

Pacific Journal Theological Research

PJTR

Vol. 15, No. 2 November 2020

CONTENTS

<i>Stephen Curkepatrick</i>	1
Theological Possibilities within Imaginary, Real and Symbolic perceptions	
<i>Ian Hussey</i>	9
Australian Baptists and Hospitality: A Response to Denominational Decline?	
<i>David Bosma</i>	19
The Prevenient Activity of God in the Conversion Narratives of Young People in New Zealand	
<i>Jackson Reinhardt</i>	34
'Religion is what a man cannot live without': The Role of Missions within Christian Reconstructionism	
Reviews	46

**The Pacific Journal
of
Theological Research**

ISSN 1177-0228

Editors

Rev Dr Myk Habets
MHabets@laidlaw.ac.nz

Rev Andrew Picard
andrew.picard@carey.ac.nz

Book Reviews Editor

Dr Greg Liston
GListon@laidlaw.ac.nz

Editorial Board

Prof Paul Fiddes <i>Regent's Park College</i>	Dr Steve Harmon <i>Gardner-Webb University</i>	Dr Steve Holmes <i>St. Andrews University</i>	Dr Christa McKirland <i>Carey Baptist College</i>
Dr Michael O'Neil <i>Vose Seminary</i>	Dr Frank Rees <i>Whitley College</i>	Dr Edwina Murphy <i>Morling College</i>	Dr Victoria Lorrimar <i>Trinity College</i>
Dr Brian Talbot <i>Dundee, Scotland</i>	Dr Martin Sutherland <i>Australian College of Theology</i>		

Contributing Institutions

Carey Baptist College (Auckland, New Zealand) Morling College (Sydney, Australia) Malyon College (Brisbane, Australia) Vose Seminary (Perth, Australia) Whitley College (Melbourne, Australia)

The Pacific Journal of Theological Research (PJTR) is an open-access online journal which aims to provide an international vehicle for scholarly theological research with a special focus on the Pacific region. However, topics are not limited to the Pacific region, and all subject matter potentially of significance for theological scholarship and ecclesial communities will be considered. *PJTR* is especially interested in interdisciplinary biblical, theological, and historical research that intersects with other scholarly disciplines and knowledge sources. *PJTR* is published twice-yearly in May and November. Articles are blind peer-reviewed, with submissions sent to international scholars in the appropriate fields for critical review before being accepted for publication. The editors will provide a style guide on enquiry. All manuscript submissions should be addressed to Myk Habets at: MHabets@laidlaw.ac.nz.

URL: <http://www.baptistresearch.org.nz/the-pacific-journal-of-theological-research.html>

All business communications

Rev Andrew Picard
Carey Baptist College
PO BOX 12149

Auckland
New Zealand

Fax: +64 9 525 4096

Email: andrew.picard@carey.ac.nz

The Pacific Journal of Theological Research is sponsored by the N.Z. Baptist Research and Historical Society and the R.J. Thompson Centre for Theological Studies at Carey Baptist College.

© *Pacific Journal of Theological Research*, All Rights Reserved, Auckland, New Zealand

THEOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES WITHIN IMAGINARY, REAL AND SYMBOLIC PERCEPTIONS

Stephen Curkpatrick

Stirling Theological College, Melbourne

Lacan's *Imaginary*, *Real* and *Symbolic* represent a dynamic means of mapping human expectations, experience and understanding. Where assumed engagement with *reality in itself* transgresses a symbolic order that supposedly prevents this engagement, without symbolic mediation, reality is traumatic; symbolic mediation too, distorts reality, even as it filters it. The gospel parable of *a father and two sons* and aphorisms of *Ecclesiastes* present examples of dynamic interplay between *imaginary*, *real* and *symbolic* features that illustrate the usefulness of Lacan's *IRS* as a paradigm for engaging interfaces of human custom, conventions, aspirations and calamity, so prefacing engagement with the redemptive impetus of Christian faith.

IMAGINARY, REAL AND SYMBOLIC

Within freedom of choice, imagination is in play—a particular decision is made toward a specific projected outcome, which is presumably advantageous and likely, pleasurable too. Yet the reality present within any significant decision is this: having to take a risk, which might be detrimental; the reality of a decision lies beyond its imagined possibilities. With any decision, custom and law envelop volitional freedom with symbolic limits ranging from social approval to legal prohibitions that can allay drastic decisions and limit irrevocably detrimental trauma. This scene is common in human existence as *imaginary*, *real* and *symbolic* possibilities within human volition and actions. This is the scene of Lacan's *Imaginary*, *Real* and *Symbolic* (*IRS*).¹

A common expression of Lacan's *IRS* might look like the following scenario concerning marriage: imagined expectations of a marriage relationship (*I*), within a social frame of valuations concerning marriage (*S*) and experience of real marriage (*R*). Within this scene, real experience of marriage can distort received social valuations and expectations of marriage (*S*), even as this symbolic reception filters difficult experiences

¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with H. Fink & R. Grigg (London & New York: W.W. Norton & CO., 2006), 671-702; Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey (London, Boston & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 60-61; Marcelle Marini, *Jacques Lacan: The French Context*, trans. Anne Tomiche (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 42-46; Philippe Julien, *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary*, trans. Devra Beck Simiu (New York & London: New York University Press, 1995); Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 164-168; Slavoj Žižek, *Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006); Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press, 1992); *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (Cambridge & Malden: Polity Press, 2014), 66-69; *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2009), 118-120; *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), 116-119, 142-144; Duanne Rousselle, "Real, Symbolic, Imaginary," *The Žižek Dictionary*, ed. Rex Butler (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2014), 213-216; Sean Homer, "Lacan," *Žižek Dictionary*, 158-161.

of marriage (R), providing a structure of durability. Romanticized expectations (I) may be disappointed or even yearn for other imaginary partners in resistance to either real experience of marriage (R) or a distorted frame of social expectations within marriage (S).

Another application of Lacan's *IRS* might look like this in mapping dynamics of work: work, so skill formation, competency and discipline are formed within and contribute to society (S), generating beneficent effects and trajectories in excess of raw forces of the natural world (R), also enduring beyond any individual so as to be beneficial to the next generation (S). Through work, reality is negotiated within social mutuality, generating products of utility, order and creativity (S) that ground and shape imaginative possibilities (I) amid the reality of existence (R). Work, within a social frame of reference (S), instead of revolution (I), is effective in realizing individual possibilities amid the vicissitudes of existence (R).

A further example of applied *IRS* can be cast in the following scenario concerning politics: a lament that voters have *got it wrong* (I) is belied by numerical votes (R) within a democracy (S) that is also distorted by human desire, mendacity and contradiction amid the vicissitudes of social life (R). Belief in legislative solutions to social dilemmas (I) invariably encounters prevarication and compromise within the machinations of governance whereby any legislation is wrought through compromise, its execution also often tardy and less than optimal (R). Coordinating an economy seemingly amounts to getting all the variables right (I), yet immersed in the reality of need, desire, competitiveness and greed (R), economic solutions also distort and scuttle social equilibrium, allaying its realization—so an interweave of *IRS* dynamics.

Imaginary, *Real* and *Symbolic* can interact with various weightings in different configurations and with diverse effects, mapping interaction between imagined, real and symbolic expectations, experience and understanding. An assumed engagement with *reality in itself* is sustained by a tacit fiction, which transgresses a symbolic order that presumably prevents this engagement; yet direct engagement with reality is without mediation by the symbolic, which filters reality, even as it can distort it too.² The quest for reality *in itself*, in imaginary pursuit of a particular pleasure, experience or phenomenon, is precariously exposed to the inassimilable reality of existence, without a symbolic screen to allay exposure to a terrifying void of chance, stupidity, antagonism and death. This is Lacan's *Real*, *Imaginary* and *Symbolic*.

IRS TRAUMAS

Exposure to reality through an imaginary or fictive impetus has the potential to encounter trauma, especially without the mitigating presence of symbolic frames and interpretations—social, legal, customary—to allay raw exposure to existence.³ The symbolic is never fully adequate to such mitigation, which represents another trauma in the difference between expectation of symbolic amelioration of reality and exposure to

² Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 2009), 17-18, 310-312; *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 65-70; *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), 184-190, 438-443; *Trouble in Paradise* (London: Penguin, 2015), 192.

³ Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London & New York: Verso, 2011), 292; *Lacan*, 57.

real trauma, in spite of its symbolic filtering. An imaginary engagement with reality is traumatized by the presence of a stain within reality that prevents its genuine but fictive assimilation. This stain is often perceived as either a symbolic blocking of immediate experience with reality or the breakdown of symbolic expectations of reality, in which reality recoils against symbolic order through raw, confronting and even violent dissent.⁴ The following three scenes illustrate how trauma is encountered in various combinations of Lacan's *Real*, *Imaginary* and *Symbolic*.

Culture shock

First trauma: *Culture shock* occurs in the absence of adequate interpretive means of assimilating what is different, even confronting. If a culture is approached through an imaginary "culture" of glossy tourism advertising, a tourist will lack an adequate interpretive prism to negotiate confronting aspects of a very different culture. An interpretive (symbolic) prism might consist of historical, ideological and pragmatic reasons why governance, relationships and ablutions are different. Any culture has layers of meaning, which engaged with intentional inquiry through its symbolic prisms, can mediate positive cultural encounter—yet not without inassimilable remainder. An imaginary culture engaged through "brochure" images—digital or material—is most unlikely to help negotiate the complex reality encountered. This could also apply to a certain genre of social messaging within an imaginary register after travel brochures; such messaging seeks to allay the trauma of perceived or actual social tension, yet without recognition of reality—of the incomplete human self as a perennial source of social antagonism.

Between virtual and actual

Second trauma: The difference between digital and actual violence is something like encountering another culture merely through tourism advertising. By staging an imaginary encounter with violence, digital violence displaces any interpretive medium by which to negotiate exposure to actual violence. While imaginary violence is encountered within seemingly innocuous digital games, this medium can displace or even erase any political, historical, social or theological medium by which to process the inevitable shock of actual violence. Consequently, exposure to actual occurrences of violence, whether near or far, is experienced as wholly traumatic. Paradoxically, while shock is diminished within digital violence, without an interpretive medium by which to negotiate actual violence, exposure to trauma is increased. Similarly too, and here I pose a question: To what degree does digital and virtual access to trauma *anywhere* effectively fictionalize it as voyeurism, which paradoxically, accentuates its impact?

The thing we love to hate

Third trauma: A thing or person that someone *loves to hate* is a tacit source of enjoyment; enjoyment is in loving the hating. While a particular thing or person is detested—as necessarily erased or banished—this thing or person is also tacitly *loved*, having become essential to a feeling of personal rightness, purpose and

⁴ Žižek, *Disparities*, 156-160; Lacan, 59.

cohesion. Yet loving to hate, fails to evaluate the detested thing or person as a stain within reality—a stain that eludes symbolic assimilation, while inciting imaginary scenarios concerning its antagonism. Social media offers serial versions of such indulgent enjoyment in flaunting vociferous revulsion. Revulsion directed toward a particular detested thing masks by enjoyment of hatred, its necessity. Since the excluded detested thing serves as a point of coherence, it is experienced as both enjoyment and trauma.⁵ For example, an obnoxious politician or public figure is viewed as a detestable stain on the political or civic landscape; indulgent exhibitions of revulsion in response are simultaneously, a source of enjoyment, solidarity and trauma. Removing the source of trauma would also remove the focus of enjoyment and solidarity. Eventually, an alternative *stain* will be engaged.

Imaginary and symbolic engagement

In an imaginary register, a fiction of unmediated engagement with reality is pursued within diverse phenomena; yet reality consists of numerous unpredictable contingencies of existence that recoil on such fictions.⁶ In engagement with presumed naked existence, reality subsumed under any symbolic order is resisted in an imaginary quest of *reality in itself*; tantalized by the pursuit of raw reality, imaginary engagement is exposed to potential self-destruction.⁷ A symbolic order filters reality; tacitly, custom, myth and even superstition soften the hard edge of reality. So too, but more explicitly, religious lore accounts for reality—but never completely. In Lacan's *IRS*, reality is other than the symbolic, yet a phantasmal presence within the symbolic, which presumably allays traumatic exposure to reality, yet never adequately—so reality negotiated through a symbolic prism, such as providence or theodicy, yet without this prism completely circumscribing reality. This is a source of antagonism within symbolic discourses. Ambiguity within the symbolic is supposedly avoided through an imaginary *direct encounter* with reality in itself. The imaginary impetus seeks to engage the visceral or elemental in its fullness without symbolic filters; yet it is precisely the symbolic that mitigates exposure to an abyssal void within reality—of chance contingencies and human caprice.⁸

Impediment and drive

A fragment of reality that cannot be assimilated represents an impediment to free and fulfilling existence; it is a source of antagonism; it must be removed or eliminated. Yet this *impediment* is the very source of drive in seeking to confront and to prevail over its nemesis, so inversely giving purpose; its termination would eliminate drive that sustains existence; but the impediment cannot be assimilated either. As an inassimilable fragment of reality, an impediment presumably blocks one's primary possibilities; yet its perceived

⁵ References, 2.0 above.

⁶ Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, eds. Rex Butler & Scott Stephens (London: Bloomsbury, 2006, 2014), 392-393.

⁷ Žižek, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?: Four Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2002), 163.

⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 190-195; *Ticklish Subject*, 388-396.

antagonism is a source of purpose; the fantasized antagonistic character of an impediment is also a cohering focus.⁹

IMAGINARY, REAL AND SYMBOLIC: CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

Lacan's *IRS* provides a way of mapping human expectations, experience and understanding. The gospel parable of *a father and two sons* presents a dynamic interplay of *imaginary*, *real* and *symbolic* features that illustrate the usefulness of Lacan's *IRS* as a model for engaging the interface of human custom, conventions, aspirations and calamity, so prefacing engagement with the redemptive impetus of Christian faith. The aphorisms of *Ecclesiastes* increase the complexity of imaginary, real and symbolic mapped within the parable. *Ecclesiastes* offers a scene in which imaginary, real and symbolic are cast before us candidly within the context of human existence that is also a gift within Christian evaluation.

Home, prodigality and return (IRS)

In the gospel parable (Luke 15:11-32), a father represents a symbolic reality within which there are children, gratuity, provision and so the possibility of flourishing life through a combination of symbolic and material existence. Tacitly, the younger son rejects the symbolic existence of home and seeks an imaginary reality or existence elsewhere. He seeks an imaginary future that promises to be liberating and an encounter with real life in its immediacy. The imaginary real turns out to be a reality of raw existence that is indifferent to the son's aspirations; the son has lost any mediating or symbolic frame within a real encounter with existence, which is confronting and diminishing.

Under duress within reality, the son now recognizes the symbolic as a necessary frame of existence, for while there is accountability and humility within a symbolic order, it is a sphere that can allay raw exposure to reality; the symbolic is a source of community within which, even menial work, by contrast to a romanticized imaginary reality, offers the possibility of existence.

On returning to the symbolic realm, even within an expected diminished role, the son discovers life as gift (grace) beyond this symbolic order perceived as calculation.

The elder son views the symbolic realm with calculation, with the father representing the symbolic order; he cannot accept that the symbolic was always gift. The elder son imagines the imaginary realm of the younger son's venture, suggesting that tacitly, he too would rather live in the same imaginary possibilities than in the present symbolic order, as he perceives it. The father, embodying this symbolic order, discloses the symbolic realm as a gift that allays death through exposure to actual reality within the promises of imaginary life; the symbolic gives by framing identity and existence within structures of dignity and safety, which are otherwise squandered in either an imaginary quest (younger son) or dreams (elder son) of real life, without having anticipated the callous indifference of actual reality, which any imaginary reality masks.

⁹ Žižek, *Organs without Bodies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 2012, 82-83, 88-89, 92; *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 184, 199-200; Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013), 214-215.

The lacanian *Imaginary* is an exposure to the *Real* of existence and its potential for traumatic recoil in having resisted any screening value of the *Symbolic*. The *Real*, paradoxically, is a source of enticement, promise, compulsion and traumatic experience.

Human existence (IRS)

Ecclesiastes depicts the reality of chance, stupidity, elemental contingencies and death. Various renditions of the symbolic might assuage the trauma of these, while imaginary fictions offer deceptive safety within life. *Ecclesiastes* shows us human existence in the variegated ways in which people encounter the imaginary, real and symbolic. The following samples are cited: *freedom and chance* (9:11-12), *time and obscurity of purpose* (8:5-11:6), *relationality* (4:7-16) and *desire and possession* (2:1-11; 5:9-16; 6:1-9).

Freedom of choice generates imaginary possibilities, yet choice must ultimately negotiate the reality of decision, especially contextual ethical decisions that are not corralled by a code—the symbolic that by custom, convention and regulation allays too many traumas through the risks of decision invoked by imaginary possibilities within freedom of choice. Further, chance is reality that thwarts an imaginary cast freedom. Chance is exposure to the real, which scuttles imaginary freedom, eluding intention, as a trauma that is only partially ameliorated by symbolic renditions of benign providence or consistent causality within existence: regardless of speed, courage, prudence, wealth or favour—everyone is subject to chance contingencies, human stupidity, bad timing and so the possibility of real disaster.

Time replicates chance in offering reality that stymies imaginary possibilities, even if partially moderated by symbolic assurances. *There is a time for everything and every matter under heaven*. Yet immersed in time, we are never finally in sync with time, for our time is also being taken away in every moment we assume is gained. We presume at least to have present time, yet this is forever receding away from us, never being secured as *now* because it always ceases to be now as *then*. We are suspended between what is no longer and what is not yet over an ever disappearing now. We are never in sync with time so as to presume we possess it. Time is reality that scuttles imaginary intent, however much we undergird existence by symbolic grids of temporal assurance.

Relationships—in which two or more people in close proximity desire the best effects and outcomes of their liaison—can become stressful, traumatic and even *monstrous*.¹⁰ Within relationships, annoying habits and idiosyncratic propensities represent the reality of another person whose behaviour is different; reality can be experienced within incorrigibly different expectations—for example, contingencies that were unknown or chance events that were unexpected when relationships were formed, especially relationships extending into marriage. Reality exhibits various forms of social or vocational pressure that change behaviour patterns or make evident inadequacies in response to stress, anxiety or variegated vicissitudes of human existence. The imaginary is posited as ideal partner, ideal sex, ideal family, ideal colleagues and so an ideal future calibrated from these. Where imaginary possibilities prevail, symbolic underpinnings of society

¹⁰ Žižek, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?*, 163.

by custom and implicit expectations are inadequately formed or nurtured, unable to meet traumatic challenges of reality that imaginary projections mask.

The impetus or drive for possessions is their imaginary fulfilment of desire. Yet once desire is sated, the reality of possessions is the failure of their imaginary impetus. Their imaginary framing of life assumedly adds security and esteem. Desire creates an imaginary illusion of completing itself, by assimilating what it has constituted in a desired object. An object appears to be external to a person's desire, but a person constitutes the value of an object by desire and intentional assimilation. A desired object substantiates a person's desire; it is a real object, independent of that person, yet it is also consumed, assimilated by a person's desire. Desire cancels itself. Tacitly, people know that an object will not complete their identity, yet they continue to posit such possibility in the desire to consume diverse objects.¹¹ Desire generates an insatiable thirst. Desire is projected onto something as desirable, which is impossible to acquire, because it is a projection. Even if a particular desired thing is possessed, the source of desire is not this thing but an investment in the thing as desirable. Human subjectivity is the source of desire, not any object; an object can never satisfy desire, because desire is a subjective perspective concerning a thing. An object not only does not satisfy desire, its projection from a source of desire, a person, is invariably not noticed. Dissatisfaction will later find another object or thing on which to project desire.¹²

Ecclesiastes presents many aspects of human existence and so variegated ways in which people could be shown to encounter Lacan's *Imaginary, Real and Symbolic*.

IN SUMMARY

Within a lacanian focus, an imaginary *real* existence has no screening capacity against recoil from raw reality (*R*); reality can destroy a person, akin to an overconfident mountain climber who loses judicious respect for the elemental and is destroyed by its recoil. Wholly exposed to reality within an imaginary fantasy of encountering unmediated existence (*I*), there is no prism (*S*) through which to give provisional sense to reality, which is therefore experienced as both antagonistic stain and unmitigated possibilities for trauma. With the pervasive contemporary loss or perceived breakup of any received symbolic framing—and so an impetus away from the symbolic to imaginary engagement with presumed reality in itself—trauma is accentuated as a direct intrusion of reality. Pursuit of the imaginary within the dynamics of Lacan's *IRS*, fulfils a contemporary impetus to embrace reality that supposedly dispenses with symbolic frames, to encounter an imaginary *reality in itself*, yet being wholly exposed to traumas of reality.

People respond differently to traumatic events. Within a focus on Lacan's *IRS*, responses might occur with varying levels of interpretive adequacy—within imaginative naivety, heroic acceptance of reality or a

¹¹ Georg W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind: A Revised Version of the Wallace and Miller Translations*, rev. with intro and commentary Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), paras 426-429; *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), paras. 185, 190-195.

¹² Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 135; *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 259.

tertiary symbolic order. It is possible to be exposed imaginatively, to real hard edges of life, with human resources of symbolic mitigation, such as lore, law and wisdom. For Christian faith, composite exposure to life is resourced christologically by genuine immersion in the materiality of existence—so its tangible hard edges, which are mitigated within and by a community of generosity and veracity that is neither naïve in imagination nor symbolically cramped in its capacity to enfold human life within relationships of composite skill and life engagement.

AUSTRALIAN BAPTISTS AND HOSPITALITY: A RESPONSE TO DENOMINATIONAL DECLINE?¹

Ian Hussey
Director of Post Graduate Studies, Malyon Theological College

INTRODUCTION

This essay is an interdisciplinary exercise in Practical Theology based on the findings of the 2016 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) for Australian Baptists. It briefly reports on the “standard” questions of the NCIS but also on the results from a series of special questions commissioned by Crossover Australia, the evangelism resourcing branch of the Baptist Union of Australia. These questions were particularly concerned with evangelism, faith sharing, invitation, and hospitality amongst Australian Baptists. A particular focus of this essay will be the practice of sharing meals with non-Christians. The practices of Baptists in these areas are then reflected upon theologically and sociologically to develop some suggestions for Australian Baptists.

A SNAPSHOT OF AUSTRALIAN BAPTISTS

Every five years most Australian Baptist churches participate in the National Church Life Survey (NCLS). The survey provides a snapshot of what Australian Baptists are thinking and doing. It also allows an examination of the trends in Baptist church life as data is compared to previous surveys.

In late 2016, 33,898 adult Baptists attenders aged 15 years from over 319 churches completed the NCLS. The average age of the Baptist attenders was 50 years, compared with 48 years and 6 months in 2011 and 46 years and 9 months in 2006. The 2016 figure continues the concerning trend: Australian Baptists are an aging movement. In part, it reflects the aging population of the entire nation, but it still signifies that Australian Baptists are not retaining or incorporating enough young people into churches to rejuvenate the denomination. The telos of an aging entity is death, and so the denomination needs to do something about attracting and retaining young people in churches.

Perhaps reflecting this aging, 43% of Baptists have a university degree (up from 39% in 2011 and 32% in 2006) while for the general population only 31% have a bachelor degree or above.² Baptists are generally more educated and, as a result, probably more affluent than the general community. Sociologists have noted the effect that the gospel has in “lifting” the socio-economic status of those it influences, as

¹ This article is an adaptation of a series of articles written for *PRAC* magazine which is a publication of Crossover, the evangelism wing of the Baptist Union of Australia. <https://www.crossover.org.au/ncls-prac-summary/> Used with Permission.

² ABS—Education and Work, May 2017 (cat. no. 6227.0)

disciples focus on relationships and education rather than less helpful pastimes.³ And so, this figure could be good news because it reflects the power of the gospel to transform lives but it also means that Baptists need to be careful not to be disconnected from the communities they are seeking to reach.

The NCIS also asks participants what it is that they value about their church and what should be a priority for the next 12 months. Although still the primary value, “Sermons, preaching or Bible teaching” was becoming less valued—53% in 2001, 50% in 2006 and 48% in 2011. However, in 2016, 52% of Baptist attenders indicated that the thing they most valued about their church was the ministry of the Word. This *may* reflect the reversal of a trend and a “returning to the roots” of the Baptists in Australia in an increasingly unsettled world.

When asked what should be the priority of their church in the next 12 months, “Spiritual growth (e.g. direction)” continued to be the highest rated response. Building a sense of community and encouraging people to find or use their gifts also featured. Nearly half (49%) of attenders agree that their gifts, skills, and talents were being used well at their local church, but 27% (over a quarter) wanted to be more involved at their local church. Australian Baptists are hungry to grow spiritually, to experiences community and to serve, and they are looking to their local church to be able to help them to do these things.

Australian Baptists continue to be an increasingly multicultural community. In 2016, 36% of attendees were born overseas, compared to 31% in 2011 and 23% in 2006. The percentage born overseas in the wider community in 2016 was 28.5%.⁴ Australian Baptist churches are a remarkable manifestation of the beautifully diverse picture of the church we see in Revelation 7:9. As such they can also have a powerful witness to the community of the power of the gospel to forge unity in an increasingly fractured society.

However, the influx of new people into Baptist churches may be slowing. Only 30% of attenders have switched from another church in the previous five years, down from 31% in 2011 and 34% in 2006. Similarly, the percentage of Newcomers (people who have joined the church in past five years but who were not previously attending a church) was 6%, compared to 7% in 2011 and 8% in 2006. In one sense, it is exciting to think 6% of Baptist congregations are “converts” in the past five years. However, the trend is concerning — it may be our missional effectiveness as a denomination is declining.

This decline in Newcomers is not because Baptists feel less at ease talking about their faith with others — in 2016 19% looked for opportunities to do so, compared to 18% in 2011 and 17% in 2006. Although only one in five feel comfortable about talking about their faith there does not appear to be a discernible trend in this ratio. Nor is the decline in Newcomers a result of less invitation to church: 36% invited friends and relatives to a church service in the last year, the same as in 2011. Given that Baptists are *not* less inclined to talk about their faith or invite others to church, there is another factor in play. I will argue in this essay that this factor is hospitality.

³ Donald Anderson McGavran (Revised and Edited by C. Pater Wagner), *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 211–16. See also, Rodney Stark, *America's Blessings: How Religion Benefits Everyone, Including Atheists* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2012).

⁴ ABS—Migration, 2015–16 (cat. no. 3412.0)

But, to summarise the 2016 NCIS, Australian Baptists are a culturally diverse and educated community who strongly value sermons and Bible teaching. They want to grow in spirituality, community, and service. However, this does not appear to be enough to reverse the decline of the denomination. The increasing average age of attenders and the decline in the percentage of switchers and Newcomers means that Australian Baptists face serious challenges. It is important to focus on inviting new people into faith and into the wonderful experience of being part of a Baptist church.

FAITH SHARING AND INVITATION AMONGST AUSTRALIAN BAPTISTS

As well as the “standard” NCLS survey questions, Crossover commissioned a number of “Baptist-only” questions related to evangelism in the 2016 NCLS survey that went to Baptist churches.

The first question related to faith sharing readiness. Attenders were asked how well equipped they felt to share their faith. Only 14% felt they were “very well equipped,” 30% felt “well equipped” and 4% indicated they were not at all equipped. The majority (36%) indicated the middle or “neutral” option on the five-point Likert scale. And so, even though it is encouraging that 44% felt equipped or very well equipped, the survey suggests that over half of Australian Baptists are not sure they are ready to share their faith. It has been postulated that one of the reasons that Christians do not share their faith is that they do not know how, and this finding may confirm that theory.

The second set of questions addressed another hypothesis: that the reason Christians do not share their faith is because they do not have many meaningful relationships with non-Christians. The first question was, “If a friend is defined as someone you share a significant personal conversation with at least once a month, how many non-Christian friends do you have?” Only 8% of Australian Baptists indicated that they had no such friends. The largest group (42%) had 1–5 such friends, while 18% indicated they had 16 or more such relationships! This would indicate that, at least on this measure, Australian Baptists are not disengaged with the non-Christian world, but have significant numbers of meaningful relationships through each the gospel could be shared.

The next question focussed on hospitality: “How often in the last year have you intentionally shared a meal with a non-Christian?” Of the respondents, 14% indicated never, 52% occasionally, 19% monthly, 10% weekly and 5% daily. Hence it appears that while 52% of Australian Baptists intentionally share a meal with a non-Christian “occasionally,” only 34% do so monthly or more frequently. This is problematic because when asked, “When are you most likely to share your faith?”, most (52%) responded, “In a relaxed environment with people I know (e.g. sports, meal, men’s shed, etc.)” In other words, two thirds of Australian Baptists are rarely intentionally putting themselves in the place where they are most likely to share the gospel with others.

Another question focussed on “frontline” evangelism. Attendees were asked how often in the last year they had shared their faith with someone they knew through a secular workplace, club, school etc. Most (61%) indicated occasionally, but 18% indicated “never,” and only 21% shared their faith on a monthly

basis or more often. Baptists were even less likely to invite their non-Christian workmates or colleagues to church: only 7% had done so on a monthly or more frequent basis.

Attendees were also asked, “How often in the last 12 months have you shared on social media/web content from your church for evangelistic purposes?” The great majority (92%) indicated occasionally or never. Given the great usage of social media by younger people, this is concerning.

A final hypothesis explored in the commissioned questions was that Christians are nervous about inviting their non-Christian friends and relatives to church because of the style of the church services. Attendees were asked: “To what extent do you feel that this church is a good one to invite a (non-Christian or enquiring) friend to?” The majority (61%) indicated that “It’s a great church for beginners.” Only 1% indicated “This church may do more harm than good to a beginner.”

So, what can we conclude from this survey? About half of Australian Baptists feel equipped to share their faith and most have a good number of meaningful friendships through which they could share that faith. Generally, Baptists are comfortable about inviting a non-Christian friend or relative to their church. However, they are hesitant about sharing their faith on their frontlines, and, notably, appear hesitant to exercise hospitality, with only one third intentionally having meals with non-Christians on a monthly or more frequent basis even though they identify that setting is one where they are most likely to share the gospel.

We can conclude that Australian Baptists have not withdrawn from the world and have meaningful relationships with non-Christians. There appears to be a need to do more to equip church members to share faith with confidence, especially on frontlines (work, clubs, schools etc.) and through the use of social media.

However, the research also suggests that the missing piece of the evangelism process could be hospitality. Australian Baptists consider shared meals to be a good place to share the gospel, but only one-third of them are intentionally experiencing hospitality with non-Christians on a monthly or more frequent basis. This phenomenon is problematic because theologically, historically and sociologically, hospitality emerges as a crucial dimension of the church’s relationship with the rest of the world.

HOSPITALITY AND EVANGELISM

Domestic hospitality, and as a subset of that hospitality, the shared meal, is a hallmark of the people of God throughout the Bible. As Pohl points out, the father of faith, Abraham, and his wife, Sarah, offered hospitality from their home to the three strangers who turned out to be angels (Gen 18:1-16).⁵ Hospitality was also expressed through the laws to ensure the poor and aliens could find food in Israel (e.g., Lev 19:9-10; Deut 14:28-29, 26:11-13). Israelites were instructed to make a place for sojourners within their families

⁵ Christine D. Pohl, “Building a Place for Hospitality,” in *Hospitality*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz (Waco: The Center for Christian Ethics Baylor University, 2007), 27–36.

when they celebrated the feasts (Deut 16:9–15). Barton calculates that in the Torah hospitality is commanded twenty-four times.⁶

Because Israel was a stranger, she too was to offer hospitality to strangers (Lev 19:34). Israel's self-understanding was that of being a stranger, alien, and tenant in God's land. They were both dependent on God for welcome and provision and answerable to God for their treatment of aliens and strangers.⁷ The experience of being a stranger motivated the people of God to practice hospitality towards the strangers living among them. The self-understanding of being a stranger enjoying God's hospitality was both motivating and sensitising.

The New Testament Greek word usually translated hospitality is *philoxenia*. It is composed of two Greek words, *phileo* and *xenos*. *Phileo* is the love or affection for people who are connected by kinship or faith while *xenos* generally denotes a "stranger." The ideas of friend and stranger are thus juxtaposed. In Hebrews 13:12 *philoxenos* is contrasted explicitly with "love of brother" (*philadelphia*): "Let mutual love (*philadelphia*) continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality (*philoxenos*) to strangers." Hence, *philoxenia* can be defined as to "show hospitality to a stranger, that is, someone who is not regarded as a member of the extended family or a close friend."⁸ This leads Barton to conclude that hospitality can then be defined as "a social process by means of which the status of someone who is an outsider is changed from stranger to guest."⁹

Many of Jesus' activities were tied to hospitality. In Luke especially, he was a guest at numerous meals (e.g., Luke 4:38–39, 5:29–32, 7:36–39, 10:38–42, 11:37, 14:1–14, 19:1–10). Although these meals were not in his home, he sometimes acted as a host (e.g., Luke 9:12–17, 18:15–17, 22:7–23). The meals recorded in Luke were places of repentance (5:27–39) and forgiveness (7:36–50). Many of Jesus' most memorable parables were told during these meals, and the themes of abundance and hospitality characterise the narratives.

The Lord's Supper is also an event of hospitality. Jesus' disciples are invited to his eschatological table by eating bread and drinking wine. However, "if our practice of the Lord's Supper is to imitate that of the early church, it would be an actual meal. The Lord's Supper was most likely not a sombre moment of silent reflection, but a joyful time spent over a meal."¹⁰

It was also recognised that in welcoming a brother or sister one was potentially welcoming Jesus himself (Matt 25:43) and may be the grounds for salvation, as it had been for Abraham, Lot and Rahab. "Hospitality to strangers was not an optional practice for the church but something that is deeply related to salvation."¹¹

Following the example of Jesus, hospitality became a central practice for the early churches (Rom 15:7; Heb 13:2). This perhaps reflects a self-understanding of being a stranger (1 Pet 2:11) and so offering hospitality to other strangers—mirroring the Israelite's motivation for hospitality. Their stranger-hood had

⁶ Stephen C. Barton, "Hospitality," in *The Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 502.

⁷ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 16.

⁸ Johannes P Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 453–54.

⁹ Barton, "Hospitality," 501.

¹⁰ Naomi Walters, "Lord's Supper and Hospitality," *Leaven* 22, no. 4 (2014): 187.

¹¹ Joshua W. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 7.

a specific purpose in this world: Christians, in their strangeness, were called to transform the world through love and hospitality.¹²

Therefore, “practice hospitality (*philoxenian*),” said Paul in describing the Christian lifestyle (Rom 12:13). Bishops, elders, and widows were required to show hospitality (1 Tim 3:2; 5:9-10; Tit 1:8). Although initially reluctant, the apostle Peter left behind his xenophobic upbringing to eat with gentiles because he realised God’s hospitality embraced all (Acts 10: 9–11:18).

As a result, Christians received others into their homes (e.g., Acts 2:44–47, 16:15; Rom 16:23; 3 John 5–8). Worship gatherings were often household-based, and the image of the church as the household of God was prominent (e.g., Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15). Because converts came from many backgrounds, shared meals were useful for building unity and a new identity, for transcending social and ethnic differences, and for making sure that the poor were fed (e.g., Acts 2:46; 1 Cor 11:17–34). “Hospitality was practically necessary and theologically central.”¹³

The parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15–24) illustrates the relationship that the church is to have with its neighbours. The church, like the great king, is to extend an invitation to those who previously were not the guests or who are marginalised on the edge of society. This invitation is to a messianic feast that has already begun. And like Jesus the church is to be simultaneously centrifugal—going out into the world and centripetal—drawing the world into the banquet.¹⁴

It is not surprising therefore that the Didache encourages Christians to be openhanded in their hospitality, especially towards the poor.¹⁵ In 1 Clement 10:1-12:8, Abraham, Lot, and Rahab are all described as having been saved by their hospitality (*philoxenian*). Benedictines received all guests as though they were the Christ.¹⁶ Calvin said, “let us therefore learn from this passage to be kind and dutiful to fugitives and exiles, and especially to believers, who are banished for their confession of the word. No duty can be more pleasing or acceptable to God.”¹⁷

Henry asserts that Baptist life has been characterised by hospitality from its earliest days, asking whether Baptist ideology would have found a home in English separatism if not for the hospitality that Thomas Helwys extended to the churchless and marginalised John Smyth, who both went on to be key figures in the establishment of the Baptist movement.¹⁸ The hospitality offered to Smith and Helwys’s Gainsborough faithful in Amsterdam by separatist pastor Francis Johnson’s congregation was also significant.

¹² Oswald Pearson Sichula, “Hospitality in Urban Baptist Congregations in Zambia and the Role of Pastoral Ministry” (unpublished Master of Arts Dissertation, North-West University, 2008), 42.

¹³ Pohl, “Building a Place for Hospitality,” 29.

¹⁴ Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 135.

¹⁵ Didache 4.5.

¹⁶ Rule of Benedict 53:1. See also Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2017), 72.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *John Calvin's Bible Commentaries on Isaiah 1–16* (Altenmünster: Jazzybee Verlag), 361.

¹⁸ Douglas V. Henry, “Can Baptist Theology Sustain the Life of the Mind?,” in *The Scholarly Vocation and the Baptist Academy: Essays on the Future of Baptist Higher Education*, ed. R. A. Ward and D. P. Gushee (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 226.

Indeed, Helwys's calls for religious tolerance were in part an expression of hospitality—an awareness of, and appreciation for, the stranger who holds a different opinion.¹⁹ Unlike many advocates of religious tolerance in the 17th century, Helwys did not just call for respect for his own views but for the freedom of all people, including Jews, to practise their religious beliefs.

However, it would seem that this early prominence of hospitality did not remain as a key Baptist distinctive. A glance through the indexes of a range of books on Baptist history and distinctives did not reveal a single reference to “hospitality.”

But not only is hospitality with non-believers theologically valid, it makes sense sociologically as well. The word “hospitality” shares its linguistic roots with hostility, hostage, and enemy.²⁰ Historical studies of hospitality have identified it as a way of managing the stranger who represents a potential for danger. Visser observed that table manners are actually a system of civilized taboos that developed to reduce tension and protect guest and host from one another!²¹ The laws of hospitality deterred host and guest from attacking each other with knives or other implements at the table.

From an anthropological perspective, hospitality is associated with the ideas of exchange and reciprocity. Sharing and exchanging the fruits of labour, together with mutuality and reciprocity, associated originally with hunting and gathering food, were at the heart of collective organization and communality.²²

However, as Selwyn concluded, one of the principal functions of hospitality is also to either consolidate recognition of a shared moral universe or to enable the construction of a moral universe acceptable to both the host and the guest. Hospitality converts “strangers into familiars, enemies into friends, friends into better friends, outsiders into insiders, non-kin into kin.”²³ This anthropological insight highlights the compatibility of hospitality with faith sharing. The creation of a mutually shared understanding is one of hospitality's core functions.

Hospitality also carries with it the notion of slowing down, resting and stopping for a while.²⁴ In ancient times travel was dangerous, and to be without shelter for the night would mean exposure to the elements, wild animals, robbery and murder at the hands of highwaymen. Hence in order to allow travel and trade, societies developed an ethic of hospitality to allow safe rest for travellers. The harsher the physical conditions, the greater the obligation to hospitality.²⁵ Thus hospitality became associated with not just the provision of shelter and food but psychological safety.

¹⁹ Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1611/1612)*, vol. 1 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Paul Lynch et al., “Theorizing Hospitality,” *Hospitality & Society* 1 no. 1 (2011): 5.

²¹ Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: Open Road Media, 1991), 92.

²² Lynch, “Theorizing Hospitality,” 9.

²³ Tom Selwyn, “An Anthropology of Hospitality,” in *In Search of Hospitality: Theoretical Perspectives and Debates*, ed. Conrad Lashley and Alison J. Morrison (Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 2000), 19.

²⁴ Lynch, “Theorizing Hospitality,” 7.

²⁵ Carol A King, “What Is Hospitality?,” *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 14 no. 3–4 (1995): 219–34.

Hence, from biblical, historical, and sociological perspectives, domestic hospitality is an ideal place for the sharing of Christian faith. It is an ancient and profound practice whereby humans slow down and encounter each other in safety even when they are strangers to one another.

THE DECLINE OF HOSPITALITY

Given that hospitality was a feature of the early churches and the early Baptists, its decline in the Australian context is worthy of exploration. However, further empirical research will be needed in order to determine why many Australian Baptists are not more inclined to share hospitality with non-Christians. However, it is possible to make some tentative suggestions.

Robert Putnam²⁶ in the United States, and Andrew Leigh²⁷ in Australia have demonstrated the growth of individualism and its contribution to the decline of social capital during the 20th and 21st centuries. Increasingly Australians are “bowling alone,” to use Putnam’s metaphor. People are less likely to share community, let alone a meal, with those outside the nuclear family. It is quite likely the spread of individualism has undermined the spirit of hospitality that marked the early Christians and the early Baptists.

Another contributor factor may be time poverty. Australians are amongst the most time-poor in the world.²⁸ As mentioned earlier, hospitality implies slowing down. For many Australian Baptists the idea of slowing down in order to share a meal with another person, especially one who is not a member of the family, may be too high a price to pay in the midst of their time poverty.

Another factor may be the emergence of restaurants. Even though early restaurants were basically homes which invited and charged “strangers” to share the family meal,²⁹ over time they have been professionalised and commercialised. Hospitality is now an “industry” where excellence or “fast food service” are the object. However, these notions stand in contrast to the traditional concept of simple Christian hospitality. Perhaps the self-imposed expectation about the quality of the “dining experience” they need to offer the guest is a disincentive for Australian Baptists to practice hospitality.

Whatever the cause, Australian Baptists need to be reminded of the theological and historical imperatives that resulted in the name of the early churches and early Baptists being synonymous with hospitality. It is another place where Australian Baptists need to consciously be countercultural — deliberately overcoming their individualism, time poverty and self-imposed expectations to offer an experience which powerfully manifests their Christian faith.

²⁶ Robert D Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

²⁷ Andrew Leigh, *Disconnected* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010).

²⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, “General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014 (Cat. 4159.0)” <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4159.0>.

²⁹ Michael Symons, “The Rise of the Restaurant and the Fate of Hospitality,” *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 25 no. 2 (2013): 247–63.

CONCLUSION

It has been said, “Something special happens when people’s legs go under the same table.” Sharing a meal together is more than a biological convenience. It is a powerful social activity which expresses acceptance and openness. Little wonder that it is the ideal venue for faith sharing. The sharing of food is a symbol of the sharing of the spiritual bread of life.

In describing the practices of missional Christians, Michael Frost identifies hospitality (the “E” for Eat in the B.E.L.L.S acronym) as one of the essential habits.³⁰ When it comes to Australian Baptists sharing hospitality with non-Christians, time poverty could be perceived as a major issue. The beauty of hospitality is that it is not an additional “church thing to do.” It is simply the modification of something that will be done anyway. The self-imposed expectation of creating a special banquet for guests needs to be countered. The beauty of hospitality is that it invites non-believers to join a community of faith as they just “do their thing.” It is an invitation into authentic life, not a stage production. If we think hospitality is about impressing our guests with our food or the beauty of our clean house, we have missed the point.

The link between hospitality and evangelism has been identified before.³¹ There is perhaps even a biblical precedent. In Mark 2:14–17, just after his call, Levi has a dinner in his home where his tax-collector friends are joined by Jesus and his disciples. Hybels labelled this a “Matthew Party.”³² It provided the perfect environment for Levi’s friends to encounter Jesus, just as he had.

Further, as N. T. Wright points out, “most writers now agree that eating with ‘sinners’ was one of the most characteristic and striking marks of Jesus’ regular activity ... Jesus was, as it were, celebrating the messianic banquet, and doing so with all the wrong people.”³³ Whereas Israel was to maintain separateness and holiness, Jesus went out of his way to eat with the unholy. In fact, he inverted the relationship between hospitality and holiness: hospitality became the means of holiness.³⁴ His hospitality and table fellowship was an enactment of the kingdom of God.

The growing awareness of living in a post-Christendom world should create in believers greater understanding of themselves as strangers in a strange land. Following in the footsteps of the Israelites and the early church, Australian Baptists may increasingly see themselves as strangers in the world, offering hospitality to other strangers. Such hospitality would see the flourishing not just of the Christian communities but those with whom they engage.

As we have seen, 34% of Australian Baptists intentionally share a meal with a non-Christian monthly or more frequently. What if we could double that figure over the next five years? Imagine the faith-sharing that would go on if *most* Baptists intentionally and regularly opened up their homes to non-Christians and

³⁰ Michael Frost, *The 5 Habits of Highly Missional People: Taking the Bells Challenge to Fulfill the Mission of God* (NP: Exponential Resources, 2014).

³¹ See for example Kel Richards and Barbara Richards, *Hospitality Evangelism: A Practical Step-by-Step Handbook* (Lane Cove: Beacon, 1994); Joseph C Aldrich, *Life-Style Evangelism: Crossing Traditional Boundaries to Reach the Unbelieving World* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Press, 1981).

³² Bill Hybels, *Just Walk across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 196.

³³ Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 431.

³⁴ Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 130.

made their faith manifest in deed and Word. What if Baptist churches could challenge their attenders to make a habit of offering hospitality to their non-Christians friends and relatives one Sunday a month after church?

According to Isaiah 25:6 Yahweh will host the messianic banquet and it will be marked by the best of meats and the finest of wines. Here is the great Host offering the ultimate hospitality to people from all nations. Australian Baptists are well-positioned to experience a foretaste of this kingdom consummation. Their relative wealth, ethnic diversity and their commitment to the Bible with its missional imperative should combine to produce a people marked by their hospitality.

THE PREVENIENT ACTIVITY OF GOD IN THE CONVERSION NARRATIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN NEW ZEALAND

David Bosma
University of Otago

INTRODUCTION

Christian conversion is a process of change that can be examined from a variety of perspectives, including the social sciences with their focus on human agency, or theology with its emphasis on the nature and activity of God. However, theology runs the added risk of discussing a subject that is to some degree hidden from the human observer. Understanding the ways in which God might have been at work in the conversion of an individual is a challenging process, particularly insofar as the primary texts used to help establish this understanding are themselves inescapably “human.” Whether it be the words of Scripture or the testimony of a new believer, careful interpretation and analysis is required as various theologies are developed. The present essay engages with the conversion narratives of 32 young adults in Canterbury, New Zealand, in order to develop a perspective on the action of God in conversion. Notably, this data set reveals important insights about the action of God in and even prior to the individual’s own growth in attraction to God and the church. This in turn confirms some key theological insights advanced elsewhere, as well as providing food for the thought of current ministry practitioners.

GOD’S ACTION AND CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

Much conversion research focuses on the various ways in which individuals are active participants in their own conversions.¹ Here, writers are reluctant to attribute too much of what goes on in conversion to outside agents such as God, worried that such an emphasis will downplay or conceal the ways in which converts are involved in the process. Yet sometimes, or so it seems at least, conversion is more a case of something happening *to* an individual, or at least something that begins with much less determination or intent from the convert. Filipino scholar Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr. defines a category of conversion narrative, “the swept,” by which he can classify this type of experience.² This kind of conversion involves “a largely involuntary experience in which the person undergoes an experience that leads to faith. . . . The experience of the divine may not be actively and consciously sought, and the story may even depict the pre-conversion self as scoffing

¹ E.g. James T. Richardson, “The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24 no. 2 (1985): 163–179.

² Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr., “Experiencing Transcendence: Filipino Conversion Narratives and the Localization of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity,” *Philippine Studies* 54 no. 4 (2006): 615–620.

at the practices of ... Christians. The story of the swept ... may be akin to the conversion story of Saul/Paul found in chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles.”³ The stories that Aguilar provides to support this concept tend to involve significant events and coincidences that take the narrators by surprise, making his comparison with Paul’s experience in Acts apt. Other key factors of this kind of experience involve an initially negative (“scoffing”) or apathetic disposition to the Christian faith, and a subsequent moment of shock or surprise in the face of a new piece of information, such as a meaningful spiritual experience, miracle, or coincidence.

Theologically, such experiences, even prior to conversion being completed, should be of little surprise to Christians, affirming as we do the significance of the independence of God. As Walter Brueggemann notes, “Yahweh, the sovereign one who acts in his lordly freedom, is extrapolated from no social reality and is captive to no social perception but acts from his own person toward his own purposes.”⁴ The author of a small project investigating recent conversions to Christianity in Auckland drew the same conclusion from his data:

There seems to be an assumption that God only works in and through the church and so God’s work is enhanced when the church positions herself properly in a community and gets its gathered life together. However, ... a number of people from non-churched backgrounds came to faith in Christ, largely though the work of God’s Spirit... We truly see that Christians don’t do the work of God, they participate in it. God is at work acting to save and, with considerable grace, involves people in these purposes.⁵

God’s work in the conversion process need not be contained or understood as always operating within human structures. Rather, a rightly held doctrine of the freedom of God’s action allows for the possibility of a broader range of conversion experiences, ones that are initiated and propelled by the action of the Spirit.

This action of God’s Spirit in conversion can be deeply personal and specific to individuals. New Zealand theologian Lynne Taylor, in her study of conversion in South Australia, notes that for her participants, “It seems that God started with their current reality and, aware of each personality, curated a conversion experience that allowed them to be, and become, who they were.”⁶ Taylor notes ways in which her participants’ conversion experiences each fit with their personalities, as well as containing moments of well-timed interventions and events that helped the conversion process along.⁷ Indian scholar Joshua Iyadurai notes that in many of the conversion narratives he analysed “a gentle conversation takes place between the divine and the convert that makes the encounter personal, not generic. Further, the encounter

³ Aguilar Jr., “Experiencing Transcendence,” 595–96.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 6.

⁵ Kevin Finlay, “Coming to Christian Faith in New Zealand in the 21st Century” (Master of Ministry Thesis, University of Otago, 2012), 59–61.

⁶ Lynne Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study of the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians” (PhD Thesis, Flinders University, 2017), 202.

⁷ Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 203.

sets up a loving and intimate relationship between the divine and the convert.”⁸ God’s action in reaching out to human persons can be shaped in such a way that it fits with their circumstances and personality and can speak to each individual on a deeply personal level.

Theologians have developed the idea of God’s action in a person’s life prior to their conversion, and even prior to their awareness that God is at work in their reality, in various ways. Particularly in the work of John Wesley, the concept of God’s “prevenient” grace has been explored as one way of describing how God can be at work in human lives, preparing them for conversion.⁹ This idea reinforces two concepts that are important for a theological discussion of conversion. The first is that God always makes the first move; it is God who prepares us to consider God, as it were.¹⁰ Thus, the true beginning of an individual’s conversion involves neither their consent nor their awareness, but God’s action.¹¹ The second helpful concept here is the fact that at times, God appears to bring his grace to bear on the lives of individuals in particularly compelling or impacting ways. As Australian theologian Benjamin Myers notes, “God’s ‘peculiar grace’ specially singles out some individuals, but all the ‘rest’ of humanity [still] receive the divine ‘call’ to salvation.”¹² South African theologian David Field, in his discussion of prevenient grace in the work of John Wesley, suggests that “because the work of the Spirit is personal, free and unpredictable there is always the potential for dramatic and unexpected movements towards justice, mercy and truth.”¹³ This is to affirm again the importance of God’s sovereignty and independence. Alongside this, we are reminded that God’s actions in the world are at times “dramatic and unexpected,” and that this is entirely in keeping with his grace.¹⁴

In the body of this essay, I will provide evidence to support the assertions made by the authors cited above, although I would extend Aguilar’s theory somewhat to include conversions that, while still surprising to those experiencing them, happen over a longer period and are less event-orientated. The data cited below comes from my doctoral research, investigating recent conversions to Christianity in Canterbury, New Zealand. I interviewed 32 young adults, each of whom had been raised in secular homes, about their conversions to Christianity during adolescence. Twenty-six of these individuals experienced, in some way, moments in their conversion journeys where they were met with an unexpected degree of congruity between one of their own emotional or practical needs and something that they encountered in the Christian world. Also, these experiences generally happened before those I interviewed would have identified as committed

⁸ Joshua Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 242.

⁹ Michael Purcell, “Glimpsing Grace Phenomenologically: Prevenience and Posterity,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73 no. 1–2 (2008): 78, Benjamin Myers, “Prevenient Grace and Conversion in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Quarterly* 40 no. 1 (2006): 22.

¹⁰ Purcell, “Glimpsing Grace Phenomenologically,” 73; Myers, “Prevenient Grace,” 24.

¹¹ Myers, “Prevenient Grace,” 22.

¹² Myers, “Prevenient Grace,” 28.

¹³ David N. Field, “The Unrealised Ethical Potential of the Methodist Theology of Prevenient Grace,” *HTS Theological Studies* 71 no.1 (2015): 5.

¹⁴ Experiences in which individuals are confronted by a sudden revelation of God’s nature may in fact be even more common in secular societies, as Andrew Root argues: “Ministry in a secular age is ‘seeker sensitive,’ but the kind of seeker sensitive that perceives divine action. *It proclaims God, not us, as the seeker.*” *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 227, emphasis original.

Christians. I have termed this “the match,” insofar as it refers to a high level of synchronicity between personal need and present experience—essentially, these two things matched. These experiences generally occurred within the following set of conditions:

1. Participants’ initial reasons for engaging with Christianity were quite mundane, usually just in response to an invitation from a friend to attend an event
2. Therefore, participants were not expecting much from Christianity, and most were not on any kind of intentional spiritual search
3. Thus, when something personally meaningful occurred in this context, it was often either
 - a. a *surprise* to the participant, in that what was occurring to them was unexpected, or
 - b. a *contrast* with their current life experience, in that what was they observed happening was a pleasant difference to daily life
4. What occurred for each participant in this category was usually something deeply meaningful that clearly spoke to a closely held personal issue or concern

As can be seen in the above list, participants, for the most part, were simply not expecting much of the church.

FINDING COMMUNITY

The reasons many participants first ended up engaging with Christianity were quite mundane. Often, this resulted from a friend or youth worker inviting them along to a Christian event and the young person deciding that they might as well go along and check things out. For example, one participant, Nathan, described his reasons for first attending youth group: “[I] kind of just went along for the fun of it really, just things to do with mates, didn’t really pay too much attention about God or any of that kind of thing.” Many participants, like Nathan, first attended a church with fairly low expectations. Thus, when they encountered something that was deeply meaningful to them, it came as a shock. One surprising experience for some participants was the discovery of community at church. The Christian community, whether a youth group or church congregation, provided several key moments of match for many participants. Their new experience of Christian community felt or functioned like a family, a place where they could build close relationships of mutual care and support. The youth group or church also provided de facto parental figures (in the form of a youth pastor or youth worker) to those who had lacked such care in their biological families. Others described a community of inclusivity, warmth, and sanctuary.

Helen¹⁵ is one of six children in her blended family. Her father passed away due to suicide when she was young, and her mother remarried. She described feeling different to her siblings, noting that she felt like the “nerdy overachiever in a family of ... very thin, very makeup-clad beauty therapists.” Church

¹⁵ All names of participants have been changed to pseudonyms for privacy reasons.

provided a new sense of family for Helen. Early spiritual experiences developed into a deeply intimate relationship with God as Father. A key group of peers at church, both male and female, grew to care for and understand Helen. She notes that this combination of connection to God and these friends “has absolutely been key in solidifying my faith.” Yet Helen did not go to church looking for a family. She was almost there by accident, invited along by her friend following a funeral that had been held in the church auditorium that afternoon.

Six other participants told similar stories, describing the ways in which their relationships at church deepened and provided a new feeling of family. Key for many of these participants was the *contrast* they noticed between their biological families and their church family. Anna loved how youth group was a place with a strong family feel, within which people were welcoming, loving, and accepting of difference. She also began hearing about how God was a loving father, which she initially found difficult to understand. Anna notes that this was because “growing up, my father was quite abusive and not a very nice man to me, so, the idea of having a loving father was kind of weird.” God’s nature as a loving father was a key point of match for those who described family as a significant factor in their early experience of church. In addition, some participants found this need met in a more concrete form. For example, when asked why he thought his youth group was a place where he “felt at home,” Nathan said that “because I didn’t really have a father figure ... my youth pastor, he pretty much became my father figure.” Nathan’s own father had left when he was younger, and he grew to deeply admire his youth pastor and appreciate his care.

Some participants contrasted the sort of mutual care they observed occurring at church with their experiences of other social environments, generally at school, where there was less concern for the wellbeing of others. Kylie described how when she first attended an evening service at which her youth leader was to be baptised, she was impressed by the level of mutual support and love that she saw. This sense of mutual care and community was one of the things she admired most about church when she first began attending:

At school I think I was seeing people ... always like, friends one minute, then they were talking behind each other’s backs. [Yet at church] ... I saw people who were just genuine and actually just all cared about each other and if someone was going through something they might not even have known them, but they’d go and talk to them and either pray for them or help them. I think I saw that and was like, “I want to be like that.”

Similarly, Martin noted that he was surprised by how kindly people at his church spoke to one another and to him, in contrast to his school where he felt as though he was always “just waiting for someone to mock [me] about something.” For these participants, being included and not bullied at youth group and church was both a contrast and a surprise. In a more extreme example of this, Rewai noted that, early on in his faith journey, he often came to church stoned, expecting to be kicked out. Yet, this was not what occurred, which took him by surprise:

I was turning up stoned to church, and they weren’t like, “Bro, you can’t be here, go home.” They were like, “What are you stoned for man? Far out! All good man, come on.” And they were like all

good, cool. Where I thought I was going to be condemned by these guys, I thought they would look at me like.... But yeah, it was real authentic. Like no place that I had been before.

Rewai described this acceptance as “authentic,” seeing at church a genuine kindness which surprised him.

These excerpts from interviews demonstrate that the Christian community provided participants with an alternative picture of how a community could function, which was often a surprise to them, and which contrasted with their experiences at home and at school. Some who grew up in difficult family environments were delighted to discover a new level of family and of fatherhood at church. While the experience of fatherhood was in some cases associated with a youth leader or other caring adult, it was also directly attributed to God by some participants. While this introduction of an alternative father figure helped participants feel more “at home” at church, it also provided a sense of emotional stability. For other participants, the ways in which their experiences of a match had a positive emotional impact were even more apparent.

FINDING A NEW WAY OF FEELING

Another group of participants described a significant change in how they felt about themselves, or others, or a personal situation. Often these experiences were deeply surprising, particularly for those individuals who may not have seriously entertained the thought of God’s existence or relevance prior to the events taking place. These experiences addressed many deep-seated emotional issues such as unforgiveness, emotional wounds, and a lack of self-worth.

Some of those I interviewed were able to view themselves in a more positive light after their encounters with God. For example, Carla described how an early message and spiritual experience at Easter Camp¹⁶ changed her self-concept. She was blown away by the notion that God would want to have a relationship with her, and, intrigued by this idea, responded to a message where this was the main theme. Yet, it really sunk in the following night at camp, when she cried at length in response to a tangible sense of God’s Spirit.

Just the act of crying for that amount of time was quite healing because afterwards I remember just feeling ... emptied out. Like I’d just gotten out a lot of that hurt.... The fact that God loved me and wanted a relationship with me ... that was such a life-changing revelation that I’d had, and that in itself had healed a lot in me because I’d realised, “Actually, someone does love me.”

Carla was carrying a deep sense of feeling unloved, a consequence of a difficult childhood. The idea that she was loved by God was a deeply healing discovery.

Some of those I interviewed felt as though their need for personal affirmation was met by Jesus. Matiu described how, throughout his teenage years, he “struggled a lot with identity, who I was, [and] where I was going.” This in turn led to depression and drug use. Traumatic experiences as a child, some of which

¹⁶ This is an annual camp held at a large campground on the northern fringe of Christchurch. In recent years as many as 4,500 young people have spent Easter weekend at this event. See <www.eastercamp.org.nz> (10 Apr, 2020).

he had suppressed, had impacted Matiu negatively, particularly those involving his father, who had been distant and abusive. However, amidst a particularly troubling flashback, Matiu heard God speak:

I started having real vivid memories and flashbacks of stuff that my father had actually done. And I remember at that moment feeling like a terrified kid, like feeling like I was helpless and hopeless and terrified.... It kind of took over my body. I cried emotionally, very emotionally for about five or ten minutes. And then I just felt an absolute calming presence, the Spirit of God, and him saying to me, "Matiu, I love you. Get baptised."¹⁷

For Matiu, these words motivated him to re-engage with his local church and eventually be baptised by the minister there. Over time his confidence improved, and he was able to distance himself from past trauma and make positive changes in his life. Matiu was eventually able to reframe his past which helped him attribute his changed circumstances and confidence to God's intervention in his life at a difficult moment.

Participants also described moments where their experiences of a match left them feeling as though difficult emotional issues had been resolved. In some cases, these were issues of depressive thoughts and self-blame that had reached heightened levels. For example, Wade described how his emotional state worsened during the last days of his grandfather's life. Wade had been particularly close with his grandfather and was feeling afraid of the impending loss, as well as blaming himself for not doing more to support his grandfather during this time. He was able to process some of these feelings through an experience at Easter Camp:

We were in this circle, and ... everyone's praying. And then one of the youth workers is just like, "You know, I just feel like something's broken in your family.... I just feel like that's taking a big toll on you, but, you know, you don't have to ... take it and blame yourself for this.... Don't put the blame on yourself, just look to God.... God's saying that ... you've got such a courageous heart, and you're such a powerful heart.... God's so proud of you." And I just bawled my eyes out, I was like, "What the heck ... like, how did you know this?"

Wade was clearly surprised by these words, which met him at a deeply emotional level. Other participants also had strong reactions to surprising spiritual experiences, to the point where they were able to forgive themselves and others for past hurts.

Caitlin's story illustrates the kind of emotional healing that involves forgiveness. On the third evening of Caitlin's first Easter Camp, she was deeply impacted by a message on forgiveness and felt that a major emotional issue she had been struggling with was laid bare. She felt a strong sense that God was calling her to forgive her father, who had left some years ago and had caused significant damage to Caitlin and her family. Caitlin acted on this immediately and left the meeting to call her father. She described this experience as feeling "uplifting ... like a big rock that I'd been holding onto and carrying around with me had just

¹⁷ This is an intriguing statement that Matiu attributes to God, in that the form it follows is one that can be seen elsewhere. Andrew Root provides three examples of moments where God spoke to individuals using a similar form, "a personal address ... followed by the naming of a decisive impingement of nothingness...leading to a promise of saving through participation in God's being through the act of ministry." Matiu's experience is particularly akin to that of Hagar (as discussed by Root) in that God redeems him from a place of desperation and isolation, and his opportunity to participate in God's being through ministry comes in the form of a command. See *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 248.

dropped or evaporated and smashed ... there was [still] little pieces, but there was not enough to weigh me down and stop me from moving forward and going on with life.” Caitlin did not say if she found this spiritual experience surprising. Yet in discussing her motives for attending Easter Camp that year, she notes that she was quite nervous about attending, and was not sure what to expect. It seems unlikely that she expected to find a resolution for her resentment towards her father.

In Caitlin’s experience, the call to forgive her father was not just about finding the power to forgive. It also forced her to consider the contrast between the person she was at the time and the person that she felt God wanted her to be. When the hurt and resentment she held towards her father was confronted, both by a message on forgiveness and with a sense that this was God’s will for her at that moment, Caitlin notes that this

wasn’t me wanting to become someone else, it was me wanting to be a better version of myself. So it was me realising that it’s not me becoming someone else, it’s me just letting go of things that were holding me back from being who I’m actually meant to be and who I am inside.

Other participants mentioned similar moments, where they felt as though they were being invited to pursue a more real, relevant, and authentic life by following Jesus. This was not necessarily something that participants had associated with the church and was often a contrast to their previously held beliefs about what a Christian life would look like.

FINDING REAL FAITH: AUTHENTICITY, MIRACLES, RELEVANCE, AND RELATABILITY

Some participants were attracted to Christian faith when they discovered just how relatable, relevant, and authentic it was for them. Often this was a contrast to previously held assumptions about Christianity, a faith perceived to be boring and irrelevant. In some cases, these insights came quite a long time after participants’ initial engagements with the church. For some, these experiences provided evidence that the Christian faith was based on something substantive. I have termed this collection of experiences “finding real faith,” as they each gave participants a glimpse of how the Christian faith contained something real. I use this term not in a starkly literal sense (as an antonym to “unreal” or “untrue,” for example) but more to describe the way in which something can begin to feel more personally relevant.¹⁸ The experiences outlined below indicate such moments, points in time where particular “facts” of the Christian faith were key factors in convincing individuals that following Jesus was valid and was something they could imagine themselves doing.

Six participants either alluded to or directly described how the concept of authenticity was an important discovery for them as they explored the Christian faith. In some cases, participants made it clear

¹⁸ Andrew Root notes that “the very experiences that become transformative to my person are those that have cause that forces me to see reality differently — they are experiences of the real.” *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 201.

that their decision to take faith seriously only occurred once they gained some sort of vision or understanding as to how following Jesus might enable them to be a more authentic version of themselves. An example is, Jeremy, who despite being raised in a secular home, attended Christian schools throughout his education. He described how his realisation that he could live an authentic, Christian life only occurred in the more intense environments of Easter Camp, and later that same year on a church mission trip. He recalled how at the camp, he began having

really good honest chats with our leaders in that camp, and basically ever since then I've just been shameless in talking to people. Like, just basically told everyone everything, everything I'd ever done, really just opened up to my close group of friends and ... God really set me free of a lot of things.

Describing the mission trip later that year, Jeremy noted how the things he was required to do as a part of the team gave him a greater exposure to an authentic Christian life:

Openly discussing biblical stuff, and having the chance just to ... [see] what it looks like to actually live a Christian life I guess, to take steps out in faith. I think that's what this trip was for me, was a massive step up in faith.... I guess a large part of that was just living in Christian community for two weeks.... Having to talk to people [I didn't know] about Jesus ... was a really big thing as well.

For Jeremy, his Christian schooling was inadequate to provide him with the kind of vision of faith he needed, and in his early teens he did not profess to follow Jesus or live according to a Christian morality. Yet the intensity and duration of Easter Camp and the church mission trip gave Jeremy the space and time to see how participating in Christian community could enable him to be more honest and more faithful.

Four participants described moments in which evidence of the miraculous met their deeply felt needs, in ways which were often highly surprising. For example, Joel reflected on an experience in which his injured ankle was healed:

That was when I knew that it wasn't so much a hoax, it was like, "Hey, this guy [Jesus] actually heals. This guy can do what he promises." ... I felt amazed. I was in a lot of shock, not like bad shock, but like, kind of amazed and shocked at the same time.

Joel had been attending youth group for some time prior to this healing and had not expressed any strong sentiment either for or against the notion of God's existence. He notes that for the most part he was there to have fun with his friends, and he displayed a level of polite openness towards what was taught, which meant he slowly became familiar with the stories and concepts present in the Bible. However, his shock in the face of the healing indicates a level of surprise about the moment when Jesus tangibly entered his reality. Joel needed Jesus to be more than just a concept before he would embrace faith on a deeper level.

Seven participants described their surprise at discovering just how relevant the Christian faith could be. Often this was a contrast to their previously held stereotypes of Christianity, generally assumed to be something boring or unnecessary. Kylie described how this view was challenged when she started attending evening services at her church:

Growing up I always thought church was ... a really strict kind of place ... elderly people who were all just sitting there, facing the front, listening to someone who's really boring, and just kind of just

zoning out.... And then I remember going and actually being ... surprised at how ... everyone was actually really just enjoying the music, listening to the sermon.... [There was a] feeling of everyone just coming together and actually ... being normal, not what I expected. I think that's what I found probably the most powerful thing.... It completely changed my perspective of church.

For Kylie, witnessing people her own age, whom she admired, enjoying and participating in the church service was a key driver in convincing her that the Christian faith could be something relevant to her as a young person.

Some of those I interviewed were surprised and encouraged when they realised that the Christian faith addressed an issue that was pertinent to them. While there were some assumptions, like Kylie's, that Christianity was dull and boring, for most it was simply a lack of understanding that faith could be so wide-reaching. Sheree was surprised that the teaching topic at youth group the first week she attended was depression and that youth leaders were offering to pray for people who were struggling with the illness. Ryan was encouraged when he realised that his moral values and those taught at youth group were so similar. Wade believed that he was too angry to fit in at church or youth group and was encouraged when his youth leaders addressed the topic of anger in a message and provided a Christian understanding of the issue. These participants often contrasted their previous assumptions about the church with the new insights about Christianity that they had learned through their engagements with church and youth group. Similarly, some participants described how hearing another person's testimony helped them understand Christianity better.

Others described a match between their own situation and something they heard in a testimony at church or youth group. This allowed these participants to see the way faith might relate to their own lives and how Christian beliefs and practices could find tangible expression. For example, Astrid mentioned growing up in a family where faith was not spoken about, and when it was, it was always constructed as a negative thing. Having spent her early childhood in Scandinavia, Astrid did not recall observing many Christians in her context practising their faith publicly. Upon migrating to New Zealand, she began attending a youth group in Christchurch. Astrid recalled appreciating the stories of how her youth leaders were expressing their faith in practical ways:

Back then, the leaders used to tell their own stories, or how they've changed or what they've learned or what God has done in their life, and I think those stories were really cool. Not only of like the very cool miracles and things that have happened but like, the small things. I can't remember any specific stories, but they were, the specific examples that the leaders gave were really cool. I guess it gave a context to put things into.

The leaders at Astrid's youth group, most of whom were only a few years older than her, provided stories and a relatable face that gave Astrid the space to imagine what faith could be like.

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS DISCOVERY

One recent piece of research regarding religion in New Zealand, the McCrindle report, documents current perspectives on the church and Christianity in New Zealand society.¹⁹ This report provides a mixed account of the public perception of the church and the Christian religion in New Zealand, with both negative and positive characteristics mentioned by the study participants. Much of this variety in responses emerges in the report's assessment of how the Christian religion is perceived as a socio-political reality, with answers given that identified New Zealanders' perceptions of how the church has handled homosexuality, or how they felt about Christian friends and workmates.²⁰ When it came to local congregations and their impact, the study findings are less positive for churches:

Kiwis know ... less when it comes to their local church, with more than one in two (56%) suggesting they don't know their local church well at all. Therefore unsurprisingly, many Kiwis (51%) take a neutral stance regarding the impact of the church in their local area, suggesting it has neither a positive or negative influence in their community.²¹

Later, the authors point out that "younger Kiwis know the least about the church in New Zealand."²² My data supports this claim. Not only do younger Kiwis appear to know very little about the church in New Zealand in general, but they also know very little about its message, its resources, and its spiritual practices. They might know that the local church runs a Wednesday night youth programme, but even this is not clearly associated with spiritual development, or indeed with any clear understanding of the mission of the local church to its community.

McCrindle Research goes on to note that "given the right circumstances and evidence, just over one in ten Kiwis (12%) would be very open ... to changing their religious views. A further two in five (42%) suggest they are somewhat or slightly open to exploring other religious views."²³ But crucial here is what follows this statement:

Kiwis are most likely to be attracted to exploring religion and spirituality further by seeing first hand people who live out a genuine faith. Three in five (59%) suggest this would either somewhat or strongly attract them to investigating religion and spirituality further. For many Kiwis, conversations with people (27%) have been the main catalyst for thinking about spiritual, religious or metaphysical things.²⁴

This suggests that for many New Zealanders, a relational connection is a crucial component in furthering any spiritual change. It also indicates that much of what might cause change in individuals is to do with what

¹⁹ McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief in New Zealand," (May, 2018), <<https://faithandbeliefstudynz.org>> (2 May, 2019).

²⁰ McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief," 6-8.

²¹ McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief," 8.

²² McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief," 48.

²³ McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief," 7.

²⁴ McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief," 7.

they observe in others. There is no sense here of active seekership or individuals on a spiritual search.²⁵ Rather, it is through seeing and hearing Christians in action that these participants suggest any real change is likely to occur.²⁶ Evidence in support of this assertion can be found in this article: in Kylie's experience, watching members of her church care for one another; in Astrid's experience, hearing her youth leaders describe how faith makes a difference in their own lives; and in Jeremy's experience, joining a team on a short-term mission trip and taking part in daily spiritual practices alongside Christian friends and mentors.

As noted above, the doctrine of prevenient grace reminds us of some important principles here, most notably the fact that it is God who always makes the first move in conversion, and that at times, in his grace, God appears to act in individual lives in particularly compelling or impacting ways.²⁷ My concept of the match, in which there is a high level of synchronicity between personal need and present experience, provides support for both these assertions. Of course, the doctrine of prevenient grace is much broader than this,²⁸ and there are certain perspectives regarding God's grace that the present project does not illuminate.²⁹ However, it would seem as though some Arminian perspectives on God's grace are also relevant here. This is particularly the case in the experiences of two participants, Maia and Wade, who for a time following their first experience of a match left the church and chose not to interact with God. Myers notes that "in the words of Arminius, all fallen human beings are 'excited, impelled, drawn and assisted by grace,' but their liberty of indifference means that 'in the very moment in which they actually assent [to grace], they possess the capability of not assenting'."³⁰ I would contend that this is a fair understanding of what occurred for Maia and Wade, in that they consciously rejected God's work in their lives for a period of time. In effect, it was not they that persevered in faith, but God, for he graciously drew them back through the situations and relationships that they found themselves in. As Field notes, describing Wesley's attempt to understand this dynamic of God's grace:

Whilst God in love and grace is persistent in seeking to draw people to Godself ... because God respects human freedom, persistent negative responses can result in the withdrawal of the influence of God's grace. God might in sovereign freedom and love continue to engage human beings who respond negatively; when they react positively God intensifies God's presence and power. Wesley's theology is here not entirely coherent in this respect – he attempts to bring together the affirmation of the reality of human liberty, God's persistent love, the reciprocal character of the relationship between grace and humanity and, at the same time, to hold up the possibility of God acting in

²⁵ As contrasted, for example, to the research of Wade Clark Roof, where he associates this kind of "seeking" after faith with those in the baby boomer generation. See *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1994).

²⁶ This theme is explored at length in Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 167–85.

²⁷ See, for example, Myers, "Prevenient Grace," 20–36.

²⁸ For example, see Field, "Methodist Theology of Prevenient Grace," 1–8.

²⁹ Such as whether this grace is resistible or not: of course, I only interviewed those who eventually "gave in" to God's grace. But I am aware that such a question is a dividing line amongst some theologians. See Myers, "Prevenient Grace," 23.

³⁰ Myers, "Prevenient Grace," 28.

surprising, new and unprecedented ways to respond even to the most resistant sinner. In the end he is confronted with the mystery of God which cannot be reduced to neat theological schemes.³¹

How and why God chose to act in this regard toward Maia and Wade is something that cannot and should not be reduced to a neat theological scheme. Rather, it is best understood as a picture of grace that inspires gratitude and worship.

While there are many possible discussion points that my theory of the match could evoke amongst Christian ministers, I wish to draw attention to the ways in which my findings point specifically to the nature of the conversion journeys of research participants, which in turn provides some possible ministry implications. While the vast majority of those I interviewed were not on an active spiritual search, particular things were nonetheless “found” by these participants as they engaged with the Christian faith. Specifically, three common discoveries were made by those who recounted experiences of a match: they found community, spiritual and emotional health, and real faith. Thus, at the very least, these three common discoveries give some indication as to what the spiritual needs of contemporary secular young people in New Zealand society might be.

Joy in discovering community is particularly relevant for those young people who experience difficulties at home or school and feel a pressing need to find a space where they feel included and loved. Sometimes this might come in the form of a father/parental figure such as a youth leader or even God. Yet it can also be a response to how the group treats the individual, with inclusive, familial communities also meeting this need in participants. The young people in this project described the discovery of a new way of feeling as well as the discovery of community as gifts that came to them through the Christian faith, solutions to something that was missing. Both the discovery of a new way of feeling, and the discovery of community, involve the meeting of an inner need, including a sense of loneliness, isolation from family, lack of self-esteem, or a significant emotional wound. Social concerns such as the search for a group, for affirmation, and feelings of loneliness, are identified by scholars as being more acutely felt during adolescence.³² Equally, psychological factors influence the individual’s relationship with God, including childhood experience of attachment. While the dynamics of how these experiences influence future spiritual interactions are contested,³³ it is possible that for some of my participants, their experiences of parental figures and family background “primed” them to be more receptive to the ministries they encountered at church and youth group.

The discovery of “real faith” (a term I am using to encompass a broad range of concepts)³⁴ indicates the value some participants placed on finding a belief system that worked, made sense, and felt personally

³¹ Field, “Methodist Theology of Preventive Grace,” 4.

³² James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 219; James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 153–54; Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 95; Daniel J. Siegel, *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2013), 72–73.

³³ Victor Counted, “The Psychology of Youth Faith Formation: A Care-Giving Faith?” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 15 (2016): 147–50.

³⁴ These are: authenticity, evidence of the miraculous, relevance, and relatability.

relevant. Here I find support for Lynne Taylor's assertion that authenticity plays a key role in the conversion process. Taylor argues that:

religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity. ... [This] was experienced in four specific ways. First, there was a yearning towards God: towards an authentic spirituality. Secondly, there was a desire to be a better person: a more authentic version of themselves. A third type of longing was expressed when remedial help was required to achieve desired authenticity. This was expressed as a yearning away from dysfunction. Fourthly, there was sometimes a further element to the desire for relational authenticity as existing intellectual frameworks were unable to fully explain one's experiences.³⁵

Although my data does not support Taylor in associating a "yearning away from dysfunction" with the search for authenticity, there is still much in the above quotation that is reflected in my research. These ideas also cohere with Andrew Root's assertion that "pulling us like a current underneath the steady lapping waves of Western history has been the movement toward authenticity."³⁶

Root demonstrates at significant length, in his *Ministry in a Secular Age* series, the growth and implications of this movement toward authenticity, particularly as it pertains to the Christian faith.³⁷ Root notes, as he both critiques and affirms this movement, that "what must be affirmed is authenticity's attention to experience.... [A]uthenticity, actually, encourages us to follow our experience, to seek the real and true in and through the experiential."³⁸ The discoveries outlined above are inescapably "experiential" in nature. They were initiated and nurtured via encounter with God and his people. This does not mean that rationality or reason were set aside during the conversion journey,³⁹ but that, as Root asserts, the path to faith (and to perceiving faith as "real and true") came via personal experience. Root also describes how this search for experience has exposed a weakness in some expressions of church:

The church has not always created space for the depth of experience itself.... With an unwillingness to speak of divine action as a real experience, the church (especially in the mainline) has too often ignored or downgraded experience itself. Charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of Christianity have fared much better in the age of authenticity because ... at their best they create space for experience — most powerfully, experiences of transcendence.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, my sample is too small to be able to provide unilateral support for Root's assertion here. Some of my participants who came from mainline churches also reported clear, and highly experiential, moments where a match occurred. However, it could simply be the case that these individuals came from mainline congregations that had allowed room for genuine talk of experience and its relevance to faith development. In any case, this research indicates that church leaders need to evaluate their practices in the

³⁵ Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 278.

³⁶ Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 5.

³⁷ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age; The Pastor in a Secular Age*.

³⁸ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 115.

³⁹ This is discussed at length in Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 253–58.

⁴⁰ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 8–9.

light of the growth of authenticity as a key theme in the Western worldview, with its accompanying commitment to experience as a genuine means of discerning value and truth.

A fresh understanding of the action of God in conversion provides insights for both theology and Christian ministry. In this article, my concept of the “match,” alongside existing ideas regarding the freedom of God and prevenient grace, reminds Christians of the importance of God’s action and independence. In turn, this relativizes any ideas believers may have about their own influence over the behaviour and choices of others. Yet this need not imply that there is nothing for us to do to support or better facilitate the activity of God in engaging with those outside the church. Clearly people today are attracted to authenticity. Equally, people in every society are helped by the presence of supportive and inclusive faith communities. In addition, this research demonstrates, implicitly at least, the importance of prayer, one thing that Christians are called to do to participate in God’s action in the world. This research demonstrates the significance of praying that those attending youth groups would find real community and deep personal relationships, and that they would encounter God in authentic experiences that connect with their real lives. And because prayer encompasses a much broader frame of reference than simple petition, even its petitionary mode is best served by careful attention to what God might be doing or saying.⁴¹ If Christians truly want to join God in ministry to the world around them, they must attend to God’s action, and this, primarily, has its beginning in the regular practice of prayer.

⁴¹ Here Root notes that “prayer has been wrongly seen as a way to continue to focus on the immanent acts of counting dollars, possessions, and followers while insuring yourself against bad luck. This is not really prayer but wishful thinking cased in religious language.” Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 276.

“RELIGION IS WHAT A MAN CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT”: THE ROLE OF MISSIONS WITHIN CHRISTIAN RECONSTRUCTIONISM

Jackson Reinhardt
Vanderbilt University, Tennessee

THESIS

In this paper, I will examine the role of missions within the Christian Reconstructionist movement. Not only will I provide an account of their missiology, but I will also summarize what Reconstructionists believe. I contend that the Christian Reconstructionist theology of missions is directly related to their desire to exercise dominion and establish a theonomy—a sociopolitical order ruled by the totality of relevant biblical law. To Reconstructionists, missional work is not merely, or *even primarily*, about conversion. Rather, the goal and function of a mission is to bring both the individual and the extra-ecclesial culture (starting from the church and working outward) into obedience to biblical law for the purpose of creating a theonomic society.

THE CHRISTIAN RECONSTRUCTIONIST PARADIGM

There has been a small, but noticeable surge in the academic analysis of the Christian Reconstruction movement. While, since the 1980s, there has been much public and editorial clamoring about the supposedly serious threat of Reconstructionism to our secular body politic—including, but not limited to, the work of Chris Hedges, Michelle Goldberg, and even evangelical writers such as Hal Lindsey—critical engagement with the theological writings of Rousas John Rushdoony, Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, et al. has been absent from the academic arena in that same timeframe. Partially beginning with Molly Worthen’s 2008 article for the journal *Church History*, “The Chalcedon Problem: Rousas John Rushdoony and the Origins of Christian Reconstructionism,” several titles from high-profile university presses have attempted to document and scrutinize the movement. Two important titles were both released in 2016; Michael J. McVicar’s biography of Rushdoony *Christian Reconstruction: R. J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*, and Julie Ingersoll’s sociological study *Building God’s Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction*.

Yet, what do Christian Reconstructionists actually believe? As mentioned, there have been various types of analyses on the movement, some emphasizing the infamous call for the re-imposition of Mosaic civil and judicial law in contemporary society (this is called *theonomy*),¹ while others point to the distinct,

¹ See Hal Lindsey, *The Road to Holocaust* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990). Lindsey makes the scandalous accusation that Reconstructionism, or what he calls “Dominionist theology,” will lead to a Nazi-esque theocracy.

politically libertarian understanding of postmillennialism.² Ingersoll defines Christian Reconstruction as possessing three distinct theological positions: presuppositional epistemology, theonomy, and a postmillennial eschatology.³ Even in the highly factious debates of Reconstruction, this trifold understanding appears to encapsulate the theological positions of the major figures and institutions of the movement.

Presuppositionalism, a radically biblicist epistemology developed by Presbyterian meta-theologian⁴ Cornelius Van Til,⁵ contends that all reasoning begins from particular normative premises. The most foundational of all premises is that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God, which must ground all of our thoughts and actions. The fall, starting from Adam on, has corrupted all human beings, including their *noetic* functions, and via God's grace are we able to think properly, so as to glorify "Him."⁶ Those who reject God's grace, willingly or not, have defective mental functions⁷ and thus cannot *truly* know anything. All reasoning, to Van Til, is *circular* reasoning: "the starting point, method, and conclusion are always involved in one another."⁸ Thus, the truth claims of the Bible can be adequately derived from the text itself, most importantly its assertions about being completely "God breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16).⁹ To the philosopher, Reformed, biblical Christianity is the most consistent presuppositional worldview for it brings every thought into obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). To presuppose our thinking means, as per Van Til protégé John Frame, "we must regard [God's] revealed truth as more important and more certain than any other, and find in it the norms or criteria that all other knowledge must meet."¹⁰ Atheism, Roman Catholicism, and even evangelical Arminianism are all faulty for they are epistemically disobedient— they place man (the

² See Michael J. McVicar, "The Libertarian Theocrats: The Long, Strange History of R.J. Rushdoony and Christian Reconstructionism," *The Public Eye* (Fall 2007), 3-10.

³ While Ingersoll claims there are only "two key aspects of Christian Reconstruction" this is because she differentiates between the theological and the sociocultural. For her, theonomy is Reconstructionist appropriation and application of presuppositionalism out of theology. I find this implicit distinction unnecessary: to the Reconstructionists, I believe, conceptualizing theonomy is just as theological as utilizing presuppositional reasoning when debating another a/theist. Julie J. Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9.

⁴ I use this term "meta-theologian" to demarcate the type of theology Van Til engaged with (theological prolegomena, the proper method by which theology can be *done*) and not as a label for his influential status within the Reconstructionist movement.

⁵ It must be noted that, while Van Til did write several articles for the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, provided many of the core theoretical conceptualizations of the movement, and served as mentor and/or teacher to the movement's founders, he did not consider himself a Reconstructionist and generally avoided the controversies it brought. See John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 217-219.

⁶ The Bible is thus an instrument of God's grace in the transformation of our minds (Rom. 12:2).

⁷ Epistemically, not psychologically or biologically. Although, there are many grim stories of a pleasant Van Till visiting scholars of different Christian traditions and, in the midst of a happy conversation, assured the latter of their eventual damnation. Van Til firmly believed that those who did not properly follow his epistemology, which he claimed was merely a reiteration of the epistemology of the Reformers, was depraved and hell-bound.

⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing co., 1976), 62.

⁹ Yet, Van Til seems to have another means to justify his biblical epistemology: it can solve the perennial, and most important, problem in the philosophy: the one and the many. To Van Til, "the so-called problem of the one of the many receives a definite answer from the doctrine of the simplicity of God...[whom] exists in himself as a triune self-consciously active being." Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* 5, 8. This is the God who provided the Bible to humanity and thus the Bible is trustworthy to place all predicated knowledge upon it.

¹⁰ John Frame, "Cornelius Van Til," in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* edited by Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 163.

creature) above God (the creator),¹¹ believing their unregenerate creaturely knowledge is enough to reason through life. Non-Calvinist Christians, when engaged especially in apologetics, will attempt at discourse grounded in epistemic neutrality, which “assumes the essential correctness of non-Christian and non-theistic conception of reality.”¹² When the humanist or non-Reformed apologist embraces human cognition, wholly or in part, as the starting point for intellectual reflection, one is “leading away from Christian theism [which in turn] leads to the destruction of reason and science as well.”¹³ Only by presupposing the inerrant Scriptures *in all ventures* can a Christian correctly understand reality and live in obedience to God.¹⁴ There is thus no neutrality of knowledge: no individual can impartially reason to an unbiased conclusion. A scientist working with naturalist assumptions about reality, according to Van Til and his intellectual progeny, will come to a naturalistic conclusion about the facts he is examining. A Christian, working from a wholly different presuppositional system, will come to a very different conclusion.¹⁵ In light of this, the only source by which orthodox, God-centered Christians can establish a proper ethic for society—at any time in history, at any point in the world regardless of context—is the Bible *in totum*.

Theonomy is the paradigm for societal arrangement based on the above biblicist perspective. Reconstructionists, following Van Til, believe that there is a consistent duality in human behavior: between autonomy and theonomy. The autonomous man abides by his own ratiocination and other faculties in order to think, act, and behave in this world. The theonomous man follows God’s complete law as revealed in Scripture and reasons presuppositionally from there. The former is inherently disobedient to God: it casts aside the true foundation of knowledge and utilizes cognitive capacities that are corrupted by sin in order, most importantly, to determine what is right and wrong. To create a society that is biblically faithful, there can be no appeal to extrabiblical standards. To Reconstructionists, this means that the biblical laws and mandates for a political, legal, and social order are more than relevant, they are necessary to implement, lest one become disobedient. As Bahnsen puts it,

Theonomy teaches, then, that in regard to the Old Testament law, the New Covenant surpasses the Old Covenant in glory, power, and finality. The New Covenant also supersedes the Old Covenant shadows, thereby changing the application of sacrificial, purity, and "separation" principles, redefining the people of God (e.g., Matt. 21:43), and also altering the significance of the promised land (e.g., Rom. 4:13; 1 Peter 1:4)... Theonomy...teaches that we should presume that Old Testament laws continue to be morally binding in the New Testament unless they are rescinded or modified by

¹¹ I use gendered language in portions of this section because it is the exact language utilized by Van Til. I have tried to be inclusive everywhere else.

¹² Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 63.

¹³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 63.

¹⁴ “This means that in the totality picture that man must seek for himself, he must go to Scripture as the final court of appeal.” Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of Reason* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 35.

¹⁵ If a secular scientist and a Van Tillian scientist were looking at a cellular organism, for example, the latter’s conclusion would be informed by the Bible: the cell was made by God, its mechanisms which are observable are providentially ordered by God, and any notion that the cell “evolves” or “acts” (some Van Tillians, being Young Earth Creationists eschew any terminological similarities to evolutionary science) independently of God is derived from humanistic presuppositions which are disobedient to God.

further revelation. Theonomy's methodology stands squarely against that of dispensational theology which maintains that all of the Old Testament commandments should be deemed -- in advance of exegesis -- to be abrogated, unless they are repeated in the New Testament.¹⁶

The Old Testament law is still binding, to Reconstructionists, because there is no explicit indication that it has been wholly fulfilled or covenantally revoked. Bahnsen writes elsewhere that “we should presume continuity between Old and New Testament moral principles and regulations until God’s revelation tells us otherwise . . . the Old Testament law continues to offer us *an inspired and reliable model for civil justice or socio-political morality*...”¹⁷ Rushdoony makes a similar point, “The God of Scripture... [has] grace and law remain the same in every age.”¹⁸ The position of the Old Testament legal code having continual binding authority to all peoples (covenant members or not) is the source of much of Reconstructionists’ controversy in the public and ecclesial spheres. The notion of a top-down Church-led judicial system fully applying the strict codes found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy (along with any additional pre/proscriptions found in the Prophets) is understandably repulsive to many. If the theonomic system was implemented, homosexuals, adulterers, and even children who talked back to their parents would be executed by stoning. To Reconstructionists, they believe that the above discomfort with their sociopolitical ideal¹⁹ is evidence of autonomous reasoning: of course, an individual working under humanistic presuppositions would disagree with theonomy because it presents to them a social order that is totally anti-humanistic.²⁰

Living according to theonomic social ethics is not merely an isolated practice for churches or families, outside the confines of secular modernity (ala Anabaptist primitivists). Reconstructionists believe that theonomy must reign globally. As Ingersoll puts it, the goal of Reconstructionists is “a complete transformation of every aspect of culture (including, but not limited to, politics). Every aspect of culture is to be brought into conformity with Biblical law.”²¹ This is called, mostly by critics, *dominionism* or, merely, *dominion*.²² It is up to epistemically self-conscious Christians (those aware of their presuppositional reasoning) to go out and bring all life under the authority and precepts of biblical law. Unless this wide-

¹⁶ Greg Bahnsen, “What is ‘Theonomy?’” *New Horizons* (April 1994).

¹⁷ Quoted in Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 23. Emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Quoted in Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 40.

¹⁹ Some Reconstructionists would say theonomy is ideal for it has been historically implemented with great success: in ancient Israel and in 17th-century New England. Bahnsen writes that “the Puritans strove to let God’s word form their lifestyle and regulate their behavior in every sphere of human endeavor . . . The Puritans even took God’s law as their yardstick for civil laws in the new land to which they eventually came, and we have enjoyed the fruits of their godly venture in this country for three centuries now.” Quoted in Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 25-6.

²⁰ What humanistic presuppositions exactly *are* to Reconstructionists is varied, depending from author to author. Generally, having humanistic presuppositions amounts to 1) believing that human beings can truly *know* without founding one’s epistemology upon the inerrant Bible (i.e. autonomous reasoning), 2) that there is any epistemic source of agreement to facilitate discourse between believer and non-believer (i.e. epistemic neutrality) and/or 2) believing that human beings have any role in salvation (i.e. soteriological synergism). Hence, to the Reconstructionist, even a fundamentalist Wesleyan can be charged with utilizing humanistic presuppositions.

²¹ Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 12.

²² To Reconstructionists, “biblical authority is God’s authority delegated to humans, who exercise dominion under God’s law in three distinct God ordained institutions: the family, the church, and the civil government. Each of those institutions has carefully delineated and limited responsibilities. When humans decide that those institutions should serve any functions beyond the ones ordained by God, they presume the autonomy and supremacy of human reason and thus violate biblical law.” Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 41.

ranging program is undertaken, the earth will fall deeper and deeper into the evils of secularism. Yet, a Satanic-secular domination of the globe would not be everlasting, claims the Reconstructionists. While there will surely be setbacks, God, says Gary North, “promises us victory” in the offensive against autonomy and its discontents.²³

However, Reconstructionists do not argue for a quick overthrow— violent or not—of the prevailing, contemporary order. They prefer to slowly and methodically wither the current system and replace it with theonomy. Gary North writes, “Our job is not to ‘throw the rascals out’ in one glorious national election. Our job is to replace them steadily by our own competence.”²⁴ Reconstructions envision a bottom-up, grass-roots, church-led campaign at “every level of politics, economics, and institutional influence, in every region of the country—indeed every region of the world.”²⁵ In light of this vision, Reconstructionists have constructed an entire subculture for their ideas to proliferate and, hopefully, spread. Homeschooling curriculum, large tomes published at a rapid pace, missionary programs (to be discussed below), etc. Reconstructionists recognize this will be a very long process of “theonomizing” the world, one potentially spanning several generations, but they know that victory is guaranteed and thus continue constructing a lasting ecclesial, publishing, and institutional infrastructure.

Reconstructionists desire theonomy, most importantly, because they believe that adhering to the right biblical ethics, will usher in the Kingdom of God and the return of Christ. Reconstructionists are avowed postmillennialists— to them, “the Kingdom of God is a present, earthly reality and ... the second coming of Jesus will mark the culmination of the Kingdom...it is the work of Christians to restore the damage done by the Fall; to bring the blessings of the Gospel to the whole earth.”²⁶ The Reconstructionist formulation of postmillennialism is distinct from prior variations, primarily due to the emphasis on theonomy and dominion. Bahnsen writes that the millennium represents a period “which will see growth and maturation of righteousness, peace, and prosperity for Christ’s kingdom on earth (visibly represented by the church) through the gradual conversion of the world to the gospel, as well as a period for the glory and vindication of the saints in heaven.”²⁷ After this period, Jesus will return, synchronized with the “the general resurrection and general judgment at the end of the church age.”²⁸ This growth and maturation of the kingdom can only occur when the totality of the biblical gospel is being fulfilled via a theonomic social praxis. Bahnsen and other Reconstructionists emphasize the gradual conversion and dominion of the world under theonomy. Conversion is not merely a verbal affirmation that “Jesus is Lord,” or the application for church membership. The conversion truly occurs when the culture has been reformed away from the precepts and principles of secular humanism and towards a complete application of theonomy. Bahnsen notes that “it is quite clear that if the Christian is not exhorting others to obey the law of God and promoting such obedience

²³ Quoted in Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 33.

²⁴ Gary North, *Conspiracy: A Biblical View* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1986), 141.

²⁵ North, *Conspiracy: A Biblical View*, 141.

²⁶ Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 27-28.

²⁷ Greg Bahnsen, “The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism,” *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, vol. 3, no. 2, (Winter, 1976-77), 63.

²⁸ Bahnsen, “The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism,” 63.

in every way he can, then he is not fulfilling the Great Commission...²⁹ North reiterates an identical claim elsewhere, “evangelism means teaching people to obey God’s law...*evangelism means obedience*.”³⁰ Thus, the correct spread and proliferation of the gospel is of utmost importance to Reconstructionists. Without a global dominion of the church and obedience to biblical law, then the millennium has not properly begun, and Christ’s return is delayed. Correct missional activity is thus, not a soul-winning enterprise, but behavioral and cultural reformation.

RECONSTRUCTIONISM AND MISSIONS

It must be noted that R.J. Rushdoony’s career began as a Presbyterian missionary to the Shoshone and Paiute tribes in Northern Nevada. In fact, it was during this brief vocational excursus that Rushdoony began to formulate ideas that would, eventually, develop into his distinct Reconstructionist theology. In his first article ever published “Christian Missions and Indian Culture,” Rushdoony bemoans the failure of contemporary American ecclesial outreach to indigenous peoples. Missions adopted an evangelistic approach that made Christianity a non-existent cultural or social force within the reservation, “the weakness of...evangel[ism]...was and is its total neglect of the cultural problem. *It limited its works to ‘winning souls for Jesus!’*”³¹ There is “no cultural world...for [the indigenous person] to live in between baptism and burial.”³² The transformative power of the Christian faith towards building a biblical civilization is untapped when a mission cares little about what occurs beyond the church walls. Conversion becomes “an arid limbo lying between heaven and hell.”³³ Rushdoony, further, sees the church relying too much on the New Testament for worship and study— it presents a one-sided picture of the faith. Instead, “a full biblical emphasis is...paramount,” it presents the “conviction of the total depravity of human nature and failure of human history...”³⁴ Rushdoony’s early, non-Reconstructionist, experience and thinking has nonetheless shaped how future Reconstructionists leaders approached the overall failure of contemporary mission work.

In keeping with Rushdoony, Reconstructionists find modern missions to be more than just inadequate— but methodologically and epistemically flawed. Contemporary Reconstructionists, in the same vein as Rushdoony, believe the American mission is focused exclusively on “short-term activities like ‘converting souls’ and church-planting.”³⁵ In Bojidar Marinov’s *Faith for All of Life*³⁶ article “Don’t Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities,” the author lambasts the cultural anemia of contemporary

²⁹ Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1984), 477-478. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ Quoted in Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. *The Greatness of the Great Commission: Christian Enterprise in a Fallen World* (Tyler, TX: Institute of Christian Economics), x.

³¹ Rousas John Rushdoony, “Christian Missions and Indian Culture,” *The Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1 (May 1949), 9. Emphasis mine.

³² Rushdoony, “Christian Missions and Indian Culture,” 9.

³³ Rushdoony, “Christian Missions and Indian Culture,” 9.

³⁴ Rushdoony, “Christian Missions and Indian Culture,” 10.

³⁵ Bojidar Marinov, “The New Missionary,” *Faith for All of Life* (September/October 2010).

³⁶ *Faith for All of Life* is the bi-monthly publication of the Chalcedon Foundation, the Reconstructionist think-tank founded in Rushdoony in the 1970s.

missions. One missionary organization, he relates, “believe[s] that the cultural practices of a convert don't need to change according to the requirements of his new faith. Christianity, in their view, requires no change of behavior, and therefore it requires no change of culture... Christianity cannot and should not build a culture, they believe.”³⁷ This organization, to Marinov, teaches that “all that is necessary is individual salvation; that individual salvation is not supposed to nor expected to produce cultural changes.”³⁸ Marinov laments the fact that soon-to-be-missionaries are “are never instructed in a comprehensive worldview that builds a new Christian culture within the old pagan culture. They leave their churches illiterate about the biblical answers to the multitude of questions other cultures are asking.”³⁹ Marinov then explains that this entire methodology of missions is based on secular humanist principles, particularly Marxian historical materialism!⁴⁰ Peter Hammond in the piece “The Amateurization of Missions” is just as negative of the current missional scene. He calls the great majority of evangelical missionaries as “religious tourists” who travel to a location for a short amount of time, mostly for photo opportunities and a spiritual pick-me-up. To Hammond, it is an ecclesial disaster that there is a “flood of untrained, ill-disciplined, and unaccountable, lone-ranger, supposed ‘missionaries’ [pouring] into Third World countries.”⁴¹ These religious tourists have little knowledge of scripture, a weak grasp of a biblical worldview, a limited understanding of history—particularly the history of the nation they have been sent to— and a nonexistent grasp of the local languages and customs. They are “untrained, unprepared, unaccountable, and even unaware of the way the local people perceive them.”⁴² To Hammond, it is common-sense that brain surgeons should do brain surgery and engineers should build bridges, but it appears that completely untrained individuals can be trusted in spreading the gospel. This *amateurization* is derived from the ubiquitous principle that a mission is first-and-foremost a task of religious conversion and not cultural reconstruction.

Yet, it should be noted that the Reconstructionist critique of contemporary missions is frequently a strawman. Rarely, if ever, do figures like Hammond, Rushdoony, or Marinov cite an expert authority—either evangelical or not— on the proper methodology of missions. There are, instead, appeals to anecdotal evidence or usage of generalities. Truly, these critiques write as if all non-Reconstructionist missions are virtually identical.

The Reconstructionists envision missions as more than a soul-conversion, but a worldview transformation within the individual person and broader culture. As Marinov writes, “the reality is that the

³⁷ Bojidar Marinov, “Don’t Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities.” *Faith for All of Life* (July/August 2011).

³⁸ Marinov, “Don’t Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities.”

³⁹ Marinov, “Don’t Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities.”

⁴⁰ By default, modern missionaries act as if the culture without Christ contains everything it needs and is good per se, or at least morally neutral. All it needs is individual salvation and an institution for dispensing religious experience, and the missionary is there to provide it with the least repercussions on the culture itself. History thus is independent of the gospel; it runs its course no matter what the religious faith and commitments of the people in the culture. Culture becomes a product of historical forces, or material forces, or chance; faith-and specifically faith in Christ-has no bearing on it: it is only an external addendum to the culture. *This is exactly the view of materialistic determinism, and specifically Marxism. Thus, modern missions are in essence Marxist and materialist in their philosophical outlook.*

Marinov, “Don’t Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities.”

⁴¹ Peter Hammond, “The Amateurization of Missions,” *Chalcedon Report* (October 1999).

⁴² Hammond, “The Amateurization of Missions.”

individual man is not really converted unless his whole worldview is converted. If he lives in a culture hostile to his private beliefs, and if he doesn't have a comprehensive answer to all the ideological challenges, he is not a believer, *only a future apostate*.⁴³ Reconstructionists, keeping in line with Rushdoony's holistic biblical plea and hermeneutical proclivities from a theonomic perspective, see the true origin and proper practice of missions to be found, not in the New Testament, but the Hebrew Bible. "Foreign missions," Marinov writes, "originated in the Old Testament and were intended as a means to expand the culture, or rather, the civilization created by the law of God in Israel, to all the nations on the earth." Under this interpretation, missions have thus *never* been a practice whereby conversion is by "winning souls."⁴⁴ Missions, since the earliest days of Israel, have focused on bringing all, via "cultural conquest" of civilization under God's law.⁴⁵ To Reconstructionists, Jesus's Great Commission must be read under this rubric: Jesus did not explicitly overturn this method of missions, nor can he in any sense contradict what was said and done in the Old Testament.⁴⁶ To go out and make disciples is to bring the masses of the earth under biblical law.

Reconstructionists, like Marinov, thus desire to construct "covenant communities" in which one's presuppositional paradigm is strengthened in the face of malignant secularism. A Christian mission is "is first and foremost an ethical/judicial undertaking, to change the hearts, behavior, practices, habits, customs, norms, laws of a nation so that the nation submits to God."⁴⁷ Marinov calls this, as mentioned, "cultural conquest," which is best achieved by the foundation of covenant communities. These communities are an alternative cultural sphere within the broader culture, an alternative economic system and also an alternative civil jurisdiction apart from the contemporary political order. Most importantly, is the creation of an alternative educational system. Reconstructionists, since the early writings of Rushdoony, have been opposed to public schools, believing them to be epicenters of secular humanism. As Ingersoll notes, "crucial to Rushdoony's critique of public schools... [was that] no educational system or curriculum would be religiously neutral."⁴⁸ A public school without God, was in Reconstructionist reasoning, against God. To Marinov, a missionary must construct a covenant community that meets the educational needs of the congregation: "Christian homeschooling or institutional Christian schools must become the focus of the missionary's effort from the very beginning of his work with the local converts. Only when the children are safely accommodated into a system of Christian education under the control of their Christian parents can there be hope for the survival of the covenant community through the generations."⁴⁹ The covenant community is thus the locus of theonomic transformation: all the activities fall under and thus become regulated by biblical law, from the purchasing of goods, worshipping, educating children, etc. It is through covenant communities that the Christian civilization is constructed, as per Gary North, "the basis for building a [biblical] society is evangelism and missions that lead to a widespread Christian revival so that the

⁴³ Marinov, "The New Missionary."

⁴⁴ Bojidar Marinov, "The Seminary and the Death of Missions," *Faith for All of Life* (September/October 2013).

⁴⁵ Marinov, "The Seminary and the Death of Missions."

⁴⁶ Kenneth L. Gentry, "The Greatness of the Great Commission," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1981), 41-42.

⁴⁷ Marinov, "The Seminary and the Death of Missions."

⁴⁸ Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 21.

⁴⁹ Marinov, "Don't Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities."

great mass of earth's inhabitants will place themselves under Christ's protection."⁵⁰ It is within these communities that congregations and new converts are properly converted: they are brought into obedience to God's law. Marinov is blunt: "*Building a covenant community that is an alternative to the culture is the only way to evangelize the world.*"⁵¹

The covenant community is started by missionaries who build upon a Reconstructionist intellectual foundation for the coming Christian civilization. To Marinov, a missionary must have a large supply of Reconstructionist literature in order to properly evangelize and construct covenant communities. He notes that "the sheer volume and ubiquity of Christian literature [in the pre-Constantinian era] created the intellectual foundation for the future Christian civilization."⁵² Thus, the same kind of literary pervasiveness must be the case for the covenant community. A young missionary must both be well-read and establish a library for the newly converted. This library must be full of "high-quality books that help him understand the application of the gospel to every area of life."⁵³ These high-quality books are none other than "all the books of all Christian Reconstruction authors, for Christian Reconstruction has been the only movement specifically devoted to building a comprehensive biblical worldview, applied to practice in both man's life and in the life of his culture."⁵⁴ The intellectual orientation of the covenant community is thoroughly Reconstructionist, for any other literature can prepare neither the individual nor congregation to faithfully submit to the Bible. Marinov believes that contemporary seminaries, even the most evangelical examples, do not prepare the missionary well for their future vocation. Instead of teaching them Rushdoony, North, and Bahnsen, seminary courses "emphasize textual and etymological criticism, or liturgical details, or philosophical hair-splitting."⁵⁵

Yet, these covenant communities are not the be-all, end-all of a mission—they are the beginning of cultural conquest. A society cannot be properly brought under God's law in just churches or merely alternative communities. Reconstructionist Kenneth Gentry remarks that "if Christ is confined within the structure of the institutional church...then He is not Lord at all. If the sphere of his dominion does not encompass the world outside the doors of the church, then he has... [in essence] no sovereignty."⁵⁶ The Reconstructionist mission, after creating epistemically self-conscious Christians, must then go out and exercise dominion. Rushdoony writes that "man is not saved merely to enjoy heaven but to serve the Lord with all his heart, mind and being..."⁵⁷ He says that our salvation is beyond ourselves: it is for the Kingdom of God, that which humans must seek first. Evangelism thus "begins with regeneration...[and] continues with sanctification and dominion."⁵⁸ A successful Reconstructionist mission is never complete until the broader society is under dominion by biblically obedient Christians.

⁵⁰ Gary North, *Political Polytheism* (Tyler, TX: Institute of Christian Economics, 1989), 585.

⁵¹ Marinov, "Don't Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities." Emphasis mine.

⁵² Marinov, "The New Missionary."

⁵³ Marinov, "Don't Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities."

⁵⁴ Marinov, "Don't Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities."

⁵⁵ Marinov, "The Seminary and the Death of Missions."

⁵⁶ Kenneth L. Gentry, "The Greatness of the Great Commission," 37.

⁵⁷ Rousas John Rushdoony, "Evangelism and Dominion," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1981), 15.

⁵⁸ Rushdoony, "Evangelism and Dominion," 15.

While Reconstructionism has never been a visibly noticeable movement—its influence has always been indirect⁵⁹—the movement has nonetheless produced several missionary organizations and programs. Marinov has spent decades as a highly successful missionary in Bulgaria where he founded Bulgarian Reformation Ministries. He has endeavored upon an extensive translation project which includes “over 30,000 pages of Christian literature about the application of the Law of God in every area of man’s life and society.”⁶⁰ Due to his prodigious translation and missionary activity, he has expanded his ministry to “include churches across the country, missions among the minorities, a publishing house, help to Christian entrepreneurs, Biblical worldview conferences, and others.”⁶¹ Marinov has also taken his missional work into the public sphere as an active participant in the fledgling Libertarian movement in Bulgaria: he is the co-founder of “the Bulgarian Society for Individual Liberty and its first chairman.”⁶² Marinov’s Bulgarian Reformation Ministries is a near-perfect example of how Reconstructionists view their missions. He is not just focused on converting Bulgarians— as the country has a sizeable number of adherents to Bulgarian Orthodoxy— nor does he merely build churches with a Reformed theological bent. He produces literature, establishes economic support networks to covenant members, and desires to establish serious change to the current Bulgarian political order. Marinov’s entire missional goal is for covenant Christians to exercise dominion over every facet of life— from faith, to education and politics— and thus thoroughly transform culture.

Peter Hammond is another Reconstructionist missionary whose organization Frontline Fellowship is located in war-torn African nations, such as Sudan, Angola, and Mozambique. While it is much harder to establish the type of covenant community Marinov proposes in nations of intense poverty, Hammond’s organization is dedicated to bringing Africa under biblical law. For example, the process of being an accredited missionary for Frontline Fellowship is an extensive undertaking: a two-year program that includes “courses such as the Great Commission Course, Discipleship Training Course, Biblical Worldview Seminar, Muslim Evangelism Workshop, First Aid courses, and participation in many outreaches, including street evangelism, Muslim evangelism, and Bible smuggling into restricted-access countries.”⁶³ Hammond, like Marinov, has “required reading lists, written assignments, and practical tests” which are primarily derived

⁵⁹ “[The] influence [of Reconstructionism] is subtle, implicit, and hidden. It is neither consistent across, nor acknowledged by, the movement we know as conservative Protestantism, which is itself complex and composed of many smaller movements. But the popular translation of Reconstructionist ideas to the broader conservative Protestant subculture is so consistent, often even including the obscure terminology and phrasing used by the Reconstructionists, and the evidence of ties between the Reconstructionists and the early leaders of the religious right are common enough, that the influence is undeniable. Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 6. In light of this, one may ask: why care about a fringe movement, which has never garnered enough adherents to warrant demographic study? First, fringe movements can be incredibly important in moving intellectual discussion around a particular issue (Abolitionism, for example, was always a fringe movement in the Antebellum United States, but its gradual, and extensive political impact is undeniable). There has been plenty of anecdotal evidence and historical research that points to Reconstructionism’s shaping of American Religious Right political and theological discourse from the 1970s onward. Therefore, to discount Reconstructionism as unimportant because of its relative socio-intellectual seclusion, past and present, is to ignore the variety of means by which small movements historically have led to large change.

⁶⁰ Marinov, “The Seminary and the Death of Missions.”

⁶¹ Marinov, “The Seminary and the Death of Missions.”

⁶² Marinov, “The Seminary and the Death of Missions.”

⁶³ Hammond, “The Amateurization of Missions.”

from Reconstructionist literature.⁶⁴ The Frontline Fellowship thus trains missionaries who are specialized in Reconstructionist theology and application. In the midst of these beleaguered and poverty-stricken areas, Frontline Fellowship sees a sociocultural *tabula rasa* (independent of the prevailing Muslim-majority social conditions) in which institutions can be constructed along Reconstructionist lines without any serious secularist opposition. The main Christian representatives of Sudan and Angola, Frontline Fellowship hopes, are citizens of a theonomic order.

Covenant communities are also found in explicitly non-missionary ventures—at least non-missionary to a non-Reconstructionist. The history of Pastor Doug Wilson and his relationship with the town of Moscow, Idaho, demonstrates that, to Reconstructionists, missions need not be foreign: the task of having people submit to biblical law can occur within one's own backyard. While Doug Wilson is not a Reconstructionist *per se*, he nonetheless identifies as a theonomist⁶⁵ and has spoken in support of such concepts as "Libertarian Theocracy."⁶⁶ Wilson, and his main congregation Christ Church of Moscow, has "for years been planning a spiritual takeover of the town transforming both its politics and its soul."⁶⁷ Wilson has founded his own publishing house (Canon Press), a four-year liberal arts university and seminary (New Saint Andrews College), built church plants throughout the town, created a denomination centered in Moscow with almost 100 congregations worldwide (Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches) and has encouraged church members to run for the town city council. Even though the two Wilson-run congregations in Moscow "make up only about 5% of the town," the controversial pastor nonetheless believes that takeover is feasible. In one Christ-Church produced pamphlet, it clearly states Wilson's long term goal for the small Idaho college town: "Our desire is to make Moscow a Christian town... through genuine cultural engagement that provides Christian leadership in the arts, in business, in education, in politics, and in literature."⁶⁸ The Doug Wilson saga illustrates that the Reconstruction view of missions is more than merely the conversion of foreign peoples—it is a fundamental duty of the Christian to perform wherever he resides. The Christian must perform dominion over a fallen, apostate world, even if that world has a population of professing believers. Wilson has created a covenant community within Moscow, remarkably similar to the archetype founded and elaborated by Marinov.

⁶⁴ Hammond, "The Amateurization of Missions."

⁶⁵ He wrote recently on his blog that every Christian, whether they like it or not, is a theonomist: "Back in the eighties, when Christian reconstruction was a thing, people used to ask me if I was a theonomist. "Oh, no," I would say. "I hate God's law." Suppose someone were then to say, "You know what I mean," I could reply that my ironic answer revealed that all Christians were theonomic in principle. What divided them was the exegesis and application of particular passages. But God's people all agree that we should do whatever God requires us to do. The debate is over what He has in fact required of us. *So in a certain sense, theonomy is inescapable in the same way that all societies are theocratic.*"

Doug Wilson, "Theonomy Is a Many-Splendored Thing," *Blog & Mablog*, January 24, 2018. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁶ Doug Wilson, "Theocratic Libertarianism," New Saint Andrews College, 15 Aug. 2018.

⁶⁷ Tracy Simmons, "Douglas Wilson's 'spiritual takeover' plan roils Idaho college town," *Religion News Service*, Nov. 5, 2019.

⁶⁸ Simmons, "Douglas Wilson's 'spiritual takeover' plan roils Idaho college town."

CONCLUSION AND CRITIQUE

In Christian Reconstruction, the purpose of missions is to bring the world into obedience to the totality of biblical law. Conversion is seen, not merely as affirmation, but submission. Church-building is replaced by the construction of covenant communities, which direct their energies beyond evangelizing people and towards changing society, culture, and the political status quo. In other words, to be a missionary is to be a steward for dominion.

Yet, does Christian Reconstruction have it right? Is the proper, biblical means of missionary work a slow, institutional build-up with the hopes of remaking culture into a robust theonomy? I find there to be three problems within the Reconstructionist paradigm of missions. First, it appears that Reconstructionist missiology is with little New Testament support. As Larry Poston writes, “Neither Jesus nor Paul sought to transform their external circumstances in any more than a limited, local way. In our fulfillment of the great commission, we are called first and foremost to effect internal and personal changes in individuals...”⁶⁹ Second, it appears that the New Testament authors believed that the eschaton was fast approaching and it was important to spread the gospel as quickly as possible, in opposition to the gradualist, postmillennial dominion strategy of Reconstructionism. “The end of all things is near. Therefore, be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray” says the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 4:17), and the Gospel of John states that “As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work” (9:4). While this critique may be aimed more at postmillennialism in general, I am only pointing out that the gradualism of Reconstructionism seems to have slim New Testament support also. Lastly, the Reconstructionists rarely are precise with their notions of culture and theonomy. When does a culture become a proper theonomy? Does a nation under biblical law, yet prone to criminality, violence, and insurgency, truly count as a theonomy? Is a non-voluntary Christian civilization the best means towards achieving worldwide support of biblical law? These questions, I have found, are rarely or insufficiently answered. Christian Reconstructionists are focused primarily on proselytizing their ideas first while worrying about the details later (or bicker about minute details in exhaustively long books).

While Reconstructionism is not, nor has been, a large movement, it nonetheless represents an influential segment of the broader evangelical community. It would be foolish to ignore or trivialize what Reconstructionists have said and are still saying: their ideas and actions, like in Bulgaria, Africa, and Idaho, affect and change lives in spiritual, communal, and emotional ways. The Reconstructionist missiology is an example of how impactful and international those ideas can be.

⁶⁹ Larry Poston, “Christian Reconstructionism and the Christian World Mission,” *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 23, no. 4 (October 1995), 474.

REVIEWS

Linda L. Belleville and B. J. Oropeza (Eds.), *Scripture, Texts, and Tracings in 1 Corinthians*. London: Lexington Books / Fortress Academic, 2019. (281 pp.) [ISBN: 9781978704688]

Jonathan R. Robinson

This is the first in a planned four volume series on Paul's use of scripture. This series seeks to address the lack of scholarly consensus around Paul's use of scripture. In particular, as the title of this volume alludes, the contributors seek to not only compare Paul with the scriptural texts he employs, but also within the traditions of textual variation and interpretation which had developed around the Jewish Scriptures by the first century. It contains 12 essays, selected from a 6-year long *Society of Biblical Literature* (USA) annual seminar. Almost half the chapters deal with Paul's engagement with the scriptures around covenant and law. Other chapters cover a range of themes from mystery, scriptural narrative, prophecy, baptism of the dead, and resurrection. In addition, there is an introduction by Belleville and Oropeza and an extremely helpful afterword by Christopher Stanley. The book does not attempt to address every use of scripture by Paul in 1 Corinthians but rather it addresses the more perplexing or controversial instances of scripture interpretation therein. Likewise, this review will not attempt to discuss every chapter in detail, but will attempt to give a feel for the collection by highlighting the parts that this reader found most interesting.

The essays begin with Erik Waaler, "Paul's Recontextualization of the Prophets and Other texts in 1 Corinthians 1-2" (pp. 7-28). Waaler begins with a brief methodological note that rather than "the current vocabulary of citations, quotations, allusions, and echoes" he prefers to employ "the general category of recontextualized text and specific descriptions of differences" (p. 7). Additionally, he asserts that all recontextualization inevitably implies both continuity and change with the original text. Waaler then discusses the numerous cultic "recontextualizations" in Paul's greeting (1 Cor 1:1-9). 1 Corinthians 1:2 "the name of the Lord" utilizes Joel 3:5; 1:3 "grace and peace" employs the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24-26 as developed in 2 Baruch 78:2, Sirach 50:22-24 and 1 Enoch 1:8; 3:4-9; 1 Cor 1:9 speaks of "God's faithfulness" using language from Deuteronomy 7:9 and 32:4 (texts related to Numbers 6 in Jewish tradition); and 1 Cor 1:8 employs the expression "the Day of the Lord" from OT prophetic texts (e.g. Amos 5:18-20; Isaiah 2:12). Waaler shows how these recontextualizations serve both to give a cultic feel to the beginning of Paul's letter (whether or not the letter was to be read aloud in a cultic setting) and how these scriptural uses prepare for later parts of the letter where Paul will return to those scriptures. For example, 1 Cor 10 returns to Deut 32 with its themes of "the rock" and "God's jealousy" (p. 11). This is, unfortunately, an unconvincing way for Waaler to begin, as what he describes in 1 Cor 1:1-9 are terse phrases, which are no doubt evocative uses of scriptural language, but the idea that they are uses of (a specific) scripture rather than just scriptural language cannot be demonstrated with so little data. Here I felt that Waaler's argument, ironically, would have been

better served by the more usual terminology of echoes and allusions. That said, Waaler's following discussion of Isaiah and Jeremiah is far more convincing. He clearly shows how Paul's quotations of the prophets in 1 Corinthians 1-2 operate with significant *metalepsis*. (*Metalepsis* describes how a quotation may bring not just its own words, but ideas, themes, and words from its original context into the new setting). He makes the surprising and surely significant observation that when Paul's quotations are lexically similar to the source he generally transforms the meaning of the text, but, at the same time, the verbally freer "contextualizations" are generally more consistent with the meaning of the scripture in its original context. The theological and exegetical ramifications of this insight surely need further discussion. Thus, this initial essay shows both what an exciting and rich study Paul's use of scripture can be, but also the way new approaches and terminology continue to multiply and cause confusion around this subject.

In "Paul's Mystery Thriller: The Use of Danielic Mystery in 1 Corinthians" (pp. 29-42), Benjamin Gladd argues that the frequently observed allusions to Daniel in 1 Cor 1:18-2:16 carry greater significance than is usually appreciated. He draws on earlier studies of Daniel as the source of the term "mystery", and its apocalyptic and eschatological connotations, in Second Temple Judaism. In a convincing treatment he outlines the allusive language used throughout 1 Corinthians 1-2 and then shows how Paul utilizes the Danielic concept of "mystery" to communicate both "the nature of God's revelation in the cross" and "the fulfilment of God's eschatological triumph" (pp. 33-34). Gladd also briefly discusses the use of "mystery" at Qumran, particularly in association with a wisdom polemic, and its use later in 1 Corinthians. Given the brevity of Gladd's essay (almost half the length of Waaler's) it was disappointing that more space was not given to discussion of the Qumran texts, as this would have considerably reinforced his thesis and may have illuminated further aspects of Paul's use of this conceptual sphere in 1 Corinthians. Likewise, the cursory discussion of mystery in 1 Cor 13:2; 14:2 was not convincing and undermined the force of his conclusion. It may be that with Gladd's reasoning explained, this reader would see how the word "mystery" in 1 Cor 13:2 and 14:3 functions as a "rallying cry for unity" (p. 37), but it is not presently apparent. In fact, many of the essays in the volume are much shorter than I would expect and do not seem to have been developed much beyond the manuscript for a twenty-minute presentation.

The third chapter is by Craig Keener, a most formidable scholar, who asks "Overrealized Eschatology or Lack of Eschatology in Corinth?" This is another short chapter with only nine pages of main text (pp. 43-52), but fourteen of notes and bibliography (pp. 52-66). Keener deals not so much with the text of 1 Corinthians as with the most likely background for Paul's emphasis on eschatology in 1 Corinthians. Keener shows how some strands of Hellenized Judaism had abandoned traditional Jewish eschatology under the influence of Stoic philosophy. He argues that the simpler, and therefore preferable, solution is that the Corinthian Christians simply struggled to grasp any kind of eschatology, rather than that they had overrealized it in the present.

Kathy Barrett Dawson, brings us back to the subject of scripture in "The Incestuous Man of 1 Corinthians 5, Septuagint Banishment Texts and Eating with Sinners" (pp. 67-80). This is an original and convincing argument that Paul's references to judging the offending member and to being present in the spirit (1 Cor 5:3) reflect Deuteronomy 17 and that Paul's references to the power of Jesus and destruction

(1 Cor 5:4-5) reflect the Passover instructions in Exodus 12. She shows how Jewish interpretation of these texts informed Paul's application of community banishment to the offender in 1 Corinthians 5. Following Dawson, Guy Prentis Waters takes a closer look at 1 Cor 5:13 and its Deuteronomistic background (pp. 81-98). In particular, he uses the allusion to Deuteronomy to argue for Paul's understanding of what excommunication entailed theologically for the offender, with particular reference to 1 Cor 5:5. Waters argues that in 1 Corinthians Christ is "the eschatological Passover sacrifice" (p. 86, cf. 1 Cor 5:7) and so removal from the community "entails placement under covenant curse" (p. 85) but is not necessarily final and may work as a remedial process (p.90). While Dawson and Waters largely cover the same texts, their differing approaches avoid redundancy.

Brian Rosner tackles "the apparent contradictions in Paul's dealings with the law" (p. 99) in his essay "Paul and the Law in 1 Corinthians" (pp. 99-109). This paper treats 1 Corinthians as a test case for the thesis of his larger work, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God* (NSBT 31, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013). He argues that Paul "repudiates" the law as law-code and covenant, but re-appropriates it as wisdom for Christian ethics and prophecy about Christ and the Gospel community (pp. 100, 106).

In his second essay of the volume, Erik Waaler discusses "Loyalty to Christ in 1 Corinthians and Loyalty to YHWH in Deuteronomy" (pp. 111-28). He makes the useful observation that the unity of 1 Corinthians is undergirded by "numerous Deuteronomistic covenantal references", seventy-five in all (p. 111). Unfortunately, the following figure showing their distribution (p. 112) is unclear and there is no table listing the seventy-five parallels. His following discussion of individual sections is, however, illuminating and he demonstrates how Deuteronomistic themes underlie a number of key arguments in 1 Corinthians. For example 1 Cor 6:16-17 uses *kallao* ("cleave"), clearly referencing LXX Genesis 2:24. What is less well noted is that similar cleaving language occurs in Deuteronomy in reference to God; thus Paul's language in 1 Cor 6:16-17 evokes both marriage covenant and the Deuteronomistic covenant and shows Paul "redirecting a vital element of the covenant language of [Deuteronomy] to Christ" (p. 114). Waaler shows that throughout 1 Corinthians Paul uses "covenant language lifted from Deuteronomy" and combines it with a "high Christology" in a way that (according to Waaler), "conflicts with his Jewish background" and is "highly innovative" (p.122-23).

With Linda Belleville's chapter, "Paul's Christological Use of the Exodus-Wilderness Rock Tradition in 1 Corinthians 10:4" (pp. 129-39), the book turns away from covenant and law to address some of the more unique moments in 1 Corinthians. Building on Francis Watson's suggestion that 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 is an "extended commentary on the exodus-wilderness narrative" (p. 130), Belleville explains the development of the travelling rock tradition from Exod 17:6 and Num 20:8-11, through Psalm 78:15-16 (and its translations in LXX and Targum) and Wisdom 11:4, into the mobile rock tradition found prior to Paul, in Philo and the *Liber Biblicarum Antiquitatum*, and after Paul, in rabbinic material and *Targum Onqelos* on Numbers 21. Paul's novel addition to the tradition then is to interpret the rock as Christ (1 Cor 10:4). Belleville then expands on Richard Hay's suggestion that Paul is here rereading "the Exodus narrative in the light of Christology" (p. 135) and on Oscar Cullman's suggestion that John 7:38 also alludes to this rock

tradition and that possibly Paul and the Gospel of John are drawing on a pre-existing Christian tradition of Christ as the wilderness rock (p. 136).

In chapter nine, “Prophecy in Corinth and Paul’s Use of Isaiah’s Prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:21-25” (pp.141-59), Roy Ciampa argues that Paul’s use of Isaiah 28:11-12 reflects “Paul’s missiological imperative” and “his emphasis on other-regard” (p.154).

David Stark aims to reanimate an old but now out-of-favour interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in “Baptism on Behalf of the Dead at Corinth—and in the Pentateuch?” (ch. 10, pp.161-77). For Stark, 1 Cor 15:29 “may be read as an allusion to Pentateuchal regulations for resolving corpse contamination (Lev 21:1-4; 22:4-6; Num 6:6-12; 19:11-22)” (pp. 161). This interpretation sees the baptism for the dead as ceremonial washing to address corpse impurity contracted through a burial. After a thorough discussion of arguments against and for this interpretation, Stark hones in on the coherence of such a background with Paul’s wider argument *vis-à-vis* the resurrection. How is it that the baptism for the dead would be nullified without resurrection (p. 172)? He discusses how 2 Maccabees 12 “implicitly describes . . . benefits that accrues to the living from actions they take in behalf of the dead”; that is, they avoid guilt for the sins of the dead and their care in burial is considered piety which qualifies them to be resurrected (p.173). Stark then seeks to integrate this allusion to washing for corpse impurity with Paul’s description of himself as a “dead” apostle in 1 Cor 15:30. Thus the baptism for the dead in 15:29 is a metaphor for the Corinthians’ baptism in response to the ministry of the dead apostles (pp. 174-75). Up to this point the essay had been largely convincing. Stark is right that this interpretation needs reconsidering but his last integrative move seems too convoluted when it would be so much simpler to take it literally as a reference to a ceremonial practice that in some way anticipates resurrection. If contextual factors render that unlikely then the argument may fall at that hurdle.

Chapter 11 contains an even more original thesis, David Burnett’s “A Neglected Deuteronomistic Scriptural Matrix for the nature of the Resurrection Body in 1 Corinthians 15:39-42” (pp. 187-211). Burnett starts with the critical observation that the creature list in 1 Cor 15:39-42 follows the same order and similar vocabulary as the creature list in Deuteronomy 4:15-19; this is contrary to the usual suggestion of either Genesis 1 or popular Greek cosmology (pp. 187-89). This allows Burnett to examine the Deuteronomistic concept of heavenly bodies as the gods or angels of the gentile nations (pp. 190-191) and its reception in early Jewish texts, such as Philo, Sirach and LXX Psalm 81[82] and its reception at Qumran. He then shows how this Deuteronomistic “matrix” appears to inform Paul’s rhetoric at several points in 1 Corinthians (i.e., 1 Cor 8:4-6; 10:20-21; 12:2; 15:20-28, pp. 196-200). Finally, he makes the argument that the reference to celestial bodies in 1 Corinthians 15 clarifies the nature of the resurrection body in terms of the Deuteronomistic creaturely matrix and an anticipated eschatological reversal where heavenly powers become mortal and those in Christ receive glorious heavenly (celestial) bodies themselves. Burnett thus makes a significant, original, and to my mind, compelling contribution to the understanding of the scriptural background of 1 Corinthians 15 and to Pauline theology, anthropology, and eschatology.

The final essay is B. J. Oropeza’s “Corinthians Diversity, Mythological Beliefs, and Bodily Immortality Related to the Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15)” (ch. 12, pp. 213-47). Oropeza carefully outlines the various interpretive options regarding the Corinthians denial of the resurrection as well as the ways in

which Greco-Roman belief in a “survival of the inner-self after death could nullify belief in the resurrection” (p.216). He then further explores Greco-Roman myths around bodily immortality finding that while there may have been popular belief in the (bodily) immortalization of great heroes, “the general assumption is that normal humans are not of the same status as heroes” (p. 223). Thus, the Corinthians might not see their own resurrection as a corollary of Jesus’ resurrection. Oropeza then presents the reader with a “fresh reading” of 1 Corinthians 15 to demonstrate that rather than a single viewpoint, “more than one type of denial [of the resurrection] is at stake” (p. 224). This is a thorough and convincing argument; however, it is frustrating that he does not appear to be aware of the two chapters in the volume that connect most closely with his work, namely the chapters by Keener and Burnett. This is an example of a wider issue with the volume as a whole. There is little sense of being a seminar, that the authors have been working together and engaging with each other’s ideas and wrestling with the same concerns. Perhaps most pertinently, this issue is reflected in the diversity of method, terminology, and criteria utilised between the different essays.

This book represents an important stride forward in appreciation of Paul’s use of scripture in 1 Corinthians, even as it leaves room for further investigation in a number of areas. I would expect to see engagement with many of these essays in any future commentaries on the letter. In particular the importance of Deuteronomy to 1 Corinthians, and perhaps Paul in general, suggests itself as a suitable topic for a substantial research project. There is an unevenness to the volume in terminology, method, length and thoroughness of treatment. Equally, some topics are covered repeatedly while other possible questions, e.g. Gen 2:24 in 1 Cor 6:16, are given only minimal treatment. Thus, the book presents as a snapshot-in-time of scholarly conversation rather than a cohesive reference work. As Christopher Stanley states in the afterword, “Taken together, these essays elucidate hidden resonances between the language of 1 Corinthians and the text of Scripture that show the extent to which Paul was indebted to his ancestral Scriptures even in a letter where biblical references are less apparent” (p.250).

This book is less suitable for the non-specialist as it uses biblical Greek and German without translation in the main body of the text (although the German is present mainly in the first essay). Despite this technical orientation, notes are presented at the end of each chapter, instead of more helpful footnotes. On the other hand, a subject index (including modern authors), and an ancient source index considerably facilitate the use of the volume for research. The book is an attractive hardback, well printed on thick paper in a readable font.

N.T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019. (343 pp.) [ISBN: 9781481309622]

Jonathan R. Robinson

N. T. Wright is both a respected academic and an incredibly successful popular author. He is (in)famous as a proponent of the New Perspective on Paul and as a defender of the historicity of the resurrection. This book is based on his 2018 Gifford lectures, a series of lectures on “natural theology” endowed by Adam Lord Gifford which began in 1888, and which have hosted an incredible and diverse array of theologians, philosophers, and scientists over the years. Previous Gifford lectures turned classics books include William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality*. Perhaps more pertinently, this is the first time a New Testament scholar has delivered a Gifford lecture since Rudolf Bultmann in 1954-55. Notably, Bultmann's lectures were titled *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity*.

In many ways Wright's book is the reverse of Bultmann's. Whereas Bultmann demythologised early Christianity down to an existential “kerygma” devoid of any real connection to historical events, Wright seeks to work from the historical events that Bultmann considered “myth” to arrive at a view of God rooted in the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. However, Wright's principal opponent is not Bultmann but no less than the Epicurean substructure of modernity. The book begins in chapter 1 (pp. 3-39) with an extended discussion of modernity and its Epicurean underpinnings. The philosophy of Epicurus, especially as developed by Lucretius, argued that the world was random and meaningless, death was the end of human existence, and so “all one could do was to make oneself as comfortable as possible” (p. 8). Along with this came an unbridgeable divide between our world and that of the gods who have no interest in us. For Wright the adoption of Epicurean materialism in modernity was not a logically necessary result of scientific discovery, but has been presented as if it were. Critically, modern Epicureanism differs from its ancient predecessor in terms of eschatology. Instead of the pursuit of pleasure (hence the confusing modern culinary usage of “Epicure”), modern Epicureans have developed a “myth of progress” which is “a kind of providence without God” (p. 27). As a consequence, we have developed the idea that you can be “on the right side of history”, that “progress”, whether technological or social, is both inevitable and something to be embraced, and that modern worldviews are inherently superior to ancient ones. For Wright “the resurgence of Epicureanism in the modern West has been the major contextualising factor, culturally as well as philosophically, within which the great questions have been posed and answers given” (p36). On the other hand, history, and particularly the canonical Gospels have been bracketed off from discussions of natural theology, or it has been assumed that history will disprove the truth claims of Christianity. For Wright this view is philosophically “muddled” and, of course, he intends to demonstrate how such historical work can contribute to a natural theology after all (pp.29-30). From the beginning, then, this is a book that deals with big ideas and grand sweeps of historical analysis.

In chapter 2 (pp. 41-69), Wright discusses how this Epicurean context affected New Testament study and historical constructions of Jesus. The protestant appeal to the original meaning of scripture as a way to

rejuvenate Christianity was “harnessed” by the rationalists to undermine Christianity by using history, within an epicurean framework, to show that the Gospels were mainly fictitious (p. 46). In particular, Wright argues here “that the idea of the literal and imminent ‘end of the world’ as a central belief of first-century Jews, including Jesus and his early followers, is a modern myth” (p. 47). This idea, of course, immediately undermines Christian faith because if Jesus and the early church were wrong about the end of the world, why should they be right about anything else? Wright surveys Strauss, Schweitzer, Conzelmann, Käsemann and Werner: a roll-call familiar to anyone interested in the historical-critical study of the Gospels. However, for Wright, our usual reviews of these figures totally misrepresent their aims and motivations. Wright argues these figures should not be considered to have progressed objective historical study of Jesus but were pushing their own theological and ideological agendas without any serious attempt at doing historical work. For example, Strauss was disinterested in historical facts and was presenting an idealist account of Christian faith (p.50). Likewise, Schweitzer did not “discover” that Jesus expected the imminent end of the world but brought that to the texts from his love of Wagner and Nietzsche (pp. 52-53). Meanwhile, Wright argues, British and American scholars misunderstood and misappropriated continental scholars and their philosophy, bending them to fit our historical positivist concerns (p. 67). Thus, real historical work, from which we might do natural theology, has been neglected.

The choice to do natural theology by bracketing out history, and the historical Jesus especially, is, for Wright, like playing a game of cricket on a baseball diamond or playing the violin without using a bow (p. 74). Wright does not want to play the natural theology game as it has been set up in the Gifford lectures; he wants to change the rules entirely. To do this he turns in chapter 3 (pp. 73-127) to the question of history and its neglected role in theology. This chapter is about twice as long as the other chapters in the book and at times is rather heavy going. At the same time, it reveals Wright at his most compelling: his discussion of the different uses and meanings of *history* (pp. 77-87) is lucid, enlightening, and thought provoking. Again, he argues that Epicureanism, idealism, and existentialism have often imposed themselves on our view of history. As antidote, he develops his approach of critical realism into an “epistemology of love” where one “simultaneously enters sympathetically into the life of the beloved while honouring and celebrating the vital differences between the two of them” (pp. 97-98). Wright however does not just target one side of the debate. His understanding of history requires that the Gospels are a public truth available to anyone (p. 105). History done within an epistemology of love should both defeat the arguments of sceptics and challenge believers (pp. 120-21). Within the rules of the epicurean game both sides have been getting it wrong. Not just materialist epicureans but “Dogma and piety alike need to submit . . . to the original meaning of scripture itself” (p.122). And uncovering this original meaning is the task of history.

The fourth chapter (pp. 129-152) focuses the discussion onto the terms *eschatology* and *apocalyptic*. This is with a view to critiquing the way these terms are used by authors such as Schweitzer, Bultmann and J. L. Martyn, but more critically to showing how first-century Jews and Jesus in particular understood the relationship between God and human history, heaven and earth, present and future. Again, Wright demonstrates his ability to clearly and helpfully present typologies of the various meanings and their resultant consequences given to the supposedly technical terms, eschatology and apocalyptic. As well as a

continuing critique of Bultmann's existentialist approach to early Christianity, Wright also takes time to critique J. L. Martyn whose Barthian reading of Galatians has been especially influential among many theologians. Wright's critique of Martyn is strident; he has both misread Paul and utilised only Barth's less mature thought (p.133). Positively, the key points Wright argues for are: that early Jewish and Christian writings are emphatically concerned with this world and apocalyptic language of cosmic upheaval is coded reference to political events; that the "now and not yet" approach to NT eschatology has been too easily dismissed by its critiques and is fundamentally accurate (p. 139); and the New Testament understands Jesus to embody the presence of God and to be the one who enacted the promised return of Israel's God to Zion (p. 144).

Chapter 5 (pp. 155-85) begins what Wright terms his "main argument". Here he outlines the first century Jewish worldview as Temple-cosmology, Sabbath-eschatology, and Image-anthropology. Heaven and earth are not separate because the temple forms a link between the two and draws them together. Present and future are not divided but the Sabbath brings the future of God's new creation into the present. And God is not disconnected from and unconcerned with humanity but having made humanity in God's image God works through us as God's vice-regents over creation. These biblical themes "were not so much rejected by the later church as simply not grasped" and the Epicurean worldview rendered modern scholarship unable to recover it (p. 183). Within such a Jewish world view the destruction of creation and the gulf between heaven and earth are incomprehensible. The biblical vision is not the abolition or leaving behind of the old world to go to heaven but that God's glory would fill the whole earth alongside humanity (p.172). This is Wright's big rhetorical move: Whereas the Enlightenment framing of natural theology has assumed that history undermines Christian faith by showing that Jesus wrongly anticipated the imminent end of the world; Wright employs history to show that Jesus' claims, when set in a historical biblical worldview 1) do not anticipate the destruction and end of the world and 2) reveal the assumptions of the Epicurean worldview and provide an alternative worldview with which to consider natural theology.

However, Wright is not arguing for the simple adoption of an ancient Jewish worldview. This worldview has been regenerated and redirected by the resurrection of Jesus (chapter 6, pp. 187-214). "The resurrection of Jesus is presented in the early Christian texts not as something in a series, not as a comprehensible part of a larger comprehensible whole, but as something which is what it is, means what it means, and is known as it is known, primarily within the new world which it launches" (p. 187). This is not a break with the old world but a new mode in which the world is recontextualised and reinterpreted (p. 190). The resurrection reaffirms the goodness and God-giveness of creation (p. 199). Because the resurrection is the reaffirmation and redemption of the creation "Love in creation and redemption closes the gap from God's side" and "love as the ultimate mode of human knowing reaches out in response" (p. 212). Much like Richard Hay's argument that the New Testament authors read scripture backwards in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection (p. 236), so Wright argues that the "commission to speak new-creational truth and to celebrate its foretastes in the original creation itself, will retrospectively illuminate every earlier glimpse of reality" (p. 213). Not least, this "new-creational perspective" looks back on the crucifixion of Jesus as the place where "God's creational and redemptive love might be known" (p. 214).

The final two chapters enter a very different mode. Earlier chapters (with the exception of chapter 1) were summaries of Wright's work in larger books elsewhere, albeit tailored to the current problem of natural theology. They were densely referenced, in critical conversation with philosophers and biblical scholars, and building on (without quite assuming) much of his earlier work. The remaining two chapters are far freer flowing and more constructive. In chapter 7 (pp. 217-49) Wright discusses "broken signposts" which are aspects of the natural world which, in the light of the resurrection, can be seen to point to "the truth of God and the truth of the world" (p.220). The seven signposts are "Justice, Beauty, Freedom, Truth and Power, Spirituality, and Relationships" (p. 224). When considered together these signposts point to our human "vocation", a concept which operates for Wright something like Kant's moral argument for the existence of God (pp. 220-221). What emerges in Wright's treatment of these ideas is a poignant *theologia crucis* where each of these vocational ideas appear to be frustrated and denied in the cross of Jesus, and yet in the light of the resurrection the cross becomes the fulfilment and paradigmatic interpretation of each (p. 225). Wright concludes that such a natural theology leads directly then to Christian mission, as "the signposts must come to life afresh" and "Those who discern the dawn must awaken the world" (p. 248). For me, this chapter was both the most engaging and stirring, but also the most frustratingly elliptic.

Finally, in chapter 8 (pp. 251-77) Wright ties together all his different threads. He uses the metaphor of a beautiful silver Eucharist chalice which might be seen by someone without knowledge of the Eucharist or Christianity but would still be evidently significant and meaningful even if the exact use and meaning was not discernible simply in itself. In the same way the natural world has this evident significance and beauty, but in itself cannot tell the whole or true story—it is a broken signpost. Only when viewed from the point of view of the resurrection does its full and true message become discernible (p. 261). Wright finds the traditional course of "natural theology" has missed the mark as philosophical assumptions have predetermined the "God" that nature might point us to. But in Wright's argument, "the reality in question turns out to be, not the God of 'perfect being', nor the prime mover, nor yet the ultimate architect, but the self-giving God we see revealed on the cross" (p. 274).

In *History and Eschatology* Wright demonstrates, again, that he is a scholar matched by few in his breadth and depth of learning and matched by even fewer in his ability to communicate winsomely and clearly. There were many high points in the book which have had to be omitted from this review. However, the overall book contained a flow of thought that was unwieldy and complex to the point of being convoluted. I wonder if perhaps too much was attempted in this book, even for a scholar like Wright, and a more focused study would have been more digestible and more convincing to its critics. In particular the most promising and intriguing aspects of his proposal, introduced only in the later chapters, received relatively little attention and development. Others have raised concerns about Wright's presentation of Epicureanism, his particular construction of an ancient Jewish worldview, and perhaps most tellingly his easy dismissal of centuries of Christian thought as "Platonic". Both the strength and weakness of a book like this is its dealing in such big ideas and grand sweeps. The devil is in the details, and many assertions would be open to critique at one level or another. What is so refreshing about Wright, in contrast to much in the field of biblical studies, is that he does not remain safely in the details arguing about minutia but works

to relate grand biblical themes and concepts to the prevailing philosophical and theological issues of our day.

The hardback book is well produced and free from typos. The only disappointment is the use of endnotes which, given how heavily referenced the book is, were a considerable frustration. *History and Eschatology* is essential reading for both biblical scholars and theologians. It is the sort of provocative and magisterial scholarship that has the potential to generate discussion for a long time to come—whether in agreement or opposition to its claims. This book is also a useful “catch-up” for those who have lost touch with Wright’s output, as it condenses several of his more important books into chapter length treatments. My sense is that this book would be accessible to non-academics, if they are prepared for a dense and complex work. This is not one of Wright’s highly readable popular theology books, but neither is it a fully technical work of biblical studies or theology. It will reward the reader with a great deal of food for thought and an enjoyable *tour de force* from one of our most prolific and innovative biblical scholars.

Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. (528 pp.) [ISBN: 9780198753179]

A. D. Clark-Howard

Academic interest surrounding the well-known and often misunderstood twentieth century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer has expanded and diversified over the course of the last two decades. This maturing field, now into its third generation of scholarship since Bonhoeffer’s own lifetime, has been met with an extended *Oxford Handbook* which brings together old and new voices in the Bonhoeffer world into one collection. The volume represents somewhat of an update from the previous similar type of project assembled as *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* which, while also being much shorter in length, was published in 1999. The new 32-chapter *Oxford Handbook* edited by Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler marks an opportune capstone of the twenty years of Bonhoeffer studies since then.

The *Handbook* is broken into five sections; the first three treat Bonhoeffer’s biography, doctrine, and ethical thought while the latter two examine thinking after Bonhoeffer and Bonhoeffer’s legacy. Part I, “Life and Context,” examines Bonhoeffer’s biography in a rough chronology: chapter one deals with his time as a student, chapter two in North America, chapter three his academic career, chapter four the church struggle, chapter five the conspiracy, chapter six ecumenism, chapter seven the Jews, and chapter eight his preaching. Part II, “Theology and Doctrine,” perhaps unusually, lays out Bonhoeffer’s dogmatic thought in a traditionally systematic fashion: chapter nine deals with his engagement of Scripture, chapter ten theology proper, chapter eleven Christology, chapter twelve pneumatology, chapter thirteen creation, chapter fourteen anthropology, chapter fifteen sin and salvation, chapter sixteen ecclesiology, chapter seventeen spirituality, and chapter eighteen eschatology. Part III, “Ethical and Public Thought,” explores Bonhoeffer’s ethical thinking; chapter nineteen deals with reality in *Ethics*, chapter twenty formation, chapter twenty-one

freedom and human agency, chapter twenty-two religion, chapter twenty-three politics, and chapter twenty-four pacifism. Part IV, “Thinking After Bonhoeffer,” and part V, “Studying Bonhoeffer,” together make up a smaller section and the remainder of the book, chapter twenty-five discussing Bonhoeffer and feminism, chapter twenty-six Bonhoeffer and race, chapter twenty-seven community and witness, chapter twenty-eight South African and global contexts, chapter twenty-nine modern philosophy, chapter thirty sources and texts, chapter thirty-one biographies and portraits, and finally, chapter thirty-two readings and receptions.

While a volume of this length cannot be covered in comprehensive detail within a single review, I will primarily discuss the arrangement and scope of the *Handbook* and its value for the study of Bonhoeffer. One of the strengths of the *Handbook* comes in its range of scholars and topics which both represent and contribute to the field of Bonhoeffer studies. The volume includes important and established Bonhoeffer scholars, such as Clifford Green, Victoria J. Barnett, and John W. de Gruchy, as well as younger, emerging readers of Bonhoeffer who represent a newer generation of Bonhoeffer scholarship, such as Jennifer M. McBride, Michael DeJonge, and Mawson himself. This volume also includes a decent selection of both German and English-speaking scholars. The various sections of the *Handbook* offer an effective introduction to the areas in which Bonhoeffer is most studied and offers generative opportunities. This includes his biography, dogmatic, and ethical thinking, as well as constructive Bonhoeffer research, utilising Bonhoeffer’s own thought in order to extend it into contemporary conversations, to use McBride’s phrase, resourcing contemporary issues “beyond Bonhoeffer, with Bonhoeffer” (p. 365). Indeed, constructive work with Bonhoeffer represents an exciting part of the field and it is equally stimulating to see the collection of essays arranged on this theme and the research it represents. The final section on the study, reception, and legacy of Bonhoeffer, also represents an important part of the scholarship which has developed as a subset of the field in and of itself. Given the ease of exploitation of Bonhoeffer’s story in popular culture, this is an important section both to comment on these developments as well as resource and point newer students and researchers of Bonhoeffer towards more accurate and reliable portraits of the figure.

Part II, which analyses Bonhoeffer’s dogmatic thought, represents a curious and even provocative choice in systematically arranging a thinker who, given both confessing and contextual reasons, is often seen as someone who resisted traditional systematisation and arrangement. One may easily argue that Bonhoeffer was a thinker more interested in the lived and embodied nature of Christian theology—so the argument goes—and thus represents a sort of ‘unsystematic systematician.’ This could be substantiated by the fact that Bonhoeffer himself critiqued this sort of doctrinal order in his reading of *Church Dogmatics* at various points in his life. The order and logic of the arrangement is also made difficult by the centrality of ecclesiology and Christology in Bonhoeffer’s work as well as the fragmentary nature of his shortened lifetime. However, given that Bonhoeffer is a figure whose ethical thought and life draws significant attention, this arrangement also offers a unique opportunity to analyse his theology from such a perspective as well as remaining fitting to the genre of the volume which seeks to analyse a topic methodologically. Bonhoeffer, while often occasional in his thinking was far from inconsistent, and, indeed, one can argue that he has a clear theological system at play even if this is not overtly reflected in his corpus. The

comprehensive theological loci covered within this part of the *Handbook* represent a generative way to continue reading Bonhoeffer for his contributions to contemporary systematics. Another critique may be in the relative neglect of a text as important as *Discipleship*, as well as a rather slim analysis of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Christian life in light of the entire volume. Both these points are minor criticisms that do not undermine the significance and importance of the *Handbook* for the study of Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer is a theologian and ethicist who continues to stimulate and generate interest, both at a lay and academic level. As is reflected in this text, the interpretation and legacy of Bonhoeffer, particularly in the ways he is appropriated within surprisingly diverse and at-times mutually contradictory communities, has become a figure of Bonhoeffer studies in and of itself. Because of this, the careful reading and varied opinions represented in this volume are incredibly valuable and well worth the time. For any modern student of Bonhoeffer, junior or senior, this is an indispensable text.

Mirsolav Volf. *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, TN: Abington, 2019. (384 pp.) [ISBN: 9781501861079]

A. D. Clark-Howard

Twenty-five years after his treatise on identity and reconciliation in a world witnessing ethno-religious conflicts at the end of the Cold War, Miroslav Volf has updated and revised *Exclusion and Embrace*. In Volf's own words, the new edition is not a "how-I-changed-my-mind" kind of text but rather an opportunity to both respond to the book's reception and criticism over the last two decades as well as reflect on the developments in global relations and identity politics in that time (p. 305). Indeed, as Volf analyses, recent developments in the Western world towards populism represent a dramatic shift from the unifying narrative of the late twentieth century within the breakup of Eastern Europe and the "triumph" of liberal democracy. Thus, this new edition of *Exclusion and Embrace* seeks, once again, to offer a theological proposal for reconciliation amidst identities and relationships marked by otherness as well as a chance for Volf to defend his thesis. Regarding the text itself, large tracts of the book remain more or less as they did in the first edition with the addition of a new introduction and a significant epilogue and appendix, the latter an edited version of his article, "The Trinity is Our Social Program." Alongside minor revisions to other parts of the original text, the only major change comes in the omission of the initial chapter on gender, given, according to Volf, the way this field has changed and expanded since. Given the relative ubiquity of Volf's first edition of *Exclusion and Embrace*, this review will focus more on the movements and claims within the text which have changed and been updated since 1996.

Exclusion and Embrace is broken into two parts, with its introduction ("The Resurgence of Identity") and first chapter ("The Cross, the Self, and the Other") sitting prior to these two sections. Both the first chapter and the new introduction discuss leading ways of conceiving of identity in the modern world before offering an alternative theological grounding for identity and reconciliation. Volf explores how "identity"

has exploded in the Western world in ways that are both similar and unique to the original occasion of his writing. In the decades between the two editions of *Exclusion and Embrace*, identity talk within the emergence of campaigns such as Brexit, “Make America Great Again,” and the European New Right, has turned late twentieth century expectations of a comfortably globalising world on its head. Instead, in a post-Brexit climate, international relations are marked by a deliberate shift away from the universal towards ideologies such as identitarianism within Europe and the development of ethno-centric ideologies which challenge once implicitly held Western ideals about the dignity of all people. Instead, “[t]he whole globe looks now more like Yugoslavia did on the eve of the outbreak of hostilities among its ethnic groups than like Europe when the Berlin Wall, that symbol of the bipolar world, came down and the European Union was expanding” (p. xiv). Thus, Volf contends, identity matters more than ever in regard to global relations, nationhood, and otherness. His proposal lies not in the institution of a new world order or social arrangement, but rather in a theological understanding of the social agent, more specifically an ethic of relationality defined by cruciform self-donation.

Volf’s proposal for reconciliation remains untouched from his first edition, defining his concept of embrace as “[t]he will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them ... prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity” (p. xxiii). This principle of embrace is based on an understanding of the self-donation of the Trinity in Christ. In the scandal and ‘failure’ of the cross, the incarnate Son dies for the ungodly and thereby draws enemies of God into divine communion. This scandal of cruciform love opens up the ability for those joined to the crucified one to give themselves over to the other, an idea that runs at odds with modernity’s self-reliance on rationality, control, and progression. Part one opens up this theme of embrace through exploring the themes of belonging (chapter two), exclusion (chapter three), and embrace (chapter four), grounding both his doctrine of God and doctrine of salvation within the gospel story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31). Apart from the omission of the aforementioned chapter on gender in part one, this section remains essentially the same. As he does throughout the book, Volf draws together these different theological themes through pericopical readings of biblical material, “participating in the salutary revival of “biblical theology” within the field of systematic theology” (p. 21). The Moltmannian conclusion is that just as God in Christ gives over himself to the way of the crucifixion for the sake of the world, so too must followers of him give themselves for the other.

Part two opens up the implications of cruciform embrace to examine concepts of justice (chapter five), truth (chapter six), and violence (chapter seven), with Volf doing so particularly through his understanding of eschatological non-memory and judgement. Similar to part one, the second half of the book remains mostly the same as the original text except for the most significant update to the new edition, the extended epilogue (“Two and Half Decades Later”) and the appendix, (“Trinity, Identity, and Self-Giving”). In these final chapters, Volf revisits parts of his argument and responds to its critique, particularly in his dealings with the Trinity. Such defence is not unwarranted; so-called ‘social trinitarianism’ has come under such criticism in recent decades that relational ontologies of the Trinity, and subsequent social implications, have receded into the background of theological research, Volf himself often being accused as

representing the worst excesses of this approach. While Volf is very comfortable exploring the social implications of trinitarian life, and thus makes a conscious departure from those who object to such a move, the epilogue and appendix provide a rare and important chance for him to defend his use of this doctrine of the Trinity. Volf argues that even with a clear Creator-creature ontological distinction, weak analogies between the life of God and human action are both biblically and traditionally warranted. He maintains that his critics have overstated the way he appropriates this (e.g. John 17:11; 21; 23). Volf's defence of the legitimacy of his approach is a valuable feature of the book, especially for those interested in contemporary trinitarian debates on both sides of the spectrum.

The decision to not update large parts of the text was made deliberately by Volf, yet it feels like a missed opportunity that many of the references remained contemporary only to the mid-1990s. This is especially true, for example, in the area of the theological race theory which has emerged under the likes of J. Kameron Carter and Volf's own colleague at Yale, Willie Jennings. Volf claims that he omits the original chapter in gender due to the way this field has changed and developed, yet he makes cursory claims about colonial history and appropriations of Pauline theology to uphold imperialism that could be dealt with in a more nuanced way. For example, in chapter two Volf analyses the way the church became complicit in the colonial process by arguing that Christian theology and self-understanding did not properly distance itself from its own imperial culture. More recent Black theologians, such as Carter and Jennings, demonstrate a more complicated and nuanced picture of the church's role within the formation of modern racial conditions and the theological funding of slavery and colonialism within late medievalism, the Enlightenment, and modernity. Updating and expanding *Exclusion and Embrace* gave Volf the chance to engage with such work and consider pertinent questions such as the performative effects of supersessionism and distorted doctrines of creation, but he instead remains on the surface by referencing older texts.

Two decades later it is still easy to understand the allure and argument of this text. It remains a *tour de force* among explorations of the social dimensions of systematic theology in the topics of reconciliation and identity and is a text that continues to spark the imagination of what theological study that resists the easy dichotomies of 'systematic,' 'biblical,' 'public,' and 'ethical' can look like. While one would have appreciated further wrestling with more recent work in areas such as theological race studies and the ongoing legacy of colonialism since the time of the first edition, the text still remains unavoidable in its field. For anyone interested in theological ways of conceiving of reconciliation amidst identity—lay, academic, or pastoral—the revised and updated edition of *Exclusion and Embrace* is an invaluable insight that considers what the embodiment of the extraordinary joining of the gospel entails within identity politics today.

David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2019. (222 pp.) [ISBN 9780300246223]

Stanley S. Maclean

Daegu, Republic of Korea

The American Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart raises hell against hell in his book, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*, and makes a forceful—and even delightful—case for universalism, which is about the salvation of all, including those who consciously reject the Gospel of Christ. Many Christians are open to the possibility of universal salvation, but Hart sees it not as a possibility but as a given. “Without the least hesitation and qualification,” he declares that the “universalist understanding” of the Gospel is the “only one possible” (p. 3).

From whence comes this confidence? His own recent translation of the New Testament, which is meant to be a companion to this book, and the teachings of certain Greek Fathers, Origen, Isaac of Nineveh, and Gregory of Nyssa, who taught an *apokatastasis* (restoration) of all things. He makes his case under “Four Meditations” on this theme. The first is “The Moral Meaning of *Creatio ex Nihilo*.” The notion of universal salvation is pregnant in the meaning of God’s creation. “If God is the good creator of all, he must also be the savior of all, without fail, who brings to himself all he has made” (p. 91). The term “good” is loaded for Hart. If anything God makes can be lost eternally, God cannot be called good without qualification. For this reason, “the moral destiny of creation and the moral nature of God are absolutely inseparable” (p. 69). The clue to the End is in the Beginning, and only from the end of things can we understand the purpose of creation and the God of creation. “Protology and eschatology are a single science, a single revelation disclosed in the God-man” (p. 68).

Biblical eschatology is examined in the “Second Meditation.” Christians believe of course that the doctrine of eternal damnation for the reprobate is biblical, but Hart demurs. He is correct to point out that the traditional Christian concept of hell is an inflation of the meaning of the Greek New Testament terms underlying the concept. “Gehenna” is the closest in meaning to hell, but he thinks this term stands not for a place of eternal punishment but for either annihilation or purification, and he is disposed toward the latter. “The texts of the gospels simply make no obvious claim about a place or state of endless suffering” (p. 118). And he finds no such idea in Paul’s writings

The gist of the “Third Meditation,” which is on the “Divine Image” in us, is that salvation is necessarily corporate. This is certainly true, although Western individualism has obscured this fact. Israel represented the circumscription of this corporate salvation, while the church represents its openness to all. Membership in the church though is characterized by faith in Jesus Christ, but Hart insists that if one person is saved through Christ then all persons have to be saved, even those without faith. The anthropological reason is that humankind is a worldwide web of interpersonal relations, so that the exclusion of even one person from salvation would have a detrimental effect on people in heaven, detracting from their bliss. “If anyone is in hell, I too am partly in hell” (p. 157). The more fundamental reason is Christological. Each

person “is a body within the body of humanity, which exists in its proper nature as the body of Christ” (p. 153). Therefore, “all persons must be saved, or none can be” (p. 155).

The best-known argument against universalism is the one from free will, and Hart reckons with it in his final meditation. C.S. Lewis summed up this argument in *The Great Divorce*: “there are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’” In other words, God wants us, and has enabled us, to love him *freely*, but this entails that we have the option of not loving him as well. Hell would be our choice, not God’s choice for us. Hart, though, finds this argument fatally flawed. No rational will, he contends, with a clear knowledge of God would reject God, because God represents the *summum bonum* (the highest good), and everyone naturally is seeking the good even if they are sinning against God. People can only reject God out of ignorance or mental derangement, but this means God cannot justly send people to “hell” for rejecting him. To be truly free requires “true knowledge and true sanity of mind.” (p. 177).

Universalism has always been a minority view within the Church, yet Hart is certain that this is the New Testament view. This begs the question, “what went wrong?” Not surprisingly, Hart points the finger at Augustine, since much of Catholic and Protestant theology can be traced to him or through him. Starting with the Doctor of Grace, “grim distortions of the gospel” began to take shape, he writes, partly because he was dependent on a poor Latin translation of the Bible (p. 133). This argument would be persuasive, if universalism were a dogma in the Eastern Church, which was shaped by the Greek Fathers, and not Augustine. But it is not. The doctrine of *apokatastasis* was condemned at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in A.D.553. The fundamental flaw with *apokatastasis* back then was that this eschatology (the end of things) was predicated on protology (the origin of things). And this is the fundamental flaw in Hart’s treatise. Creation, as a consequence, is drained of contingency and forced to yield to a metaphysical determinism. Indeed, in Hart’s book creation is docetic—not clearly distinct from the Creator, not clearly *ex nihilo*. “Between the creation *ex nihilo* and that of emanation,” he writes, “there really is no metaphysical difference worth noting” (p. 71).

That All Shall be Saved is a persuasive and challenging theological treatise, but one must be careful not to be seduced by the main argument within. One should be agnostic, not dogmatic, about the destiny of all free, rational creatures; and instead yearn, with God, for the salvation of all on the ground of Christ’s atonement for the sins of all.