mark” (Clement of Alexandria, Fragments 1, cited by Cassiodorus, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:573).

Today there are fewer and fewer people who accept the authority of the Bible. It is important that we know our audience. James Engle and Wilbert Norton in their book *What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest?* writes,

We have suggested that the key to restoring the missing cutting blades lies in a communication strategy based on an understanding of the audience. The answer is not in further polishing the message, but rather in an adaptation of what is said to the audience, making sure that what is *sent* is actually *grasped* by the recipient.⁹

Emphasize the Uniqueness of Jesus (Acts 2:22)

Peter described Jesus as a man who performed miracles. Jesus was a man. He was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth. But Jesus was not like other men. Jesus did miracles. He turned water into wine (John 2:1-12). He fed five thousand men with five loaves of bread and two fish (John 6:1-14). He walked on the stormy sea of Galilee (John 6:15-21). Jesus gave sight to the man born blind (John 9:1-12). Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11). Jesus was able to do these miracles because he is God.

Josh McDowell has written a book called *More Than A Carpenter* that has sold more than eight million copies. In his first chapter, "What Makes Jesus So Different?" McDowell writes,

How is Jesus different from other religious leaders? Why don't the names of Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius offend people? The reason is that these others didn't claim to be God, but Jesus did. That is what makes him so different from other religious leaders. It didn't take long for the people who knew Jesus to realize that he was making astounding claims about himself. It became clear that his own claims were identifying him as more than just a prophet or teacher. He was obviously making claims to his deity. He was

⁹ James Engel and H. Wilbert Norton, *What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest? A Communication Strategy for the Church and World Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 31.

presenting himself as the only avenue to a relationship with God, the only source of forgiveness, and the only way of salvation.¹⁰

When we preach the gospel today, we need to stress the uniqueness of Jesus today. Jesus is not just another teacher like Buddha or Mohammed. He is unique. Jesus is unique in the way that he entered the world. He was conceived and born of the virgin Mary (Matt 1:16; 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-37; 2:1-7). Jesus is unique in that he lived a sinless life (John 8:46; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 John 3:5). Jesus is unique in that he performed miracles that no man has ever done. His death was unique in that he died on the cross for the sins of the world (Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 3:18). The resurrection of Jesus is unique. No one has ever been raised to life to never die again (Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 15:20).

Preach the death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:23-24)

Peter preached the death and resurrection of Jesus to the Jews in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Acknowledging God's sovereign plan, Peter accused the Jews of crucifying Jesus (Acts 2:23). Peter was not afraid of confronting lost Jewish people with their sin of rejecting Jesus as their Messiah.

The crucifixion of Jesus was no accident. It was part of the sovereign plan of God (Acts 3:18; 4:28; 13:29). Jesus was delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God. Yet sinful men were responsible for crucifying Jesus on a cross. In other words, it was both the sin of man and God's plan that Jesus die on a cross. God was in control over all events (the betrayal of Jesus, the trials of Jesus and his death on the cross). God could have stopped it if he wanted. But it was God's will that Jesus die. At the same time, people were still responsible for their own sinful actions. Judas was responsible for betraying Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin were guilty of condemning an innocent man to death. Pilate was

¹⁰ Josh McDowell, *More Than A Carpenter* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1977), 10.

guilty of condemning Jesus to death even though he said Jesus was innocent.

***Use Old Testament Scriptures to Prove the Resurrection
(Acts 2:25-35)***

Peter quoted two OT scriptures to prove the resurrection of Jesus. First, he quoted Psalm 16:8-11. Peter emphasized that David who wrote the psalm was both “dead and buried.” Peter said that David spoke as a prophet when he “foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption”(Acts 2:31). I believe that Psalm 16:10 is a direct Messianic prophecy. David’s body did see corruption, but the body of Jesus did not see corruption as it was raised on the third day. Paul made this point as well as he quoted Psalm 16:10 and then said, “For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; but He whom God raised up saw no corruption” (Acts 13:36-37). Peter told the Jews that God raised up Jesus and that the apostles were eyewitnesses of him. He explained the outpouring of the Spirit as the work of the risen Jesus who had been exalted to the right hand of God. Peter declared that David did not ascend into the heavens. Then he quoted Psalm 110:1, “The LORD said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies Your footstool.”

Proclaim the true identity of Jesus (Acts 2:36-39)

Peter proclaimed, “Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Peter wanted Israel to know that God identified Jesus as Master and Messiah by raising Jesus from the dead.

***Challenge lost people to change their minds about Christ
(Acts 2:37-40)***

The Jewish crowd was convicted of their sin of crucifying the Messiah. They asked Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Peter told them, “Repent, and let

every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus, for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). The word *repent* means to “change your mind.” The Jews had rejected Jesus as their Messiah. They needed to change their minds about him. They needed to see him not as a criminal but as the Christ. They needed to see him not as just a man but as Messiah. They needed to put their trust in him alone as their Messiah. Repentance was repeatedly a part of the apostles’ message in Acts (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 13:24; 17:30; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20). Peter testified and exhorted the crowd saying “Be saved from this perverse generation” (Acts 2:40).

The Response to Peter’s Message (acts 2:41-47)

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers.

Three thousand Jews responded positively to the preaching of the gospel by Peter. They publicly demonstrated their faith by being baptized (immersed). The church was born on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. These new converts demonstrated their commitment to the local church by continuing to listen to the apostles’ teaching. They also devoted themselves to fellowship. They broke bread (celebrated the Lord’s Supper) and prayed for one another. They sold their possessions and gave to the needy. They met daily in the temple for prayer and worship. They broke bread from house to house. They practiced hospitality. They had favor with all the people, and people were saved as a result of their witness.

The Evangelistic Preaching of Peter to Cornelius and the Gentiles (Acts 10:34-43)

Emphasize that God is not a respecter of persons (Acts 10:34-35)

Peter emphasized in his gospel message that God was reaching out to all people with the good news. The good news is not just for the Jews or for the nation of Israel. Peter had learned

his lesson that God shows no partiality and accepts those in every nation who fear him and work righteousness. This does not teach that salvation is achieved by doing good works. In Acts 15 Peter affirms that salvation is by faith alone and grace alone. He said, "So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. ... But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

***Review the story of Jesus including his death and resurrection
(Acts 10:36-41)***

Peter told the story of Jesus emphasizing that God empowered Jesus to do good and heal those oppressed by the devil. Careful Bible students have noticed the similarity between Peter's gospel message here and the gospel of Mark. Mark began his gospel with John's baptism and traced the ministry of the Lord Jesus from Galilee to Judea to Jerusalem.

Peter was not afraid to state that the Jews were guilty of the death of Jesus. Earlier Peter told the Jews, "You killed the Author of life" (Acts 3:15). Peter told the rulers he said, "You crucified him" (Acts 4:10). Peter accused the Sanhedrin of murder. He said, "You killed him by hanging him on a tree" (Acts 5:30).

The movie *The Passion of the Christ* caused quite a stir because of its portrayal of Jews who rejected Jesus. Yes the Jews did reject Christ. But not all Jews. There were Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. The Romans also rejected Christ. The Roman governor Pilate condemned Jesus to die. The Roman soldiers beat Christ and nailed him to the cross. We believe that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the whole world (cf. 1 John 2:2), so we can say that all of us are responsible. Your sin and my sin nailed Jesus to the cross.

On five occasions in Acts, the apostles said that they were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ (2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:41; 13:30-31). After Christ arose from the dead, he ate and drank with his disciples. This was proof that Jesus was not a ghost and is an argument for the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Point out that Jesus will judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42)

Peter told Cornelius and the Gentiles that Jesus Christ has been appointed by God the Father to be the judge of the living and of the dead. We need to tell lost people that it is appointed unto man once to die and after this the judgment (Heb 9:27). We live in a culture where everyone thinks that when they die they will go to heaven. We need to tell them that many people are deceived by the false teaching of universalism. Only those who put their trust in Jesus and his work on the cross will be saved.

Encourage faith in Jesus in order to receive forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43)

Peter did not say that salvation is through taking the mass or observing the sacraments. He said that “whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” Faith in Jesus results in forgiveness of sins by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

The Results of Peter’s Preaching the Gospel (Acts 10:44-48)

Peter’s gospel message was received by Cornelius and the other Gentiles of his household. They believed in Christ and immediately the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 10:44). This astonished the Jews (those of the circumcision) because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also (Acts 10:45). They spoke in tongues. This was a sign to unbelieving Jews given in the first century of God’s doing a new work through the establishment of the Church (1 Cor 14:21-22). Then they were baptized in water in the name of the Lord.

THE EVANGELISTIC PREACHING OF PAUL IN ACTS

The preaching of the gospel by Paul affected the Roman Empire. Paul preached the gospel in synagogues and in the marketplaces of major cities. Paul preached the gospel to Jews, to idol worshippers, to Greek intellectuals, to Roman governors, and to kings. As a result, unsaved Jews converted to Christianity and

pagan Gentiles turned from idols to serve the one living and true God (cf. 1 Thess 1:9-10).

The speeches of Paul in Acts can be divided into three groups: (1) the missionary speeches of Paul, (2) the speech to the Ephesian elders, and (3) the legal defense speeches given during his arrest and trials.

The missionary speeches of Paul include (1) his speech to the Jews at the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:16-41), and (2) his speech to the Greeks at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:22-31). The speech to the Ephesian elders was given by Paul during his third missionary journey at Miletus (Acts 20:18-35).

Paul gave several legal defense speeches in which he presented the gospel: (1) Paul gave his testimony before the Jews after he was arrested in the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 22:1-21). (2) Paul boldly asserted his belief in the resurrection of the dead before the Sanhedrin that included Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection (Acts 23:1-6). (3) Paul recounted the events that led up to his arrest, maintained his innocence and claimed that the resurrection of the dead was the reason for his arrest as he defended himself before Governor Felix in Caesarea (Acts 24:10-21). (4) Paul claimed that he did nothing wrong and appealed to Caesar in his defense speech before Governor Festus in Caesarea (Acts 25:8-11). (5) Paul recounted his conversion and call, explained the reason for the charges against him, and asserted his orthodoxy as he defended himself before King Herod Agrippa II and Festus in Caesarea (Acts 26:2-29).

Paul knew the importance of contextualization in evangelism. Paul took the gospel to the Jews and to the Gentiles. Paul never changed the content of the gospel message. He proclaimed the good news that Jesus is the Christ who died on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of mankind and rose again to give eternal life to all who believe in Him alone for salvation (cf. 1 Cor 15:1-8). Paul did adapt to his audience by giving different arguments for the gospel. Paul considered the social and religious background of his audience before presenting the gospel. To the Jews in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia, Paul surveyed the history of Israel up to the time of Christ, declared the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection and supported his gospel by

appealing to OT scriptures that predicted the coming death and resurrection of Messiah (Acts 13:16-41). To the Greek philosophers at the Areopagus in Athens, Paul presented the same gospel but with a different argument. He quoted from one of their own poets (Epimenides) and argued from general revelation that God is not like the idols they made from gold, silver, or stone. Then he proclaimed that they needed to repent since God would judge them someday by the Man that he raised from the dead (Acts 17:22-31).

Paul tried to persuade his listeners to believe the gospel. When Paul came to Corinth: “He reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and persuaded both Jews and Greeks.” (Acts 18:4). The word “reasoned” (διελέγετο) means “to engage in speech interchange, converse, discuss, argue, especially of instructional discourse that frequently includes exchange of opinions.”¹¹ We get the word “dialogue” from this word. A monologue is one way communication in which a speaker gives a message to a crowd and there is no feedback. Paul went into the synagogue not just to preach the gospel, but to interact with his listeners possibly with a question/answer format. The word “persuaded” means “to cause to come to a particular point of view or course of action, to convince.”¹² Paul was not afraid of giving arguments for the gospel.

When Paul went to Ephesus “he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). Paul continued to preach even when he was under house arrest in Rome: “So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening” (Acts 28:23).

¹¹ BDAG, 232.

¹² BDAG, 791.

**Paul's Evangelistic Preaching to Jews in Antioch of Pisidia
(Acts 13:16-41)**

Show How God Has Worked in Israel's History (Acts 13:16-25)

Paul reviewed the history of Israel up to the coming of Jesus. First, God chose the fathers of the nation of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Acts 13:17a). Second, God made the people great while they were in Egypt (Acts 13:17b). He exalted Joseph to a place of leadership in Egypt (Gen.37-50).

Third, God delivered Israel from their Egyptian captivity through his "uplifted arm" of power (Acts 13:17c). Fourth, the Lord put up with their sinful ways in the wilderness (Acts 13:18). They grumbled against his leadership and disobeyed Him repeatedly.

Fifth, he distributed the promised land to them by allotment after he destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan (Acts 13:19). Sixth, God provided judges for the nation of Israel for about 450 years (Acts 13:20). The "about 450 years" probably refers to Israel's 400 years in Egypt, the 40 years in the wilderness, and the 10 years of conquest and settlement in the Promised Land (1845-1395 BC; cf. Acts 7:6).

Seventh, when Israel asked for a king, God gave them Saul for forty years (Acts 13:21). Eighth, after removing Saul, God raised up for the nation David, a man after God's own heart who would do his will (Acts 13:22). The words "raised up" is probably a play on words in that David's greater son was also raised up (Acts 13:23) and also raised from the dead (Acts 13:33). Paul cites Psalm 89:20 ("I have found") and follows it with another citation from 1 Samuel 13:34 ("a man after my own heart") and still another from 1 Samuel 13:14 ("who will do everything I want him to do"). What God saw in David was a deep desire to do His will. Unlike King Saul who was self-willed, David confessed his sins and repented of them (cf. Psalm 51).

Ninth, God raised up for Israel from David's seed a Savior for Israel (Acts 13:23). The Lord promised David that he would bring a Savior for the nation whom Paul identified as Jesus (2 Sam 7:12-16). Tenth, Paul emphasized that John the Baptist testified of Jesus as this Savior (Luke 16:16; 13:24-25). John preached the baptism of repentance to all people of Israel. He also testified that

he was not worthy to untie the sandals of the one coming after him.

Neil writes,

It may be that followers of John the Baptist, believing him to have been the Messiah, and constituting a sect which had spread outwards from Palestine, presented more of a problem to Christian missionaries about this time than the New Testament evidence would suggest; a hint of this is given in 19:3-5. If such were the case, it would account for Paul's strong emphasis here on John's role as merely the herald of the Messiah.¹³

Emphasize God's Fulfillment of His Promise to Israel
(Acts 13:26-37)

Paul again addressed his audience as Jews and God fearers (Acts 13:26a). This address shows the second major section in the sermon. Paul claimed that the word of this salvation (the gospel message) had been sent to them (Acts 13:26b). This is the main proposition of the message.

Paul proclaimed that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promised Messiah through David and that God raised him up after he was killed in fulfillment of the OT Scriptures (Acts 13:27-37). Paul identified those who live in Jerusalem as having fulfilled Scripture in their ignorance by asking Pilate to kill Jesus (Acts 13:27-28). After they fulfilled all that was written about him, they took Jesus down from the tree and laid him in a tomb (Acts 13:29). Paul proclaimed that God raised Jesus from the dead as was witnessed by those who were with him from Galilee to Jerusalem and are now his witnesses (Acts 13:30-31). Here we see the four-part gospel message that Paul preached throughout the Roman Empire: the death, burial, resurrection, and witnessing of the risen Christ (1 Cor 15:1-8). Through his resurrection Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to the

¹³ William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 158-59.

fathers in accordance with the Scriptures regarding David (Isa 55:3; Ps 2:7; 16:10; Acts 13:32-37).

The good news is that the promise God made to their ancestors he has fulfilled for them by raising Jesus from the dead. The promise is the covenant promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:12-16 that the Lord would establish David's house, throne and kingdom forever through one of his descendants (cf. Acts 13:23). Paul supported the fulfillment of this promise by quoting three OT Messianic passages: Psalm 2:7 (v.33), Isaiah 55:3 (v.34) and Psalm 16:10 (v.35). These OT texts all found fulfillment in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. However, Paul used "raised up" in two different senses in this message. In verses 33 and 37 he spoke of God raising up David as Israel's king. Psalm 2:7 refers to God raising up David as Israel's king. Verses 30 and 34 speak of God raising up Jesus from the dead. Jesus was always the Son of God ontologically, but God declared him to be his Son when he raised him from the dead.

Exhort lost people to trust in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and justification (Acts 13:38-41)

Paul exhorted his unsaved Jewish brethren to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins and not to stumble over this amazing work of God (Acts 13:38-41). Paul warned his listeners from history using Habakkuk 1:5 that they need to beware lest this seems so amazing that they will not believe it (Acts 13:40-41).

Pentecost writes,

Habakkuk 1:5, which Paul quoted here, refers to an invasion of Judah by a Gentile nation that would be used as God's disciplinary instrument to punish Judah for her disobedience. Paul evidently saw his generation in Israel under a similar disciplinary judgment. Paul's message, like Peter's on the day of Pentecost, was delivered

to a generation in Israel under the judgment Christ had predicted in Luke 21:24, i.e., the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.¹⁴

Neil writes,

Parallel with the positive theme of the preparation for the coming of Christ through Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David and John the Baptist, he has interwoven an admonitory reminder of those who have failed to recognize the divine plan and purpose- the Canaanites, Saul, the Jerusalem Jews and Pilate. Now he presents the Dispersion Jews with a similar challenge to accept or refuse the gospel message.¹⁵

The Response to Paul's Evangelistic Message in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:42-52)

When the people went out, they begged to hear about this on the Sabbath (Acts 13:42). When the meeting was over, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas who encouraged them (Acts 13:43). The next Sabbath almost the whole city came out to hear the gospel (Acts 13:44). Out of jealousy over the multitudes, the Jews contradicted and reviled Paul (Acts 13:45). One reason for the Jewish antagonism was the large crowd of Gentiles that came to hear Paul. Another reason was the content of Paul's message.

Bruce writes,

Knowing (as we unfortunately do) how pious Christian pewholders can manifest quite un-Christian indignation when they arrive at church on a Sunday morning to find their places occupied by rank outsiders who have come to hear a popular visiting preacher, we can readily appreciate the annoyance of the Jewish

¹⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, "The Apostles' Use of Jesus' Predictions of Judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, ed. Charles Dyer and Roy Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 140.

¹⁵ Neil, *Acts of the Apostles*, 160.

community at finding their synagogue practically taken over by a Gentile congregation on this occasion.¹⁶

Paul and Barnabas declared that it was necessary to proclaim the word of God to the Jews first (because it concerns their promises), but since they rejected it and the eternal life which they were offering, they would turn to the Gentiles as they fulfilled Isaiah 49:6 (Acts 13:46-47). It was necessary for the gospel to first be taken to the Jews because Jewish acceptance was a necessary prerequisite for the messianic kingdom (cf. Acts 3:26). Paul consistently preached to the Jews first in the cities that he visited (cf. Acts 13:50-51; 14:2-6; 17:5, 13-15; 18:6; 19:8-9; 28:23-28; Rom 1:16).

Neil writes, "Now for the first time Dispersion Jews follow the example of their Jerusalem counterparts in rejecting Christ, and for the first time Paul publicly announces his intention of turning his back on them and concentrating on the purely Gentile mission [cf. Acts 18:5-6; 28:25-28]."¹⁷

When the Gentiles heard this, they rejoiced and many believed (Acts 13:48). Acts 13:48 contains a strong statement for predestination: "And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." It is interesting to note that those chosen by God in eternity past still had to make a choice in time to believe in Jesus to be saved. The Bible stresses both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Good news spreads fast. The word spread throughout the region (Acts 13:49). The Jews stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and drove them out of the district (Acts 13:50). The Jews secured Paul's and Barnabas's expulsion from the region through influential local residents who brought persecution. Some of these people were devout women, evidently God fearers who were not saved whom the unbelieving Jews turned against Paul and Barnabas.

¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 281.

¹⁷ Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 160.

The Evangelistic Preaching of Paul to Greeks in Athens (Acts 17:22-34)

Paul's Ministry in Athens

Paul came to Athens on his second missionary journey after being run out of Thessalonica and Berea by the Jews. Paul was in Athens alone. He was waiting for Silas and Timothy to come to him from Berea. As Paul walked through the city of Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idolatry.

Athens was the cultural and intellectual capital of the ancient world. Athens, along with Tarsus and Alexandria in Egypt, were the three great university cities in the Roman empire. Athens was famous for its idols: Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus, Athena, and others. Athens was also famous for its philosophers: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno.

Paul went into the synagogue in Athens and reasoned with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers. He also reasoned in the marketplace daily with those whoever happened to be there. Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered Paul. Some of them said, "What does this babbler want to say?" The word for "babbler" (σπερμολόγος) refers to someone who picks up scraps of information here and there.¹⁸ The word was used of a small bird that snatches up scraps of food. Because Paul was not an eloquent speaker (cf. 1 Cor 2:1), some philosophers in Athens ridiculed him, thinking that he was not sophisticated enough to be taken seriously. Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods." Luke adds that they said this about Paul "because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18).

Know the Worldview of Your Audience

The Epicureans were Greek philosophers who followed the teachings of Epicurus (341-270 BC). Epicurus taught that the chief end of man was pleasure and happiness. Their slogan was "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." Epicureans believed that pleasure was attained by avoiding excess and

¹⁸ BDAG, 937.

avoiding the fear of death by seeking tranquility and freedom from pain and by loving other people. They believed that if gods did exist that they were not involved in events on this earth. They were evolutionists in that they believed that the universe was an accident. They also held to a materialistic view of the universe. They did not believe in life after death or in a future judgment.

W. Vunderink writes,

Epicurus aimed at a lifestyle in which the present was given more prominence than the future. For many of his contemporaries, the future held the fears of death and divine punishment, but Epicurus taught that (1) there is no life after physical death, for death is the disillusion of the atoms of our bodily existence; (2) even if man were to live on, there would be no divine retribution, for the gods are not concerned with human life. This deliverance from fears of the future contributed to present human happiness.¹⁹

The Stoics were followers of Zeno (332-260 BC). They got their name from the Greek word *stoa* (meaning “porch”), for Zeno taught at a place in Athens called the *Stoa*, which was located in the agora (marketplace). The Stoics were pantheists who thought the universe was ruled by an absolute Purpose or Will, to which a person had to conform his or her will, unmoved by all external circumstances and changes. They were fatalistic. The person who did this would reach the perfection of virtue. The Stoics were proud and self-sufficient. They emphasized the rational over the emotional. As pantheists they believed that all is God. Their goal was to align themselves with the will of the universe. They took pride in science as the ruling principle. They believed that man is the master of the universe. The modern equivalent of the Stoics would be the New Age teaching of today. The Stoics would have

¹⁹ R. W. Vunderink, “Epicureans,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 2:121.

been intrigued by Paul's statement that "in God we live and move and have our being."²⁰

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers took Paul and brought him to the Areopagus (17:19). The Areopagus was southwest of the Acropolis in Athens. It was also called the Hill of Ares (or Mars Hill in Latin), the god of war. This was where court was held concerning questions of religion and morals. In Athens, the supposed experts of philosophy and religion examined the gospel information.

These philosophers asked Paul, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore, we want to know what these things mean." For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or hear some new thing (Acts 17:19-21). This interest in listening to new ideas gave Paul an opportunity to preach the gospel to the Greek philosophers.

Make Observations about their Religion (Acts 17:22-23a)

As Paul walked through Athens he observed that the Athenians were very religious (Acts 17:22). Paul said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To the Unknown God" (Acts 17:23). Paul was going through Athens and noticed their "objects of worship" which were probably idols of the Greek pantheon which would have included idols of Zeus (king of the gods, god of the sky and thunder), Poseidon (brother of Zeus and god of the sea), Hades (god of the underworld), Apollo (son of Zeus and god of the bow), Aphrodite (the goddess of love and beauty), Hermes (the messenger god), Ares (god of war), and others.²¹

²⁰ G. Bromiley, "Stoics," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:621.

²¹ H. F. Vos, "Religions: Greco-Roman," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:107-108.

In the sixth century BC it was said that a poet from Crete named Epimenides turned aside a terrible plague in Athens by appealing to a god of whom the people had never heard. An altar was built to honor this god, whom the Athenians called the Unknown God. Paul obviously knew of Epimenides because he quoted the poet in Titus 1:12. Thus, Paul began his speech by appealing to natural revelation and to certain true statements of the Athenian poets.

***Use Something in Their Religion to Point Them to the True God
(Acts 17:23b)***

Paul used the altar to the unknown God to point the Athenians to the true God. He said, “Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.” (17:23). This statement is the theme of Paul’s speech. Paul made known to the Athenian philosophers the Unknown God.

A few years ago I had the opportunity of going to Russia to teach some pastors the book of Genesis. I went down to Red Square and toured the tomb of Lenin. While I was there looking at the tombs of famous Russians, I heard a Russian businessman talking to a couple from India in English. I went over and introduced myself and asked if I could join their group. We came to the tomb of Yuri Gagarin. Yuri Gagarin was the first Russian cosmonaut to go into outer space. He looked around and came back and announced to the world that God does not exist. I told the Russian businessman and the couple from India that Gagarin was wrong. I told them that the Bible begins with the words “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). I told them that God created man in his image and that man sinned against God and brought death into our world. I explained how Jesus came to earth, died on a cross for our sins and rose again from the dead. I explained that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It was a privilege to preach the gospel in Red Square.

Emphasize the Work of God the Creator (Acts 17:24-28)

Paul revealed that the unknown God is the God of creation who is greater than all idols (Acts 17:24-28). Paul said,

God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, "For we are also His offspring.

Paul declared to the Greek philosophers that God is the Creator. He made the world and everything in it. This was contrary to the Epicurean belief in evolution and the Stoic belief that identified God with nature.

Paul understood the need to refer to creation and the fall of man—both events are found in Genesis. Paul went back to the book of Genesis to show the need for the gospel. He showed that "since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Cor 15:21-22). One cannot understand the good news in the NT of Jesus' death and resurrection and payment for sin, unless one understands the bad news in Genesis of the fall of man, and the origin of sin and its penalty of death.

Paul told the Greek philosophers about this unknown God. God is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. This was contrary to the Stoic belief in pantheism. God does not need a temple to live in and he is not worshipped with the image of an idol. Again, this was contrary to what the Greeks believed and practiced as the city of Athens was full of temples and idols.

Paul emphasized that God is the Sustainer. He gives to all life and breath and all things. God is also the creator of man. All men are descended from Adam and are of one blood. The Greeks, and especially the Athenians, prided themselves on being racially

superior to other people. Paul emphasized that all people are descended from one man—Adam. This fact alone does away with racism.

The sovereign God determined where the nations would live and he determined the boundaries of their dwellings. God placed within each human being a desire to worship and seek God. Unbelievers grope for him by making images to worship. Paul emphasized the imminence of God. He is not far from any one of us. Humans can have fellowship with the God of the universe.

Challenge Lost Intellectuals to Change Their Minds About Jesus and the Resurrection (Acts 17:29-31)

Paul concluded his argument by saying that idolatry is illogical. Since people are the offspring of God, we should not think that God is like an idol made of precious metals like gold or silver or even stone. Paul emphasized the spiritual nature of God's essence. He said,

Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:29-31).

God overlooked the past idolatry of man in the sense that He did not finally judge man for it. But those times of ignorance were prior to the coming of Christ. God holds lost people accountable for the revelation that has been given to them. Many people have not heard the gospel and are ignorant of Jesus Christ, but they live in a time period after the coming of Christ and God holds them accountable because he has revealed himself in the person of Christ (John 1:18).

Now God commands all men everywhere to repent. The word "repent" means a change of mind that leads to a change of

conduct. The reason unsaved men need to repent is that God has appointed a day when he will judge the world in righteousness by the man (Jesus) whom he has ordained. God has given evidence that the day of judgment will come by raising Jesus from the dead. Paul emphasized that Jesus was a man and not a myth as many of the Greek gods. The proof that God would judge people was his resurrection of Jesus from the dead.²² Jesus will judge all people someday (John 5:25-29).

The Response of the Greeks to Paul's Gospel Message (Acts 17:32-34)

Luke recorded three responses to Paul's message to the Greek philosophers in Athens. First, when the Greek philosophers heard of the resurrection from the dead, some mocked. Paul's reference to the resurrection ignited a reaction from the philosophers. The Greek philosophers believed in the immortality of the soul, but not of the body. The Greeks believed that the soul was good, but the body was evil. They believed that at death the soul would be freed from the prison of the body. They derived from their dualistic philosophy from the teachings of Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato. They held that everything physical was evil, but everything spiritual was good and that it makes no difference what one does with one's body so long as the spirit stays good. Tragically, the Athenians' adherence to this philosophy blinded them to the truth of the gospel.

Second, others were indecisive. They said, "We will hear you again on this matter."

Third, some did believe. Was a church established in Athens? Luke says that some men joined Paul and believed. Among the believers at Athens were Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris and others with them. Though we do not have a specific New Testament epistle to the church at Athens, this does

²² For arguments for the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead see my two articles: Gary Gromacki, "The Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *Bible and Spade* 29, no.1 (Winter, 2016): 10-21 and Gary Gromacki, "The Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ Part Two," *Bible and Spade* 29, no.2 (Spring/Summer, 2016): 33-41.

not mean that a church was not established. I believe that these believers listed by Luke in Acts 17:34 formed the nucleus of the first church in Athens.

Observations on Paul's Evangelistic Preaching in Athens

Some have concluded from Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 that Paul preached a philosophical gospel in Athens, and that when he came to Corinth, he decided to preach Christ and him crucified.

Walter Liefeld refutes the view that Paul changed his message as a result of preaching in Athens. He gives these insights into Paul's Areopagus Address in his insightful guide to the study of Acts entitled *Interpreting the Book of Acts*:

Not only does the context refute the idea that Paul preached a faulty gospel message, but so does the address itself. It includes a number of important relevant doctrines, more, in fact, than are usually brought together in an evangelistic sermon. The doctrines that are mentioned (and there may have been more that were not recorded) are, in order, (1) God's creation of the world, (2) God's transcendence, (3) God as the source of human life, (4) God's sovereignty over human history and geography, (5) God's immanence, (6) God's non-corporeality, (7) God's forbearance, (8) God's righteous demands, (9) God's justice, and (10) Christ's role as appointed judge. Paul speaks of the resurrection of Christ—which presupposes his death—so it is inconceivable that Paul did not speak of "Christ crucified" (1 Cor.2:2). Given all this biblical truth in his speech, the charge that Paul employed merely human reasoning falls to the ground.²³

Did the apostle Paul change his message as a result of a lack of success in Athens? The apostle Paul did not change the content of the gospel message as he preached to different groups and in different settings (cf. 1 Cor.15:1-8). Paul preached the gospel of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He preached

²³ Walter L. Liefeld, *Interpreting The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 69.

the same gospel to the Greeks in Athens that he preached to the Jews in Antioch.

Paul was not afraid to use different arguments in presenting the gospel. Paul did contextualize the message for his particular audiences. When Paul preached to the Jews, he quoted verses from the OT to prove that Jesus is the Messiah who was crucified and raised to life. When Paul preached to the Greeks, he started by emphasizing that God is the Creator. He quoted from their own poets, but he did preach the gospel to them, emphasizing the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Paul was not afraid of using arguments to persuade lost people of their need for Jesus.

FINAL CHALLENGES FOR PREACHING THE GOSPEL TODAY

Preach the gospel with boldness.

Evangelism is preaching the gospel to the lost with the intent of persuading them to trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. God has given us the greatest message to preach. The gospel is the good news that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again to give eternal life to all who trust in Jesus alone for salvation. Never be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul wrote, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith” (Rom 1:16-17).

Preach the gospel in every sermon.

As a pastor I preached the gospel every week in my church. I prayed that the Lord would use the preaching of the gospel to save someone each week. Romans 10:17 says, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.” Don’t forget to preach the gospel somewhere in your message each Sunday. Preach the gospel when you give a funeral message or when you give a charge at a wedding. Preach the gospel to prisoners in jail. Preach the gospel to hurting people in the hospital. Preach the gospel at a rescue mission. Look for opportunities to preach the gospel.

Relate the gospel to your audience.

Peter and Paul knew their audiences. When Peter and Paul preached the gospel to Jews they quoted from the OT Scriptures. Paul used the altar to the unknown God in Athens as an opportunity to explain to the Greek philosophers the identity of the true God of the Bible. Paul did not change his gospel message, but he used different illustrations and arguments to present the gospel to his different audiences.

Make the gospel as clear as possible.

Paul spelled out his gospel clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins, was buried, was resurrected in fulfillment of OT scripture, and was seen by eyewitnesses. A person receives forgiveness of sins and eternal life when he believes in Jesus alone and his finished work on the cross. Clearly explain the facts of the gospel message. Then challenge lost people to believe in Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

Take risks to preach the gospel. Go where no one has gone before.

The apostle Paul told the Christians in Rome, “from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man’s foundation” (Rom.15:19-20). Paul blazed a trail of preaching the gospel. We need to follow in his footsteps and preach the gospel as often as we can to as many people as we can before the Lord returns.

Problems in the Doctrine of Eternal Generation

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INTRODUCTION

In my teaching, I currently hold two things in tension. First, I reject the doctrine of *eternal generation*, or at least I reject the usual interpretations in key passages that are used to support that particular doctrine.¹ Second, I hold to the *eternal sonship* of Christ. As a result, I hold to a teaching (eternal sonship) that has been justified in church history largely on the basis of a doctrine that I reject (eternal generation). Consequently, it is necessary for me to justify my rejection of eternal generation, but also to describe how I would support eternal sonship without it.

Such discussions have serious implications. Open theists insist that traditional formulations of theology proper are often rooted in Greek philosophy rather than the exegesis of Jewish Scriptures.² What is interesting about this charge is that it is

¹ I have not always rejected eternal generation. In fact, I used to teach it in my preaching and teaching in a local church setting. My dissatisfaction with the doctrine grew gradually as I did more exegetical work in the various passages. I have noticed that a number of the more modern evangelical systematic theologies do not deal in great detail with the doctrine of eternal generation. This may be a sign of increasing disinterest in the doctrine although it is hard to tell.

² For example, within a chapter on the pagan inheritance of notions about God that have crept into Christianity, Clark Pinnock notes that a “package of divine attributes has been constructed which leans in the direction of immobility and hyper-transcendence, particularly because of the influence of the Hellenistic category of unchangeableness” (*Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], 65). Ironically, the rise of open theism has fostered study of the

sometimes true.³ Methodologically, the important question is raised as to what extent we can incorporate Greek philosophical concepts and terms into our doctrinal formulations. Almost all of us will be satisfied with the classical statement of the Trinity in which God's oneness is described with words like *being* or *essence* and God's threeness is described with the term *persons*. Nowhere in the Bible are these words or concepts defined. Such a distinction (being and person) has been brought over from Greek philosophy. These concepts are brought to the text to help communicate the truth found in the Bible that God is one and three are God. We generally do not struggle with this use of Greek philosophical concepts because, in this particular example, there is no distortion of exegesis to make the doctrinal formulation. It is essentially a cultural communication of biblical truth that has been highly successful for many centuries.⁴

However, in my mind the issue of eternal generation does not fit into the same category. It is not at all clear that the concept

concept of time as it relates to God and creation by using an appeal to philosophical reason and, at times, with little reference to the Bible, including such discussions by those with open theist leanings. See, for example, Gregory E. Ganssle, *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001).

³ Of course, I am not suggesting any kind of support for open theism. Open theism is clearly heresy. It is impossible to affirm a factual view of inerrancy and hold to an open view of God's foreknowledge. See Michael D. Stallard, "A Dispensational Critique of Open Theism's View of Prophecy," *BSac* 161 (January 2004): 27-41.

⁴ For a discussion of current issues and problems in the doctrine of the Trinity related to the Sonship of Christ, see Millard Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 97-138. Erickson appears to propose a needed update to the doctrine of the Trinity without abandoning the traditional formulation. I am putting forward something similar, although perhaps less ambitious. Some contemporary reformulations of the Trinity are being driven by evangelical feminism. See Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

avoids the distortion of exegetical work in various supporting passages. Eternal generation can be defined as the Father giving life to the Son every tick of eternity, so to speak. It is a dynamic, ongoing, and unending process or activity that takes place within the Godhead itself. As such the doctrine is meant to convey, at least as many of the church fathers seem to teach, that the birthing of the Son by the Father in this dynamic way is an ontological reality. It usually does not speak to purposes or function, but to the essence of God. What remains to be seen is if this concept can be proven exegetically or at least deduced theologically with strong exegetical support.

BIBLICAL PASSAGES AND ETERNAL GENERATION

Several verses have been put forward in church history to support the doctrine of eternal generation. In general, all passages that speak of Jesus being “begotten” (e.g., John 3:16) appear on the surface to imply a point in time when the Son began his existence. This is, of course, at odds with the deity of Christ, which implies a belief in eternity. However, specific passages help to fuel the discussion. Proverbs 8:22 played an important role in the genesis of the doctrine of eternal generation during the days of the Arian controversy. The Trinitarian interpretation of Psalm 2:7, in spite of contextual markers in different directions, became the foil for the response of the church fathers. Psalm 2:7 is of special interest because of its usage in the New Testament. Consequently, Hebrews 1:5 and similar passages become extremely important in understanding how NT authors used Psalm 2:7. Jesus’ statement about possessing “life in himself” found in John 5:26 poses another exegetical dilemma that must be solved. Thus, below we will address these various individual passages that are part of the mosaic of the debate.

Proverbs 8:22 and the Arian Controversy

One of the key problem passages for the early church fathers was Proverbs 8:22: “The Lord possessed me at the beginning of

His way, Before His works of old.”⁵ The “me” of the verse in context is lady wisdom. The first phrase (*The Lord possessed me*) is the most controversial due perhaps to the fact that the verb *qanah* allows for various translations that yield different nuances of meaning. There are perhaps three main interpretations. First, *qanah* can be understood as “acquire” which happens elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 47:20). By implication, when something is acquired it is possessed. Hence, the translation of “possessed” appears in some translations (KJV, ESV, NIV footnote). But something can also be acquired by means of creating or bringing it into existence. Thus creation (*the Lord created me*—RSV) and birth (*the Lord brought me forth*—NIV) are ideas that can flow from the use of *qanah*. One can also note with a certain amount of confidence that the concepts of creating or birthing can be used interchangeably in various contexts.⁶

The Bible of the early church fathers, the LXX, opted for the creation idea in the translation of Proverbs 8:22 (κύριος ἔκτισέν με). This presents two issues, one primarily exegetical with theological overtones and one theological through and through. As to the first, the context seems to bring to mind the idea of creation. Verse 23 sees wisdom saying, “From everlasting I was established” while the wording of verse 24 yields “when there were no depths I was brought forth.” Therefore, on the surface the creation idea is supportable. This exegetical conclusion raises the question as to how wisdom could be created. Is not wisdom something that is part of God himself in some fashion? It should be viewed as always there just as God is always there. However, one must note that this is a section of poetry and the personification of wisdom itself. To speak in these terms within that genre could simply highlight God as the source of all things and not really view God as having a time of his life when wisdom

⁵ Unless otherwise specified, the New American Standard Bible, 1995 update, will be the English translation used throughout this presentation.

⁶ For a good summary of all of the interpretive options in this section of Proverbs 8, see Kenneth T. Aitken, *Proverbs*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1986), 82.

was absent. As verse 27 notes, “I (wisdom) was there when he set the heavens in place,” thereby seeing wisdom existing in the pre-created order.

More germane to the discussion is the theological dilemma that the LXX translation raises within the context of early church history. The early church fathers almost unanimously affirmed the equation of the wisdom of Proverbs 8 and the *logos* of John 1. A typical statement would be that of Eusebius:

In the same manner, or rather in a manner which far surpasses all likeness or comparison, the perfect Word of the Supreme God, as the only-begotten Son of the Father (not consisting in the power of utterance, nor comprehended in syllables and parts of speech, nor conveyed by a voice which vibrates on the air; but being himself the living and effectual Word of the most High, and subsisting personally as the Power and Wisdom of God), proceeds from his Father’s Deity and kingdom.⁷

Such examples could be multiplied many times over.⁸ This view is partly justified on the basis of 1 Corinthians 1:24: “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” By this means, the church fathers were forced to read Christ into Proverbs 8 and see lady wisdom as equivalent to Christ in a virtually ontological

⁷ Eusebius, *The Oration in Praise of the Emperor Constantine*, 12; see Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. I*, Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 598. I am using the classical notation for the church fathers as much as possible, although from time to time I add the notation to show that I am using the Schaff edition of the fathers as it appears in Logos Bible Software.

⁸ See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin with Trypho*, 61; Theophilus of Antioch, *Theophilus to Autolyclus*, 2.22; Origen, *Against Celsus*, 3.40; and Jerome, *Letters of St. Jerome*, 13, to give just a few.

way.⁹ Consequently, Christ is created; the language is reinforced in Arian minds by the “begotten” passages elsewhere.

Within this general approach for dealing with Proverbs 8:22, it is relatively easy to see how the Arians would jump to the conclusion that Jesus was a lesser god created in time by the Father. Two approaches would seem to alleviate the potential problem in the passage for anti-Arians. First, one could resort to the understanding of eternal generation. The imagery of lady wisdom was construed by some in a manner consistent with God eternally generating the Son. For example, Justin Martyr’s teaching in the middle of the second century spoke of wisdom being birthed or created as fire coming from fire. This analogy was used by Justin to speak also of the Word coming from the Father.¹⁰

A better strategy is not to force the connection of Word and wisdom as the church fathers have done.¹¹ While there is no disputing the wisdom of God in Christ, that fact alone does not cause the insertion of Christ into a passage of wisdom literature that is within a section on ethical considerations. The writer does not intend philosophical discussion with Messianic identification and eternal ramifications that are ontological. Wisdom in this

⁹ One example which uses the passage almost exclusively to talk about Christ in Proverbs 8 and virtually ignores the concept of wisdom is the nineteenth century commentary by Charles Bridges, *Proverbs*, The Geneva Series of Commentaries (repr., Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 79-82. This approach mirrors that of some of the early church fathers.

¹⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin with Trypho*, 61. Compare John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.iv.7.

¹¹ For a clear rejection of the equation of wisdom with logos in Proverbs 8, see Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 127-28. Waltke suggests that “there is not a straight trajectory in Hellenistic Jewish wisdom literature moving from wisdom in Proverbs 8 to Wisdom as the agent of creation to Jesus Christ as Creator” (128).

context is simply seeing life from God's point of view with a desired corrective for living. Such an approach is entirely consistent with the passage and avoids a theological interpretation that is driven by linkage that comes from elsewhere. Therefore, Proverbs 8:22 can be removed as a passage that justifies a need to develop a doctrine of eternal generation.

Psalm 2:7 and Hebrews 1:5

While the starting point for discussing eternal generation is Proverbs 8:22, perhaps the most important passage in the discussion is Psalm 2:7: "I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'" Unfortunately, this is a passage that has been appropriated to advance the idea of eternal generation. The decree is in some fashion the eternal decree of God. The word *today* refers to "this eternal day" or "every tick of eternity" or some such concept. In this way, the passage is turned into a Trinitarian verse with ontological ramifications. Origen is often credited as the source for the teaching,¹² although there is evidence that his teacher Clement of Alexandria taught it.¹³

Cyril, a contemporary of Origen, explained the doctrine with some measure of clarity thereby giving some evidence that the teaching had been grounded for some time:

He was not begotten to be other than He was before; but was begotten from the beginning Son of the Father, being above all beginning and all ages, Son of the Father, in all things like to Him who begat Him, eternal of a Father eternal, Life of Life begotten, and Light of Light, and Truth of Truth, and Wisdom of the Wise, and King of King, and God of God, and Power of Power.¹⁴

¹² Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 2.2.

¹³ Clement, *Stromata*, 4. 162.

¹⁴ Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures*, XI.

However, according to Cyril the biblical basis was partly the teaching of Psalm 2:7: “He who is a Spirit hath spiritually begotten, as being incorporeal, an inscrutable and incomprehensible generation. The Son Himself says of the Father, *The Lord said unto Me, Thou art My Son, to-day have I begotten Thee*. Now this to-day is not recent, but eternal: a timeless to-day, before all ages.”¹⁵

Augustine also affirms eternal generation in his interpretation of Psalm 2:7, although he notes in passing the possibility of an incarnational interpretation:

Although that day may also seem to be prophetically spoken of, on which Jesus Christ was born according to the flesh; and in eternity there is nothing past as if it had ceased to be, nor future as if it were not yet, but present only, since whatever is eternal, always is; yet as “today” intimates presentiality, a divine interpretation is given to that expression, “To-day have I begotten Thee,” whereby the uncorrupt and Catholic faith proclaims the eternal generation of the power and Wisdom of God, who is the Only-begotten Son.¹⁶

It is possible that Augustine rejects single meaning and looks at layers of meaning within the text, although he does not seem to be clear on the matter other than to affirm the doctrine of eternal generation.

The dispensationalist John Walvoord does a good job of voicing the modern appropriation of this view:

The Scriptures represent Christ as eternally the Son of God by eternal generation...Further evidence is found in the doctrine of the eternal decree as it relates to Christ as a Son. In Psalm 2:7 (ASV) Jehovah speaks, ‘I will tell of the decree: Jehovah said unto me, Thou art my son; this day have I begotten thee.’ According to this passage, Christ is declared to be the Son of God and begotten in the day of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶Augustine, *On the Psalms*, Psalm II, 6. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. VIII, Augustine: Expositions on the Book of Psalms*. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 3.

the eternal decree. This is, in effect, a statement that Christ is eternally the Son of God as the decree itself is eternal. He is not only declared a son from eternity but begotten from eternity.¹⁷

Walvoord goes on to note that any predictions in the Psalm depend upon this unique status of the Son as does also the NT citations in Acts and Hebrews.¹⁸ In general, this interpretation seems to be more theological than exegetical.

We see more caution in the textual approach of John Calvin. Calvin seems to affirm a form of the doctrine of eternal generation but not on the basis of Psalm 2:7. Note the following words from Calvin's commentary:

When God says, *I have begotten thee*, it ought to be understood as referring to men's understanding or knowledge of it; for David was begotten by God when the choice of him to be king was clearly manifested. The words *this day*, therefore, denote the time of this manifestation; for as soon as it became known that he was made king by divine appointment, he came forth as one who had been lately begotten of God, since so great an honor could not belong to a private person. The same explanation is to be given of the words as applied to Christ. He is not said to be begotten in any other sense than as the Father bore testimony to him as being his own Son. This passage, I am aware, has been explained by many as referring to the eternal generation of Christ; and from the words *this day*, they have reasoned ingeniously as if they denoted an eternal act without any relation to time. But Paul, who is a more faithful and a better qualified interpreter of this prophecy, in Acts 13:33, calls our attention to the manifestation of the heavenly glory of Christ of which I have spoken. This expression, to be begotten, does not

¹⁷ John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

therefore imply that he then began to be the Son of God, but that his being so was then made manifest to the world.¹⁹

Calvin's statements reveal several features. First, the idea of begetting that is in Psalm 2:7 is something that happened in time. He notes that God begot or birthed David upon the throne at a time when it was manifested to others. This leads to the second feature noted here: Calvin ties the language of Psalm 2:7 to the appointment of a king. This approach certainly has the most favorable exegetical support. Verse 6 of the Psalm seems to be parallel: "I have installed my King upon Zion." This would imply that David's sonship, if such is in view in this Davidic psalm, would refer to the concept of kingship. Third, Calvin explicitly rejects the idea that Psalm 2:7 speaks of the eternal generation of Christ. He does not deny that the passage should be applied to Christ as well as to David. However, his application of the passage to Christ shares one common feature with how it applies to David while at the same time diverging from it as well. The commonality is that it refers to a point in time when there is a manifestation of the birthing of the Son; he calls it here "the manifestation of the heavenly glory of Christ." In this way, the begetting is time-bound, but only a revelation of what is already actually there, namely the sonship of Christ. The point of divergence with respect to Christ is Calvin's appeal to Acts 13:33. There he sees Paul (in Luke's account) using the passage to speak of the resurrection. Consequently, instead of seeing the passage pointing to a time when Christ is birthed upon the throne of David, Calvin (adding a reference to Rom 1:4) notes that "what is here said has a principal allusion to the day of the resurrection."²⁰ So the time of the ultimate manifestation of the birthing of the Son appears to be at his resurrection, although Calvin insinuates that the manifestation actually started with the incarnation.²¹ If Calvin

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalm*, Vol. I, trans. James Anderson (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 17-18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*; Calvin in this context alludes to John 1:14.

had maintained a purely exegetical approach and commonality between applications to David and Christ, he would have concluded that Psalm 2:7 is referring to the kingship of Christ and probably the day of his coronation as king as the day of birthing.

However, other interpreters, even premillennialists, argue for the resurrection view of Psalm 2. This is largely based upon the overwhelming focus on the resurrection of Christ in the context of Acts 13:33, where Luke reports Paul's synagogue sermon. Notice the following words of Zeller and Showers:

Since Paul's statements in Acts 26 are parallel to his Acts 13 statement and make it clear that the fulfillment of God's promise to the Israelite fathers was dependent on Christ's resurrection from the dead, it would appear that the Acts 13:33 reference to God's raising up of Jesus concerns His bodily resurrection from the dead. The resurrection interpretation leads to the following conclusions: God's Psalm 2:7 decree concerning the Messiah was fulfilled when Jesus rose from the dead; there is a sense in which God begot Christ on His resurrection day; and there is a sense in which Christ's being the Son of God is related to His resurrection.²²

Zeller and Showers go on to speak in terms similar to Calvin:

"To summarize, Psalm 2:7 does not militate against the eternal sonship of Jesus Christ. It does not refer to a time when Christ became the Son of God through a begetting act of God. Instead it refers to the day of Jesus' resurrection when God brought Him forth from the womb of the earth and thereby publicly decreed that He is who He always was—the Son of God."²³

Thus, when writers often see an interpretation of sonship language that does not automatically force the conclusion of

²² George W. Zeller and Renald E. Showers, *The Eternal Sonship of Christ: A Timely Defense of This Vital Doctrine* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1993), 59-60.

²³ *Ibid.*, 64.

eternal sonship, they seem to feel compelled to point out that the sonship of Christ is actually singular. In their view, there is a sonship that is eternal and all other birthing passages relative to Christ such as Psalm 2:7 are actually outward manifestations of the qualitative status that Christ already has as Son. I find this view overblown. Even though it is true that all of these passages relate to the eternal Son, it is not at all assured that the biblical author had in mind eternal status when he penned the words of Psalm 2:7. The passage seems to suggest sonship as kingship in a straight forward way. Therefore, another major passage can be removed as an assured supporter of eternal generation.

Hebrews 1:5 and the Gospels

The independent idea of sonship as kingship is more prominent in the Bible than evangelical scholarship has generally recognized. Church history has perhaps overdosed on the idea that Son of God means deity and Son of Man means humanity when speaking of Christ.²⁴ By this means, Messianic kingly overtones have been muted or diminished. Perhaps this has been because of the dominance of amillennialism which speaks in more abstract and spiritual terms about the kingdom. Nevertheless, it is instructive to point out the many passages where the sonship of Christ is stated in terms of his Messianic, kingly role—a birthing upon the throne of Israel, an establishment of his rule over the nation of Israel.

The starting place for the discussion here is Hebrews 1:5: “For to which of the angels did He ever say, ‘You are my Son, Today I have begotten you’? And again, ‘I will be a Father to him and he shall be a Son to me.’” The overall theme of Hebrews is the superiority and supremacy of Christ. The first argument given by the author is that Christ is superior to the angels. Why is this so? The answer is not as some have suggested: he is the eternal Son of God who is God. It is true that there are a few statements in the

²⁴ In saying this, I do not mean to imply that the term *Son of God* never refers to deity or the term *Son of Man* never refers to humanity. I am suggesting that we have clung to these phrases simplistically as I hope my ongoing discussion will clarify.

first chapter that point to the deity of Christ (Heb 1:3, 6, 8). Such references help to establish the largeness of Christ's superiority over the angels. But the deity of Christ is not the main idea, and the sonship of Christ as deity (eternal generation or otherwise) is not the point. The reason that Jesus is superior to the angels is that he is the Davidic Son; that is, he is the Christ, the Messianic King who is coming to rule.

The proof of this proposition begins in Hebrews 1:5 where the author conflates Psalm 2:7 with 2 Samuel 7:14 and introduces the quotations with verse 4: "He has inherited a more excellent name than they (the angels)." The more excellent name is expressed by the teaching in verse 5. We have already noted the strong possibility of the kingship interpretation of Psalm 2:7. The writer of Hebrews agrees. In 2 Samuel 7:14, God refers to Solomon as essentially the "son of God." God also says this of King David in Psalm 89:26-29. In this light, the notion that God has established a father-son relationship with any king of Israel or Judah seems apparent. The minute a man becomes the king, he can say that God has established him on the throne or birthed him upon the throne. We are back to Calvin's understanding of how Psalm 2:7 should be applied to David.

However, Hebrews 1:5 is about Christ. He is the final, ultimate, Messianic king of Israel predicted throughout the Old and New Testaments who will rule the nation. This status makes him more significant than the angels. Interestingly, in the following section of the first chapter of Hebrews, the author gives a string of quotations, two of which directly highlight the reigning aspects of Jesus (Heb 1:8-9/Ps 45:6-7 and Heb 1:13/Ps 110:1). The clincher, however, is Hebrews 2:5: "For he did not subject to angels the world to come, concerning which we are speaking." The future time of ruling belongs to Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah, and the coming King of Israel. However, throughout this first section, he appears to have the status of Son as a present reality even though the ruling is in the age to come. This means that he is a king-in-waiting, one who has been anointed king but

who does not yet rule. This is in keeping with the model of David who was anointed king long before he ruled the nation.²⁵

Sonship as kingship in a similar way can be found in the Gospel accounts. In Matthew 16:16, Peter's confession is that "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Interestingly, Jesus' question was about the Son of Man (v. 13). Was Peter telling us that Jesus was two things: Christ (the Messianic King) and also the Son of God (some Trinitarian notion)? Or was Peter identifying Jesus as one thing: the Messianic King whose kingship is described as the Son of God in the Davidic sense of 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7? It seems that the latter is surely the best understanding of the passage. It is not at all clear that the apostles had a definite understanding of Jesus' deity at this point in time. Later in the chapter, kingship is raised again using the term *Son of Man* along with the coming kingdom (v. 28).

In Mark, the conversation between Jesus and the high priest offers another example of the highlighting of sonship as kingship. In Mark 14:61, the high priest asks Jesus, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" The latter phrase is certainly another way of saying "Son of God." Again, we wonder if the speaker is asking about one thing or two. Are *Christ* and the *Son of God* two separate concepts in the mind of the high priest? It is highly doubtful that he is suggesting two separate things here. The two terms are in apposition: Are you the Christ, i.e., the Son of God? Son of God is another way to label the Messianic King since he is the ultimate and last Son of God or King to sit on David's throne in light of Psalm 2:7 and similar passages. Christ's response is "I am" as he acknowledges that he is the Messiah. However, in doing so he avoids use of the term *Christ* and the phrase *Son of the Blessed One*. Instead, he says to the high priest, "You shall see the *Son of Man* sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the

²⁵ This is also in keeping with the argument of Acts 2:36 where Jesus is said to be made both Lord and Christ. I take these as Messianic terms and in no way speaking of deity; he is not made God. What his resurrection shows (notice the context) is that God has accepted him now as the anointed king of Israel. A dead Messiah would be a difficulty. But God raised him from the dead so that he could one day rule in fulfillment of the prophecies about the coming Messianic King.

clouds of heaven,” a reference invoking kingly, Messianic overtones from Daniel 7:13-14. At this point it is quite tempting to see Messiah, Christ, Son of Man, Son of God, and King of Israel as equivalent terms in various passages that highlight kingship.

Finally, in John’s Gospel we see the story of Jesus talking to Nathanael as indicative of the same understanding. Using language that has Messianic overtones, the passage begins with Philip telling Nathanael that he has found the Prophet that Moses predicted had would come (talking about Jesus; 1:45). When Jesus wows Nathanael with a glimpse of omniscience, Nathanael responds with the exclamation: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel” (1:49). Once again, does Nathanael mean one thing or two? It seems clear that the terms *Son of God* and *King of Israel* are equivalent. The Jews would have understood them in light of a heritage that includes Psalm 89, 2 Samuel 7, and Psalm 2. The Messiah was *the* Son of God in terms of kingship. What is again fascinating is that Jesus responds in the context by using the phrase *Son of Man* (1:51).

Many more Gospel passages could be discussed in this vein. The point is that the Jewish understanding of the term *Son of God* in the first century does not have the overtones of later philosophical discussions about eternal generation and eternal sonship. These doctrines are not necessarily denied by such a state of affairs. In fact, there are times that *Son of God* refers to deity in light of the accusations of blasphemy thrown at Christ (John 5:18). What interpreters have often done is take such passages as John 5:18 and use the implications of deity to overpower the kingship notions relative to Israel that are in many of the other passages. Instead, the passages should be allowed to speak for themselves in each context. In doing so, it may be possible to assert that the most prominent notion of the sonship of Christ in the Bible is his kingship over Israel. In light of this, many passages can be interpreted accurately without resorting to the doctrine of eternal generation.

John 5:26

We have seen that John 5:18 uses the Father-Son picture to speak of the deity of Christ in the minds of the Jewish opponents of Jesus. I see no major exegetical reason to see that they were wrong in their assessment that Jesus was claiming deity. However, later in the chapter, we come to a passage that has been a major support for many who hold to eternal generation. John 5:26 says, “For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself.” This verse is part of the section on end-time judgment and resurrection. Contextually, it seems that a better case can be made for eternal generation here than in Proverbs 8:22 or Psalm 2:7, although not without problems. In the verse, the Father gives the Son life so that the Son has life-in-himself. D. A. Carson notes that many “systematicians have tied this teaching to what they call ‘eternal generation of the Son’” and goes on to call this linkage “unobjectionable.”²⁶ Wesley saw the verse as teaching eternal generation.²⁷ Hendrickson also seems to go in the same direction with the words, “In passages of this nature it must be borne in mind that our Lord’s mediatorial sonship in which he carries out his task on earth rests upon his eternal, intra-trinitarian sonship.”²⁸ The wording of 5:26 is probably the most conducive passage to derive the teaching of eternal generation. Its language of the Father “giving” the Son life and of the Son ending up with “life in himself” can easily be visualized in the same way that the ancients intended for eternal generation.²⁹

²⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 257.

²⁷ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (New York: Carlton & Porter, n.d.), 226.

²⁸ William Hendrickson, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, Vol. I (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 202.

²⁹ For a representative early church father, see Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 2.2.

However, a contrary opinion has been offered by Reymond who rejects the doctrine of eternal generation rather strongly. He comments that

... a consensus has by no means been reached among theologians and commentators that the words of John 5:26 refer to an ontological endowment. It is entirely possible, indeed, much more likely, that they refer to an aspect of the incarnate son's messianic investiture. John 5:22-23 which precedes the verse refers to his designated authority to judge, clearly an aspect of his Messianic role, and so is the similar thought of 5:27 which follows it. Accordingly, 5:26, paralleling 5:27, seems to be giving the ground upon which the Son is able to raise the dead, namely, it is one of the prerogatives of his Messianic investiture.³⁰

Another way to voice Reymond's position, if I understand him correctly, is that the wording can be taken to mean simply that the Father has given Jesus the authority to raise the dead. From this vantage point, taking "life in himself" as eternal generation is an importation of a philosophical notion about ontology into the text when no context supports it. I incline toward Reymond's view here although, as I have said above, this is the strongest passage in my view to support a form of eternal generation. At the very least, it can be said that even this passage can be taken in different ways. In short, the Trinitarian view of sonship is not explicitly mentioned. There is no slam dunk in favor of the eternal generation interpretation.

CONCLUSION: ESTABLISHING ETERNAL SONSHIP

There are other passages which could be discussed relative to eternal generation, but I have chosen to highlight Proverbs 8:22, Psalm 2:7 with the associated passages of Hebrews 1:5 and

³⁰ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 325.

the Gospel selections, and John 5:26.³¹ In those cases, it was demonstrated, at least to my satisfaction, that eternal generation was usually not the best option for interpreting the relevant sonship terminology.

In light of this, I want to suggest that interpreters cease from trying to bring all sonship passages and terminology together. A forced unity may lead to some distortion of exegesis. For example, I believe we can suggest that Jesus is the Son of God in the Bible in more than one way. First, he is the Son of God by virtue of His *incarnation*: “The angel answered and said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Second, Christ is the Son of God by virtue of His *resurrection* as Calvin had noted – “declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4). Third, Jesus is the Son of God by virtue of his *Messianic kingship* (Psalm 2:7 and the host of passages we have discussed). These three aspects of the sonship of Christ are all time-bound. His incarnation is in time. He is raised from the dead at a point in time. He will begin his reign as the Davidic King at a particular point on the timeline. None of these can be said on the surface in and of themselves to demonstrate an eternal sonship.

What then is left to us concerning eternal sonship? It might be possible to suggest that the very words *Father* and *Son* are used to suggest some ontological status between them. Since both are declared to be God, then some form of eternality relative to the sonship idea can be put forward. If we do not resort to the dynamic process of eternal generation, then we must leave it unexplained, noting that God simply has not revealed to us the ontological working of the sonship of the Second Person. This may be the best that we can do.

However, I want to suggest that Johannine literature in the Bible, especially the Gospel of John and perhaps the book of Revelation, may be fertile ground for exploration of the eternal

³¹ Some other passages that could be added to the list would be John 1:1, 1:18 and Hebrews 1:3.

sonship of Christ. It is in the Gospel of John where the terminology brings together Son and notions of deity. It is also true that in John, Jesus in his conversations with the Father tends to push the Father-Son relationship back into eternity past. This is most evident in the high priestly prayer of John 17: "Now, Father, glorify me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was" (v. 5). It is possible perhaps to see this as merely the use of metaphorical language to accommodate human understanding. However, the realities expressed seem to indicate something more, a relationship that is substantial in some way. In this light, I conclude that there is an eternal sonship of Christ taught in the Bible. However, as to eternal generation, I continue to have my doubts.

Contending for the Faith Once Delivered: An Exposition of Jude 3 and its Contribution towards the Doctrine of a Closed Canon

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INTRODUCTION

Several months ago, I taught a 5-week Sunday evening series on how we got the Bible. It was an ambitious project, I will admit, for 5 weeks is nowhere near the amount of time to cover in-depth all the sub-topics of this important study (the historical transmission of the Old and New Testaments, textual criticism, the development of modern English translations, etc.). However, my goal was not to present a doctorate-level evaluation in all these matters, but rather to give the attendees confidence in knowing that they had the very word of God in front of them despite historical and textual obstacles. Even a short discussion on the deliverance of the Bible to the church can have a major impact on the confidence of believers who live in a grotesquely anti-supernatural and secular culture, and making that impact was my ultimate aim.

Of course, one should never be foolish enough to think that one can simply discuss such topics without being prepared to answer difficult and often uncomfortable questions, as was evident following the conclusion of night three. At the end of the third session, I informed the congregation that week four's topic would be a short overview on the development of the biblical canon. As I began to cleanup, one of the men who attended made his way up to my podium. Following an exchange of pleasantries, he said to me, "Daniel, I was wondering if for next week you could include a discussion on the topic of a closed canon. I am very

interested in apologetics, but I am having difficulty in explaining the concept to my friends and when I talk to those who belong to a cult group. I know all about the history of the councils and the canons of major theologians, but these only seem to go so far when I debate. Can you help me?"

Whether that man realized it or not, his dilemma highlights the difficulty facing many theologians as they attempt to develop a theological method concerning the source material of systematic theology. To be more precise, does systematic theology draw its data from the Bible alone—a narrow view—or from all possible sources concerning God and his works—a broad view?¹ Although this question is a “no-brainer” for some theologians who ask, “How could the believer even begin to think that anything other than the 66 books of the Bible constitutes a proper source for information about God and His works?”, certain areas of theology create difficult gray area in relation to this question. The most notable of these areas is the canon. In the humble opinion of this writer, the canon of Scripture, titled canonology when pursued as a science, is the most unique and challenging area of bibliology—perhaps even in all theology—because of the push-pull between the use of internal and external evidence for the canon in establishing its facts. The handling of this area of theology varies from theologian to theologian. On the one hand, in the last thirty years many of the most popular published general theological works² spill a significant amount of

¹ The terms “narrow” and “broad” in reference to the source material of systematic theology is adapted from Rolland McCune’s introduction to systematic theology. Here, he compares this methodological dichotomy by listing the definitions of systematic theology as defined by several prominent theologians. See Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity* (Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary P, 2009), 1:3-17.

² For example, see Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Introduction and Bible* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2002), 1:514-540; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 54-69; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the*

ink expositing the canons of significant individuals and councils in defense of the canon. On the other hand, those theologies that do not discuss the historical acceptance of the canon into the church either devote very little space to the biblical arguments for the canon,³ argue that historical studies are not appropriate for systematic theology because such topics are to be concerned historical matters rather than theological matters,⁴ simply assume the canon as is,⁵ or fail to mention the discussion at all.⁶ This wide range of positions on the canon in relation to theology should convince the reader of the conversation and challenges presented in developing a theology of the canon, if it is even possible.

Unfortunately, the push-pull between the narrow and broad views of the canon, i.e., assuming the Christian canon *a priori* versus a reliance on extra-biblical evidence to establish the canon has created a scenario of which many false religious systems have taken advantage. One area that has been especially targeted is - no coincidence-the concept of an open vs. closed canon.⁷

Way (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 194-196; Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology: Knowing the Ultimate Reality: The Living God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 147-48, 152-53; Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 119-124.

³ See McCune, *Systematic Theology*, 179-80.

⁴ John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 586.

⁵ See Anthony C. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 104, 109, 215, 255.

⁶ See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

⁷ A closed canon is a term referencing the position that God ceased revealing His written word at the conclusion of the writing of the NT and thus no more works can be added to the body of Scripture, whereas an open canon is a term referencing the idea that God can and will add more works to his written word as He sees fit.

Historically, the church has argued for a closed canon, but in contrast to the majority of cults and false religious groups that argue for some kind of open canon. Examples are legion. Mormonism argues that God spoke through the man Joseph Smith to produce new sacred writings, and such new revelation is guaranteed by biblical prophecy.⁸ Islam argues that the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel have been corrupted⁹ while also arguing that numerous texts in the Bible point to Muhammad,¹⁰ thus demanding the necessity of future revelation and an open canon at least in respect to the OT and NT. Modern liberals appeal to the discoveries of other so-called gospels to argue that other ancient works should be included in the canon of Scripture.¹¹ Although the motives of these groups differ, their end goal is the same: The Scriptures should not be considered closed but open for revision and addition as prompted.

In the past, the church has responded to such arguments for an open canon by arguing from history, i.e., by quoting the canons of famous church and councils or the opinion of famous theologians. For example, in his well-known work *The Canon of Scripture*, F. F. Bruce appeals to the *Didache*, Josephus, the *Letter of Aristeas*, Irenaeus, and Athanasius in his argument for a closed canon.¹² However, such a strategy falls into the “wheelhouse” of

⁸ R. K. Salyards Sr., *The Book of Mormon: Origen, Nature, and Purpose* (Independence, MO: Herald House, n.d.), 13-16.

⁹ George W. Braswell Jr., *Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Politics, and Power* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 50.

¹⁰ For a survey of these texts and a response to such claims, see Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 152-59.

¹¹ See Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth Behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006).

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988), 23.

the cultist who simply repeats an assortment of conspiracy theories ranging from the post-apostolic church corrupting the Scriptures (and thus needed new revelation to “correct” its “errors”)¹³ to Emperor Constantine and his followers wiping out “competing Christianities” and sealing the canon with so-called orthodox texts.¹⁴ Since these conspiracy theories are well ingrained in secular culture and academia,¹⁵ eliminating these from serious consideration will probably not happen anytime soon.

For the believer who accepts the 39 OT and 27 NT books found in the standard English Bible to be divinely inspired and authoritative for faith and practice, the very thought of an open canon presents many uncomfortable questions. Can I trust the Bible in my hand is the complete word of God? Is the church missing out on God’s revelation? Will I be punished if I do not recognize these other so-called scriptures? Will a rejection of

¹³ For example, Mormon apologist Scott Petersen supports this premise with a statement with content is all too familiar to the Christian apologist: “Fallible and biased men determined which books were to be included in the final canon of scripture, and neither Athanasius nor any other early church leader ever claimed divine intervention in the eventual selections ... many manuscripts are known not to have survived due to manipulation by the prejudicial views of orthodox leaders and the massive persecution and book burnings during the reign of Diocletian. Inasmuch as the accepted canon contains flaws, and no one knows the extent those flaws have corrupted interpretation, it is difficult to use the Bible alone as the standard to discern the voice of God in the present dispensation.” See Scott R. Petersen, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* (Springville, VT: Cedar Fort, 2005), 179.

¹⁴ This is the premise of Bart Ehrman’s 6th chapter in his work, *Whose Word is It? The Story Behind Who Changed the New Testament and Why* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

¹⁵ The view of many “legitimate Christianites” being overtaken by a fourth-century “orthodoxy” is the common position held by secular universities and the hypothesis behind the best-selling *Da Vinci Code* series.

these works place my eternal soul at stake? Is the concept of a closed canon actually heresy? Am I limiting God's ability to act in the world if I hold to a closed canon? Do I simply ignore the problem and rely on faith that the church has the correct canon?

Answers to these questions are only confounded because of God's respect for his own word. Moses, speaking on the Lord's behalf, told the nation of Israel, "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you" (Deut 4:2; cf. 12:32).¹⁶ In the immediate context Moses was speaking of the law which he was about to present to the people rather than a body of Scripture or even Deuteronomy itself,¹⁷ but these words clearly speak to an overarching principle concerning the reverence God has for his commandments, which would include Scripture. An additional warning of similar nature is presented in the Apocalypse: "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book" (Rev 22:18-19). Although the context clearly indicates that the passage speaks specifically of the book of Revelation rather than the entire body of Scripture,¹⁸ it echoes the exhortation of Deuteronomy 4:2,¹⁹ that God is reverent toward his word and will not allow for alterations of any

¹⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are taken from the NASB.

¹⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 130.

¹⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 65.

¹⁹ Osborne points out that Revelation 22:18-19 is probably an allusion to Deuteronomy 4:2 and 12:3. See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 795.

kind.²⁰ The point is this: If the canon is truly open, contrary to the position of historic Christianity, then the church is potentially missing Scripture, and if so, the church is under duress of God's disfavor (to put it lightly).

Although it is difficult to apologetically defend a closed canon on extra-biblical grounds as argued above, is it possible to defend a closed canon based upon Scripture? In his *Basic Theology*, Charles Ryrie argues that "The Bible ... like any other witness, has the right to testify on its own behalf."²¹ Since the Lord clearly holds his word with great respect, then one must conclude that he would make some statement concerning the nature of the canon. This writer believes that he does. In the epistle of Jude, the author exhorts his readers to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints," and such exhortation must swing the advantage towards a closed canon. That this provocative verse be missed by so many in the Christian community is not surprising. Jude's short length, citation of strange extrabiblical texts, reference to Jewish folklore unknown to most Christians in the 21st century, and its relationship to 2 Peter provides "adequate" explanation as to Jude's neglect in the church. Most believers may have never listened through a sermon on Jude. However, in an ironic twist, Jude contains one of the greatest testimonies to a closed canon, a testimony that the church so desperately needs in the wake of cult apologetics.

EXPOSITION OF JUDE 3

In the Greek text, Jude 3 reads as follows: Ἀγαπητοί, πᾶσαν σπουδὴν ποιούμενος γράφειν ὑμῖν περὶ τῆς κοινῆς ἡμῶν

²⁰ Aune argues that Revelation 22:18-19 is a "conditional curse formula" similar to that of Galatians 1:8-9: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!" See D. E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, WBC52C (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 1213-15.

²¹ Ryrie, *Basic Theology* 76.

σωτηρίας ανάγκην ἔσχον γράψαι ὑμῖν παρακαλῶν ἐπαγωνίζεσθαι τῇ ἀπαξ παραδοθείσῃ τοῖς ἁγίοις πίστει; in the NASB, “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.” In providing an exposition for the purpose of using it to argue for a closed canon, it is helpful to divide Jude 3 into several subsections, as organized below. It is the prayer of this author that clever readers will identify the argument of Jude 3 in its relationship to a closed canon as they read the following exposition.

Authorship

If one is to make an authoritative statement on the biblical canon, or any other doctrine or teaching for that matter, then one must possess such authority. Does the author of Jude 3 meet this qualification? Jude 3 refers to its own author, as noted in the following: Ἀγαπητοί... ανάγκην ἔσχον γράψαι ὑμῖν, “Beloved ... I felt it necessary to write to you.” Who is the author, the “I” in ἀνάγκην ἔσχον γράψαι ὑμῖν, “I felt it necessary to write to you”? Ancient letters began with an identification of the author. The epistle of Jude follows this trend and begins with the following statement: Ἰούδας Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος, ἀδελφὸς δὲ Ἰακώβου, directly translated as “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James” (v. 1). The author identifies himself as Ἰούδας, directly translated as *Judas* but written as *Jude* in most English Bibles, most likely to avoid any relationship with Judas Iscariot.

The NT directly refers to six men named Judas. The most well-known of these six, Judas Iscariot (Matt 10:4), the betrayer of Christ, is certainly not the author since he hung himself before Christ's death (Matt 27:5). Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37), a revolutionary, is even more unlikely to be the author because he was killed in AD 6 following a failed uprising against the census imposed by Caesar Augustus.²² Judas of Damascus, yet another

²² F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), 125.

"Judas," is the Judas in whose house Saul lodged during his stay in that famous city (Acts 9:11).²³ However, this Judas is such an obscure character that there is no serious contention for him as the author of Jude. This leaves three other men: Judas son of James, the tenth apostle; Judas Barsabbas, an early Christian prophet; and Judas, a half-brother of Jesus.

Some older commentators, including John Calvin and Matthew Henry, believed the author of Jude to be the apostle "Judas of James" (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13: Ἰούδαν Ἰακώβου). Judas occupied the tenth position among the twelve disciples, is commonly identified as Thaddaeus (*cf.* Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18), and is distinct from Judas Iscariot (John 14:22).²⁴ Establishing Judas of James as the author of Jude would give the epistle apostolic authority and would make sense in light of Judas' status as an apostle, for surely one of the twelve would exhort his readers to contend for the faith (Jude 3) and condemn those teachers who err (4) just as Jesus did Himself during His earthly ministry (*cf.* Matt 22:15-22). However, it is not likely that the tenth apostle wrote Jude, for Ἰούδαν Ἰακώβου is best translated as "Judas *son* of James," not "Judas *brother* of James," as is stated in Jude 1 (Ἰούδας ... ἀδελφὸς δὲ Ἰακώβου, *Judas ... and brother of James*). In addition, one might also expect the author of Jude, if he were truly the tenth apostle, to identify himself an apostle, a title notably absent in Jude 1.

Other modern scholars (Selwyn, du Plessis, Ellis) suggest that the author of Judas was "Judas Barsabbas" (Acts 15:22, 27, 32).²⁵ This particular Judas was considered a prophet (v. 32) who joined Paul, Barnabas, and Silas in their ministry efforts at Antioch (v. 22). However, Judas Barsabbas was never identified

²³ Gene Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 1.

²⁴ Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC 50 (Waco: Word, 1983), 21.

²⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2003), 404.

with James²⁶ and one would expect Judas to use his surname Barsabbas to distinguish himself from others who are called Judas, especially Judas Iscariot.²⁷ Ellis argues that ἀδελφός, *brother*, should not be understood to be a physical brother, but a co-laborer; and in this case Judas would have been a co-laborer of James, not the brother of James, which allows for Judas Barsabbas. However, in every example in the NT, the phrase "brother of" always refers to family relations, not Christian brotherhood.²⁸

The most popular view of the identity of Judas is that he was the half-brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3). The title, Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος, *slave of Jesus Christ*, does not help much in identifying Jude, but ἀδελφός δὲ Ἰακώβου, *and brother of James*, provides greater insight. There are four men in the NT identified as James: (1) James, the son of Zebedee (Mark 1:19), James, the son of Alphaeus (3:18), James, the father of Judas (Luke 6:16), and James, the half-brother of Jesus (Matt 13:55-56), who became the prominent leader in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 15:13-21; Gal 2:9) and wrote the epistle of James.²⁹ Of the four, the last choice, James the half-brother of Jesus, is most likely.³⁰ The primary challenge to this view is that Judas does not identify himself as the half-brother of Christ. In response, it is worth pointing out that author of the epistle of James, who is most likely James, the half-brother of Jesus, does not identify himself as the half-brother

²⁶ Bauckham, *Jude*, 22.

²⁷ Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 9.

²⁸ Bauckham, *Jude*, 22.

²⁹ Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 9.

³⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 27.

of Jesus either.³¹ Moo argues that Judas, like James, avoided identifying himself as the brother of Jesus because this title brought Jude no special authority, and instead used a title, Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος, *slave of Jesus Christ*, which pointed to the greater significance of Jude's ministry,³² and this is probably correct. It was good practice for an apostle to claim his authority (e.g., Gal 1:1) and Jude follows suit by identified himself as a “slave of Jesus Christ.” Although δοῦλος typically identifying a common slave bought and sold as property, Jude’s original readers would have understood the word to have a deeper religious significance. Throughout the Scriptures, the Bible marks off certain men as slaves of the Lord—those men who both served the Lord and held great authority. Moses (Deut 34:5; Jos 1:1), Joshua (Judg 2:8), Paul (Rom 1:1), Peter (2 Pet 1:1), Timothy (Phil 1:1), James (Jas 1:1), and, of course, Jude, are all identified as slaves of the Lord, and because these men were slaves of the Lord they have the right and authority to speak on behalf of their Master.³³

Identifying the author of Jude as Judas the brother of Jesus is important because it places the author of Jude within the first century apostolic community. According to Acts, the brothers of Jesus, including Jude, had witnessed the resurrection and joined the ministry of the church (1:14). Therefore, Jude is not simply an outsider giving his own perspective but an insider, having at first rejected the Messiah’s teachings during His earthly mission (John 7:3-5) but who later joined the apostolic band and remained steadfast in the apostles’ doctrine (Acts 2:42). Above all else, however, Jude is identified as a slave of the Lord and thus possessed authority to speak to the church on matters of doctrine and practice.

³¹ Moo, *The Letter of James, PNTC* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 22

³² Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, 27.

³³ Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 44-46.

The Historical Context

The historical context of Jude 3, like its authorship, provides significant facts relevant to the issue of a closed canon. The first section gives this context: “Ἀγαπητοί, πᾶσαν σπουδὴν ποιούμενος γράφειν ὑμῖν περὶ τῆς κοινῆς ἡμῶν σωτηρίας ἀνάγκην ἔσχον γράψαι ὑμῖν παρακαλῶν ἐπαγωνίζεσθαι; “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly. ... ” The epistle of Jude is unique in that it is the only letter in the NT in which the author had an original intention to write a letter but changed it due to extenuating circumstances. Originally, Jude had in mind a letter concerning “our common salvation.” However, an external influence made Jude “felt the necessity” to write a different kind of letter. That external influence is described in v. 4: “For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”

Who were these apostates that provoked Jude to write his letter? Many modern scholars argue that these apostates were Gnostics. The primary argument for this position is that Jude's opponents appear to be Gnostics because of their tendency towards immorality, i.e., “Ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness.”³⁴ This interpretation has had great effect upon the introduction and interpretation of the letter. Since full-blown Gnosticism as an organized system did not appear until the second century, it is argued that Jude is a product of the second century. In addition, some scholars see discussions of “the faith” (see below) as evidence for an early Catholicism, which

³⁴ Among other things, the Gnostics believed in a dualism which identified the spiritual as good, but matter as evil, or at best nonexistent. As a result, many Gnostics felt no need to control their bodies, since the material world was evil anyways and could not destroy the spirit, and hence became libertines. See Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody: Prince P, 1991), 1:58-60.

arose within Christianity during the second century,³⁵ and the author's calling for the readers to remember the words of the apostles (v. 17) seems to imply that the author is looking back upon the apostolic era, and hence implying a later date.³⁶

The above arguments, though persuasive, are unconvincing. Although Jude's opponents may have possessed gnostic tendencies, a rejection of the practical matters of the law was alive and well even in Paul's day (cf. Rom 6). In addition, the argument for an "early Catholicism" is weak because (1) prior to any development of "early Catholicism," the church did pass down "tradition" as it was given by the apostles (e.g., 1 Cor 15:1-8);³⁷ (2) "Early Catholicism" emphasized ecclesiastical authority in its rebuttal of heresy, whereas the author of Jude emphasizes moral obligation and the consequences of immorality;³⁸ and (3) Jude places great emphasis on the return of Christ (Jude 14, 21, 24), a point not stressed in early Catholicism.³⁹ In addition to this rebuttal, Jude's reference of extra-biblical Jewish Apocalyptic works such as the *Assumption of Moses* (Jude 9) and *1 Enoch* (14-15) points to a 1st century date. These and other Jewish apocryphal works were very popular in the first century church but fell out of favor during the second century.⁴⁰ Since there is no

³⁵ Bauckham, *Jude* 8-9.

³⁶ In light of these facts, some scholars have argued that Jude was written pseudonymously or by a man named Judas, called "Judas of James," who was the third bishop of Jerusalem. This would allow for a late date without making Jude pseudonymous. Of course, the curious student might wonder how a work written by a man who was not an apostle or an associate of an apostle would end up in the canon.

³⁷ This point will be discussed at length under "the faith."

³⁸ Bauckham, *Jude*, 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

convincing reason to date Jude in the second century as opposed to the first, it is best to place Jude within the first century, perhaps in the mid-60s.⁴¹ This would make the apostates simple antinomians and opponents similar to those faced by Paul, who, most likely well-known to the recipients of Jude's letter and perhaps considered disciples (cf. 12), were attempting to argue that grace freed men from moral obligation (4).⁴²

Like the authorship of Jude, the setting of Jude in the historical context of the mid-60 has its implication. The most notable is that the date places Jude's letter during the apostolic era, and it is at this time that the church began to recognize that God was revealing a new body of Scripture to the church (cf. 1 Tim 5:18; 2 Pet 3:15-16). It is also crucial because it helps define the content of *the faith* (see below). Finally, it reveals that the apostates, though not Gnostics, were still a threat to the established rule of faith as given to the church by Christ and his apostles.

The Faith

In response to these apostates, Jude changed the content of his letter and exhorted his readers to παρακαλῶν ἐπαγωνίζεσθαι τῇ ἀπαξ παραδοθείσῃ τοῖς ἀγίοις πίστει, to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints." Jude's focus here is upon "the faith," the object of which the beloved was to fight for in wake of the activity of the apostates. This leads to the question: What exactly is "the faith"? There are three primary positions within academia on the identity of the faith.

The first view insists that *the faith* is reference to catholic doctrine developed in the second century. However, this view is closely related to a belief in a second century dating of Jude. It has been shown above that the internal and external evidence argues

⁴¹ Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 18.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 19.

for a first century date. Therefore, *the faith* cannot be a reference to later ecclesiastical dogmas or creeds.

The second view, which stands in direct contrast to the first view, understands *the faith* as reference to the condition of salvation, i.e. salvation by grace through faith.⁴³ Faith is commonly used throughout the NT and the OT to reference one's personal trust in the Lord for salvation (e.g., Rom 10:9). In defense of this position and against the view of *the faith* as developed doctrine, Bauckham argues that Jude's concern with the moral implications of the gospel rules out any possibility that Jude is referring to such a body of doctrine,⁴⁴ but is the understanding of *the faith* this simple? Scripture makes a close link between doctrine and practice (e.g., Phil 2:1-11). Perhaps then there is more to *the faith* in Jude 3 than just belief.

This leads to the third and final view, which contests that *the faith* is a body of doctrine given from Jesus to the apostles. By definition it would include salvation by grace through faith (view 2) but would not be limited to that soteriological position. Although faith is generally used in both the Old and New Testaments as personal belief, it is also used with the definite article to indicate a specific faith. Several examples will suffice. In Galatians 1:23, Paul reminds his readers that he had not yet spoken to the churches in Judea, but that they kept hearing that Paul, "who once persecuted us is now preaching *the faith* which he once tried to destroy," and "*the faith*," according to George, is "the objective content of the Christian message."⁴⁵ George also connects the *the faith* described in Galatians 1:23 to Jude 3. Moo adds, "Clearly, 'faith' has the objective meaning here: It describes what Christians believe— such things as Jesus' atoning death and resurrection, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, salvation by grace through faith, and (especially in Jude's situation) the holy lifestyle

⁴³ Bauckham, *Jude* 32-33.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁵ Timothy George, *Galatians: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 132.

that flows from God's grace in Christ."⁴⁶ Paul also refers to *the faith* 1 Corinthians 16:13: "Be on the alert, stand firm in *the faith*..." Also making reference to Jude 3, Garland argues that the passage "refers to the traditions that are the foundation of the community and that Paul passed on to them ... In the immediate context, "faith" refers to the traditions about Christ's death and resurrection that Paul delivered to the Corinthians (1 Cor 14:3-5; cf. 15:14, 17); but it also applies to the belief in one God over all the earth, a jealous God (8:4-6) who prohibits all forms of idolatry and sexual immorality."⁴⁷ According to Mounce, in the pastoral epistles πίστις, "faith", is used fifteen times with the article. Three of them refer to personal trust (2 Tim. 1:5; 2:18; 3:10), but the rest refer to "the faith" in a creedal sense, i.e., the content of the faith.⁴⁸

This understanding of *the faith* should not come as a surprise to the student of Scripture, for the NT makes constant reference a body of tradition and doctrine passed on from the apostles to the church (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 11:2; 2 Thess 2:14-15; 3:6; 2 Tim 1:14). Teaching that originated from other sources and stood contrary to sound doctrine was to be rejected (cf. Rom 16:17-18; Eph 4:14; 1 Tim 1:3-4; 2 Tim 2:16-18; Titus 1:10-11; Heb 13:9; 2 Pet 3:17; 2 John 1:9-10). Commenting on these and similar passages, Frame notes, "These passages indicate that the gospel of Christ is a specific content, a tradition...passed from the Father, to the Son, to the apostles, to the churches. That tradition serves as the criterion of discipleship, of doctrine and behavior."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, 228-29.

⁴⁷ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 766.

⁴⁸ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC46 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), cxxx-cxxxi.

⁴⁹ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 109.

The Definite Nature of the Faith

According to Jude 3, τῆ... πίστει, *the faith*, is a very specific kind of faith, being qualified as ἅπαξ παραδοθείση τοῖς ἁγίοις, “once handed down to the saints.” First, *the faith*, is identified as ἅπαξ, meaning *once for all*. Most notably the word is used to identify the number of times Christ suffered for man’s sins (Heb 9:26, 28; 1 Pet 3:18), the number of times men die (Heb 9:27),⁵⁰ and the number of times the high priest entered the Most Holy Place every year (v. 7). There is no doubt that ἅπαξ refers to the concept of once or once for all, lest one is willing to deny some of the most crucial elements of the Christian faith. When applied to *the faith*, it would classify *the faith* as unique and definite.

In Jude 3, ἅπαξ acts as an adverb describing παραδοθείση, which means *I hand down* or *I pass on*, in the NASB, *delivered*. This verb reveals two critical truths to the writer’s thesis. First, the aorist tense tells readers that the delivering of *the faith* is a completed action accomplished in the past.⁵¹ Second, the passive voice reveals that *the faith* is not performing the action, but is having action performed to it, more specifically *the faith* was delivered by someone or something. Although the text does not directly state the party performing the delivery, it is clearly not the saints in general, since they are the target recipients (see below). Jude’s high regard for the words of the apostles (cf. v. 17) suggests it is the apostles whom Jude has in mind. Paul, an apostle himself, uses παραδίδωμι to reference his action of delivering his apostolic message to the churches (1 Cor 11:2, 23),⁵² and is also used to describe the distribution of the results of the Jerusalem council by the apostles (Acts 16:4). Since there is virtually no other candidate for the deliverer of *the faith*, it is best to conclude

⁵⁰ Cases like Lazarus are clearly the exception, not the norm.

⁵¹ Herbert W. Bateman IV, *Translating Jude Clause by Clause: An Exegetical Guide* (Leesburg, IN: Cyber-Center for Biblical Studies, 2013), 41.

⁵² Bauckham, Jude 33.

that the apostles were the vehicle of bringing *the faith* to the church. Due to its once-for-all delivered nature, it logical to conclude that *the faith* cannot change⁵³ and that nothing needs to be added to *the faith*.⁵⁴

Finally, *the faith* is said to be delivered τοῖς ἁγίοις, *to the saints*. The word “saint” is a term filled with ecclesiastical baggage, but in its biblical usage it is simply used to identify an individual (or a group of people) who has placed his faith in Jesus Christ regardless of his moral excellence (e.g. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1). Jude’s lack of qualifying the location of “the saints” indicates that *the faith* was once for all delivered, not to a very specific body of people, e.g., a specific local church, but to the church as a whole.

Summary

In summary, apostates of the antinomian variety had entered the church and were attempting to relax the moral demands of Christianity. In response, Jude, an authority in the apostolic church, charges his readers to stand for *the faith*, the core doctrines given by Christ to the apostles and then handed down to the church. The delivery of these core doctrines was completed in the past, and thus they are not susceptible to any modification or addition as the apostates were attempting to accomplish. *The faith* was delivered to the saints collectively, not to a specific group of Christians.

⁵³ Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 42.

⁵⁴ Commenting on the sufficiency of the faith, Kraftchick notes, “The narrative of those acts delivered to the community contains everything necessary for a life of faith and recounts truthfully everything required for salvation.” See Steven J. Kraftchick, *Jude and 2 Peter*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 30.

JUDE 3 AND AN ARGUMENT FOR A CLOSED CANON

Having presented the introductory and exposition material, the following argument is now presented for a closed canon:

(1) The church was built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

(2) As the foundation of the church, the apostles and prophets would be the source of doctrine for the believing community.

(3) The doctrine of the apostles and prophets is identified in the NT as the faith.

(4) Jude 3 proclaims that the faith was once for all delivered to the saints.

(5) The doctrinal content of the faith is preserved in the inspired writings of the apostles and their associates.

(6) If the faith was once delivered to the saints, then the inspired writings of the apostles and their associates were once for all delivered to the saints.

(7) If the inspired writings of the apostles and their associates were once for all delivered to the saints, then no future works could be added to the collection of inspired writings.

(8) Therefore, the canon must close at the end of the apostolic era.

Each premise will now be examined for its truthfulness and accuracy in light of Scripture.

(1) The church was built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

Premise 1 is clearly defended by Ephesians 2:19-20, in which Paul, speaking to the church at Ephesus, writes, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the *cornerstone*. Here, the apostles are defined as those men whom were commissioned by Christ to authoritatively proclaim his message in oral and written form and established

churches,⁵⁵ and the prophets are defined as NT prophets whom were given the gift of prophecy to edify, comfort, and exhort the church (1 Cor 14:3, 31).⁵⁶

(2) As the foundation of the church, the apostles and prophets were the source of doctrine for the believing community.

As chosen vessels charged with proclaiming Christ's word, the apostles and prophets naturally became the source of normative teaching for those belonging to the Christian community.⁵⁷ Commenting on Ephesians 1:19-20, Arnold notes, "The apostles and prophets lay that foundation through their proclamation of Christ and through building people up in their knowledge of Christ and his word."⁵⁸ Such truth is evident from the polity of the first church, whose members devoted themselves to the apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42). This doctrine was passed on as "tradition," and teaching that originated from other sources and stood contrary to sound doctrine was to be rejected.

⁵⁵ Hoehner identifies three types of apostles: (1) those whom had been with Jesus and witnessed His resurrection (Acts 1:21-22), (2) Paul who was born out of season (1 Cor 15:8-9), and (3) those who received the gift of apostleship (Eph 4:11). See Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 399.

⁵⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the issues surrounding the identity of the apostles and NT prophets, see *Ibid.*, 133-35, 397-404. See also Gary Gromacki, "The Foundational Gifts of Apostle and Prophet in Ephesians," *JMAT* 17.2 (Fall, 2013), 5-32.

⁵⁷ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 154.

⁵⁸ Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 171.

(3) The doctrine of the apostles and prophets is identified in the NT as the faith.

Premise 3 has been proven under the above exposition of Jude 3. For sake of the flow of the argument, let the reader be reminded that the whole of the NT identifies the teachings of the apostles as the faith, which includes not only the gospel but the core doctrinal content necessary for faith. This content was taught by Christ to the apostles and then given to the church.

(4) Jude proclaims that the faith was once for all delivered to the saints.

The above exposition of Jude 3 has proven premise 4 beyond doubt. *The faith*, that body of doctrine collectively given by the apostles and prophets to the saints, was given only once to the saints. *The faith* being once delivered reveals its sufficiency and proves that nothing can change about *the faith* and nothing can be added to the faith. As a servant of the Lord, Jude can make this statement with authority.

(5) The doctrinal content of the faith is preserved in the inspired writings of the apostles and their associates.

That the apostles and their associates intended to preserve their doctrine and instruction in writing is evident from the NT itself. Examples abound. Luke's introduction, addressed to Theophilus, cites that Luke's reason for writing was "so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4). John gives his purpose statement very clearly at the end of his Gospel: "But these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). In his first letter, Peter gives his purpose statements as follows: "Through Silvanus, our faithful brother (for so I regard *him*), I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!" (5:12), and in his second letter, commenting on the nearness of his death and the truth given to his readers, Peter notes, "And I will also be diligent that at any time after my

departure you will be able to call these things to mind” (1:15). When writing to the Romans, Paul informs the church that he wrote “very boldly ... to you on some points so as to remind you again” (Rom 15:15), thereby demonstrating that the apostle thought it necessary to put apostolic teaching into written form for reference. The apostle John concludes his first epistle with the following: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13).

Beyond direct purpose statements, there are several passages which imply that the word of God was preserved for future generations. For example, in Revelation 2-3, Jesus addresses seven different churches concerning issues and concerns specifically addressed to each church. However, the concluding statement, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) suggests that the letters written to the seven churches were not just for the seven churches but for all believers. The entire testimony of Scripture is concurrent on this matter. Paul reminds the Romans that “whatever was written in the earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). Since it is clear that Paul understood that God was adding to his word (see above discussion on the date of Jude), it is logical to conclude that Paul understood that these newly added works were also written for man’s instruction. This cumulative case argument overwhelmingly demonstrates premise 5.

(6) If the faith was once delivered to the saints, then the inspired writings of the apostles and their associates were once for all delivered to the saints.

Premise 6 is based specifically upon the truthfulness of premises 4 and 5. If the NT is the written form of *the faith* as preserved by the apostles and their associates (premise 5), and if that faith was once delivered to the saints (premise 4), then it is logical to conclude that the inspired writings of the apostles and their associates were once for all delivered. There are several

potential challenges to this premise which must be cleared of value before proceeding.

First, one could argue that the apostles did not record all of their teachings in Scripture, e.g., Roman Catholicism's insistence of "sacred tradition." In response, one would assume that such "tradition" would never contradict Scripture since they both come from the same apostolic source, which is often not the case with other so-called extra-biblical traditions found in various religions. In addition, the challenge begs the question because it assumes that the apostles had teachings which they did not record in Scripture. According to Paul, the Scriptures are sufficient for bringing men to salvation, instruction in righteousness, and the equipping of men to perform good works (2 Tim 3:15-17). It may be asked of those who pose this challenge, "What are the Scriptures lacking that so-called apostolic tradition provides?"

Second, one could argue for some form of apostolic succession, which implies that new revelation may be possible. In response, it has already been demonstrated that *the faith* was once delivered, which makes the doctrinal content of *the faith* sufficient and in need of no updates or revisions. In addition, the biblical evidence for apostolic succession is very weak.⁵⁹ Those who argue for apostolic succession must look to history for support which, as the reader must be aware of, is ironic at best.

Third, one could argue that the New Testament texts are corrupt, including Jude, thus making any assertion that the New Testament teaches a closed canon meaningless (and, by extension, the necessary for new revelation to correct the corruption). In response, the science of textual criticism has demonstrated the text of the New Testament to have been

⁵⁹ Those who argue for apostolic succession look to Matthew 16:18 for their support. However, even if one presumes that the "rock" is Peter, even as some evangelical commentators do, the passage does not come close to defending the hierarchies of the likes found in Romanism and Mormonism. See D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositors Bible Commentary, Vol. 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gabelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 368.

preserved with incredible accuracy.⁶⁰ As for Jude itself, P⁷², which contains the earliest complete copy of Jude, is dated between the second and third century AD,⁶¹ and probably at least 100 years prior to the rise of Constantine and any possible so-called “orthodox corruption.” The burden of proof is upon the one who argues for the corruption of the text.

Fourth, one could argue that this premise commits the fallacy of division. For example, the fictional character Joe works for a pharmaceutical company that has great lobbying power and influence; therefore, one may conclude that Joe has great lobbying power and influence. Of course, this might not be true, for Joe may not work at this pharmaceutical company as a lobbyist or company representative and thus not have great power or influence. In the same way, it may be argued that the Scriptures, though part of the faith, are not equal to the whole of it, and thus the faith may be once delivered, but the Scriptures are not. In response, this writer is not arguing that the Scriptures are a *part of the faith*, but the *written form of the faith*. Those who argue that the Scriptures are a *part of the faith* run into the same problems faced by those who make the first two listed challenges.

Finally, one might argue that this premise limits God. To put it differently, to argue that the Scriptures were once for all delivered prevents God from giving new written revelation and thus degradingly keeps him from working in this dispensation. In response, this is an argument from emotionalism. Truth is not defined by how one feels, but by what corresponds to reality, in this case, what the Scriptures teach. If the Lord deliberately “limits himself” (whatever that means) by proclaiming the closure of the canon, then so be it, and all glory to him.

⁶⁰ For an extensive defense on the historic reliability of the NT, see Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 342-73.

⁶¹ Paul D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 258.

(7) If the inspired writings of the apostles and their associates were once for all delivered to the saints, then no future works could be added to the collection of inspired writings.

If the inspired writings of the apostles and their associates were once for all delivered, then no other document can be added to the collection of inspired writings given to the church by the apostles and their associates during their active ministry. This premise is not only based upon the exposition of Jude 3 and the preceding argument but also on logic, for if the apostles ministered during the first century, then they could only pen Scripture during the first century. On this point, Geisler notes, "The apostles of Christ lived and died in the first century; consequently, the record of this full and final revelation of Christ to the apostles was completed in the first century."⁶² Nothing more needs to be said on this matter.

(8) Therefore, the canon must close at the end of the apostolic era.

Premise 8 is the logical conclusion of the above argument. As commonly known, the canon is the collection of divinely inspired writings. If the written form of the faith (Scripture) was once delivered by the apostles to the saints, then the canon must have closed at the conclusion of the apostolic era (first century AD). With the evidence presented above, there is no other possible option.

CONCLUSION

As the introduction to this work implies, canonology poses great difficulty for the theologian attempting to develop an objective statement on the canon of Scripture, particularly the closing of the canon, and such difficulty has caused great discouragement in the wake of cult apologetics. Fortunately, Jude 3 provides an answer the church so desperately needs. Although the Bible does not contain its own complete canonical list, it does

⁶² Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 1:534.

reveal the cut-off point of that canonical list, for *the faith* being “once delivered” leaves no possible interpretation other than the one which proclaims that the canon of Scripture closed at the conclusion of the first century A.D. As Schreiner so beautifully puts it, “From statements like these early Christians rightly concluded that the canon of Scripture should be restricted to those early writings that explicated the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁶³

Of course, Jude 3 is not merely an apologetic tool for the scholar, but gives great assurance to all believers. One does not need to worry that he is missing out on new revelation or that he is limiting God’s ability to communicate to man in some way. Most importantly, however, he does not have to worry that he is living in ignorance, but can confidently place his trust in the written words of Christ’s apostles who were commissioned and inspired to record the truths of the Christian faith for future generations. Like those who first read Jude’s epistle, believers today must continue to stand for *the faith* against any worldview which seeks to add or modify God’s word as delivered to the saints.

⁶³ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 436.

Kingdom Hermeneutics and the Apocalypse: A Promotion of Consistent Literal Methodology

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INTRODUCTION¹

George Eldon Ladd espoused wisdom when he said, “The easiest approach to [the book of] Revelation is to follow one’s own particular tradition as the true view and ignore all others; but the intelligent interpreter must familiarize himself with the various methods of interpretation that he may criticize and purify his own view.”² It is in this Laddian spirit that the present article will consider the hermeneutical approaches of several key eschatological positions concerning the book of Revelation, and in particular, the kingdom views attached to each position. However, rather than give a summary statement of the three different millennial positions,³ the focus here will be to expose each position’s supporting hermeneutical base as that is where the differences originate. This will be done with a view to comparing and contrasting each position’s hermeneutical method against the backdrop of a consistently literal, grammatical-historical interpretation that results with the view that ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (the kingdom of God) is still awaiting a

¹ This article was originally presented at The Evangelical Society Far-West Regional Conference, April 15, 2016, San Diego Christian College; and The Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics, September 15, 2016, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana.

² George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 619.

³ That is, pre-, post-, and amillennialism.

future and literal fulfillment—a position unique to the system known as dispensational premillennialism.

THE FOUR APPROACHES

There are four popular hermeneutical approaches concerning the book of Revelation, which in turn affects one's view of the kingdom or millennium.⁴ Traditionally, these have been labeled preterist, historicist, idealist, and futurist. Each of these eschatological views is derived from the hermeneutics employed to reach that particular position. That said, elements of literal, symbolic, and figurative expressions are recognized in each of these four, but the question to be answered is this: What was God's intended meaning when he wrote the book through its human author?⁵ As these approaches to Revelation are explored, it will be shown that only the futurist approach concerning the promised literal thousand year kingdom is consistent with a grammatical-historical hermeneutic and, because of that, does the most justice to the book of Revelation as a whole.

Preterism

According to Ladd, preterism is “the prevailing interpretation of the Revelation in scholarship.”⁶ The preterist position derives its name from the Latin root for “past” and sees Revelation today, not as predictive prophecy in any sense, but views the book as

⁴ For the purpose of this article, the words *kingdom* and *millennium* are being used throughout synonymously (Rev 20:2-7; cf. 11:15).

⁵ While the debate rages concerning the human author of Revelation, this writer agrees with the traditional view that the Apostle John, son of Zebedee, penned the book (cf. Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). For an excellent treatment defending this view from several angles, see Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 2-19.

⁶ Ladd, *Theology of the NT*, 621.

mostly apocalyptic in genre. Using heavy symbolism and metaphors distinct to what is often described as Jewish apocalyptic literature, Revelation is said to convey hidden meanings regarding past events already fulfilled.⁷ Cornelius Venema, himself a preterist and president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary⁸, explains, “In this approach, the book of Revelation primarily refers to events that occurred in the past, either in the period prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70 or in the early Christian centuries leading up to the destruction of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD.”⁹

⁷ It is noteworthy that “Apocalyptic” as a specific literary genre was virtually unknown and unclassified until nineteenth-century German theologians began studies on supposed Jewish apocalypticism. The term *apocalyptic literature*, as applied to Biblical and non-canonical books, seems not to have had its official consideration until the late twentieth-century by way of the Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Genres Project from 1975 to 1978, which then led to the Uppsala Symposium’s coining the term in 1979. It has since been anachronistically applied to Revelation (cf. Rev 1:1) and sections of certain OT books ever since. Cf. Sara Robinson, “The Origins of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature: Prophecy, Babylon, and 1 Enoch” (master’s thesis, University of South Florida, 2005) 2-3; Helge S. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic: The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and of the Son of Man* (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany: Neukirchen-Verlag, 1988); David E. Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,” *Semina* 36 (1986): 67–91, as well as David Aune, *Revelation 1–5 WBC* (Dallas: Word), lxxvii–lxxxii. For an older (preterist-idealist) treatment on Revelation that, before most, dogmatically classified the book under “apocalyptic literature,” see Ray Summers, *Worthy of the Lamb: Interpreting the Book of Revelation in its Historical Background* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1951).

⁸ Venema is used throughout this article because of his fair assessment of the four end times views.

⁹ Cornelis P. Venema, “Interpreting Revelation,” *Table Talk* 36, no.1 (January 2012): 12. It should be noted the former date (prior to AD 70) is the prevailing date of composition of Revelation by most preterists. It is important to call attention to these specific dates as being crucial to the preterist understanding of Revelation as a whole, and thus their

This approach favors allegorizing the book of Revelation in its basic hermeneutical method viz. finding various meanings for key events in the book rather than drawing out a single intended meaning. This method also serves as the foundational base for amillennialism, an end-times position that does not see a future or literal component to the kingdom (Rev 20:1-7); rather, it takes the “thousand years” in Revelation 20:2-7 as purely symbolic.¹⁰ According to Riddlebarger, a proponent of this approach, the millennium is currently being experienced today in the church:

The promises to Israel, David, and Abraham, in the Old Testament are fulfilled by Jesus Christ and his church during this present age. The millennium is the period of time between the two advents of our Lord with the thousand years of Revelation 20 being symbolic of the entire interadvental age.¹¹

eschatological position is entirely dependent on the actual dating of the book.

¹⁰ Of this persuasion are Oswald Allis, R.C. Sproul, Michael Horton, and Kim Riddlebarger. Some forms of preterism also support the postmillennial position seeing the church or gospel as ushering in the kingdom—a kingdom that is literal or nonliteral, depending on the theologian. Out of this preterist-postmillennial position was born the modern day theonomist movement (or Christian reconstructionism) of which Greg Bahnsen and R. J. Rushdoony were pioneers, and Kenneth Gentry and Gary DeMar are today’s best known advocates.

¹¹ Kim Riddlebarger, *The Case for Amillennialism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 31. An irresolvable question regarding this position is this: If we are in the kingdom now, how does the kingdom of God and the horrific tribulation(s) described by Jesus in Matthew 24:3-29 exist simultaneously? Perhaps it is due to this dilemma that some amillennialists have opted for a more neo-Platonist view that the kingdom is presently experienced with life in heaven, while anything non-blissful pertains to life on earth. This dual metaphysical structure seems to be more reminiscent of ancient Greek philosophy rather than the result biblical exegesis.

Against the backdrop of a consistently literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic, the preterist approach differs in that it fails to remain literal in regards to prophecy concerning Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹² And as a result, preterism offers a distorted view of the kingdom in Revelation. This approach must be rejected due to the violence of interpretation done in their abandonment of a consistent application of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic. In the preterist allegorical approach, any distinction between Israel and the church is totally lost as the latter swallows up the former. This is due to a structural hermeneutic that uses the NT to reinterpret key OT prophetic texts.¹³ When this is committed “replacement theology” or “supersessionism” is the result, which has been the notorious culprit behind much of the anti-Semitic attitudes throughout church history.¹⁴ Vlach observes, “The supersessionist approach defangs the OT and does not allow the Hebrew Scriptures to speak to the issues they address such as God’s plans for the nation Israel.”¹⁵ Thus, the preterist approach can birth negative implications toward national Israel that are difficult to dismiss.

Because the Scriptures are not taken literally all the way through in the preterist approach, the Bible’s last book is left to spiritual allegory which itself rests on the subjectivity of the

¹² E.g., Jeremiah 31:2-4, 31-40; Daniel 9:24-27; 12:1; Hosea 14:4-7; Zechariah 1:17; 2:10-12; 12:10; 14:4-9, et al.

¹³ For example, using NT texts such as Romans 9:24-26 to justify the church replacing Israel as the sole recipient of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-40. Thus this hermeneutical strategy tends to *re-interpret* meanings found in the OT, not merely expand its applications.

¹⁴ From the Latin *super* (on, upon) and *sedere* (to sit). Thus supersessionism is the view that the church has permanently taken the seat of Israel, or, in other words, has replaced her and thus all promises given to that nation are now applied solely to the church. Another view is that “Israel” in the OT always referred to the church.

¹⁵ Michael J. Vlach, *Has The Church Replaced Israel: A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 96.

interpreter to decipher multiple possible meanings. Because of this, the authorial intent of certain key passages such as Revelation 20 is lost as it is usurped by the intent of the interpreter who assigns foreign meaning to the text. Thus a literal future kingdom in the land of Israel is just a fanciful dream. Pentecost, warning of the danger of this approach, solidifies why it should be rejected:

The basic authority in interpretation ceases to be the Scriptures, but the mind of the interpreter. The interpretation may then be twisted by the interpreter's doctrinal positions, the authority of the church to which the interpreter adheres, his social or educational background, or a host of other factors.¹⁶

Historicism

Venema states, "The historicist approach reads the book of Revelation as a visionary symbolization of the sequence of events that will occur throughout the course of the history of the church, from Christ's first coming until His second coming at the end of the present age."¹⁷ In other words, the interpreter committed to historicism will read into the text of Revelation meanings for symbols that are considered to correspond directly to actual events throughout church history.¹⁸

¹⁶ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 5.

¹⁷ Venema, "Interpreting Revelation," 12.

¹⁸ There are technically two varieties of historicism: (1) the "traditional-historical" approach which uses Greek and Oriental myths, and Jewish tradition as its interpretive lens for the book of Revelation; and (2) the "continuous historical approach," which is the dominant version, as it concerns Christian church history, and is the one discussed here. Cf. Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 329-31.

The historicist position finds itself a major ally with the preterist approach in that both abandon the literal, grammatical-historical interpretation in favor of allegory. The historicist approach was a favorite among the Reformers who identified the “harlot of Babylon in Revelation 17 with the Roman Catholic Church and the papacy,” while the medieval church saw, “the Beast from the sea in Revelation 13 with the rise of Islam.”¹⁹ Like preterism, the historicist approach has no agreed upon use of a literal, futuristic kingdom (Rev 20), and has *also* traditionally been a utilized hermeneutic for amillennialists.²⁰ In favor of rejecting this hermeneutical outlook, Ladd notes a problem with historicism: “A major difficulty with this approach is that no consensus has been achieved as to what the outline of history foreseen in Revelation really is.”²¹ MacArthur rightfully takes it further by exposing in detail historicism’s grave errors: “It ignores Revelation’s claim to be prophecy [cf. Rev 1:3, 22:7, 18-19]. It also robs the book of any meaning for those first century-believers to whom it was addressed. And it removes the interpretation of Revelation from the realm of literal, historical hermeneutics, leaving it at the mercy of the allegorical and spiritualized meanings invented by each would-be interpreter.”²²

Idealism

Like its historicist cousin, the hermeneutical approach to the eschatological kingdom called idealism views the visions and symbols of Revelation as corresponding to life in the church.

¹⁹ Venema, “Interpreting Revelation,” 12.

²⁰ Yet, this approach has also been used by certain premillennialists such as I. Newton and H. Alford, as well as postmillennialist, D. Brown. Cf. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 622.

²¹ George Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 622.

²² John MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 10.

However, its difference is seen in “its reluctance to identify any particular historical events, institutions, or people”²³ and thus adds a touch of mysticism. Rather than making direct correspondence to literal history, it pictures all of Revelation as the never-ending struggle between good and evil endured by the church in each generation between Christ’s two advents.²⁴ Noting a major flaw with the idealist approach, Ladd observes, “The objection to this view is that the genre of apocalyptic literature always used apocalyptic symbolism to *describe events in history*; and we must expect the Apocalypse [i.e., the book of Revelation] to share at least this feature with other books of its character.”²⁵ Also, like historicism and preterism, idealism depends entirely on an abandonment of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic in favor of the allegorical method. Indeed, this is the common thread binding three of the four hermeneutical approaches. Concerning

²³ Venema, “Interpreting Revelation,” 12.

²⁴ Nineteenth-century Scottish theologian and commentator on Revelation, William Milligan, was a noted proponent of idealism (as was Augustine and Jeremie). Today, Sam Hamstra Jr. is a known idealist proponent. See Marvin C. Pate, ed., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 93–132. Additionally, the emergent field of post-colonial biblical criticism resulting in “empire” studies on Revelation appears to be a recent expression of the idealistic hermeneutical approach.

²⁵ George Elden Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 622. In contrast to Ladd, this writer does not favor the literary categorizing of the Book of Revelation as “apocalyptic literature” (see n. 6 above). The book describes itself as “prophecy” five times—from chapter 1 to chapter 22 (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19)—thus forming a notable *inclusio*. While the book might share features common in accepted apocalyptic works, it is best to let Scripture itself determine the literary genre—especially when explicitly stated. For a solid comparison highlighting the differences between prophetic literature and apocalyptic literature see Anonymous, “Interpretation Regarding the Millennial and Eternal State,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, ed. by Ron J. Bigalke Jr. (Lanham, MD: University P, 2005), 307–23.

this interpretative method, MacArthur adds, “The book [of Revelation] is thus reduced to a collection of myths designed to convey spiritual truth.”²⁶ Therefore, like the other two, the idealist approach to NT eschatology must also be rejected.

Futurism

Of the four main interpretations concerning the eschatological kingdom, it is only this last approach—futurist—that is derived from a consistent, literal hermeneutic. Because of its literal hermeneutical approach, this writer suggests futurism is the only proper interpreting conclusion for the book of Revelation as a whole.²⁷ It is the futurist approach that serves as the underlying support for the position known as premillennialism—the eschatological camp that sees Christ’s return occurring before the future Millennium of Revelation 20. This was in fact the dominant end-times view of the first three hundred years of the church. Men such as Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian all held to a futurist approach in hermeneutics resulting in premillennialism.²⁸ Concerning this fact, Theissen observes, “The early church was largely premillennial. Eschatology was not clearly systematized in the early centuries, but certain early writings can be drawn upon to support the fact that during the first three centuries of the church,

²⁶ John MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, 10.

²⁷ Of this persuasion are George Ladd, J. Dwight Pentecost, Henry Theissen, Robert Thomas, John MacArthur, Craig Blomberg, Mark Hitchcock, Christopher Cone, Norman Geisler, Charles Ryrie, and Darrell Bock. However, futurists (such as these men) differ on issues considering the particulars of doctrines of the rapture and the millennial kingdom as will be shown.

²⁸ Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V; Papias, *Fragment* IV, VI; “Barnabas,” *The Epistle of Barnabas* XV; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* cp. LXXX; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* III:XXV.

premillennialism was widely held.”²⁹ This futurist-premillennial view while being the position of the author, in addition understands the millennium as comprised of a literal thousand years, and will serve as the complete fulfillment of the Abrahamic, land, and Davidic covenants originally given to Israel.³⁰

It is also the futurist position that follows most closely Jesus’ own stated structure of the book of Revelation in 1:19; “Write therefore the things *which you have seen* [ἃ εἶδες], and the things *which are* [ἃ εἰσὶν], and the things *which shall take place after these things* [ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα] (Rev 1:19, emphasis added). With this verse as the book’s interpreting guide, futurism understands chapter one of Revelation as John’s incredible vision of Christ,³¹ chapters 2–3 (the seven letters to seven specific churches) as historical local churches as well as representative of the church since the days of Pentecost,³² and chapters 4–22 as

²⁹ Henry C. Theissen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 365. Confirming this assessment is church historian and non-premillennialist, Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 2:614: “The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius.”

³⁰ For a helpful ten-point defense of premillennialism, see Paige Patterson, *Revelation NAC* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 36–40.

³¹ This first verb, εἶδες (you have seen/come to know), is the only aorist active indicative second person singular verb in the sequence in v.19 highlighting its past (or perfective) aspect and singular application to John himself. This underscores the fact that only John saw the revelation of Jesus Christ having already occurred in chapter one. See n. 51 for further exegesis concerning this rich verb from Revelation 1:19.

³² This view, labeled “extreme futurist” by George Ladd, differs from his own “moderate futurist” view in that while he agrees that Revelation

still future events waiting to be fulfilled. This schema follows precisely the “things seen,” “things which are,” and “things after these.”

The futurist approach to Revelation, with its resulting premillennialism—and literal thousand-year view of the kingdom—is the only proper outlook on eschatology as it is based on a straightforward reading of the book, that is, a consistent application of the literal, grammatical-historical hermeneutic. This does not mean, however, that futurism sees no symbolic meaning or figures of speech inside Revelation.³³ It simply means any such figures carry with it one straightforward interpretation as opposed to the allegorical, mystical, or spiritual approach guiding the other three interpretations above. Robert Thomas agrees, “Only the futurist approach to the book grants sufficient recognition to the [book’s] prophetic style and a normal hermeneutical pattern of interpretation based on that style.”³⁴ Pentecost explains further,

The purpose of figurative language is to impart some literal truth, which may more clearly be conveyed by the use of figures than in any other way. ... Perhaps the primary consideration in relation to

1-3 represent all the churches throughout history, his futurism does not occur until Revelation 7. Cf. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 624.

³³ Unfortunately, this is an all too common mischaracterization of futurists, particularly of premillennial-dispensationalists, by non-futurists. It is noteworthy (and ironic to this false charge!) that the definitive textbook on figures of speech still used today, *Figures of Speech used in the Bible*, was written by the futurist (and ultra-dispensationalist) E. W. Bullinger in 1898. While some of Bullinger’s beliefs were questionable, his scholarship concerning figures of speech in Scripture is unmatched. The point made here is that Bullinger proves futurists understand and recognize non-literal speech in the book of Revelation, as well as the rest of the Bible for that matter.

³⁴ Robert L Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 331.

the interpretation of prophecy is that, like all other areas of Biblical interpretation, it must be interpreted literally. Regardless of the form through which the prophetic revelation is made, through that form some literal truth is revealed.³⁵

MacArthur sums up nicely the superiority of the futurist approach to Revelation against the background of the other three methods above. This, he does, by highlighting futurism's consistent use of a literal interpretation of Scripture:

The futurist approach sees in chapters 4-22 predictions of people and events still yet to come in the future. Only this approach allows Revelation to be interpreted following the same literal, grammatical-historical hermeneutical method by which non-prophetic portions of Scripture are interpreted. As previously noted, proponents of the other three approaches are frequently forced to resort to allegorizing or spiritualizing the text to sustain their interpretations. The futurist approach, in contrast to the other three, does full justice to Revelation's claim to be a prophecy.³⁶

³⁵ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* 42-43, 60. It should be noted that this writer does not particularly favor the term "figurative language" when describing the events in Revelation. The semantics and syntax John used was literal; the vision itself was figurative. Or, to say it another way: John used literal words to describe a figure he was looking at. The real question at play (answered most satisfactorily by the literal hermeneutic) is what did the figure mean, not the words—the words are readily understandable.

³⁶ John MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, 10. It is worth noting that some interpreters follow a fifth hermeneutical approach to Revelation referred to as the "eclectic" approach. This approach amalgamates the other four into one in an attempt to see the good in each method. However, just as with the other non-literal approaches mentioned earlier, the eclectic approach abandons a consistent application of literal hermeneutics and thus results in, this author suggests, a schizophrenic hermeneutic that leaves the interpretation to the whim of the interpreter and to whatever approach he or she deems favorable at the time. Scholars favoring the eclectic approach include Grant Osborne and Greg Beale.

DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

In contrast to the many disagreements within non-dispensational camps, dispensational premillennialism enjoys wholesale agreement within its camp as to what it believes regarding the end times. This positive feature, particular to this brand of premillennialism, is wrought by a consistent application of the literal interpretation of Scripture. It is this hermeneutical conviction—distinct to dispensationalism—that dispensational-premillennialists find their strongest pillar, and enjoy the unrivaled solidarity within its members. Dale Dewitt, tracing the historical roots of dispensationalism's vigor towards literal hermeneutics, clarifies that its hermeneutical approach is not something to be feared:

Dispensational theology employs no unique or cultic hermeneutic; its hermeneutic is the historic Protestant hermeneutic. But it does attempt to apply this method more consistently to Old Testament predictive prophecy than the Reformers or the denominational traditions coming from them were willing to do.³⁷

It is this aspect of employing a literal rendering of Scripture to all its components consistently, including prophecy, which makes dispensational premillennialism distinct in its eschatological theology. As Geisler notes, "The issue, then, boils down to *the understanding and/or application* (rather than the name) of the method of interpreting (hermeneutics) [emphasis in original]"³⁸ In this vein, it is helpful at this point to specify the method dispensationalists employ that in turn results in their unique eschatology. Here, Charles Ryrie is lucid in correctly assessing five key components of dispensational-premillennialism:

³⁷ Dale S. DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America During The 20th Century* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 2002), 8.

³⁸ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2005), 4:414.

The hermeneutical principle of literal interpretation, which leads to a belief in (2) the literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, which in turn cause one to recognize (3) a clear distinction between Israel and the church, out of which the concept of (4) the pretribulation rapture of the church grows, and the belief in (5) a literal, earthly millennial kingdom during which the covenant promises to Israel will be fulfilled [emphasis in original].³⁹

Particularly, points four and five above are reached by a consistent hermeneutical approach to key eschatological texts found in places like the “seventy weeks” of Daniel (9:24-27), along with texts found in NT passages: Matthew 24-25; John 14; 1 Thessalonians 4; 2 Thessalonians 2; 1 Corinthians 15; and Revelation 3, and 20. Adding to the weight of dispensational-premillennialism is the telling fact that the book of Revelation has a complete absence of any mention of the church from chapters 4 to 22—the block of chapters detailing the horrific events of the tribulation on earth. Additionally, the NT emphasis on the expectancy of Christ’s return,⁴⁰ as well as the Restrainer (2 Thess 2:6-7) being removed before the tribulation starts,⁴¹ all

³⁹ This quotation is a summation of Ryrie given by Larry V. Crutchfield, “The Early Church Fathers and Foundations of Dispensationalism,” in *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics* ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 88. For Ryrie’s original outline, see Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 146–49.

⁴⁰ This expectancy is also called the doctrine of imminence, taken from places such as John 14:2-3; Acts 1:11; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; Philippians 3:20; Colossians 3:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 1 Timothy 6:14; James 5:8; 1 Peter 3:3-4.

⁴¹ That the “Restrainer” in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7 is the Holy Spirit indwelt church, and not human government or law, makes the most sense grammatically and logically. In v.6, τὸ κατέχων (that [which] is restraining), is in the neuter and likely refers to the church, while v.7, ὁ κατέχων (one restraining, or the restrainer) is in the masculine gender pointing to an active personal agent supplying the church with the restraining power. Taken together with texts such as 1 Corinthians 3:16

cumulatively point to a pre-tribulational, pre-millennial rapture of the church. Commenting on both the doctrine of Christ's imminent return and the Holy Spirit's work of restraint of the antichrist, Pentecost states,

To the church, no signs were given, the church was told to live in the light of the imminent coming of the Lord to translate them in His presence. ... As long as the Holy Spirit is resident within the church which is His temple, the restraining work will continue. ... It is only when the church, the temple, is removed that this restraining ministry ceases and lawlessness can produce the lawless one.⁴²

Not only does a consistent plain reading of Scripture reveal a pretribulational rapture, but it also solidifies the coming kingdom as a literal, thousand-year period. Indeed, as McClain affirms, "Here the Kingdom of God appears as a government of God to be establishment on earth at the second coming of Christ, who will reign with His risen and glorified saints over the nations in a literal kingdom for a 'thousand years.'"⁴³ A consistent, grammatical hermeneutic simply will not allow for any other interpretation. Concerning this fact, Moulton has provided three grammatical details which cannot be overlooked when

and 6:19, this restraining agent is best identified as the Holy Spirit who presently indwells Christians individually and the church corporately. It therefore seems logical that it is only when every Christian is removed from earth that the careers of the antichrist and false prophet are possible as all godly influence, wisdom, and restraint on the planet will be gone and thus leave a horrific vacuum of leadership to be filled. That said, for an alternate, noteworthy view that understands God the Father as the Restrainer and his providential care as that which restrains the present evil, see Issa E. Haddad, "The Identity of the 'Restrainer' in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7" (master's thesis, Southern California Seminary, 2009).

⁴² J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 203, 205.

⁴³ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1959), 8.

interpreting Revelation chapter 20, and provide an air-tight case as to why kingdom must be literal:

First: The statement of the thousand (χιλιά) is used six times in the text (20:1-7). The use of *literary repetition* adds emphasis to this specific and crucial time period. Second: The use of the *definite article* accompanies statements regarding this thousand-year period [vv.3, 5, 7]. The article emphasizes that this time period is a known unit, removing any reason to interpret the thousand in a manner other than literal. Third: The author uses both a specific time word (the thousand) and a non-specific time word (for a short time, 20:3) in the same context. This strongly argues for a literal interpretation for the ‘thousand years,’ since this author could well have used the expression ‘a long time’ in place of the ‘thousand’ if in fact he did not truly mean a literal ‘thousand.’⁴⁴

It is worth noting that it is only dispensational premillennialism that treats the biblical data concerning the future kingdom comprehensively. This is due to the system’s recognition of the covenants given to Israel, such as the Abrahamic (Gen 15), the Davidic (2 Sam 7; cf. Psalm 89), and the new covenant (Jer 31), all finding their fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. In contrast, non-dispensational systems simply have no real use for the promised kingdom as they fail to recognize a distinct, literal fulfillment of these promises given to national Israel. For example, historic-premillennialist, Millard Erickson, clearly admits, “There is in posttribulationism relatively little theological rationale for the millennium. It seems to be somewhat superfluous.”⁴⁵ Likewise, even Ladd admits,

⁴⁴ Brian Moulton, “The Brief Case for a Literal Millennium” (course notes, *Analysis of Daniel*, Southern California Seminary, El Cajon, CA, 2010). Emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 1231. A post-tribulation rapture is the common eschatological view within covenant or historic premillennialism (to which Erickson subscribes), as opposed to dispensational

“Here we are shut up to inferences, for the New Testament nowhere explains the need for this temporal kingdom, except to indicate that in some undisclosed way it is essential to the accomplishment of the reign of Christ (1 Cor 15:24ff).”⁴⁶ As both of these scholars have revealed, without a belief in the literal future fulfillment of the covenants given specifically to Israel—a belief that is birthed out of a consistent application of the literal, grammatical hermeneutic—there is simply no use for a literal millennial kingdom. Highlighting this fact, Michael Wiley boils down the millennial kingdom to two distinct purposes, with dispensational-premillennialism being the only end-times view that embraces both. Wiley states,

Consequently, there are two main propositions that can be concluded regarding the purpose of the millennial kingdom: (1) the Kingdom is set apart for the purpose of Christ to defeat his enemies once and for all (1 Cor 15:24-25); and, (2) the Kingdom is set apart for the purpose of the unconditional covenants to be fulfilled. If both propositions are disregarded, one will logically adopt either an amillennial or postmillennial view. If just the first proposition is accepted, but the second is denied, then one will logically espouse a non-dispensational premillennial view. However, if both propositions are claimed, then it seems apparent that one will logically come into full agreement with dispensational premillennialism.⁴⁷

premillennialism which alone sees a pre-tribulation rapture of the church.

⁴⁶ George Ladd, *Theology of the NT*, 629. It is specifically here, concerning the literalness of millennial kingdom, where Ladd distances himself from dispensational premillennialism while still holding to some (undefined) future aspect to the kingdom.

⁴⁷ John Michael Wiley, “Comparisons and Contrasts Between the Millennial Kingdom and the New Heavens and New Earth” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 19, n. 58 (Winter 2015): 276.

It is because of the non-dispensationalists' blurring, or destroying, any distinction between the church and national Israel, they simply see no unique purpose of the millennial kingdom other than to propose Christ does *something* during that time. Additionally, this author suggests it is the subtle, yet heavily entrenched supersessionism that keeps the non-dispensationalist from embracing a pre-tribulational rapture of the church. As non-dispensational (historic) premillennialist, Wayne Grudem, realized,

It must be said that behind this argument of pretribulationists is probably a more fundamental concern: the desire to preserve a distinction between *the church* (which they think will be taken to heaven to be with Christ) and *Israel* (which they think will constitute the people of God on earth during the tribulation and then during the millennial kingdom).⁴⁸

While Grudem correctly assessed the dispensationalist's instance on the distinction between the church and national Israel, he does not go back far enough in addressing the real underlying concern. In actuality, the dispensationalist's desire to preserve a distinction between the church and Israel is born out of the previous desire—to read Scripture in a manner accurately by taking the Word of God consistently at face value.

It all boils down to hermeneutics, and for the dispensational-premillennialist, consistent literal hermeneutics really is the key factor at play in all doctrine. Therefore, the dispensational-premillennialist's desire to preserve a distinction between Israel and the church has no other motivation than to remain true to the Word of God (2 Tim 2:15). For this reason, the only legitimate eschatological conclusion resulting from a consistent application of the literal, grammatical hermeneutic, is the specific futurism encased in dispensational-premillennialism.

⁴⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 1133.

A PLEA FOR CONSISTENT GRAMMATICAL- HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

As demonstrated throughout, the only proper Biblical hermeneutic—one that does the most honor to Scripture—is a consistently literal, plain interpretation or what is called the “grammatical-historical hermeneutic.” Defending the importance of this hermeneutical methodology, Cone is emphatic:

An examination of the various methods of interpretation demonstrates that the only method which consistently recognizes this foundational truth [viz. a consistently practiced literal hermeneutic] is the literal grammatical historical approach, and thus not only is necessary, but by virtue of its necessity (for one) it is certainly possible.⁴⁹

This literal way of interpreting Scripture was the accepted hermeneutic of the Antiochene school of interpretation in the early centuries of the church,⁵⁰ but goes back even further to the apostle Paul (cf. 1 Cor 15:27) and the scribe Ezra (Neh 8:8). Thus, the plain, or literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic finds biblical support in both Old and New Testaments.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Christopher Cone, *Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method*, 2nd ed. (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary P, 2012), 155.

⁵⁰ Among whom the most prominent were Lucian (A.D. 240– 312); Diodorus (d. 393); John Chrysostom (A.D. 354–407); and Theodoret (AD 386–458). Cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1992), 141-42. Additionally, see Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook, 1991), 37-38.

⁵¹ Other specific textual indicators supporting a consistently literal hermeneutic within Scripture are the following: the origin of communicated speech in Genesis 1 and 2—God created human language and spoke to Adam in literal fashion an expected Adam to understand/obey, while Satan introduces the first non-literal interpretation (Gen 3:1). Prophecies literally fulfilled, e.g., future

The key to the grammatical-historical method of hermeneutics is interpreting Scripture in light of its immediate context (grammatical and historical, which includes biblical, cultural, political, etc.) in order to exegete the *author's single intended meaning*. When applied consistently, this method helps the interpreter recognize not only Scripture's various genres, but also how to decipher the author's point within those genres if he moves from the literal to the figurative—such as John's use of the comparative particles ὡς (like, as, as it were) and ὅμοιος (similar to, resembling) used well over 90 times in Revelation alone.⁵² Similarly, Ezekiel's frequent use of the comparative noun

leaders like Cyrus King of Persia, or the gathering and dispersing and re-gathering the nation Israel, as well as the 300 + prophecies about the Messiah literally fulfilled in Christ. Specific Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 14:33: "God is not a God of confusion" (immediate context has to do with languages and understanding revelation in the church); Nehemiah 8—Ezra reads from law all day to the people in plain language as its written so they understand; 1 Corinthians 15:27—Paul is describing the prophetic order of end times events (prophecy!) and he uses the adjective δῆλον (meaning clear, plain, evident, cf. BDAG, "δῆλος") to get his point across that he is discussing prophecy *literally* and expecting the Corinthians to understand it *literally*; Acts 26:14—Paul retells his conversion story to Agrippa, and it is only in this account where he specifies the voice from heaven as speaking to him was in a clear, literal local human dialect (Aramaic, or "the Hebrew language"): "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?" Finally, Jesus' words to His disciples—"Follow Me!"—were understood literally obeyed literally (e.g., Matt 4:19-20, 9:9). Additionally, his miracles lose all meaning if they are not reported with a literal intended meaning as they served as literal signs for belief (Isa 35:5; John 20:30-31).

⁵² It is also worth mentioning John's use of the adverb πνευματικῶς (spiritually, symbolically) in Revelation 11:8 when describing the future apostate Jerusalem as "Sodom and Egypt." Thus, along with his constant use of ὡς (like, as it were) and ὅμοιος (similar to, resembling), as well as the verb ἐσήμανεν (He signified) initiating the Apocalypse in 1:1 (cf. 12:1, σημεῖον, sign), John employs these textual markers in order to make plain for his readers when a literal truth *within* a specific figure of speech is intended. Indeed, John's use of the second aorist verb εἶδες (you have seen) from the root οἶδα (I know) to initiate the verb sequence

תוֹמָר (likeness, something-like) and attached preposition דְּ (like, as, according to) when attempting to describe something that is beyond words.⁵³ The governing desire of this hermeneutical approach—to draw out the authorial-intent of the biblical writer—is what sets the literal method apart from its allegorical rivals.

It is this consistent hermeneutic alone that has as its main goal to draw out the author's intended meaning through diligent exegesis—whatever the genre may be. Robert Thomas, a known champion of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic, offers sound advice for the reader of God's Word: "Interpret each statement in light of the principles of grammar and facts of history. Take each statement in its plain sense if it matched common sense, and do not look for another sense."⁵⁴ This is, after all, the way we interpret writings today such as newspapers, personal letters, tax documents, medical records, etc. Whatever the original author meant to say *then* (by his use of semantics and syntax), is what he means to say *now*. While applications of the text can be multiple, the author's original intended meaning is never discarded, overruled, abrogated, or changed.⁵⁵

in Revelation 1:19 strongly suggests John's mental grasp of truth while physically observing its figure or vision; cf. BDAG, 5205.4.

⁵³ E.g., Ezekiel 1:5: "And from the midst of it came the *likeness* [תוֹמָר] of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human *likeness* [תוֹמָר]" (ESV; emphasis added).

⁵⁴ Robert L Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 155.

⁵⁵ Although the NT can later expand on an OT text, that is built upon it and apply it in unexpected ways (e.g., Hos 11:1 = Matt 2:15), it never cancels out the original meaning found in the OT. The OT can stand on its own merit. Because of this, all four unilateral covenants given to Israel throughout the OT (Abrahamic, land, Davidic and new covenants) will be fulfilled in literal Israel during the millennial kingdom at Israel's national repentance and restoration (Zech 12:10; 14:4; cf. Acts 1:3, 6).

Therefore, the interpreter of Scripture, following the biblical method of consistent historical-grammatical hermeneutics, will choose to analyze the text according to the following guidelines offered by McLean: "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal, literary meaning unless the immediate context clearly indicated otherwise."⁵⁶ Indeed, this writer suggests it is imperative that those filling leadership roles in churches, Bible colleges, and seminaries teach the consistently literal, grammatical-historical method of Scripture interpretation in order for Christians to literally understand and literally obey God's truth (Psalm 119:160; John 17:17).

CONCLUSION

With a view to analyzing the different hermeneutical approaches to the kingdom of God in Revelation 20 against the back drop of dispensationalism's literal approach, the legitimacy of the consistent application of the literal, grammatical-historical hermeneutic has been demonstrated throughout. Any abandonment of the literal interpretation of Scripture results in placing the interpreter as the arbiter over Scripture, rather than submitting to Scripture and drawing out the author's intended meaning. When this error is committed, various untenable conclusions arise in regards to the book of Revelation and the future kingdom in particular. However, when the literal hermeneutic is consistently applied, the only legitimate result is the dispensational-premillennial understanding of eschatology to include its instance on the future, literal thousand-year kingdom of Revelation 20.

⁵⁶ John A. McLean, "The Importance of Hermeneutics," in *The Fundamentals of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 78.

Majority World Theology in an Urban, Multiethnic North American Church Plant

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INTRODUCTION

Should theology from the Majority World be utilized in the planting of multiethnic churches in urban North America? Or should multiethnic North American churches merely contextualize their methodology, but not their theology? This article argues that North American church planters should use majority world theology when planting urban, multiethnic churches. Furthermore, this article briefly explores how that contextualization might take place.

Urban North America is characterized by diversity. In an analysis of census data from 1990, 2000 and 2010, the Brookings Institution has detailed how America's major cities (and their surrounding suburbs) have become increasingly diverse. The report, authored by William Frey and released in 2011, reveals that "well over half" of American cities are "majority minority" and that minorities make up at least 48% of the urban population, while comprising only 35% of the suburban population.¹ The increase in diversity across the three censuses studied by Brookings is unmistakable. This is why an American Demographics writer in 1990 could predict, "You'll know it's the twenty-first century when everyone belongs to a minority

¹ William Frey, *Melting Pot Cities and Suburbs: Racial and Ethnic Change in Metro America in the 2000s*, May 4, 2011, accessed June 30, 2016, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/5/04%20census%20ethnicity%20frey/0504_census_ethnicity_frey.pdf, 1.

group.”² This diversity is at once both beautiful and dizzying. For urban church planters, it is a fact of life, one that must be addressed in church planting strategies. As Conn and Ortiz declare, “All of our ministries will have to contend with this demographic situation, a pluralism impossible to escape. Our ministries, seminaries and churches will encounter a multiethnic, multisocioeconomic, multi-religious challenge. ...”³

Many (including this writer) have responded to this diversity by seeking to plant multiethnic churches in major North American cities. Yet many efforts to plant multiethnic churches have resulted in churches that are methodologically diverse, yet theologically Western. For instance, multiethnic churches in North America might utilize music styles from the majority world, while using theology derived only from American seminaries.

This article argues evangelicals must plant churches that are not only methodologically but also theologically contextualized if they wish to respond fully and appropriately to the ethnic diversity present in North American cities, and that in order to do so, they are best served to draw upon the majority world. Toward that end, this paper will first set forth a biblical theology of culture. This theology of culture will be rooted in the biblical metanarrative, give special attention to the *imago dei*, and emphasize a Scriptural perspective on the role of race in shaping culture. Second, the article will set forth a theological argument, grounded in a theory of contextualization and a model for contextual theology. Third, it will engage missiological arguments, based upon the writings of Lesslie Newbigin and Paul Hiebert, and will culminate with a brief case study from this writer’s current context in New York City.

² Quoted by Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City & the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 73.

³ *Ibid*, 288.

BIBLICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE USE OF MAJORITY WORLD THEOLOGY IN MULTIETHNIC CONTEXTS

Sometimes in American Christianity one will hear references to “ethnic churches” and especially to “ethnic theology.” What is usually meant by these statements is that these churches and theologies are not the products of European culture. Remarking upon this problem, Soong-Chan Rah declares that, in the West, “What is assumed as normative in theology arises from the Western context. For example, while non-white, non-Western theology usually requires an adjectival marker—Black Theology, Liberation Theology, Minjung Theology—Western Theology does not, since it is considered central and normative.”⁴ According to Rah, for many, Western Theology is simply “theology” and it is assumed to be historic, orthodox Christian doctrine. Perhaps the problem identified by Rah stems from the sins of racism and ethnocentrism. Or perhaps it is due to a deficient theology of culture and an improper theological method.⁵ This section will engage the topic of a theology of culture, and the subsequent section will surface issues relevant to theological method.

Many crucial elements contribute to constructing a biblical theology of culture. This article will examine three of them: the biblical metanarrative, the doctrine of the *imago dei*, and the relevance of race.

The Biblical Metanarrative

Henry Van Til establishes an insightful definition of culture: “I use the term [culture] to designate that activity of man, the image-bearer of God, by which he fulfills the creation mandate to

⁴ Soong-Chan Rah, “The Sin of Racism: Racialization of the Image of God,” in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 209-10.

⁵ Perhaps the problem stems from a combination of these issues.

cultivate the earth, to have dominion over it and to subdue it.”⁶ In using the creation narrative as his starting point, Van Til situated his theology of culture squarely within the storyline of the Bible. Some theologians have recognized that the story of Scripture can be recapped in four movements: creation, fall, redemption and restoration (or re-creation). In understanding human history from God’s perspective, it is imperative to understand that God created everything good (creation), that this paradise was spoiled by humanity’s sin (fall), that Jesus died and rose to offer salvation (redemption) and will one day return to roll back the curse (restoration).

Neo-Calvinists, such as Van Til, use this metanarrative to frame their approach to culture. They correctly understand that the doctrine of creation has many implications, one of which is that culture is inherently good. In fact, we can see that God has a high view of culture in the famed “Dominion Mandate” given to humanity in Genesis 1:26-28. God told Adam and Eve to rule over the earth. Like Van Til, Goheen and Bartholomew maintain that “all of culture and society, all of human civilization, is in response to this one divine mandate.”⁷ Having established that culture is intrinsically good, since it is God’s creation, we can now turn to the doctrine of the *imago dei*.

Imago Dei

As previously mentioned, God gave humanity the task of exercising dominion over the earth. He did so against the backdrop of what has come to be called the *imago dei* (Genesis 1:26-28). God created man in his image and his likeness (two terms that are probably synonymous). This refers to man’s responsibility to represent God upon the earth and rule over it on his behalf. Bird notes that the ANE backdrop for the term *image*

⁶ Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), xvii.

⁷ Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 41.

typically refers to a statue “usually of a deity or king, especially as set up in a temple as a visible sign and manifestation of the living god or person.”⁸ God placed humanity upon the earth to represent him and to rule as his vice-regent. This is illustrated by the Creator’s commands to subdue the earth and to fill it.

Culture making is an important aspect of human’s role as image-bearers. As God’s representatives on earth and as those who rule on his behalf, our central task as humans is to create culture that images God. This is why Crouch can boldly declare that “culture is God’s original plan for humanity—and it is God’s original gift to humanity...”⁹ To be made in God’s image is to be given the responsibility to create God-honoring culture. All human beings fall within the scope of the *imago dei*. There is not a single culture that does not have the capacity to image God.

Race

Race is a social construct¹⁰, not a biological reality. Biblically, there is only one human race (Acts 17:26) and everyone shares equally in the *imago dei*. One writer declares, “This conclusion has far-reaching implications for theology and ethics.”¹¹ One such implication is that there is no privileged culture per se. As various races developed in the aftermath of Babel, God’s image bearers made up these various cultures. Consequently, God’s image

⁸ Phyllis Bird, “‘Male and Female He Created Them’: Genesis 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation,” in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 343.

⁹ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 175.

¹⁰ Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), Kindle loc. 243.

¹¹ J. Daniel Hays, *A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 50.

bearers are hard at work in every culture. Some of them are creating good culture, while others create culture that is distorted and evil. Yet every culture has the capacity for good. As one writer declares, “Humanity in its entirety is the image of God, inclusive of all ethnicities and nationalities.”¹²

A biblical theology of culture, then, will include the following points. First of all, it will be rooted in the biblical narrative (especially creation and re-creation). This demonstrates that culture is inherently good. Second, it will be grounded in a functional view of the *imago dei*, one which posits humanity’s role as culture makers. Third, it will emphasize that each culture/race that emerged from Babel is a potentially beautiful representation of God and is made up of image bearers. How does this relate to our thesis that urban, North American planters should use theology from the majority world when planting multiethnic churches? This writer believes that understanding God’s view of culture is a necessary pre-condition to contextualizing theology. It is this theology of culture which serves as the crucial foundation for a proper theory of contextualization, to be discussed in the next section.

THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE USE OF MAJORITY WORLD THEOLOGY IN MULTIETHNIC CONTEXTS

Contextualization Theories

If God has created humans to be culture makers, and this manifests itself in a rich diversity of expressions, then it behooves the church to contextualize its message to correspond to this diversity. Many have written about a theory of contextualization, and there is a proliferation of models. David Hesselgrave has proposed a “translation” model that focuses upon accurate but relevant translation of the Christian message into a receptor culture. He says, “It may be useful to think of contextualization as a process with three distinct elements, revelation, interpretation,

¹² David Stevens, *God’s New Humanity: A Biblical Theology of Multiethnicity for the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 55.

and application, throughout which a continuity of meaning can be traced.”¹³

According to Hesselgrave, a contextualizer will determine the meaning of Scripture and translate it into terms understandable in the target culture. Others have proposed a much narrower, local process for contextualization. James Cone exemplifies this approach with his landmark work *A Black Theology of Liberation*. This narrower approach is why he is able to claim, “Theology is not universal language about God.... Theology is contextual language—that is, defined by the human situation that gives birth to it. No one can write theology for all times, places, and persons.”¹⁴

This writer would take exception to both approaches. Hesselgrave’s translation model has some beneficial features. Most notably, it emphasizes the unchanging meaning of Scripture, and its universal value for all cultures. Ignoring this central truth can lead one down the path toward syncretism. Yet, in spite of this helpful insight, Hesselgrave’s model does not go far enough. For instance, Hesselgrave seems content to merely translate a biblical principle from one culture into another. Although he acknowledges this contextualization is best done by indigenous Christians,¹⁵ his model is primarily rooted in the culture of the missionary.

On the other hand, Cone’s model of contextual theology allows for little input from outside voices. His is a localized theology of the oppressed, a “black theology” that speaks directly to the concerns of a particular culture. Writing as an African-American, Cone believes that he is uniquely qualified to answer the theological questions of the black community. Cone is somewhat correct in his model. He is correct that every theology is a contextual theology because every theology is a response to

¹³ David Hesselgrave, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1989), 201.

¹⁴ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York, Maryknoll, 1990), xi.

¹⁵ Hesselgrave, *Contextualization*, 198.

the questions of a particular culture and era (see below section on method). As Anthony Bradley notes, “What black liberation theologians objected to is the fact that their white colleagues never provided a platform for applying the Scriptures within the confines of an African-American’s self-understanding.”¹⁶ Cone sought to answer questions posed by his community, while noting that these questions were largely ignored by white American systematic theologies. In spite of his noble attempt to produce a contextual theology, Cone erred in significant ways. He diminished the value of theology by claiming that theology could not make universal claims. Yet a theology that is faithful to Scripture will contain universal truths of timeless value. His other mistake was in allowing a philosophical system (Marxism) to undergird his hermeneutic and take precedence in the shaping of his theology.

A Model for Contextual Theology

Mike Stallard has written that systematic theology is akin to model building and that theologians are merely attempting to create a “model of what we believe reality to be.”¹⁷ According to Stallard, this model is created with various inputs or sources for theology.¹⁸ It would seem that Scripture, tradition, reason, culture, experience, and mission are the most helpful sources when constructing a theology.¹⁹ As the authoritative source, the

¹⁶ Anthony Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 146.

¹⁷ Mike Stallard, “A Proposal for Theological Method: Systematic Theology as Model Building” (*Our Hope Blog*, September 2009, accessed July 6, 2016, <http://our-hope.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Method2.pdf>, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁹ This writer seeks to build upon the famous Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

Bible must take the leading role in theological formulations. Yet it would be improper to ignore the “inputs” of tradition (church history), reason (philosophy, logic, science, etc.), culture, experience, and mission.²⁰ Culture is an indispensable source for those who are doing theology. In this way, theology will look different, depending upon the culture in which it is produced. For instance, a theology developed by African-Americans in the Antebellum South might emphasize suffering and an eschatological hope. A theology produced by German Christians during the rise of Fascism might grapple with a theology of civil disobedience. A twenty-first Century North American theology must, of necessity, address issues of police brutality, gender dysphoria, and abortion.

These various cultures in various eras can produce complementary rather than competing theologies. They can do so because the theologians within these various cultures are seeking to answer the questions posed by their culture.²¹ This is the reason that James Cone can declare that theology was defined by its “human situation.”²² He correctly understands that all theology is “context-laden.”²³ Yet, as previously noted, Cone is wrong to assert that theology cannot make universal claims.

²⁰ Drawing upon the influence of Lesslie Newbigin, this writer believes that the church’s “missionary encounter” with a culture is one of the most fruitful opportunities for theologizing.

²¹ David Clark said that “In dialogue with culture, the evangelical theologian, in community with other believers, hears a question ... and evaluates the deep theory lying behind the question. She then reforms the deep theory, reformulates the question in light of Scripture, and finally offers interpretation that is both biblical at its core and relevant to the concerns of culture as originally expressed.” See David Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 98.

²² Cone, *Black Theology*, xi.

²³ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 1:19.

We live in a globalized society, one which provides a unique opportunity for theologians. In previous eras, it was far too easy to be fragmented and disconnected from what theologians in other parts of the world were writing and saying. Now, in the twenty-first century, we have opportunities to explore a truly global evangelical theology. Chinese-American theologian Amos Yong said that a “methodology that is renewed and always seeking the renewal of the church in its mission embraces the ecumenical, intercultural, and interdisciplinary character of the theological task. ... The intercultural facet points to the global context in its dizzying plurality.”²⁴ Yong believes that the Spirit speaks through Christian communities and theologians around the world, and that we must be receptive to the Spirit’s voice.²⁵ This model of a global theology must of necessity involve dialogue between various contextual theologies. It is at this point that Kärkkäinen’s insights are extremely helpful: “What ‘global’ means is that in the presentation and argumentation of constructive theology, voices, testimonies, and perspectives from around the world and from different agendas will be engaged. It is a communion of local conversations in interrelated dialogue.”²⁶ This dialogical approach to contextual theology appears to be the best way to build a truly comprehensive theology, one influenced by the contours of global Christianity. As theologians interact with Christians from around the world, they will learn much about God and about what it means to faithfully follow Jesus. So far this article has sought to establish that culture is a good gift created by God, one which has resulted in a dizzying array of cultures. In response to this diversity, theologians must formulate contextual theologies that are faithful to Scripture and culturally relevant. In a globalized society, it is becoming more crucial than ever to embrace a dialogical approach to theology,

²⁴ Amos Yong, *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity* (Waco: Baylor UP, 2014), 353.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 354-55.

²⁶ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation*, 20.

one that integrates a diversity of Christian voices from around the world. In multiethnic urban settings in North America, it will no longer be sufficient to rely exclusively upon Western systematic theologies. Church planters and pastors in cities like New York must learn theology at the feet of both Western and non-Western theologians. This will enable church planters to develop “glocal” theologies, ones that are shaped by both the contextual situation of urban North America and the context of the majority world. As a result, those who minister to the burgeoning immigrant population will understand, and potentially answer, the questions posed by these new residents of the United States.

MISSIOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE USE OF MAJORITY WORLD THEOLOGY IN MULTIETHNIC CONTEXTS

Having laid a biblical foundation and made a theological argument for the use of majority world theology in multiethnic contexts, we now turn to some missiological considerations. In particular, this section interacts with the thinking of two leading missiological thinkers, Lesslie Newbigin and Paul Hiebert.

Lesslie Newbigin

As the twentieth century’s preeminent missionary statesman, Lesslie Newbigin reshaped how the Western world thought about mission. Of all his many insights, perhaps his most profound is his recognition that the West needs its own “missionary encounter” with the gospel. He declares “that there is no higher priority for the research work of missiologists than to ask the question of what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and this modern Western culture.”²⁷ Newbigin understood that the West needed to be evangelized and that it had become one of the largest and

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greek: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3.

neediest mission fields in the world. Towards the end of his ministry he began to champion this idea that the West needed its own missionary encounter with the gospel. He decried the fact that the gospel was being contextualized in other cultures, but was lying dormant within the “Christianized” West.²⁸ For Newbigin, it was imperative that cross-cultural missionaries bring their insights to bear so that the gospel could be contextualized for Western culture.

Newbigin’s thinking sparked a missional church movement in North America. His work was carried on by George Hunsberger, who has written extensively over the past few decades, seeking to foster the gospel’s missionary encounter with the West. Hunsberger, in commenting upon Newbigin’s emphasis upon a missionary congregation, declared that the missionary encounter with the west “belongs to the heart and birthright of the church.”²⁹ Hunsberger understood, as did Newbigin, that the Church existed because of mission and it existed for this missionary encounter.³⁰

Newbigin taught that American culture and cities needed a missionary encounter with the gospel. Yet the lines are not so neatly drawn as they once were. With rising globalization and increased global migration, one cannot automatically look at a city in the West and assume that it is Western. Newbigin was at the forefront in understanding this, which is why he discussed at length the way in which the church should function in a pluralistic world.³¹ When approaching an “international city” such as New York, a missionary church planter must recognize that the gospel’s missionary encounter with this city must

²⁸ Ibid., 2.

²⁹ George Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 18.

³⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), Kindle loc. 29.

³¹ Ibid, *Open Secret*, chap. 10.

necessarily be contextualized in a diversity of ways. If Newbigin is correct that church planters must contextualize the gospel for a missionary encounter with their culture, and if their culture is now incredibly diverse, then it stands to reason that North American gospel contextualization for cities must be incredibly diverse. This will require church planters in multiethnic, urban North American contexts to practice holistic contextualization in the midst of a variety of cultures, necessitating the use of majority world theology.

Paul Hiebert

Missionary Anthropologist Paul Hiebert builds upon the traditional “Three Selves” model of missionary work. He proposes that it is not enough for new churches to be self-propagating, self-supporting, and self-governing. He advocates for what he terms “The Fourth Self”—self-theologizing. He believes that new churches should be able to contextualize the gospel for themselves, with the result being the formation of an indigenous contextual theology. In order to accomplish this, Hiebert lists three vital ingredients: exegesis of Scripture, exegesis of one’s culture, and culturally relevant hermeneutics.³² Hiebert understands that “parent” churches will be understandably nervous about the prospect of allowing their “daughter” churches to “come of age” and make their own theological formulations. This is the same anxiety biological parents feel as their children reach adulthood and begin to make their own decisions. Yet he steadfastly maintains that each new church should be able to self-theologize:

Do churches in other cultures have the same right to understand and apply the gospel in their own settings? Is there not a danger that they will go theologically astray? The answer to both of these questions is yes. To grow, spiritually young churches must search the Scriptures themselves, and if – for fear that they will leave the

³² Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 201-202.

truth – we do not allow them to do so, we condemn them to spiritual infancy and early death.³³

Urban North America is increasingly diverse, and as we plant churches there that are culturally relevant, should make every effort to preserve indigeneity by contextual theologies, including those from the majority world. Each contextual theology needs both “insider” and “outsider” critique, for church planters cannot blithely accept any culture’s model of reality. Instead, a diverse group of voices should be heard, both from inside and from outside the culture. This plurality of voices provides safety in numbers, helps church planters guard against cultural biases, and forces church planters to properly grapple with Scripture. Above all, church planters must ensure that every theology (Western or non-Western) should be filtered through the prism of Scripture to ensure that it is faithful to the text.

We have observed that the church is in the midst of a missionary encounter with the West. In a complex and globalized society, however, Western cities are no longer dominated by Western thought. Church planters must adapt by embracing non-Western theology where appropriate. We also discussed the need for what Hiebert called “self-theologizing.” If churches are planted in urban North America, they should grapple with a diversity of theological voices from around the world as they seek to build their own contextual theologies.

Summary

This article began with a biblical argument, one that proposed that God made culture good and that it is now expressed in a variety of ways, many of which image him. I then posited a theological argument, outlining a theory of contextualization and contextual theology. Finally, I interacted with leading missiologists to learn that missionary encounter with American cities must produce indigenous theology. The three strands of this argument, when taken together, should lead

³³ Ibid., 208.

one to conclude that church planters in urban North America should utilize theology from the majority world. Yet, how can this be accomplished? The concluding case study will attempt to demonstrate how this might be done, using Caribbean theology and Brooklyn as the object and setting for this analysis.

THE ISLANDS IN NEW YORK: CARIBBEAN THEOLOGY IN A BROOKLYN CHURCH PLANT

This writer lives in a Brooklyn neighborhood called Crown Heights. This neighborhood is both dense (200,000 people in the two-square mile area) and diverse (over twenty ethnic groups live here). Forty-five percent of the residents of Crown Heights hail from the Caribbean. In response to this diversity, this writer planted a diverse church called Mosaic, one that is currently made up of at least fourteen different cultures.³⁴ About half of the congregation would identify as Caribbean (Jamaican, Haitian, Bajan, etc.). This case study will integrate Caribbean theology into this multiethnic church, demonstrating that this majority world theology can shape the ecclesiology of a multiethnic North American church plant.

Creole Ecclesiology

Gilbert Bond has developed a contextualized theology with roots in the Caribbean. He attempts to use “creole consciousness” as a lens to assist the church in understanding Paul.³⁵

Bond believes that the Apostle Paul was a “creolizer” who combined various elements of his personhood and experience to

³⁴ This writer’s church plant of forty-five people includes representatives from Jamaica, Taiwan, Ghana, India, Trinidad, Panama, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Hong Kong, Guyana, Italy, Barbados, as well as African-Americans and Anglo-Americans.

³⁵ Gilbert Bond, *Paul and the Religious Experience of Reconciliation: Diasporic Community & Creole Consciousness* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

produce diverse communities of slaves and free people, of men and women, and of Jews and Gentiles. According to Bond, Paul created “creole” (mixed) communities called the church: “Paul has given his passion and his life to the cultivation of creolian consciousness among believers in order that the believers might worship and receive a creole Messiah³⁶ by creating communities through the process of creolization that Paul calls reconciliation.”³⁷

In this writer’s context in Brooklyn, how can this perspective be useful in “self-theologizing” at a multiethnic church plant? A “creole ecclesiology” that emphasizes the “mixed” nature of the church can be useful, both in shaping theological identity as a community, but also in communicating that message in a Caribbean context. Mosaic Baptist Church can articulate to its community that Jesus died to tear down the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, and that he created “one new humanity” (Eph 2:15). This new humanity is the multicultural Body of Christ, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, Jamaicans and Italians. As we are reconciled to God, we can then become reconciled through the cross to one another, thereby producing these creole communities called the church.

Diaspora Ecclesiology

New York pastor-theologian Delroy Reid-Salmon has written on the Caribbean diasporan church. In his book *Home Away from Home*, he discusses the importance of understanding a community’s identity. For instance, Reid-Salmon delves into both history and culture to clarify the identity of the Caribbean Diasporic Community. Caribbean-Americans (he calls them Caribamericans) are not residents of the islands. Instead, they are a diasporic community, one that has a foot in two different worlds, and as such never feels at home. There are at least two

³⁶ It is unclear to this writer what Bond meant when he referred to Jesus as a “creole Messiah.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

different ways in which this stream of theology can be used in a multiethnic church planting context.

First of all, Reid-Salmon emphasizes that Caribamericans are “pilgrims from the sun,”³⁸ on a quest for survival. He explains, “The Caribbean diaspora is historically and generally understood as a migratory movement of pilgrim people. I use the term pilgrim to define the first period of Caribbean migration based on the people’s belief of living away from their homeland for a temporary duration.”³⁹ This is why Reid-Salmon can say that Caribamericans were “home away from home.”

Mosaic is an international church, primarily comprised of first and second generation immigrants. They instinctively connect with this narrative of migration to another country, of being a community of exiles. Indeed, the author of Hebrews expressed this same truth two millennia ago when he declared that the patriarchs were “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb 11:13). He noted that these faithful patriarchs were looking for another City, because they understood that they were called out of Ur and were residents of a heavenly country (Heb 11:13-16). At Mosaic, we have an opportunity to connect with our congregants’ sense of pilgrimage, by articulating a pilgrim ecclesiology, one that emphasizes that this world is not believers’ home because they are citizens of God’s coming kingdom. In the midst of the uncertainties in America, this group of pilgrims can band together as a community of exiles.

Second, Reid-Salmon opines that “Caribbean Christians interpret the migration experience as an opportunity to evangelize and transform the world because they see God as being actively involved in human history and willing human emancipation.”⁴⁰ Indeed, he notes that nineteenth century

³⁸ Delroy Reid-Salmon, *Home Away from Home: The Caribbean Diasporan Church in the Black Atlantic Tradition* (London: Equinox, 2008), 95-108.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

Jamaican Baptists engaged in missionary work in West Africa.⁴¹ However, the author is quick to point out that the Caribamerican community has historically mobilized for mission only to people of African descent. They have been on mission in the Caribbean, in the Caribbean diasporan communities, and in the “mother land” of Africa.

This point provides a fruitful opportunity to test our commitment to contextual theology. Clearly, the Caribamerican community is right to view itself as a missionary people, with a unique opportunity to engage in mission. They have literally been scattered and should “migrate on mission.” However, from a biblical perspective, we must conclude that mission exclusively to one group of people is ethnocentric, and falls far short of the Great Commission mandate to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19-20). Here we must employ insider and outsider critique to dialogue with this strand of Caribbean ecclesiology. We can embrace that which is biblical (the church is a missionary people on the go with Jesus) and reject that which is unbiblical (we will mobilize only to reach people who are like us).

Summary

In this brief case study, we have seen that Caribbean theology can be utilized in developing a robust biblical ecclesiology. We can focus upon our nature as a “creole” congregation, made up of Christians from around the world, baptized by one Spirit into the body of Christ. We can also connect ourselves with the tradition of the migrant church to recognize that we are to be a pilgrim people, as well as a family on mission.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued biblically that God created culture very good (Gen 1), that humanity images God by creating culture (Gen 1:26-28), and that this has resulted in various cultures/races in the aftermath of Babel (Gen11). I moved on

⁴¹ Ibid., 115.

from this foundation to articulate a theological perspective on both contextualization and contextual theology. I argued for contextual theologies that are dialogical in nature and benefit from both insider and outsider critique. Finally, I argued from a missiological standpoint, recognizing that the church's missionary encounter with diverse, Western cities must involve self-theologizing. The conclusion is simple: North American church planters should use majority world theology when planting urban, multiethnic churches. Furthermore, our brief case study demonstrated how one particular non-Western theology could be utilized in a multiethnic congregation in NYC. Andrew Walls was correct when he declares that:

This compulsion to think in a Christian way becomes more powerful and more urgent whenever the gospel crosses a cultural frontier, since the process of crossing cultural frontiers almost inevitably creates situations not previously encountered by Christians, and a different climate of thought poses intellectual questions not considered before. Crosscultural encounter is therefore a spur to theological creativity.⁴²

Walls understands the need for a truly robust, global evangelical theology. Church planters in North America can adapt to their contexts, engage their culture(s), and embrace evangelical theology from around the world. Here, on the frontiers of mission, is where theology thrives.

⁴² Andrew Walls, "The Rise of Global Theologies," in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, ed. Jeffrey Greenman and Gene L. Green (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 19-20.

A Biblical Theology and Pastor Survey on Local Church Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus inaugurated a fresh move in God's mission on the day of Pentecost, bringing the church into existence by the power of his Holy Spirit.¹ The gospel took the world by storm in the first century, and in the 2,000 years since, the church has steadily grown around the world. Today vibrant expressions of the body of Christ can be seen in each of the 194 countries across the planet.² The church is especially vital to the Global South and in

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² For instance, Patrick Johnstone's painstaking research traces the relatively even spread of the church throughout the globe, with places like Africa experiencing explosive growth over the past 100 years. See Patrick Johnstone, "The Future of the Global Church," accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.thefutureoftheglobalchurch.org/digital-collection/chapter-eight-missions>. See also Jessica Martinez, "Study: 2.6 Billion of World Population Expected to Be Christian by 2020," *The Christian Post*, July 13, 2013, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/study-2-6-billion-of-world-population-expected-to-be-christian-by-2020-100402>.

Pacific Rim countries.³ Lamin Sanneh claims the explosion of the Christ-movement in the non-Western world amounts to a third great awakening.⁴ Truly, Jesus' prophetic word about the church, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it," has come true when viewed at the macro level (Matt 16:18).

At the same time, demographers and pollsters in America have increasingly sounded the alarm that church attendance in the West is declining and in some places precipitously.⁵ While different pollsters offer different reasons, increasingly observers

³ William Lane Craig, "On Being a World Christian: A Challenge to Christians to Become Involved in the Task of Bringing the Message of the Gospel to the Entire World," accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/on-being-a-world-christian>.

⁴ Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2008), 274.

⁵ Not every pollster agrees that the church is in crisis. For instance, Ed Stetzer believes that many respondents who checked they were Christians a decade ago, were in fact, cultural Christians. He suggests that *cultural* Christianity— not Christianity—is dying in America. When asked about their faith more recently, they did not mind shedding the label. Ed Stetzer, "The State of the Church in America: Hint: It's Not Dying." *The Exchange: A Blog by Ed Stetzer*, October 2013, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/october/state-of-american-church.html>. Moreover, Philip Jenkins believes that the U.S. has become a *more* Christian country. "What we are rather seeing is *How Mass Immigration Ensured That a Christian Country Has Become an Even More Christian Country* (emphasis his). Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity, Rev. and Expanded* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2007), 124. For an example of an author who takes the decline seriously see David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of over 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008). For a more recent example see, "America's Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population: Pew Research Center, "Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow," accessed May 15, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org>.

of the Western church, point to the quality of the leaders.⁶ Are local churches producing leaders with the vision to lead as Jesus commanded in the Great Commission? And if so, are they building leadership structures that promote consistent disciple-making?

This article examines the leadership structure of churches led by 223 graduates of a conservative theological seminary (Dallas Theological Seminary, henceforth DTS) and how they assess the health of their own churches, especially their elder and deacon boards. In this article we will (1) review the biblical theology of local church leadership, a theology that is broadly consistent with historical-grammatical approach to interpreting New Testament passages, (2) report the results of a recent survey of DTS graduates conducted by the authors about the health of their church leadership structures, and (3) offer specific suggestions for how pastors can better equip church leaders in post-Christian America.

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership Paradigms

Servant

Servanthood is a deeply embedded leadership paradigm in Scripture. Moses is repeatedly called the servant of God.⁷ Isaiah

⁶ Rodney Stark goes so far as to say that the decline in many churches is due to “clergy disbelief in the essentials of Christianity and the clergy’s unquestioned faith in radical politics.” See Rodney Stark, *America’s Blessings: How Religion Benefits Everyone, Including Atheists* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton P, 2013), 305, Kindle. Likewise, Stark argues that growing churches are those that place higher demands on their members. His work is consistent with Jesus’ admonition that believers count the cost of discipleship. See Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe* (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2008), 456, Kindle.

⁷ See for example Exodus 14:31 and Joshua 1:1. Moses is also called the servant in the NT (Rev 15:3).

predicted that the coming Messiah would be the servant.⁸ As Jesus develops his ministry, he comes as the quintessential servant and makes service integral to his mission (Mark 10:45). Moreover, Jesus exhibits his ministry of service in the Lord's Supper in a highly tangible way. While the disciples are arguing over who is going to be the greatest in the kingdom (Luke 22:24), Jesus wraps himself in a towel and models humble service, gently and yet firmly washing the disciples' feet, including Peter (John 13:3-10). This act foreshadowed his ultimate example of serving: his substitutionary death on the cross (Matt 20:28).

By appropriating the image of the servant, the Bible shows God's grand pattern to reverse worldly values: "By worldly standards servanthood is something ignominious, but in the economics of the kingdom the epithet 'servant of the Lord Jesus Christ' becomes an honorific title."⁹

Any biblical theology of church leadership must begin, therefore, with an overall orientation of serving as Jesus served. Spiritual leaders are other-centered disciples who attend to the needs of others, often sacrificially and without seeking notoriety. This is certainly a reversal of popular approaches to ecclesiastic practices in America.

Shepherd

A second leadership paradigm that permeates Scripture is the shepherd. While Moses is called the servant of the Lord over 75 times,¹⁰ he is also called a shepherd in Isa 63:11 and Psalm

⁸ Isaiah's five "Servant Songs" are presented in 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12; and 61:1-3.

⁹ Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity P, 2000), 774. See also, James 1:1; Colossians 1:7; 4:7.

¹⁰ Moses spent roughly one third of his life as a shepherd (Exodus 2:15—3:1), and he metaphorically led his people as a shepherd through the Red Sea (Ps 77:20). Likewise, David started his leadership career as a shepherd (1 Sam 17:34), and also metaphorically led his people like a flock (Ps 78:70-72). When Israel was leaderless it was as if they had no

77:30. Later in Israel's history, David learned dynamics of spiritual leadership as a shepherd in the fields outside Bethlehem (1 Sam 17:34-27; Psa 23:1-6). OT prophecies about God's Messiah suggested he would be shepherd to his people.¹¹ Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14). And when Jesus restores Peter to his place as leader of the disciples, he uses the language of shepherding to reinstate Peter: "tend my sheep" (John 21:15-17). Not surprisingly, Peter would use the same metaphor to instruct leaders of local churches: "Shepherd the flock of God among you."¹²

This leadership paradigm is distinctly different from other common paradigms of leadership both in the ancient and modern world such as coach, general, union boss, or CEO. Jesus, from his ascended place in heaven, serves as the ultimate shepherd and therefore the supreme example to follow as leaders (Heb 13:20).

The shepherd paradigm assumes that leaders will be firm but gentle, skillful but kind, and that they will develop loving personal relationships with their flock. This paradigm also assumes that local church members will often stray and get into trouble. Clearly a spiritual leader should like being around sheep and not be overly frustrated, impatient, or surprised when they fail.

Elder and Overseer

A third leadership paradigm is specifically related to the offices of local church leaders. Two words are used

shepherd (1 Kgs 22:17). Isaiah prophesies that Cyrus will be a shepherd to Israel (Isa 44:28). God himself is regarded as a shepherd (Psa 23:1; Ezek 34:12).

¹¹ Prophetically, the coming Messiah is called a shepherd (Zech 13:7).

¹² In 1 Peter 5:1-5 elders are commanded to exercise their oversight with a view to their ultimate evaluation by the risen Christ. Paul likewise encourages elders to "watch carefully over themselves and the flock" (Acts 20:28-29).

interchangeably for local church leaders: ¹³ *elder* (referring to the person's spiritual maturity) and *overseer* (referring to the person's ability to "watch over" the affairs of the church). As Stott observed, "In sum, 'the title' *episkopos* denotes the function, *presbyteros* the dignity, the former was borrowed from Greek institutions, the latter from the Jewish."¹⁴ Peter is quick to qualify how this oversight is designed to take place in spiritual leadership: it must happen with willing enthusiasm (1 Pet 5:2),¹⁵ and it must be an oversight that is accountable to the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4).

Consequently, elders are seasoned spiritual leaders who wisely watch over the affairs of a local church using the relational style of Jesus and with a sense of being watched over by the risen Christ who passionately loves his sheep (John 10:11).

Power through Grace

The predominant power source for spiritual leadership is the presence of the invisible resurrected Christ who promises to be with his leaders as they carry out the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). While Matthew incorporates the entire Trinitarian fellowship into his version of the Great Commission, Jesus is the member of the Trinity specifically mentioned as the power source for discipleship (Matt 28:20). Luke, however, mentions the Holy Spirit as the specific power source for leadership and witness in his writings (Luke 24:29; Acts 1:8; 10:35).

¹³ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1996), 90. For the relevant biblical data, see Acts 20:17:28; Titus 1:5, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ The parallelism in 1 Peter 5:2b suggests that willingness (or intentionality) and enthusiasm (or alacrity) are the positive attitudes that counter the negative attitudes of compulsion ("have to") and shameful gain ("what's in it for me"). The mindset that will keep elders in this positive frame of mind is an eternal one: an elder's service will be reviewed by the Chief Shepherd.

The Triune God extends power for spiritual leadership through the principle of grace (2 Tim 2:1-2); that is, “God enables us to do what we cannot do on our own strength.”¹⁶ This gracious power is mediated to the post-Pentecostal church through his Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31), although the other members of the Trinity are also involved (Rom 8:15).

Summary

Combining these basic ideas (servant, shepherd, elder/overseer, operating in grace), one could say that biblical spiritual leadership takes place when a leader, consciously living in God’s presence, exercises skillful servant-influence, through the Spirit’s power. Spiritual leadership is, therefore, markedly different from secular forms of leadership precisely because of the *spiritual* component. This deeply spiritual component must be emphasized as part of the culture of the local church. As Lewis S. Chafer says, “A supernatural power is provided for the ... execution of ... life under grace. There is no aspect of the teachings of grace which is more vital than this.”¹⁷

However, as soon as the notion of power is introduced, one must also introduce the necessity of character. The two go hand-in-hand.

¹⁶ This specific wording comes from Dallas Willard. “Willard Words,” accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.dwillard.org/resources/WillardWords.asp>.

¹⁷ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Grace: The Glorious Theme* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1922), 200. Walvoord would seem to agree when he says, “Such ministry [of the Holy Spirit] brings for the time being a control of the believer’s life by the Holy Spirit, and the infusion of spiritual power, enabling a Christian to do far more than he or she could do naturally.” See John F. Walvoord, “The Augustinian-Dispensational Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification* ed. Stanley E. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 215.

Leadership Character

All forms of power tend to have a corrupting influence on fallen humans.¹⁸ Leaders with underdeveloped or immature character can use even spiritual power inappropriately.¹⁹ Local church leaders understand they will possess real power by virtue of their position in Christ and the fullness of the Spirit. Even within the most committed spiritual leader, temptations abound to misuse power.²⁰

If redeemed leaders are going to lead well, they must have a portfolio of character traits that enlighten their leadership, so that they maintain the humble demeanor of a servant-shepherd, while at the same time exhibiting growing levels of the Spirit's strength.

General Qualities

General character qualities for spiritual leadership are mentioned in Exodus 18:21-22 and Acts 6:3. Both are central passages on leadership, and both stress the God-centeredness of

¹⁸ This famous quotation, widely attributed to Abraham Lincoln (but probably actually penned by Thomas Carlyle), says, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." Lord Acton (1834-1902) penned a similar concept: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

¹⁹ For instance, in Numbers 20:8-12, Moses abuses his power by hitting the rock instead of speaking to the rock as God had commanded. Moreover, he seems to take credit, along with God, for the miracle (20:10). Additionally, Moses puts a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see that the glory was fading (Exod 34:35; 2 Cor 3:13, 15).

²⁰ Peter assumes this when he says, "[Lead] not for shameful gain...not domineering over those in your charge" (1 Pet 5:2b, 3a). It must have been possible, therefore, to lead with improper motives. Moreover, the example of many OT leaders is that they started well, but spiritual passion slowly eroded, and they did not finish well. King Uzziah is a vivid example (2 Chr 26:16-19).

the task. A common theme in both is the necessity of a vibrant immediate relationship with God: “fear God” (Exod 18:21) and be “full of the Spirit” (Acts 6:3).²¹

Specific Qualities

More specific character qualities for local church leaders are enumerated in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and in Titus 1:5-9. Although there are some minor emphases in the two lists, they are essentially the same. At the head of the list is the quality of being above reproach. This does not mean perfect or without sin, but rather someone of a generally good reputation in the community, both among believers and nonbelievers.²²

After the overall quality of being above-reproach, there appear to be three sets of qualifications in the two main NT character passages: (1) character with respect to the family (a microcosm of the church), (2) character with respect to personal life, and (3) character with respect to using God’s Word to empower growth.²³ One key quality is the ability to manage emotions in the face of conflict, an issue that tripped up many spiritual leaders in the OT.²⁴

²¹ Fear of God in Exodus 18:21 presumably meant reverence for the localized presence of God as seen in the glory cloud. “Full of the Holy Spirit” would refer to the localized presence of God that was resident in each believer post-Pentecost. In both cases, the leadership perspective was profoundly God-centered.

²² Gene Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God’s Plan for Leading the Church*, Chicago, IL: Moody, 2003). Notice that even the best leaders are not always regarded by *everyone* as being above reproach. In Luke 7:34 Jesus was criticized as a “friend of tax collectors and sinners,” but he was also the sinless Son of God.

²³ John Stott employs this basic three-part schema in his exegesis of the Titus passage in *Guard the Truth*, 175-78.

²⁴ See 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7. Moses, for instance, was prohibited from entering the land of promise because he disobeyed God in Numbers 20:8-12 and hit the rock in anger.

Summary

If one combines the empowered servant-shepherd paradigm with the character qualities found in the Pastoral Epistles, the resulting leadership concept might be synthesized this way: For spiritual leaders to use their spiritual power well, they must consistently manifest the character of God toward the people they lead, beginning with their families.

Leadership Structure

Combining Acts with the Pastoral Epistles, it is possible, to gain a helpful understanding of how the churches were planted and elders established. As Paul and Barnabas circle back to the cities visited in the first missionary journey, they began to establish elders in every city. Three principles emerge from their work.

Decentralization

First, church leadership was decentralized. While more hierarchal forms of leadership emerged by the early second century,²⁵ a strong case can be made for a biblical pattern where local churches were led by a plurality of elders who establish “self-governing independent local churches.”²⁶ Acts 14:23 shows

²⁵ The Didache (late first or very early second century) seems to assume that local congregations were independent and self-governing. It even includes qualifications for elders and deacons that mirror 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. See Thomas O’Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010). However, more hierarchal forms of church governance quickly emerged in response to questions of authority. See Paul Johnson, *History of Christianity* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 56. See also John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2001), 260.

²⁶ Norman L. Geisler. *Systematic Theology, Volume Four: Church, Last Things* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2005).

that the movement toward an independent self-governing structure took place from the very beginning. Retracing their steps on their first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas, “appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” That Paul continued this pattern as is clear from Paul’s command in Titus 1:5: “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.” Elders were established in every church and in every city. But it seemed to be a decentralized structure, led by gifted laypeople functioning as believer-priests.²⁷ A decentralized structure would, ideally, motivate leaders to rely on Jesus as the Chief Shepherd to provide highly targeted ministries to the indigenous needs of those specific cities.²⁸

²⁷ This mindset was lost in the Middle-Ages but wonderfully recovered by Martin Luther during the Protestant Reformation. “It follows then that there is no basic true difference between lay people, priests, princes and bishops, between the spiritual and the secular, except for their office and work and not on the basis of their status” (Martin Luther, “Appeal to the Nobility of the German Nation,” in *The Christian Theology Reader, Second Ed.* [Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001], 477-78).

²⁸ Seeking to discover God’s work in specific indigenous situations has been an important feature of the recent missional church movement. Note the following definition: “A missional church is a highly unified body of believers, intent on being God’s missionary presence to the indigenous community that surrounds them, recognizing that God is already at work.” Rod MacIlvaine, “Select Case Studies in How Senior Leaders Cultivate Missional Change in Contemporary Churches” [D.Min. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2009], 10-11).

Plurality

Second, biblical examples consistently show plurality of elders in each location.²⁹ The plurality-of-overseers concept advances the notion that the resurrected and ever-present Jesus is dynamically and spiritually operative among local church leaders as the Chief Shepherd.³⁰ Leaders in these churches would thus have had to expend much spiritual energy in prayer over various matters. Later these questions were often handled by hierarchal clerical leaders and dictated on the basis of authority, but not at first. Moreover, a plurality of leaders would have clearly offset the weaknesses of individual elders to ensure that the church operated on the principle of spiritual gifts (Eph 4:11-13; 1 Cor 12:12-31).

Common Tasks

Third, church leaders, regardless of geographic location, were charged with common tasks. These included (1) Seeking God in prayer,³¹ (2) making doctrinal/policy decisions based on Scripture (Acts 15:6-7), (3) guiding the flock (Acts 20:25-28; 1 Pet 5:1-5), (4) stewarding financial resources,³² (5) comforting and praying for the sick (Jas 5:14-15), (6) guarding themselves in

²⁹ The notion of plurality is present in the many places such as Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 4:4; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1, 5; James 5:14.

³⁰ See Matthew 28:20; 1 Peter 5:4 This notion of Jesus' supernatural presence among the churches is also brought forth in Revelation 1:12-20 as Jesus is depicted as walking among the lampstands.

³¹ See Acts 6:4. While this principle specifically applies to apostles in context, by application a similar pattern would apply to elders of local churches.

³² See Acts 11:29-30. Also, since the family seems to be regarded as a microcosm of the local church, paying attention to finances seems to be a vital role for elders. See 1 Timothy 3:4-5.

acts of self-care,³³ (7) declaring the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), and (8) engaging in church discipline (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5:1-2).

Assisted by Deacons

Fourth, elders were aided by deacons. While the terms *elder* and *overseer* are clearly terms that came from well-known leadership structures in late antiquity,³⁴ the term *deacon* appears to be an innovation of the early church.³⁵ While some deacons, like Phoebe, appear to be unofficial servants,³⁶ it seems certain that other deacons occupied an official office (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8-10).

Comparing the pericope on the qualifications for elders with the section on the qualifications for deacons, one can conclude that the deacons “functioned under the general oversight of the elders” but with the same high levels of character, to serve the specific needs of the church as determined by the elders.³⁷

Summary

“A church officer is someone who has been publicly recognized as having the right and responsibility to perform certain functions for the benefit of the whole church.”³⁸ This

³³ See Acts 20:29-31. The idea of leaders needing self-care is also brought forth in 1 Samuel 30:6 as David “strengthens himself in the Lord his God.”

³⁴ Stott, *Guard the Truth*, 90.

³⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Dubuque, IA: ECS Ministries, 2005), chapter 4.

³⁶ See Romans 16:1-2.

³⁷ Ryrie, chapter 4.

³⁸ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity), 905.

leader, living in the presence of the resurrected Christ, exercises skillful servant-influence, through the Spirit's power.

Although a strong case is made for an elder-led approach to ecclesiastical leadership, the biblical data is sufficiently broad to allow for various interpretations of church governance. Indeed, four types of church government emerged from late antiquity onward: hierarchal (or Episcopalian),³⁹ Presbyterian,⁴⁰ congregational, and independent local elder-ruled. Down through the years, evangelical churches have used all four.

The historical-grammatical hermeneutic consistently taught at many conservative seminaries, (including DTS) has resulted in a significant number of graduates who generally trend toward the final view.⁴¹ This view can be stated as follows: Individual local churches are governed by a board of elders (either chosen by existing elders or by the congregation) who exercise humble leadership in the power of the risen Christ, with Jesus as Chief Shepherd and organic power source.⁴²

³⁹ James, Timothy, and Titus are often (erroneously in our view) used as examples of proto-bishops in a hierarchal structure, rather than as apostolic representatives. See Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 106-107.

⁴⁰ Hayes argues, "Elder rule was based originally on John Calvin's concepts of church organization. He said the church has four offices—pastors, elders, teachers, and deacons—and he based this representative style of Presbyterianism on Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28; and 1 Timothy 5:17. See Edward L. Hayes, "The Church: The Body of Christ in the World Today," *Understanding Christian Theology* ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 1165.

⁴¹ This is an impression that many have of DTS because of the popular works of Ray C. Steadman in the 1970s and the work of Gene Getz in the decades following. Both pastors inspired independent churches based on the local elder-rule model.

⁴² Various word-pictures in the NT vividly describe Jesus' organic relationship to the church and underscore the nature of his life-giving power including vine-branches (John 15:1-5), groom-bride (Eph 5:22-

How then do pastors of conservative churches feel that this construct is working in their respective churches, and is this really the structure wherein which they function most often?

THE TELEIOS STUDY

Background

The DTS alumni relations department in cooperation with Teleios Research (www.teleiosresearch.com) conducted a study in January-February of 2015 to assess how DTS graduates view their relationships with their elder boards.

The purpose of the leadership survey was to examine existing leadership structures and their effectiveness within churches pastored by graduates of DTS. Surveys were sent twice over a two-week period to a non-biased random sampling of graduates through the Alumni Office. The RAND formula in Microsoft Excel was used to select a random sample of 1000 from 2500 alumni. The survey was performed anonymously online.⁴³ To our knowledge it was the first ever church-based leadership survey to examine leadership structure, training, and quality.

Of the 1000 surveyed, 228 responded, but five were excluded for not being pastors. This provided 223 responses (22%).

General Insights

In general, the highest percent of respondents were located in the south/southeast portion of the United States and serve in primarily non-denominational churches almost always located in their own free-standing facility. Most were senior pastors and had been at their church for 10 to 20 years. The most common degree was the Th.M., and the average weekly church attendance

33), cornerstone-stone (1 Pet 2:6), and head-body (1 Cor 12:12-26; Eph 4:15).

⁴³ A summary of the survey could be made available upon written request.

was between 200-500; however, 18% of pastors reported attendance of more than a thousand.

The most frequent form of church government was elder-led (congregants electing elders), but pure elder-led (elders appointing new elders) and congregational forms were also common. The average number of elders was seven, but a wide range existed among the churches. The great majority of churches consistently kept their elder positions filled.

Specific Findings

The survey revealed that elders were most typically chosen by the current elder board and senior pastor and then approved by the congregation. New elder training was almost always offered, and that training was either based entirely on Scripture, or extra-biblical material was developed and taught by members of the pastoral staff.

Elders fill a wide variety of spiritual and administrative functions, most commonly teaching, leading small groups, and pastoral as well as church oversight. Pastors are most appreciative of elders for their commitment to God's Word and the support of the pastor. However, the survey revealed that two things concerned the pastors: (1) an elders' lack of biblical knowledge and (2) a need for further developing their respective leadership skills.

In contrast, deacons were utilized by just two-thirds of the congregations. The average number of deacons was 12; this number varied widely among the churches. The most common activities performed by deacons consisted of caring for the physical needs of the church and the sick as well as any activities delegated by the elders.

Deacon training was similar to that of the elders in that it is usually provided by either direct teaching from the Bible, or extra-biblical resources, or training prepared from the pastoral staff.

Pastors expressed their greatest gratitude for the deacons' commitment to God and support of church programs. However,

as with the elders, their main concern was their inability to lead and teach and their lack of biblical knowledge.⁴⁴

Church Structures

Seventy-eight percent of churches led by DTS graduates maintain a system of small groups. Further, in over 90% of these churches the small groups are led not just by pastoral staff and elders, but by spiritually mature lay leaders. However, pastors reported that less spiritually developed (but socially mature) laypersons were also active in small group leadership.

The training for small group leaders is most often prepared by the pastoral staff, especially in larger churches. This leadership is seen as being crucial since small group leaders undertake a wide variety of spiritual and social functions that mirror those of elders.

Pastors express the most gratitude for the small group leaders' (1) commitment to God, (2) fidelity to the small group structure, and (3) incorporating new members into the church. However, the pastors' most frequent concerns about the small group leaders was (1) their inability to incorporate new members in to the church and (2) their lack of biblical knowledge.

Summary

The Teleios survey suggests six important findings: First, the churches in this study generally employed an independent and local elder-rule form of government. Additionally, they utilized a small group structure to meet the leadership, spiritual, and social needs of the church.

Second, the job duties of the small group leader appear similar to those of elders, but these leaders often do not have the full-orbed character qualities of elders.

⁴⁴ Participants in this study indicated at least one elder in each local church. More research could examine further the distinctions between churches that have deacons *only*, in contrast to those with deacons *and* elders.

Third, a deacon structure is used less often, and deacons receive more limited spiritual responsibilities, even than small group leaders.

Fourth, training is derived from a variety of sources including, directly from the Bible, extra-biblical resources and from the material developed from the church staff.

Fifth, the greatest complaint among pastors for all three lay leadership groups (elders, deacons, and small group leaders) is the lack of leadership skills and biblical knowledge.

Sixth, the data indicate that elders are used by the vast majority of conservative evangelical churches and tend to accept the biblically prescribed tasks delegated to them by Scripture. Pastoral leaders seem to consider their elder boards integral to spiritual and administrative function of their respective churches.

Teleios did not repeat the survey over time to evaluate the long-term consistency of the findings, nor did it analyze any of the suggestions and conclusions discussed in this article in a well-controlled, randomized prospective study.

Much more research is required to determine the best training methods for church leaders as well as different advantages among common church government types.

CONCLUSION

Based upon the biblical theological material and the survey data, the authors offer the following four applications.

First, local churches seeking to strengthen their elder/deacon boards and their small group leaders should consider establishing a well-designed discipleship program broadly throughout the church that concentrates on Jesus' words to "[teach] them to observe all things that I commanded you" (Matt 28:20). This ministry would raise biblical and leadership skills broadly among church members and would likely surface far more qualified candidates for the three crucial positions identified by DTS pastors.

Second, elder boards could potentially benefit from developing specific biblical training that directly applies to

independent elder-led churches.⁴⁵ Although the Teleios survey did not address this question specifically, anecdotally, the authors have observed that many elder boards feel that their current materials could be improved, but they have not taken the time because of pressing ministry demands. Attention to this priority would significantly strengthen the leadership culture of an elder board.

Third, local church leaders should consider the reality of resource limitations and recognize the value of Bible-based seminaries. Clergy can consider seminary training not only for themselves, but also for their lay leaders. Today, there are various options ranging from online, one-year certifications in Bible to robust masters degree programs in a variety of residential, online and hybrid customizations. Never before in the history of the church has quality theological education been more accessible for pastors and laypersons alike. What can be more strategic than for local churches to harness seminary educational programs to complement their existing and future ministries?

Finally, all three types of leaders (elders, deacons, and small group leaders) need periodic times of spiritual renewal. If Jesus is truly the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4) and the Great Shepherd (Heb 13:20), and if believers are seated in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph 2:6), then he is immediately spiritually available and has the power to strongly intervene and lead elders. Elders who are serving in a plurality of leadership can find refreshment through mutual prayer, scheduled retreat, and regular seasons of rest. This may empower leaders with increased creativity as they make critical decisions and work with vision.

⁴⁵ For a good place to begin with this, see Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: A Biblical, Historical and Cultural Perspective* (Chicago: Moody, 2003). See also Aubrey Malphurs, *Leading Leaders: Empowering Church Boards for Ministry Excellence*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005).

Why Study History? Reflecting on the Importance of the Past. John Fea. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013. 182 pages. \$19.99.

John Fea is an associate professor of American history at Messiah College in Pennsylvania. Rather than a historical study, *Why Study History?* is an examination of historiography—“a primer on the study of the past” (viii). Fea’s focus is upon “the pursuit of history as a vocation,” particularly from a Christian perspective (ix). Although the book’s full title is *Why Study History: Reflecting on the Importance of the Past*, Fea directly distinguishes “history” from “the past.” The “past” is simply what happened, and “history” is “the art of reconstructing the past” (3). In this sense, “While the past never changes, history changes all the time” (16).

According to Fea, historical narrative should be sensitive to the five C’s—“*change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity*” (6). Based upon Fea’s own descriptions, one could add further C’s—historical narrative should be cautious yet compelling (23, 25, 95). Academic history-writing is also communal, in that it is peer-reviewed and “must be written within a diverse community of historians who will expose our biases and correct our ‘wrong-headed’ assumptions and interpretations” (21). “The practice of deciphering what is a good story about the past, and what is not, comes through the historian’s willingness to work within a fellowship of other historians who are also interested in defending the past” (22). Furthermore, good history is also creative in character—it requires “interpretation, imagination, and even literary or artistic style” (29).

Fea insists that historical investigation requires the two crucial virtues of empathy and humility (58). In a humbling manner, “It makes us realize our own smallness in the vast course of human history” (60). Elsewhere, Fea focuses upon the virtue of hospitality within historical scholarship—welcoming the “other” (126, 131, 132). As L. P. Hartley quipped, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (quoted on p. 48). Therefore, study of the past requires an openness to what is foreign. “Doing history will require ‘intellectual hospitality,’ or

the willingness to engage the ideas of people from the past with humility" (131). Other virtues, including judiciousness, enlighten the historian's path as well: "Christians who study the past must be prudent" (136). One would imagine that the virtue of honesty is also essential to the historical task, which Fea probably assumed as a "given" (cf. 133). The historian must deal honestly with the sources and the evidence.

History is both "complex and complicated" (32). Theologically, the complexity of history is intensified by the tragedy of the fallen human condition. Even laudable heroes of history are tainted by the fall: "All humans are tainted by sin and are susceptible to acting in ways that preference themselves over others and God" (91). According to Fea, "History demands we set aside our moral condemnation about a person, idea, or event from the past in order to understand it" (118). One wonders, however, whether this is meant to be a temporary or a permanent setting aside. For example, Fea claims, "There are no villains in history" (85). But does the fact that all humans are fallen require the corollary that none exhibit a pattern of villainy? Fea himself recognizes the moral impulse in history-telling (95-96), and he provides five helpful suggestions in thinking through the relationship between historical study and moral reasoning (105-107).

A Christian anthropology also reminds that all humans are made in the *imago Dei*. Fea reasons that the universal presence of the "image of God" in humans requires that "everyone's voice counts" in history-telling, rather than an elitist model (what Fea terms "Whig history") (89). Historiography has often felt a tension between the "great leader" approach to history, and the alternative of a populist model that focuses upon the nameless masses. Interestingly, while the Hebrew Scriptures often speak of "the people" (the *Am ha'aretz* living their day-to-day lives), the historical narratives tend to underscore the role of leaders. One more issue related to theological anthropology may be worth mentioning as well. Fea emphasizes that characters from the past may seem "utterly strange" to contemporary readers (48). Nevertheless, might a recognition of the continuity of human

nature that transcends eras and cultures soften this sense of incommensurable dissimilarity?

Fea's discussion of "Providence and History" (chapter 4) may be the most controversial of his theological forays. He argues that "providence is an unhelpful category in the interpretation of the past" (69). He specifically takes umbrage with the likes of Marshall and Manuel's work on American history (*The Light and the Glory*), which wanted "to see the hand of God at work in history" (77). According to Fea, Marshall and Manuel claim "to know when [God] is working and when he is not" (77). And Fea critiques this approach, since we cannot discern the divine will—"the will of God" often "remains a mystery" (81): "We must avoid trying to interpret what is hidden from us or what is incomprehensible, because our understanding is so limited" (80). Undoubtedly, the work of Marshall and Manuel is historically lacking in various ways. Fea's theological discussion, however, could benefit from a more analytical model of notions of the divine will, one that distinguishes between God's decretive will, sovereign will, moral will, and desirative will. As a concrete example, Martin Luther (whose words are summoned on 80-81), sharply contrasted the "hidden" or "secret" nature of God's decretive will and God's "revealed" will. Regarding providence, everything that has happened in the past has happened within God's sovereign will—he is, in fact, always working (cf. 78). In this sense, the what of God's sovereign will related to the past is not mysterious at all—his sovereignty encapsulates all that has happened. The why of God's sovereign will may yet remain an inscrutable manner, as faithful Job discovered.

The final chapter concludes by answering the question, "So What Can You Do with a History Major?" In a pragmatic turn, Fea lists occupations in social work, writing, business, sales and marketing, communications, film, ministry, medicine, and criminal justice. Of course, the list is not exhaustive, as lawyers, politicians, librarians, and archivists come readily to mind. Still, Fea's basic point is timely and well-taken—one should not consider a history major to be the acquisition of content alone. Rather, historical study bestows a marketable skill set, making the student "a more effective thinker, writer, and communicator"

(151). One could also add a more effective reader, listener, and analyst (cf. 156).

Fea's previous publications include *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* (Westminster John Knox, 2011). In line with his own historical focus, the examples in *Why Study History?* usually come from the American context (as manifested in the index). An appendix even announces his intentions to form a "Center for American History and Civil Society" (172-79). Fea declares that history is to help "the members of your community use the past to make meaning of their lives" (46). It is a force of "public memory" (38) and therefore "collective identity" (39-40). In conjunction with his American national focus, Fea is clearly troubled by the contemporary "culture wars" that have led to "the virtual collapse of civil society in the United States" (117). In the current context, "public debate has turned toxic" (172). Fea's solution seems to be an iconoclastic approach to American exceptionalism. While agreeing that various popular authors have played fast and loose with the historical data in order to construct a modern form of Manifest Destiny, one wonders if there might be another way forward for the contemporary Christian. Fea rightly associates the historical enterprise with a sense of solidarity, "the greater good of the larger community" (112). Of course, this begs the questions of which community, whose memory, and whose identity? Perhaps the volume would have been enriched with a "hospitality" that welcomed case studies from broader and global church history. Perhaps part of the solution to a blind patriotism is reflection upon believers' ecclesiastical identity as "strangers" and "pilgrims" with an alternative citizenship.

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Black and White Bible, Black and Blue Wife: My Story of Finding Hope after Domestic Abuse. Ruth A. Tucker. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. 206 pages. \$16.99

Ruth Tucker of Jerusalem to Irian Jaya fame, has penned a personal, heart-wrenching account of years of domestic violence at the hands of her “charming, articulate, and intelligent” husband and once beloved pastor. Her ex-spouse (who is never named in the book) inflicted untold physical and emotional horror on her and their son for years. Sadly, Tucker’s experience is not unique in the church. Women and their children like her and her son (Carlton) should not have to suffer in silence and alone. The church needs to read this book to be motivated to come along side others like Tucker.

What Tucker suffered at the hands of her husband was terrible and inexcusable. Her ex’s use of the Bible to cower Tucker into submission was not only violence inflicted on his wife, Ruth, but also abuse of the worst kind on the biblical text itself. And this is where Tucker does not differentiate between what the Bible actually teaches and what her husband inflicted on her based on his warped hermeneutic. For Tucker they are one in the same.

While there is certainly a danger that the doctrine of biblical submission in marriage has (and will be) used as a vicious club (23), Tucker misses the point that God never intended this doctrine to be wielded in such fashion. Sadly, she also confuses the perpetrator with the teaching when she writes, “Yet the doctrine of male headship demands that an independent single woman turn into another woman—a woman under subjection” (53). Tucker’s horrendous experience was at the hands of her ex who had violated the biblical text long before he had abused her.

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