A New Age Love Story: Worldview and Ethics in the Gospel of John

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Certain biblical books seem to be particularly helpful in providing themes for the development of a biblically based worldview. The book of Genesis, for instance, provides ample material on which to base one's answers to the basic questions of life. The affirmation of the created order as good, the significance of people as the image of God placed in creation as God's palace-temple, and the celebration of sharing in God's Sabbath rest all provide "root images" through which we look at reality. The book of Exodus presents the reader with a God who restores the created order and who liberates the poor and oppressed as he comes in glory to the tabernacle among his people. One of the

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1I want to express my appreciation to Dr. Rikki E. Watts for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I have also benefited from the discussion on my paper at the annual Canadian Evangelical Theological Association in Edmonton, Alberta, in May 2000.


The main reasons why both the creation account of Genesis and the restoration account of Exodus are suggestive in terms of developing a biblically informed worldview has to do with the fact that they deal with historical particularities, with people’s everyday struggles and celebrations. We see our lives reflected in the opening books of the canon.

The gospel of John has been a less admired candidate from which to draw in search of a holistic worldview. One might even wonder whether the Jesus who meets us on the pages of John’s gospel threatens to pull us away from the world and its historical exigencies. Is John’s gospel truly concerned with the created order and with the reestablishment of justice and mercy in God’s created world? Or, does John present us with a dualistic framework, with a worldview that ultimately is Gnostic and therefore sub-Christian? Jack T. Sanders denounces the “weakness and moral bankruptcy” of John’s gospel as follows:

Here is not a Christianity that considers that loving is the same as fulfilling the law (Paul) or that the good Samaritan parable represents a demand (Luke) to stop and render even first aid to the man who has been robbed, beaten, and left there for dead. Johannine Christianity is interested only in whether he believes. “Are you saved, brother?” the Johannine Christian asks the man bleeding to death on the side of the road. “Are you concerned about your soul?” “Do you believe that Jesus is the one who came down from God?” “If you believe, you will have eternal life,” promises the Johannine Christian, while the dying man’s blood stains the ground.  

While most will not join Sanders in his sharp judgment, the issue of John’s alleged introspection and sectarian exclusivism has not disappeared from the discussion. Any assessment of John’s gospel as a resource for a biblically based worldview must beware of the pitfall of simply combing his gospel in search for statements

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5 Cf. Ernst Käsemann, The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17, trans. Gerhard Krodel (London: SCM, 1968), 66: “In John, overcoming no longer means the conquest and transformation of everyday earthly existence, but, in agreement with his christology, separation from an earth which as such no longer belongs to Christ.”


indicating a concern for broader moral or social issues. Such a search can only end up in disappointment. One looks in vain for explicit statements on the environment, on the treatment of the economically marginalized, or on Christian involvement in politics. J. L. Houlden goes as far as to suggest that “[n]o New Testament writer has less interest in the sanctifying of ordinary life” than John.8 Is it true that John’s worldview is entirely introspective? Does he have no concern for the embodiment of the gospel in the world?9 Can we perhaps even detect traces of Gnosticism in John’s gospel?10

An approach that takes its starting point in a dualist separation between theory and practice—between theology and ethics—will indeed look in vain for explicit social or ethical applications of the doctrines set forth in the fourth gospel.11 It seems to me, however, that a biblical approach should rather be concerned with how to live out the implications of the biblical story—or, better yet, how to take one’s place within the biblical story. Recent approaches to biblical authority have emphasized the role of the biblical narrative. N. T. Wright, for instance, makes the comment, “Story authority, as Jesus knew only too well, is the authority that really works. Throw a rule book at people’s head, or offer them a list of doctrines, and they can duck or avoid it, or simply disagree and go away. Tell them a story, though, and you invite them to come into a different world; you invite them to share a world-view or better still a ‘God-view.’”12 Based on story authority, this article will argue that our failure to see the implications of John’s gospel for a Christian worldview stems from modern ways of looking at this gospel—interpretations that look for an abstract, timeless theology in John’s gospel, along with a separation between such a theology and its ethical applications. When instead we look at John’s gospel as part of God’s larger narrative of love, we find that rather than being morally bankrupt, the fourth gospel opens up a worldview that invites us to enter into the story of Israel and Jesus, and so into the new age where love is the basic ground rule—

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12N. T. Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?” Vox Evangelica 21 (1991): 22. The entire article (pp. 7-32) is helpful for our topic, as is Wright’s reworking in The New Testament and the People of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 121-44. Wright’s approach takes into account the gains of the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment naïve realist epistemology without falling into the trap of relativism.
involving human beings in God’s project of restoring and bringing to fulfilment his good creation.

Jesus and Signs

John is known as the apostle of love. Jesus’ example of foot washing (13:1-17) and his love command arising from the story of the vine and the branches (15:9-17) feature prominently in most discussions on the implications of John’s gospel for the Christian life. For our present purpose, however, it is necessary to look behind these marvellous accounts of the foot washing and the vine and the branches. It is not sufficient to take an abstract, timeless concept of love as the starting point of one’s worldview. The danger is too real that such love be restricted to the soul of the man bleeding by the side of the road. If we want to embody the story, we first need to look behind Jesus’ love command that he issues in the “book of glory” (ch. 13-20). The basis for this imperative stems, after all, from the narratives that we find in the “book of signs” (ch. 2-12). It is the book of signs that describes the arrival of the new age, as well as its rejection by the world. A biblically centred worldview, therefore, is one that bases itself not on a love command erroneously abstracted from the biblical narrative. Instead, it is necessary to do justice first to the narrative of the book of signs prior to an exploration of the book of glory. It is important, therefore, to carefully trace the story of the book of signs in order to arrive at a worldview consistent with the gospel of John.

John’s description of Jesus’ miracles as signs (σημείων) is a significant illustration of the narrative context of a Christian worldview. The word σημείων plays a threefold role in John’s gospel: (1) It has a redemptive function—the word σημείων is an indication that the new exodus, or the new age, has arrived; (2) it has a legitimating function—Jesus, by doing signs, legitimizes himself as the Christ, the Son of God, who brings about this new age; and (3) it has a parenetic function—Jesus’ signs call for trust (πίστις) in him as the Son of God.

Before illustrating how the word σημείων plays redemptive, legitimating, and parenetic functions in the gospel of John, I want to explore the Old Testament background to the word itself, as well as its threefold function there. It seems clear that the Septuagint use of the word σημείων lies at the back of John’s

13Fernando F. Segovia interestingly subdivides the book of signs and the book of glory as follows: (1) the gathering of the elect and the initial incomprehension of “the world” (John 1-3), (2) the elect on “the way” and the growing rejection of “the world” (John 4-12), (3) the farewell to the elect and the exclusion of “the world” (John 13-14), (4) the vindication of the elect and the judgment of “the world” (John 18-20). (“Peace I Leave with You; My Peace I Give to You”: Discipleship in the Fourth Gospel,” in Discipleship in the New Testament, ed. Fernando F. Segovia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 76-102).

14Although the noun πίστις does not occur in John’s gospel, the verb πιστεύω functions as a key word.
gospel. Signs played an important role when the people of Israel attained their freedom in the Exodus. The signs that Moses performed in Egypt led to freedom (redemption) for the Israelites. Thus, these signs fulfilled a redemptive function. At the same time, they legitimized Moses' as well as Yahweh's position before Pharaoh and the Israelites. Signs, therefore, played a legitimizing role. Finally, Yahweh's signs at the time of the Exodus were meant to induce trust in him as God and Saviour. Thus, signs also had a parenetic function.

Jesus' signs in the gospel of John seem to play a similar role. Here, however, the redemptive function refers not to the exodus from Egypt but to the new exodus that is taking place in Jesus. His signs "are the kind of miracles expected with the dawn of the Messianic age." Here, the legitimizing function serves to uphold Jesus as the one in whom the new age has arrived. Finally, here, the parenetic function calls on the readers of this gospel to place their trust in Jesus as the new lawgiver, both God and Moses personified, as it were (cf. 1:1; 13:34).

An analysis of the book of signs confirms the Old Testament root of the word σημείον. When Jesus changes water into wine at the wedding in Cana (2:1-11), this is his first σημείον (2:11). He changes the water of the Torah into the wine of the messianic age—the redemptive function of this sign. The sign shows...
Jesus' glory (δόξα; 2:11), and so establishes his role as the Son of God (cf. 1:14)—the legitimating function of the sign. While both Mary and the master of the banquet display typically Johannine misunderstanding, Jesus’ disciples put their trust in him (ἐπιστολογείων; 2:11)—the parenetic function of the sign.21 Thus, all three Old Testament elements of the word σημείον come to the fore in the first sign that Jesus performs.

When Jesus “cleanses” the temple (2:12-22), he symbolically puts into question the entire sacrificial system.22 The new age would no longer have merchants in the temple (Zech. 14:21). This is likely the reason for Jesus’ comment, “Stop making the house of my Father a house of trade” (2:16). Before Jesus’ arrival, the use of the temple court as a marketplace was perfectly legitimate to keep the sacrificial system going.23 Now that he has introduced the messianic age and has fulfilled Zechariah 14:21, this use of the temple court is no longer acceptable. Jesus’ temple cleansing thus plays a redemptive function.

Jesus’ anger stems from the fact that the worshippers are still buying sacrifices for the altar at the temple of bricks instead of seeing in Jesus the very presence of God (a temple of flesh) and the ultimate sacrifice.24 The Jews do not understand who he is. Even though they have just witnessed an important sign (the cleansing of the temple), they still ask Jesus to legitimize himself by means

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21 Cf. Meeks’s comment: “The prophetic aspect of the commission, the ‘signs’ which are to evoke ‘belief’ in the messenger and thus belief in the Sender, all argue strongly for a connection between John’s view of Jesus’ mission and Moses’ traditional function” (Prophet-King, 303).

22 Although I am referring to a “cleansing” of the temple, I use quotation marks to indicate that this word is not really an apt description of the meaning of Jesus’ action.

23 There is a great deal of discussion about the meaning of the temple cleansing in John. It has been interpreted in various ways:

• A protest against the confusion of religion and economics, the spiritual and the material. Apart from the fact that our passage does not mention this objection, the separation between the spiritual and the material is one that is alien to a biblical worldview.

• A protest against unfair business practices. This interpretation uses the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46) to interpret the gospel of John, which does not mention extortion.

• A protest against the exclusion of the Gentiles. The business practices in the outer court of the Gentiles would hinder their worship of Yahweh. Again, the text does not refer to this problem.

The alternative solution that I am proposing has the advantages of staying with the text itself and fitting with the fulfilment theme that runs throughout these first chapters of John.

24 Cf. 1:29, 36.
of a sign (2:18). Jesus then complies by cryptically speaking of his death and resurrection. In this way, the temple cleansing serves a legitimating function.

The end result is that the disciples, after his resurrection, believed (ἐπίστευσαν) the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken (2:22). The faith of the many bystanders (πολλοί ἐπίστευσαν), however, is so unstable that Jesus does not reciprocate it (οὐκ ἐπίστευσεν αὐτόν αὐτοῖς; 2:23-24). The parenetic function of the temple cleansing thus calls for faith in Jesus. In summary, by presenting himself as the new temple Jesus (1) signals the arrival of the redemption of the new age, (2) legitimizes himself by centering this arrival around his person, and (3) makes a parenetic appeal by calling for trust in him.

Jesus’ nighttime encounter with Nicodemus is occasioned by the σημεῖα that Jesus does (3:2). They have convinced Nicodemus that Jesus is a teacher (διδάσκαλος) from God. Jesus, however, corrects Nicodemus’ understanding of him. In doing so, he first points out to Nicodemus that the new age has dawned. In order to see or to enter the kingdom of God, one needs to be born from above; one needs to be born of “water and the Spirit” (3:5). Clearly, the latter expression evokes prophetic images of the new age. Despite his learning as a teacher (διδάσκαλος) of Israel (3:10), Nicodemus has a hard time understanding the Old Testament prophets (3:4, 9). The reason is that he does not understand how one becomes a child of God. As with the Jews in chapter 8, he still thinks that one is and remains a covenant member—a child of Abraham—by natural birth (8:33, 39). The gospel of John undermines this notion (cf. 1:13). In order to become a child of God, a covenant member, one needs to be born from above; one needs to take part in the new covenant blessings announced by the prophets. Covenant membership is not by race but by grace. Thus, Jesus’ reference to the gift of the Spirit plays a redemptive function: it signals the arrival of the new age.

Jesus is the one who introduces this new age. The dialogue leads to Jesus’ statement that he is far more than a teacher: He is the Son of Man who will be enthroned as king. Nicodemus is still in the dark (3:2). He still needs to come

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25 The same thing happens in 6:30. After Jesus has fed the five thousand, the Jews still ask Jesus for a sign so that they may put their trust in him.

26 The word ἄνωθεν can either mean “again” or “from above.” The latter is Jesus’ intended meaning (cf. 3:31; 19:11,23). This may possibly be an instance of Johannine irony—Jesus means “from above” and Nicodemus understands “again.”

27 Cf. especially Ezek. 36:24-26. For both a fuller discussion of alternative interpretations and a defense of the Old Testament background to this expression, see Carson, John, 191-96.

to an acknowledgment of Jesus’ messianic glory.29 Just as the snake was lifted up in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up (ψωμήν).30 Ironically, this glorious royal (messianic) enthronement will take place on the cross. The cross is the antitype of the pole in the desert (Num. 21:9). In the Septuagint, this pole was described as a sign (σημεῖον). The implication appears to be that John “considers the lifting up of Jesus on the cross (viz., into his glory) the σημεῖον par excellence.”31 It may be concluded that Jesus uses the conversation with Nicodemus to point him to the ultimate sign, the sign of the cross. This sign thus plays a legitimizing role: It legitimizes Jesus as the Son of Man.

Finally, the σημεῖον that bring Nicodemus to Jesus (3:2), as well as the σημεῖον of the cross, play a parenetic function. The verb πιστεύω occurs six times in 3:12-18. Jesus calls for trust in him. It is important to note that this trust is not simply intellectual assent. It is a trust that involves works that can stand the light (3:20); it is a trust that involves doing the truth (3:21).32 A worldview that wants to appeal to John’s gospel cannot ignore the broader concerns of the Christian life: For John, trust in Jesus goes hand in hand with a Christian walk of life. To sum up, again Jesus does three things: (1) he points Nicodemus to the eschatological new birth from above as the way to share in the new age—the redemptive function of the signs; (2) he presents himself as the Son of Man, whose signs (in particular the crucifixion) inaugurate this new age—the legitimating function of the signs; and (3) he calls for a trust in him that is evidenced by works that can stand the light—the parenetic function of the signs.

Why this analysis of the three opening stories of John’s book of signs? The above discussion has made clear that John’s main concern is an eschatological one: Jesus is the one who changes the water of the law into new wine of the messianic banquet, he is the one who replaces the old temple of bricks with his new temple of flesh, and he is the one who fulfils the Old Testament prophecies by bringing about a new birth from above. In short, the message of 2:1-3:21 is that

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29The gospel presents a gradual change in Nicodemus’s outlook, by way of a defense of Jesus’ right to a hearing (7:50-52) and to a royal burial of his body (19:38-42). In Jesus’ death on the cross, Nicodemus has seen the messianic (royal) glory of the Son of Man.

30The verb ὑψάω (“lift up”) also occurs in 8:28; 12:32, 34. The last passage makes clear that Jesus has crucifixion in mind.

31Severino Pancaro, The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity according to John, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, no. 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 333.

32The expression “doing the truth” (ποιεῖν τὴν ἀλήθειαν) is a Semitic expression, which indicates that a person strives to do God’s will. In John, Jesus represents the truth (14:6). Therefore, to do the truth means to live in harmony with one’s trust in Jesus (cf. Schnackenburg, St. John, 1:407).
Jesus brings new wine, a new temple, and a new birth. His signs authenticate him as the Messiah who inaugurates the new age. The signs that point toward this new age are accompanied by parenetic appeals that ask for faith and works. Jesus’ love commands in the book of glory are based on a narrative structure rooted in the Old Testament story of God’s redemption of Israel. John’s gospel asks for a worldview that invites the readers into the story of Israel as it has climaxed in the eschatological new age of Jesus.

Jesus and Sabbath Celebration

The paradigm shift introduced by the coming of Jesus implies a worldview that is celebratory in nature. To be sure, the continuity of the narrative means that celebration was already an aspect of the old age as well. Nonetheless, with the arrival of the new age, this celebration is both intensified and redirected. Celebration is no longer restricted to certain days; moreover, it now centers in the one who has introduced it. The feasts of the old age have found their meaning in Jesus. The feasts of the old age—the Sabbath in particular—play an important role in the book of signs. The healing of the paralytic takes place on the Sabbath (5:9-10, 16, 18). There are several aspects in this episode that prove problematic to the Jews: (1) the healed man carrying his mat on the Sabbath (5:8-12); (2) Jesus’ work of healing on the Sabbath (5:16-17); and (3) Jesus’ defense, appearing to make him equal with God (5:18). Jesus does not deny the Jewish accusation that he is working on the Sabbath. He defends his action on the Sabbath by saying that he does so as a son of his Father who is continuously at work maintaining his creation (5:17). As the true image of his Father, he does what he sees his Father doing (5:19). The Sabbath was a gra-

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33 Again, similar analyses could be made throughout the book of signs: Jesus as the bridegroom of the new covenant (3:27-30); Jesus as the new Israel providing living water (4:4-15); Jesus as the new temple (4:19-26); Jesus as the word of new life (4:43-54); Jesus as the new Sabbath (5:1-47); Jesus as the new manna (6:1-71); Jesus as the new water of life flowing from the new temple (7:37-39); Jesus as the new patriarch, the one greater than Abraham (8:31-59); Jesus as the light of the new creation and the new exodus (8:12; 9:1-41); Jesus as the shepherd of the one new flock (10:1-

34 Sabbath (5:1 [possibly]; 5:9-10, 16, 18; 7:22-23; 9:14, 16; 19:31); Passover (2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; 19:14); Tabernacles (7:2); Dedication (10:22). John does not appear to make a distinction between the Feast of Dedication and the other feasts, which had all been prescribed in the Old Testament. The prominence of the Sabbath amidst the other feasts is an indication that to John it was part and parcel of the Old Testament cycle of celebrations.

cious gift of God intended to make his people whole. Jesus makes the lame man healthy or whole (ἁληθινός, ἁλήθιον), fitting him for the new age as a child of God. This explains why Jesus not only works as the Father's Son on the Sabbath but why he also tells the paralytic to carry his mat. Jesus has brought the wholeness of the new Sabbath, the new age. Those who see the Son work on the Sabbath may themselves work on the Sabbath. Those who trust in the Son may work, just as the Son himself works.

Something similar is going on in the Sabbath healing of the man born blind (9:1-41). Jesus' kneading of the mud and his opening of the blind man's eyes would ordinarily constitute infractions of the Sabbath command (9:15). Also in this situation, Jesus appeals to God. Jesus is doing the works (ἐργάζεσθαι τὰ ἔργα) of the one who sent him (9:4). Jesus, after all, originates from God (9:4, 16, 33). It is only as the Son of God that Jesus is able to introduce the new Sabbath, the new age, and that he is able to work. The prophets had announced sight to the blind in the new age. Jesus' work on the Sabbath is intimately tied up with his identity as the one introducing this new age. Pancaro puts it well:

The question is not, “Can Jesus be a man of God and notwithstanding that still work on the Sabbath?” but, “As Son of God must Jesus not work also on the Sabbath?” The answer to this last question is affirmative (Jn 5,17) and it shows that, although the Sabbath is abolished, the law is fulfilled, not violated.

In chapter 5 the fact that Jesus is the Son of God is used to explain the Sabbath “work” as a “δεῖ” which is not an infraction of the Law but its fulfilment (Jn 7,21-23). In chapter 9, starting from the fact of the healing, Jn shows that Jesus is “of God” not only in the broad sense of the term (man of God) but in the strict sense (Son of God). Once this truth is reached (by inference), the reader is left to draw his own conclusion. It is the same as that stated in chapter 5 by Jn himself: as Son of God Jesus does not violate the Sabbath, he abolishes it.

Jesus has brought the dawn of the new age, of the eternal Sabbath. It is the age in which the lame and the blind find wholeness, according to the Scriptures. This implies that the Old Testament feasts, including the Sabbath, have found

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36This element is worked out in detail by J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Circumcision and Perfection: A Johannine Equation,” Evangelical Quarterly 63 (1991): 211-24. Derrett argues that circumcision was devised to make males healthy and whole (ἁλήθιον). The healing of the paralytic made him healthy and whole (ἁληθινός, ἁληθινός). If the wholeness of circumcision was congruent with the Sabbath command, then certainly the wholeness that Jesus gave the paralytic was also congruent with the Sabbath command.

37Cf. Isa. 33:23-24; 35:6; Jer. 31:8; Mic. 4:6-7; Zeph. 3:19.

38Pancaro, Law, 19-20.

39Isa. 29:18; 35:5; 42:16,18; Jer. 31:8.

40Pancaro, Law, 29-30.
their fulfilment in Jesus. They have come to their goal and end with the arrival of the new age. At the same time, a Christian worldview may affirm that the Old Testament celebrations have intensified and have been redirected. Christians celebrate Sabbath as they do the works of Jesus who sends them into the world (cf. 9:4 with 17:18). The daily work of Christians takes on an intensely celebratory character in Jesus’ new age. When Christians take their place in the story, their lives center not around Old Testament feasts but in Jesus.

Jesus and Torah

The intensification and redirection of the celebration of the feasts of the old age—including the Sabbath—is an indication that the Torah itself is no longer normative as a legal code. To be sure, apart from the Sabbath, the question of the normativity of the Torah does not explicitly come to the fore in the gospel of John. Still, Jesus’ attitude to Moses and the Torah does play an important role. This attitude appears to be in agreement with our findings thus far. The Torah is not something negative. When faced with accusations against him, Jesus appeals to the Torah. When it comes to the people’s rejection of him, he maintains that this has been foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures. Both in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and in his passion, the Scriptures come to fulfilment. It is Jesus, rather than the Jews, who can claim continuity with the Torah.

This also means that when Jesus speaks about “your law” he does not speak negatively about the law as such. Although this expression does have a “hostile connotation,” this hostility is directed not against the law itself but against those who believe that natural birth into the race of the Jews and mere possession of Torah makes people children of God. The very Jews who claim to be

41 Several scholars therefore speak of a “replacement theology”: Jesus has made the Jewish feasts obsolete in the new age (Brown, John, 411; Rodney A. Whitacre, Johannine Polemic: The Role of Tradition and Theology, SBL Dissertation Series, no. 67 [Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1982], 57; Gale A. Yee, “The Day Was the Sabbath,” The Bible Today 28 [1990]: 203).


436:45 (Isa. 54:13); 12:37-38 (Isa. 53:1); 12:40 (Isa. 6:10); 13:18 (Ps. 41:9); 15:25 (Ps. 69:4); 17:12 (Ps. 41:9).

4412:13 (Ps. 118:25); 12:15 (Zech. 9:9; Zeph. 3:15); 19:24 (Ps. 22:18); 19:28-29 (Ps. 69:21); 19:36 (Ps. 34:20); 19:37 (Zech. 12:10).

458:17; 10:34; cf. 15:25.

46Brown, John, 341.

47Whitacre rightly points to 8:56 (“your father Abraham”). Although they are physically children of Abraham, the Jews cannot rightly claim to be his descendants (8:39). In the same way, although the law has been given to the Jews, and even salvation is from the Jews (4:22), the Jews are not true followers of the law.
the guardians of Torah are the ones who fail to keep it (7:19,50-51). By attempting to kill Jesus, without even giving him a hearing, they go against Torah. As Pancaro puts it:

"We are in the presence of two different interpretations of the Law; the Law is apparently not quite the same entity for Jn and for the Jews. For the Jews the Law is against Jesus, it demands his death; for Jn it should lead to accept Jesus—to kill him is to go against the Law. "To do the Law" is to believe. To murder the one to whom the Law pointed and who came to fulfill the Law, is to go against the Law itself." 48

The point of debate between Jesus and the Jews is not about whether the Torah was God's good gift or not. There is agreement that Torah was God's gracious gift to the people of Israel.49 The point of debate concerns its function. The Jews are convinced that they derive their status as God’s people from their possession of Torah. This implies that they would still be required to obey its rules and regulations. Jesus, however, claims that it points to him, that it comes to its final destination. 50 To still try and live by its rules and regulations means to deny that it has come to its final destination.51 N. T. Wright makes the point well when he comments that the Torah was a good thing, given deliberately by God for a specific task and a particular period of time. When the task is done and the time is up, the Torah

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48Pancaro, Law, 137-38. Cf. Whitacre: “They do not keep the Law in that they do not receive Jesus” (Johannine Polemic, 34).

49John 1:17 states that “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” This should not be seen as a denial that God’s grace and truth were present in his gift of Torah. Rather, it is an assertion of the Son’s superiority over the Torah. When looking at God’s grace and truth in Jesus Christ, the Torah pales in comparison. Cf. the excellent article of Eldon Jay Epp, “Wisdom, Torah, Word: The Johannine Prologue and the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel,” in Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney Presented by His Former Students, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 128-46 (see esp. 139). W. J. Dumbrell argues—unconvincingly in my opinion—that John 1:17 does not have in mind the Torah itself but the Torah as the entire body of oral and written tradition as it functioned in the Judaism of Jesus’ day (“Law and Grace: The Nature of the Contrast in John 1:17,” Evangelical Quarterly 58 [1986]: 25-37).

50Meeks puts it well when he comments in the conclusion of his study that “one who had formerly accounted himself a ‘disciple of Moses’ would now have to decide whether he would become instead a ‘disciple of Jesus.’ If he did not, then from the viewpoint of this gospel he had in fact deserted the real Moses, for Moses only wrote of Jesus and true belief in Moses led to belief in Jesus” (Prophet-King, 319).

51Hays rightly comments, “Nowhere in John do we find any appeal to the Law as prescriptive of moral conduct; it cannot be assumed that the Torah implicitly remains normative for John’s community” (Moral Vision, 139). To be sure, the discontinuity in normative status does not deny a continuity of direction: The heart of the law (love of God and neighbor) does not change in the New Testament. The point is that the character of God is revealed more clearly in Jesus than in the Old Testament.
reaches its goal, which is also the conclusion of its intended reign, not because it was a bad thing to be abolished but because it was a good thing whose job is done... The Messiah is the fulfillment of the long purposes of Israel’s God. It was for this that Torah was given in the first place as a deliberately temporary mode of administration. In the Messiah are fulfilled the creator’s paradoxical purposes for Israel and hence for the world. He is the climax of the covenant.52

Jesus and Works

The Torah may no longer be normative as a legal code in the new age, but this does not mean that good works have become less important in the new age than they were in the old. It has become commonplace by now that neither the Old Testament nor Pharisaic Judaism were plagued by the danger of “works-righteousness” in the sense of earning one’s salvation.53 Those who reject Jesus in the gospel of John do not display any such tendencies. The problem with the Jews in John’s gospel is not that they try to earn their way into heaven; their problem is that they take Moses rather than Jesus as their foundation; thus failing to acknowledge that it was Moses himself who pointed to Jesus.

This explains why the fourth gospel does not regard as secondary the way in which we take our place in the story. Anybody who is of the opinion that to embody the story in ordinary life is not a Johannine concern will have to give a reckoning of the prominence of work terminology in this gospel.54 There is a sharp distinction between people who do their works in communion with God (ἐν τῷ θεῷ; 3:21) and those who “do the works” of their father, the devil (8:41). The latter, whose “works are evil,” do not come to the light (3:19). They belong to the world that hates Jesus because “their works are evil” (7:7). They are the Jews intent on killing Jesus, the ones who are not Abraham’s true children because they do not do Abraham’s “works” (8:39). Doing the “works of God,” on the other hand, means believing in Jesus (6:28-29). It also means working along with Jesus. The person who believes in Jesus will “do the works” that Jesus does (14:12).

By speaking of work in connection with the believers’ lives, John emphasizes the bond between these believers and Jesus. “John’s characteristic use of ἐργαίνω is for the works of Jesus. Of the twenty-seven times he uses the word, eighteen times he applies it to what Jesus has done.”55 Jesus does the Father’s works that


54John uses the noun “work” (ἐργαί) twenty-seven times, and the verb “to work” (ἐργάζομαι) eight times.

55Morris, John, 611.
he has commissioned him to do. The believers in turn do Jesus’ works that they have been commissioned to do. Jesus’ work and that of the believers are obviously not two separate entities. The new covenant community has become part of a chain that links the Father, the Son, and the believers. They therefore no longer look to the Torah to regulate their works as they try to live out Israel’s story; instead they look to Jesus, so that they can do his works. A Johannine based worldview does not have an introspective emphasis on faith as opposed to works. Johannine Christianity is certainly not “interested only in whether [a person] believes.” Works are no less important in the new age than they were in the old. Because the Son of the Father has inaugurated the new age, it is the Son whose work in living and dying constitutes the story that his disciples will follow.

Jesus and Love

To live the story of Israel and Jesus does not mean that one falls into introspection or retreats into sectarianism. John 3:16—“For God so loved the world”—is not an exception, as Fernando Segovia maintains when he says, in “Jn 3:16 one finds a relationship of love which is not mentioned elsewhere in the Gospel and is, therefore, uncharacteristic of the author’s thought.” Segovia’s view has a narrow lexicographical basis. While John may not often use the word love (ἀγάπη) to describe God’s passionate care for the world, God’s saving love is clearly present in this gospel. In many ways, it unabashedly affirms God’s passion for the fallen and rebellious world of Jews as well as Gentiles. John 3:16 finds many echoes. References to the insignificant little town of Cana bracket the story of the change from water into wine (2:1, 11). The backwaters of Galilee receive a paradoxically important role. When the Jews are trying to kill Jesus (5:18), he reacts with a love that wants to save them (5:34). A Samaritan woman figures prominently; she even becomes instrumental in bringing many other Samaritans to faith in Jesus (4:39). Greeks are getting to see Jesus (7:35; 12:20-21). By way of the nation of the Jews, Jesus reaches out also to the Gentiles (10:16; 11:51-52; 12:32).

Jesus’ love, as it reflects the Father’s own love, is not a love directed only to the Christian community. The Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world (1:29). The Samaritans acknowledge that he is the Saviour of the world (4:42).

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56Sanders, Ethics, 100.


58Cf. Mary E. Clarkson’s priceless comment: “If reminded that there is no word about mercy and forgiveness in this gospel, surely the sayings, ‘Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out,’ and ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son,’ are as comprehensive, if not as vivid and dramatic, as the parable of the Prodigal Son” (“Ethics,” 114-15).

59See especially 4:45; 7:41, 52.
Indeed, he is the light of the world (8:12; 9:5; cf. 12:46) who did not come to judge the world but to save it (3:17; 12:47). As Herman Ridderbos comments, John 3:17

looks at everything from the viewpoint of the mission of the Son and of the descent of the Son of Man from heaven. That descent has no other purpose—as is often repeated in the Gospel (cf. 12:47; 8:15)—than to open a way, in him, for faith and to save the world.  

This world is the very world that is in rebellion against God. At times, the Jews who oppose Jesus are identified as the world.  

Although the Father and the Son love the unbelieving world, their love is not restricted to it. The Father loves people who love the Son and keep his commandments (14:21, 23). The Son loves his disciples to the end (13:1). This love of the Father and of the Son for the believers is a reflection of the love between the Father and the Son. The believers are commanded to image the love of the Father and of the Son. The Son obeys the Father, and the believers are to reflect this obedience. The word command (ἐντέλλω/ἐντολή)—interestingly never used by John in connection with the Torah—is used both with regard to the believers’ love for the Son and with regard to their love for each other.

This love among the believers is based on Jesus’ own sacrificial love. In chapter 13, the foot washing is an example (ὑποδείγμα) to the disciples (13:15). They are to wash each other’s feet. Culpepper has shown that the foot washing is not simply a moral example but that it “functions metaphorically and proleptically in relation to Jesus’ death. It clarifies in advance the meaning of Jesus’ death.”

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61Ridderbos, Johannes, 1:165 (my translation, HB).
62When Jesus says that the “world” hates him (7:7), he is speaking of the Jews in Jerusalem—the “world” to which his brothers want him to show himself (7:4).
63Carson, John, 123.
64Cf. 11:3, 5; 13:23, 34; 14:21; 15:9, 10, 12; 17:26; 19:26; 20:2.
6813:34; 14:15, 21; 15:10, 12, 14, 17.
69R. Alan Culpepper, “The Johannine Hypodeigma: A Reading of John 13,” Semeia 53 (1991): 139. Cf. Brown, John, 558-78. Brown discusses eight different interpretations, opting for the foot washing as a symbol for Jesus’ death, although allowing for baptismal symbolism as a secondary interpretation. This passage alludes to Jesus’ death in various ways: (1) 13:1, 3 mention that the hour has come to return to the Father; (2) Jesus “lays down” (τίθημι) his clothing and “takes them up again” (ἐλαβέν ... πάλιν; 13:4, 12), just as he will “lay down” his life and “take it up again” (10:17-18); (3) the foot washing episode can only be understood after Jesus’ death and resurrection (13:7); and (4) the foot washing is necessary if one is to have part with Jesus (13:8).
This means that Jesus’ own death, “interpreted through the foot washing, is the norm of life and conduct for the believing community.”\textsuperscript{71} Jesus will show his love for the disciples in his death. They are to demonstrate this same love for each other (13:34-35; 15:12). In other words, as the disciples embark on their journey in the new age, they are to become part of the story of Israel as it climaxes in the life and death of Jesus. The newness of Jesus’ love command lies in his grounding of the commandment in his own love as he displays it in his death (13:34; cf. 1 John 2:8). Thus, Jesus commands his disciples to love each other “just as” (καθὼς—cf. 13:15; 15:9, 12; 17:11, 23) he has loved them.\textsuperscript{72} Even if Barbara Bowe’s conclusion is an overstatement, her comment illustrates the dramatic, radical nature of this commandment: “The one who is Lord and master becomes the servant of all, by that reordering, even abolishing, of all distinctions of power and privilege.”\textsuperscript{73} At the heart of a worldview that stands in continuity with the gospel of John lies the same self-sacrificial love as displayed in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

\section*{Conclusion}

What is the worldview that John’s gospel invites us to share? It is not a worldview that is sectarian and introspective in character. Jack Sanders’ description of the Johannine worldview as characterized by “weakness and moral bankruptcy” is wide off the mark. Instead, John’s gospel makes some significant contributions to a Christian worldview. John presents the story of Jesus as the culmination of Israel’s story. Israel’s eschatological new age has arrived in Jesus. This means that John does not hold to an abstract ethic of love. Instead, the readers are invited to join in the festivities of the new age by observing Jesus’ signs. By noting the lack of explicit lifestyle issues and concluding that John has no concern for a Christian walk of life, one fails to understand the narrative logic of this gospel. John does not give us some kind of abstract “ethic.” Instead, he asks us to “turn with new earnestness from the application of Scripture to the performance of Scripture.”\textsuperscript{74} By celebrating the transition from the old age to the new, John leads his readers to see that the Torah has lost its role as the ground rule for Israel’s walk of life. Along with the other Old Testament feasts,

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{71}Culpepper, “Johannine Hypodeigma,” 144.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{72}Cf. Pryor, John, 163. The love command already lay at the heart of the Torah (Lev. 19:18). Although it is true that the new age makes love possible, John gives no indication that this is why he calls it new (pace Brown, John, 614; Furnish, Love Command, 138; Ridderbos, Johannes, 2:122).}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{73}Barbara E. Bowe, “John 13 and Christian Service,” The Bible Today 32 (1994): 225.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{74}Rodney Clapp, A Peculiar People The Church As Culture in a Post-Christian Society (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 137. Clapp pleads for a Christian discipleship that is based on the “model of apprenticeship” rather than the “model of the how-to manual.” He concludes, “scripture is genuinely respected and obeyed only in community. And so it is that Scripture really has authority only when it is performed and not merely applied” (Ibid., 139).}
the Sabbath has been intensified and redirected in Jesus. Participation in the new age love story means adopting a celebratory worldview and so partaking in God’s restoration of the created order.

Every indication is that the celebratory character of such a worldview does not make the Christian inward looking. A Johannine perspective does not allow for an introspective concern with faith as opposed to works. Works remain important, both for Jesus and for his followers. The fulfilment of Torah does not leave Christians without commandments. Jesus gives his followers the new commandment of love, as it is based on the example of his self-sacrificial death. This sacrificial love ultimately stems from God’s own love for the world, which is a central concern in this gospel. It is true that John does not show us a man “bleeding to death on the side of the road”; but all indications are that John would be appalled by Christians’ bypassing such a person. Love among Christians does not exclude love for others. As Furnish rightly concludes, “[L]ove for ‘one another’ is neither a softening nor a repudiation of the command to love the neighbor, but a special and indeed urgent form of it.”

Why do we tend to find it so difficult to see the relevance of John’s gospel for a Christian worldview? I suggest that the reason is that we have read his gospel for too long as though it were stamped with otherworldly—perhaps even Gnostic—concerns. John, however, is not interested in abstract, timeless theologizing; neither is he interested in ethics understood as the practical application of such theorizing. Once we take off our modern lenses, we may regain an eye for the narrative logic of this gospel, and we may consider ourselves invited to a worldview that is truly concerned with the embodiment of a new age love story.

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75 Furnish, LoveCommand, 148. Cf. Pryor’s comment that “we ought to avoid concluding that the love command represents a narrowing of the broader neighbour love of the synoptic tradition. There is simply no evidence that this is so. It derives from the experienced love of Jesus for the community of disciples, and there is no indication that it implies a rejection of obligations to outsiders” (John, 163).
“Making Proclamation to the Spirits in Prison”: Another Look at 1 Peter 3:19

Andrew J. Bandstra

The meaning of every word or phrase in 1 Peter 3:19 has been and is disputed. No one interpretation has gained dominance. So it is unlikely that “another” interpretation will succeed in commanding the field. One can only offer a viable interpretation that does some justice to the context, the grammar, the usage of the words, and the message of the New Testament. It is not the intention of this brief article to give an accounting of current scholarly views or to refute other interpretations, though we will mention some of them to provide a context for the position advocated in this article. The attempt will be made, rather, to present a consideration of some of the grammatical features of the text that, in our opinion, have not received adequate attention.

The current (1985) edition of The NIV Study Bible on this text gives a helpful summary of the three main interpretations of this passage: First, some hold that in his preincarnate state Christ went and preached through Noah to the wicked generation of that time. Second, others affirm that between his death and resurrection Christ went to the prison where fallen angels are incarcerated and there preached to the angels who are said to have left their proper state and married human women during Noah’s time (cf. Gen. 6:1-4; 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6). The message he preached to these evil angels was probably a declaration of victory. Finally, still others argue that between death and resurrection Christ went to the place of the dead and there preached to the spirits of Noah’s wicked contemporaries. The message that Christ proclaimed there is held by some to have been the gospel and by others to have been the declaration of the victory of Christ and doom for his hearers.

This overview is helpful as long as one recognizes that within these three main kinds of interpretation there are divisions or subsets. One such subset, and a significant one, applies to the second interpretation. This subset, put forward most fully by Wm. J. Dalton, holds that Christ, in his resurrected state, made his proclamation to the fallen angels on the occasion of his ascension into heaven.¹ The position put forward in this article is a variation on that sub-

set. By way of anticipation, it will be argued that 1 Peter 3:19 should be understood as follows (with additions for the sake of clarity): “And in that [resurrected] state, by means of [his] going further [into heaven], he made proclamation [of his victory] to the spirits in prison.”

The verse begins with the phrase: “in which (or: whom) also” (εἰς ᾧ καὶ). Obviously the phrase refers back to something in the last two lines of v. 18: “having been put to death in the flesh [or: body] and having been made alive in the Spirit [or spirit].” These two clauses, joined by a νεκ—δέ construction, clearly refer to Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. In resurrection contexts, the Greek verb for “to make alive” is virtually synonymous with “to raise from the dead,” (cf. Rom. 4:17; 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:22 and 35-36). It is possible, as some continue to hold, that the “in whom” refers back to the last word only, namely, “the spirit” or “the Spirit.” However, that is most unlikely. The phrase, εἰς ᾧ appears four other times in this brief epistle (1:6; 2:12; 3:16; and 4:4). In each of these instances, the phrase seems to refer not to a specific word but to a state or condition. Clearly, this is so in those two instances (1:6; 4:4) in which the phrase, as here, stands at the beginning of the clause. It seems likely, therefore, that such would also be the case in 3:19. So, the NIV rightly renders it in the text: “In that state,” referring to the previously mentioned resurrection in the Spirit.

Most frequently the two verbal forms in 3:19 are translated as if they were both finite verbs: “He went and made proclamation.” This is not the case, however. The first verb is in form an aorist passive participle, πορευέται which is, by the way, not only the same word but also the same participial form used in 3:22: “by means of his having gone into heaven.” Although in 3:19 it is permissible to translate the participle as a finite verb, it is certainly not necessary to do so. In fact, one should first of all attempt to make sense of why he used the participial form rather than a finite verb. It certainly could be taken as a modal participle, expressing the manner or means by which an action takes place: “And in that state, by means of his going further, he made proclamation.” In this case, his going would itself be understood as the proclamation. Certainly the aorist form of the participle does not require the notion of time preceding that of the main verb; in fact, the time may be identical with that of the accompanying finite verb.2

The grammatical syntax in 1 Peter 3:19 is similar, in my judgment, to that of Ephesians 2:17, where an aorist participle precedes a finite aorist verb: καὶ ἐλθὼν εὐγγέλισεν. Here, too, it is most frequently read as if there were two finite verbs: “And he came and preached.” This translation has led to a variety of speculations as to which aspect of Christ’s ministry was in view: e.g., the preaching of his

earthly ministry, the preaching of the exalted Christ through his apostles, or the preaching of his manifestation to the powers. But if A. T. Lincoln is correct—and there is much to be said for it—the statement in verse 17 is a retrospective reference to verses 14-16; that is, to that coming of Christ that culminated in his reconciling death. If that is correct, then it makes much more sense to translate the participle as a participle, and a modal one at that: “And by means of his coming he preached peace.” Thus, both the coming of Ephesians 1:17 and the going of 1 Peter 3:19 are joined together with Christ’s preaching and proclaiming so that they would be understood as the preaching or proclamation itself.

Returning to 1 Peter 3:19, the question must be asked: Which going is referred to here? Many argue that it is a “going down to Hades,” or a “going down to Hell” that is meant, but the word itself surely does not denote a “going down.” For that kind of descent a form of ἐκκαταβάσεως would have been a better choice (cf. Rom. 10:7). In addition, there are some good arguments to support the idea that it was Christ’s ascension into heaven that was intended. Noted previously is the fact that it is the same verb and even the same form of the verb that is used in 3:22 to indicate Christ’s going into heaven. Surely this cannot be disregarded. More importantly, because the opening phrase of 3:19 likely refers to Christ’s resurrection state in or by the Spirit, one is encouraged by the rest of the New Testament message to think of Christ’s ascension, for throughout the New Testament, the part of the salvation story that is proclaimed as happening in Christ’s resurrection state is his going or ascending into heaven.

What must we make of the fact that in 3:19 the participle stands alone, whereas in 3:22 the phrase “into heaven” (ἐις οὐρανόν) is added? An important feature of the literary style of 1 Peter can account for this phenomenon. It is a literary characteristic of this epistle that often a concept is first introduced (as here in v. 19) and later elaborated (as in v. 22). In a similar manner, the concept “salvation” is first introduced in 1:5 and then elaborated in 1:9-11, and “Christ as the Stone” is first introduced in 2:4 and later elaborated in 2:6-8. Taken together, these three arguments give weighty support to the view that the going of 3:19 is a reference to Christ’s ascending into heaven.

To be sure, not many New Testament scholars have adopted this view. A listing of them up to 1989 can be found in the second edition of Wm. J. Dalton’s work referred to earlier. Among commentaries written in English, the reader may be referred to those of J. N. D. Kelly and S. J. Kistemaker. For those who can read Dutch, see the commentary of S. Greijdanus, who in the main follows the posi-

4Dalton, Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits, 47-49.
5N. N. D. Kelly, A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 152-57.
6S. J. Kistemaker, Peter and Jude, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 141-43.
7S. Greijdanus, De Brieven van de Apostelen Petrus en Johannes, en de Brief van Judas, Kommentaar op het N.T. (Amsterdam: Bottenburg, 1929), 141-45.
tion of H. Bavinck.Both Greidanus and Bavinck not only hold that the going refersto Christ’s ascension but also agree that the going itself is the proclamation.

The text states that by his going he “made proclamation” (ἐκήρυξεν)—the only use of this verb in the Petrine letters. The word in classical Greek meant “to act as a herald” and thus, “to proclaim an event publicly.” In the New Testament, following the usage in Isaiah 61:1, it means to publicly proclaim the good news (e.g., Gal 2:2) or to publicly proclaim Christ (e.g., 1 Cor 1:23). This is its most frequent use in the New Testament, and thus it often coincides with “preaching the good news” (εὐαγγελίζω, cf. Luke 8:1). However, there are also a few places in which the more neutral idea of proclaiming something publicly is meant (see Luke 12:3; Rom. 2:21; Rev. 5:2). That is probably its meaning here in 1 Peter 3:19 and thus the NIV correctly translates “made proclamation,” leaving the sense more neutral. To be sure, the word “to preach the gospel” (εὐαγγελίζω) is used in 1 Peter 4:6 (also in 1:12 and 1:25; the noun in 4:17). Scholars who see a connection between that verse and 3:19 insist that the sense in 3:19 should also be “preach the gospel” with a view to the conversion of the hearers. The two passages are really very different though. Not only are different verbs used but those addressed are characterized in 3:19 as “the spirits in prison” and in 4:6 as “the dead.” Although 4:6 is notoriously difficult to interpret, there are many who hold, and in my opinion correctly so, that 4:6 refers to the preaching of gospel to Christians who were then alive but who are “now dead” (cf. the NIV).

If 1 Peter 4:6 and 3:19 are referring to different events, then the way is opened for our understanding the proclamation of 3:19 to be “the victory declaration to the spirits in prison.” That issue, in turn, raises the question of the identity of those receiving the proclamation, namely, “the spirits in prisons.” There are some who continue to insist that this refers to humans, even though the Bible never says that humans are “imprisoned.” Consistently, the word spirits in the New Testament always refers to nonhuman spirits unless the term is qualified (as, e.g., in Heb. 12:23). Thus, both angels (see, e.g., Heb. 1:14) and demons (see, e.g., Rev. 16:13-14, and frequently in the gospels) are designated by that term. Here it is obviously the latter, for 3:19 states that they are “in prison” and 3:20 describes them as “those who were disobedient long ago” and associates them with the “days of Noah.” The pseudepigraphal book of 1 Enoch helps us to understand how Genesis 6:1-4 was understood in Jewish circles of Peter’s day. The “sons of God” were disobedient angels who had disobeyed God and were then put in prison (see also 2 Pet. 2:4, and cf. Jude 6 and Rev. 20:1-3, and 7). Enoch sees a place of imprisonment and is told: “These are

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among the stars of heaven that have transgressed the commandments of the Lord and are bound in this place" (21:6; see also 1 Enoch 10-16 and the rest of chapter 21). Note that this description includes all of the elements to which Peter refers. Peter refers to "spirits" as does 1 Enoch (stars [of heaven], angels, watchers, and spirits are used interchangeably). Peter describes them as being "disobedient," and 1 Enoch says they "transgressed the commandments of the Lord." Peter describes them as spirits "in prison" and Enoch hears the word (21:10): "This place is the prison house of the angels; they are detained here forever." Both Peter and 1 Enoch recognize this as happening in the days of Noah.¹⁰

This likely background to 1 Peter 3:19 and following, supplemented by the fact that in 3:22 Peter explicitly speaks of "angels, authorities, and powers" being in submission to the ascended and reigning Christ, makes it most likely that 3:19 is referring to a "victory proclamation" to the disobedient supernatural spirits. Peter is not interested in the reaction of the "spirits" to the message but to the fact that this is an important part of the message to the persecuted Christians to whom he is writing.

Such an interpretation fits with Peter’s encouragement, beginning in 3:13, to suffer for doing good for the sake of Christ. They may know that Christ himself suffered but did it for their benefit, even to the point of gaining a victory over the forces of evil. Understanding this as a reference to Christ’s ascension and its proclamation of victory to the spirits in prison places this in the broader context of the message of Christ’s victory over spirits (e.g., 2 Cor. 2:14; Col. 2:15; Eph. 1:20-22; Rev. 12:7-11; and implied in Matt. 12:29 and Eph. 6:11-12). That message continues to have relevance for Christians today.

¹⁰Cf. P. H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 140.
John Knox and the Care of Souls

Richard Kyle

John Knox served as God’s mouthpiece— as both a preacher and a prophet. He desired to reform religion on a national level in both England and Scotland, but did he limit his ministry to these public tasks? Did he ignore individual spiritual needs? His biographer, Eustace Percy, thought so: Knox was not “much of a pastor; the personal care of souls meant little to him, either for himself or as an aim of church policy.”¹ From this judgment, I must dissent. Many of Knox’s letters reveal that he had a pastor’s heart. He had great concern for the spiritual well being of individuals.

The term pastor comes from the Latin word passere and means to pasture or feed. In a biblical sense, it commonly refers to a shepherd’s caring for a flock. Thus, Christ is called the Good Shepherd. The pastor is a designated New Testament office. Ephesians 4:11 says that some are appointed “to be apostles, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors [shepherds] and teachers.”² In the early church, the pastor and teacher were often one position, two sides of the same coin. The pastor-teacher was to feed (teach God’s Word) and care for the flock.

In the modern world, the teaching or feeding function of the pastorate has been diminished. Instead, the contemporary church emphasizes the caring and therapeutic aspect of this office. Modern Christians forget that the shepherd should both feed and care for the flock, but this was not the case in the sixteenth century. The Reformed pastor had three basic duties: preach God’s Word, administer the sacraments, and enforce church discipline. Given these tasks, how would a pastor care for the flock? This was seen as an aspect of teaching the Scriptures. The pastor must proclaim God’s Word both publicly (preaching) and privately (counseling), and the Reformed pastor based his spiritual advice and encouragement squarely on Scripture tempered with common sense and understanding. The Reformed tradition knew nothing of counseling devoid of Scripture. Thus, spiritual nurturing must be seen as an extension of teaching God’s Word.³

As a spiritual advisor, how did Knox relate to this tradition? As far as we can tell, he conformed to the pattern of the Reformed pastor. He was first and foremost a preacher. Whenever possible, he blew his master’s trumpet. In fact, the very success of his preaching created a need for counseling. His powerful messages won converts to the Protestant faith, and these new converts had many questions: Were they reconciled to God through faith alone? Could they disregard the ceremonies and rituals of the Catholic Church? The new Protestants faced these and many other spiritual issues.4

John Knox confronted these problems head-on—often with great care and concern. To be sure, he made preaching his first priority, but he regarded spiritual counseling as very important. His mother-in-law, Mrs. Bowes, apologized for troubling him over a spiritual matter. Knox replied that comforting her was no trouble at all. In fact, only preaching would take precedence over giving her spiritual counsel, “and no other labors save only the blowing of my Master’s trumpet shall impede me to do the uttermost of my power [to comfort you.]”5

Knox’s Counseling: His Approach

Knox was confronted with a number of spiritual questions, but most concerned the issues of salvation and the Christian life. The recent converts sought the assurance of salvation. Were they justified by faith without works? Many new Protestants had trouble accepting this doctrine. Were they among the elect? How could they know? If they indeed were justified and among the elect, why did they still sin? If facing persecution, could they participate in the Catholic Mass? What about the liturgy of the Church of England? Could they take part in it? While not as idolatrous as the Catholic Mass, it still represented a compromise.6

How did Knox deal with such spiritual problems? His approach was largely spiritual but not completely so. While most problems were theological in nature, they also had personal and political overtones. Whenever possible, Knox gave biblical answers. Or, if the questions arose from a problem in the understanding of Scripture, he would attempt to interpret the passage or give a theological explanation. Knox certainly regarded spiritual counseling as an extension of his preaching, but at times the Reformer modified his biblical literalism with common sense, even humor. What is more, Knox’s spiritual advice ranged between two extremes: encouragement and admonition. He could

cheer and embolden those in despair. Conversely, the Reformer would warn others not to slide back into idolatry or apostasy.\(^7\)

In his handling of spiritual problems, Knox also showed considerable understanding, even empathy. For the most part, his responses to questions came as advice, not commands. When individuals came to him for spiritual counsel, he did not lord it over them or show any sense of superiority. Rather, in interacting with them, he often revealed his own weaknesses and sinfulness. Knox assured them that he had traveled down the same path—experiencing doubts, sinful thoughts, spiritual pride, and more: “I have sometimes . . . felt not sorrow for sin, neither yet displeasure against myself for any iniquity in which I did offend; but rather in my vain heart did flatter myself.”\(^8\)

In fact, Knox did not regard spiritual advice as a one-way street: It often became a give-and-take affair. The questions directed toward him by Mrs. Bowes and Anne Locke forced him to delve into Scripture more deeply than he normally would have done. Moreover, their struggles prompted Knox to examine his personal life, often seeing their problems as a reflection of his own conflicts: “The exposition of your troubles, and acknowledging of your infirmity, was first unto me a very mirror and glass wherein I beheld myself.”\(^9\)

In his role as a spiritual advisor, we see a different John Knox. He emerges as a caring, religious leader who is concerned with individuals—their spiritual well-being and their personal struggles. He could, of course, be a pulpit thumper and a prophet denouncing individual and corporate sin, but any balanced picture of Knox must take into consideration his gentler and kinder side.\(^10\)

Sources and Context

Having said all of this, one might assume that an abundance of evidence exists regarding Knox’s pastoral activities. This is not the case. He did not deliberately write instructions on the subject. While he pastored congregations in Scotland, England, and on the Continent, we have little information regarding his pastoral work. However, indirect evidence regarding Knox as a spiritual

\(^7\)See Works, 3:337-402; 4:219; 6:12-14, 22, 26, 83-5, 103, 130, 602; Reid, “Knox, Pastor of Souls.”


a counselor does exist. He wrote letters to his former congregations and to Protestants who were experiencing persecution. Most informative are the extant letters that Knox wrote to women: thirty to Elizabeth Bowes, fourteen to Anne Locke, and five to his “Sisters in Edinburgh.” Unfortunately, what the women wrote to Knox has not survived. Regarding Knox’s pastoral activities, two other sources are relevant. Elsewhere, he makes passing comments that indicate the nature of his pastoral concern. Also, the sheep—those on the receiving end of his spiritual advice—testify as to his pastoral effectiveness. They recognized Knox as one who was willing to help them.11

Why did so many women turn to Knox for spiritual guidance? If Knox was indeed a misogynist, why did they seek help from him? Did he not write The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women—a pamphlet that earned him a reputation as a woman hater? Actually, Knox was not the antifeminist that he has been made out to be. Despite this popular image, he did not have a natural dislike for women. In fact, he demonstrated a remarkable tenderness for females. He wrote many letters to women; he married twice and apparently enjoyed the company of women. Furthermore, Knox directed The First Blast at Mary Tudor, whom he hated intensely—not for her gender but for what he considered her idolatrous practices. She persecuted Protestants in England and forced him into exile on the Continent.12

Still, Knox was a man of his time. He accepted the prevailing opinion that women were inferior to men in all areas of society—the home, the church, and the government. In particular, he detested female rule, which he regarded not only as contrary to Scripture and nature but also as illogical. How could a woman be barred from all leadership positions except that of a monarch? On a more personal level, he had conflicts with three female sovereigns—Mary Tudor, Mary of Guise, and Mary Stewart.13


Women, however, turned to Knox for spiritual advice for a more important reason—the context of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation opened the door to many changes, especially in respect to religion. It was an age of uncertainty for both men and women. An entire generation experienced very real confusion: Their spiritual certainties, reinforced by centuries of tradition, had been shattered in a few short years. While many regional differences existed, for about a millennium Europeans had shared a common faith—one that centered on the Catholic Mass. Now all of this was changing. Many people embraced a new religion, one that said individuals were justified by faith and not the Catholic sacramental system. As Protestants, they had given up the traditional religious supports of Catholicism—especially the Mass and priestly intercession.14

Such changes affected both men and women, but women experienced even more ambiguities. Gone were the Virgin Mary and the female saints who had been role models and who had provided sisterly patronage. With the end of the confessional, many women sought spiritual help, and they often turned to the Protestant Reformers. Knox was not unique in this regard—many pious women also consulted Bullinger, Luther, Calvin, and other English Reformers for advice. Moreover, women no longer had the option of becoming nuns in communities governed by females, and virginity lost its esteemed status. All women were now expected to marry, and both the ecclesiastical and the civil authorities required them to submit to their husbands.15

Not all the changes brought on by the Reformation affected women adversely, however. The Reformers elevated marriage to a spiritual vocation. Sexuality gained greater respect: It was now viewed as a natural human behavior and not just a means of reproduction. The responsibility for the spiritual nurture of children largely fell to the mothers, and this task assumed a moderate level of schooling in religious matters. Whether Protestantism improved the level of female education is uncertain. Yet, some women—especially the noblewomen—did study Scripture and developed an interest in theological matters, and through their correspondence with women, the Protestant Reformers encouraged them to understand theological issues.16

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The Pastor at Work

A number of people came to Knox for spiritual advice. Still, his regular correspondence with Elizabeth Bowes provides the best insight into Knox the pastor. The daughter and coheiress of Roger Aske—a nobleman in North Yorkshire—she became the wife of Richard Bowes, the captain of Norham Castle. Married in 1521, Elizabeth and Richard subsequently produced fifteen children. The Bowes family had a long tradition in the north of England on the Scottish border. Here, Elizabeth Bowes met Knox. After a stint on a galley ship, he received an appointment as a preacher in Berwick.17

Just when Mrs. Bowes became a Protestant is unknown, but her conversion came at a time of great religious change in England. Born during the last years of Henry VII’s reign, she was raised in a preeminent Catholic family. When Henry VIII repudiated Rome’s authority, northern England remained loyal to the Catholic faith. When the Protestant wind blew during the reign of Edward VI, her family became nominal Protestants without antagonizing the local Catholic gentry. Apparently, at some point and against the wishes of her husband and most of her family, she became an enthusiastic Protestant—a decision that made her life even more difficult when Mary restored the Catholic faith.18

Some scholars have viewed Elizabeth Bowes as unstable and spiritually disturbed. Others have described her as a strong woman.19 Actually, there is some merit to both perspectives: She overcame tremendous obstacles but still doubted her salvation. Knox saw her as a strong person who heroically struggled for the faith against tremendous odds: “In Scotland, England, France, and Germany, I have heard the complaints of divers that feared God, but of the like conflict as she sustained... I have not known.” For her faith, Mrs. Bowes ignored social conventions and endured exile and estrangement from her husband. Still, doubts regarding her salvation nagged her to the end. For comfort she often turned to Knox—so much so that he confessed that her troubles were a cross for him to bear.20

What was Knox’s relationship with Mrs. Bowes? They met in the north of England where Knox had a pastorate, but the exact date is uncertain. The correspondence between Knox and Mrs. Bowes is difficult to date. It began as early

as 1551 when Knox’s pastorate shifted from Berwick to Newcastle. It continued as late as 1560 with the peak of the correspondence coming in 1552-53. Though she became his mother-in-law, their relationship was primarily ideological, spiritual, and sometimes emotional—not sexual as some have contended. Mrs. Bowes encouraged Knox’s marriage to her daughter Marjory, a relationship deemed socially inappropriate because of the Reformer’s social status and Scottish birth. After Knox’s exile to the Continent, Elizabeth and Marjory fled to Scotland. On Knox’s visit to his homeland, the wedding took place, probably in 1555. Knox then took his wife and mother-in-law back to Geneva with him. When the Reformer returned to Scotland in 1559, they came with him. Marjory died in 1560, and Elizabeth took care of Knox’s two sons until his second marriage in 1564. She continued to live in Scotland until returning to England shortly before her death.

Knox’s correspondence with Mrs. Bowes focused primarily on one problem—the assurance of salvation—and the questions that grew out of this issue. The church and sacraments could no longer guarantee anything. Salvation was by faith alone, but did Mrs. Bowes have faith? Was she really saved? Was she among the elect? If so, how could she be certain? Thousands of people all over Europe were asking similar questions. Closely related is the issue of temptation. If the miracle of justification had taken place, why was she still tempted to sin? Why did she fall back into sin? There was also the problem of the old religion. That which Mrs. Bowes had embraced all of her life was now being called idolatry, and the fear of falling back into this idolatry haunted her. To complicate all of this, Mrs. Bowes was not a passive disciple. She studied Scripture and challenged Knox regarding the issues of justification, election, and temptation.

How did Knox handle these questions? He offered Mrs. Bowes theological answers—but to no avail. To her, they seemed like circular arguments. He stressed justification by faith, but she brought up biblical passages that seemed to run counter to that doctrine. Did not Jacob wrestle with the angel until he received God’s blessing? Was this not a work for salvation? Knox countered by saying that this story was a metaphor for grace. He argued that Jacob prevailed because of divine power—not his own strength. The same is true for our lives: “Hereby is signified, that our victory proceedeth not from our own strength,

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but from the goodness of Him, who by his Spirit, poureth into us understanding, will, sufficiency, and strength.”

In respect to justification, Knox tried to move Mrs. Bowes beyond her subjective doubts. He pointed her to the finished work of Christ and the promises of God: “Your sufficiency stands not within yourself, nor yet in your repentance, but in the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.” With pastoral concern, Knox accentuated Christ’s victory over Satan. He presented justification not just as a theoretical doctrine but as an accomplished fact.

For Knox, however, the bedrock of salvation rested on nothing less than God’s eternal election. He numbered Mrs. Bowes among the elect: “I am equally certified of your election in Christ, as that I am that I myself preacheth Christ to be the only Savior.” Mrs. Bowes did not share his confidence. She constantly doubted her election, largely on two grounds. She had problems with certain biblical passages, but of greater significance, she deemed herself as too sinful to be elected to salvation.

As Mrs. Bowes read Scripture, she became concerned about her election. Christ said, “many are called but few are chosen.” Knox contended that this passage referred to those attempting to enter the kingdom of God by means other than Christ. Moreover, it applied to the reprobate, not to Christians. Another passage bothered Mrs. Bowes: First Samuel 15:35 speaks of God’s repenting for making Saul a king. If God had abandoned Saul, could he not change his mind about her? Knox generally advocated a literal interpretation of Scripture, but in this case, he cautioned against such an approach. At times God accommodates our weaknesses and speaks in a language understandable to humans. Knox insisted that from the beginning God knew the mind of Saul and that he had always been a reprobate. Just because God had elevated him to a lofty worldly position did not mean that he was among the elect.

That which nagged Elizabeth Bowes the most was the psychological and the personal dimension of election. If God had elected her to salvation, why did she have so many spiritual struggles? Where were the signs of grace in her life? Sin and temptation were especially troubling. Mrs. Bowes experienced temptations. Did this mean that she was not a Christian? Knox told her that temptations are

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24Works, 3:399.
27Works, 3:369.
28Works, 3:351.
29Works, 3:362, 363. Calvin also enunciated this principle of accommodation.
the work of the devil. Satan tempts all Christians—some so subtly that his “temp-
tations appear to be the cogitations [thoughts] of our own hearts.” In other
cases, “He is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.” While Mrs. Bowes felt
that she had not repented enough, Knox assured her “that your sufficiency
stands not within yourself, nor yet in your repentance” but in Christ alone.30

This theme continued in many of Knox’s letters to Mrs. Bowes. In one, he let
her know that to be tempted to sin is not sin; and even if we sin, we can repent
and be forgiven.31 Elsewhere, Knox made it clear that election must produce cer-
tain fruits and signs or something is wrong. Absence of sin, however, is not such
a sign because the elect could sin grievously and at times even resemble the
reprobate. Yet, God does not abandon them to perdition but hears their peti-
tions and enables them to resist sin. Therefore, Mrs. Bowes was not to despair of
her election because of isolated lapses into sin. In fact, Knox pointed out that
her worries concerning her sin indicated that she was of the elect. Though the
elect need not lose hope if they fall into sin, they cannot be devoid of all positive
signs. The elect cannot delight in persistent evildoing and have a deep aversion
to godliness and still claim the assurance of salvation. Rather, they must evidence
a positive righteousness and a genuine desire to live a pure, holy life.32

In dealing with the issues of sin, temptation, and doubt, Knox revealed sev-
eral of his counseling methods. In what modern therapists would regard as
negative, at times he became impatient and even lapsed into sarcasm. For
example, Mrs. Bowes compared her sins to those of Sodom and Gomorrah.
Knox took her to task for exaggerating her sins and let her know that she did
not know what she was talking about: “Mother, the cause of your unthankful-
ness I take to be ignorance in you, that you know not what were the sins of
Sodom and Gomorrah.”33

In another place, Knox resorted to logic. At times, Mrs. Bowes had doubted
that there was a God, and this terrified her. “If you really believe that God does
not exist, why should such a thought frighten you?” asked Knox.34 Elsewhere he
even tried some psychology on Mrs. Bowes. He contended that an under-
standing of one’s spiritual insufficiency is a prerequisite for divine grace and a
sign of salvation: “The chief sign of God’s favor is, that we know . . . our selves
. . . to be nothing without his support.”35

Most revealing was Knox’s use of empathy, or cocounseling. He did not
assault Mrs. Bowes’ spiritual fragility with “the force of his masculine and pro-

30Works, 3:367, 368.
31Works, 3:381-82.
33Works, 3:382, 383.
34Works, 3:360; Frankforter, “Elizabeth Bowes and John Knox,” 343.
fessional authority.” As noted, spiritual advice flowed in two directions. While he counseled her, she also supported him in his spiritual battles. In what was probably a deliberate pastoral technique, Knox confessed that he had also experienced Mrs. Bowes’ problems. Indeed, she had helped him perhaps as much as he had aided her. In fact, he admitted to being afflicted with the suffering of Job, and though his theology said that God would aid him, Knox often felt that he would not. In making such a confession, Knox had laid his soul bare to Mrs. Bowes. He had gone beyond self-disclosure, speaking “more plain than ever I spoke,” and acknowledged her to be “one fellow and companion in trouble.”

Still, when it came to slipping back into idolatry, Knox was not as empathetic. Mrs. Bowes faced constant pressure to return to the Roman faith. Her husband and family encouraged her to attend Mass, and the possibility of a Catholic resurgence under Queen Mary made matters even more difficult. Mrs. Bowes had no confidence that she could withstand the temptations of her old faith, and if she failed to do so, she would have committed the sin unto death. Knox combined sarcasm, humor, and direct admonitions in dealing with this problem. On one hand, he gave her words of encouragement: she was to rest in Christ for he has already defeated Satan. On the other hand, he warned her of great dangers if she were to cooperate with Catholic idolatry. She could not be a closet Protestant—outwardly conforming to Catholicism while preserving the Protestant faith in her heart. In another place, he openly chided her for being attracted to the Catholic Mass, declaring that in this regard, “Alas, Sister! your imbecility troubles me.”

John Knox’s pastoral side also came out in his letters to Anne Locke. Mrs. Locke lived in London and came from a merchant background—the daughter of a merchant and the wife to another. She and a Mrs. Hickman had a close relationship with Knox, serving as his confidantes after the death of Edward VI. In London, Knox lodged with them and they treated him with great care. Mrs. Locke was about fifteen years younger than Knox and a very gifted woman—apparently more sophisticated than Mrs. Bowes. While in Geneva, she translated into English Calvin’s sermons on Hezekiah and a book by John Toffin. Mrs. Locke was a staunch Protestant, and while her husband also embraced the new faith, he apparently lacked her enthusiasm.

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38 Works, 3:353, 355, 361.
40 Works, 3:361.
Knox’s letters to Anne Locke differed from those to Mrs. Bowes. Several came before their stay in Geneva, but most came after. Fearing the Marian persecution, Knox wrote at least three letters before 1556 urging her to come to Geneva. She did so, apparently with her husband’s permission, for after her return to London, she lived with him until his death. Knox wrote eight of his fourteen letters to Mrs. Locke during the year 1559—a time when he was actively promoting the Scottish Reformation. During this period, Knox wrote to Ann Locke for two purposes: as a means to communicate news from Scotland about the Reformation and as a way to raise funds for the Protestant cause. Apparently, this latter endeavor met with little success. As a result, when compared to the letters to Mrs. Bowes, much less space is given to private pastoral concerns. Some, however, do tell about Anne Locke’s spiritual anxieties and Knox’s response to them.\(^{42}\)

The main thrust of Knox’s early letters to Anne Locke concerned predictions of imminent persecution, warnings not to succumb to idolatry, and pleas for her to come to Geneva.\(^{43}\) Couched in these letters are more pastoral concerns. Apparently, Mrs. Locke shared some of Elizabeth Bowes’ spiritual anxieties. Nevertheless, he assured her that her eternal life had not been purchased by gold or silver, the blood of calves or goats, or even the Catholic Mass but by the death of Christ.\(^{44}\) In another letter, Knox urged Anne Locke to confide in him concerning her spiritual problems: “Touching your troubles (spiritual I mean) fear not to be plain with me,” and in turn he communicated to her what the Holy Spirit “teaches me within his most sacred Word.” Knox also told her that it is easy “to think well of God” during times of prosperity. The Spirit of God, however, would help her turn to God even in difficult times.\(^{45}\)

Knox’s later letters to Anne Locke contain at least one reference to the spiritual anxieties that plagued Mrs. Bowes. At midnight, Anne Locke wrote to Knox regarding a spiritual battle. He advised her to continue the struggle knowing that many others had faced the same problems: “Be of comfort, Sister, knowing that you fight not the battle alone.” What is more, he suggested that pride might lie at the root of her problems but that this was a problem that everyone faced.\(^{46}\)

Still, a different pastoral concern dominated Knox’s later correspondence with Anne Locke—namely her participation in the services of the Church of England. Knox had always disliked aspects of the English liturgy, but because he generally approved of the religious policies of Edward VI’s government, he

\(^{42}\)Collinson, “Knox, the Church of England,” 83, 84; Frankforter, “Correspondence with Women,” 167; Reid, Trumpeter of God, 141; Ridley, John Knox, 247.


\(^{44}\)Works, 4:221, 222.

\(^{45}\)Works, 4:237; Frankforter, “Correspondence with Women,” 168.

\(^{46}\)Works, 6:79; Felch, “Deir Sister,” 57; Frankforter, “Correspondence with Women,” 168.
muted his objections. The Catholic Mary Tudor was now the queen and Anne Locke resided in Geneva. So, in a 1556 letter, he warned her not to compromise with Mary's idolatry, even if this entailed forsaking friends and possessions.47

The religious situation in England changed with the ascension of Elizabeth. She restored Protestantism—but by the puritan standards embraced by the Marian exiles—it fell far short of their religious ideals. Anne Locke found herself in a quandary. With Elizabeth on the throne, she could now return to England, but could she participate in the liturgy of the Church of England? Or would this be a compromise with idolatry? So she wrote to Knox from Geneva. By his own admission, he took a hard line that many considered “extreme and rigorous.” The Book of Common Prayer still contained “diabolical inventions,” he contended. Thus, he could never counsel anyone to participate in the “dredges of Papistrie” still found in the English service.48

Yet, more than external rituals corrupted the English worship. The sacraments were administered “without the Word truly and openly preached.” Because of this, the clergy of the Church of England were “none of Christ’s ministers, but Mass-mumming priests.” In Knox’s opinion, the English service lacked what was central to the Reformed faith—the preaching of God’s Word. He believed that it had been so distorted by human inventions that it ceased being a worship service at all. In fact, Knox now implied that it was sinful to even attend an English worship service. Thus, in his mind, Mrs. Locke was confronted with a major decision: Was she going to obey God or men?49

Anne Locke, however, continued to push Knox in this regard—so much so that he became exasperated. Referring to his earlier letter he wrote, “your questions . . . I have (more) than once answered.” She should not participate in a “bastard religion” such as the “mingle mangle” then practiced in the Church of England. Still, he seemed to understand her dilemma: To not attend the English services would seem like sinful negligence to some, but to do so might further an idolatrous cause. Thus, the decision was hers to make. Knox’s spiritual advice did not come as a command. Rather, he prayed that the Holy Spirit would guide her into the right decision.50

Elizabeth Bowes and Anne Locke were not the only women to seek Knox’s spiritual advice. Some women in Edinburgh wrote to him concerning two practical but loaded questions. The first addressed the subject of female wearing apparel. Knox acknowledged that this was a difficult question to answer with

47Works, 4:220; Frankforter, “Correspondence with Women,” 168.


49Works, 6:13, 14; Felch, “Deir Sister,” 55; Frankforter, “Correspondence with Women,” 168; Ridley, John Knox, 310.

50Works, 6:83, 84; Frankforter, “Correspondence with Women,” 168; Felch, “Deir Sister,” 55, 58, 59.
any certainty. Two extremes existed—one would “restrain Christian liberty” while the other would open the door to “foolish fantasy.” Moreover, individuals differed widely in their dress. Thus, Knox refused to make any specific prescriptions. Yet, he did set down two general principles in respect to wearing apparel. Women must not dress ostentatiously, and women should not wear the garments of men or carry their weapons. In his reasoning for this rule, one can see shades of The First Blast—women are inferior to men. “The garments of women do declare their weakness and inability to execute the office of men.”

The second question addressed the issue of eating meat offered to idols. Would eating in a Catholic friend’s home be tantamount to the sin condemned in 1 Corinthians? The women thought so, but Knox distinguished between attending the Mass and eating in a Catholic friend’s home. The Mass had to be avoided at all costs, yet he did not condemn social engagements with Roman Catholics. Even in social gatherings, however, Protestants had to be prepared to be a witness to their faith.

Pastors also visit the sick and comfort the bereaved. What did Knox say about such a ministry? His writings reveal little on these subjects, though some information can be gleaned from the collective works that he sanctioned. The Form of Prayers used in Geneva gave some instructions on visiting the sick while the Book of Common Order contains a lengthy prayer regarding this subject. Life was difficult in the sixteenth century. Medical knowledge was primitive; public health and sanitation barely existed. Disease and death frequently stalked people in all ranks of society. While the Reformers regarded sickness and death as coming from the hand of God, they also saw healing as a gift from God to be appropriated by both spiritual and medical means.

In this regard, Knox followed the thinking of the continental Reformers. He urged ministers to pray for and visit the sick. Such tasks were “things very necessary,” but he refused to prescribe a set procedure. Rather, the minister, “like a skillful physician,” should tailor his visit to the circumstances. Visiting the sick could be an occasion to lift up an individual to “the sweet promises of God’s mercy through Christ,” or, if the sick person, had no sense of his or her sins, the minister could “beat him down with God’s justice.” Moreover, the minister should go beyond praying for the sick during his visit. He should also lift up the sick in a public prayer before the entire congregation.

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51 Works, 4:225-29; Reid, “Knox, Pastor of Souls,” 7.
52 Works, 4:230, 231; Reid, “Knox, Pastor of Souls,” 8.
In this study, we have seen a different John Knox—not a pulpit pounder or a Hebrew prophet proclaiming God’s wrath. To be sure, Knox’s beliefs remained the same, but his style changed. As a pastor in the care of souls, he demonstrated compassion, care, and empathy. He went to great lengths to help individuals with their struggles of conscience. He readily acknowledged that their struggles and failures were similar to his. Their anxieties were those of first-generation Protestants attempting to understand their new faith, and Knox usually gave them balanced and reasonable answers.
Inquiry into the Practice of Faith: 
A Reformed Perspective

F. Gerrit Immink

This article deals with the discipline of practical theology in general and at the end considers briefly the subject of homiletics in order to become a little less abstract. My main concern is the development of a theoretical insight into the practice of faith. As Schleiermacher rightly observed, practical theology is not just the practice but the theory of the practice. Those who perform leadership roles in a given practice must have some theoretical insight into that practice. Why is it done this way and not another? What are the reasons for this specific performance? Whoever has a leading role in the practice of faith must act with a reflective competence.

Old and New Models in Practical Theological Discourse

It was Schleiermacher, the founding father of the discipline of practical theology, who described practice in terms of leadership in the Christian church. This approach is sometimes called the “clerical paradigm” because the emphasis is on the pastor’s work. Although Schleiermacher acknowledges a basic equality and reciprocity in the community of faith, he nonetheless stressed the distinction between leadership and laity. This inequality is not based on ordination but rather on theological education. Why so? According to Schleiermacher, a community of faith is only edified by what he called a circulation of religious interests and that only happens when someone takes the lead. According to him, well-educated theologians have to play this role precisely because they are theologically educated. Thus, we need leadership in the church in order to sustain the community of faith. Basically, all are equal in the community of faith. However, for the sake of the communication of faith—which is necessary to keep our faith alive—we do need leadership. It seems that there are at least two important principles in this model. First, the practice of faith is essentially communicative. Second, the communicative act implies a more passive receptivity and a more active productivity.

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1Friedrich Schleiermacher, Die praktische Theologie nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhang dargestellt (Berlin: Jacob Frerich, 1850), “Der Ausdruck praktisch ist allerdings genau nicht ganz richtig, denn praktische Theologie ist nicht die Praxis, sondern die Theorie der Praxis” 12.

2Ibid., 16 “Diese Ungleichheit findet er der Form statt, daß der Gemeingeist in einigen produktivist, in den anderen besteht er mehr in einer lebendigen Empfänglichkeit.”
In more recent models, the emphasis is neither on leadership nor on the activities of the church as such. Rather, the emphasis is on the interaction between modern society and the Christian community. The leading idea is that Christianity is challenged by our rapidly secularizing society and has to adjust to our modern culture. The radical shifts in our culture toward the modernization of our lifestyles requires, so one argues, a new practice of the church. Practical theology is therefore understood as a crisis-science: It deals with the radical and rapid shifts in our cultural climate, and practical theology should—based on reliable empirical research—make strategic proposals for a constructive renewal of Christian practice. In this model, the developments and changes in modern culture take the lead in the analysis of the practice of faith. The older models are rejected as being deductive. The basic idea is that our consciousness and language, as a result of secularization and modernization, are no longer receptive to a fixed message. The old message lost its plausibility. Consequently, the communication of the gospel is no longer understood in terms of mediation and proclamation but rather in terms of conversation and dialogue. As Don Browning argues, practical theology deals with the correlation between Christian texts and common human experience and language. The positive point in this approach is that our modern society, in which we live and breathe, receives full attention. However, it seems to me that the secular a priori’s are too easily accepted as self-evident. Modern (practical) theologians seem to think that the modern mind has completely lost its sensibility for God, and, further, they seem to hold that a theistic frame of reference is completely outdated. This trend started in the 1960s and 1970s of the twentieth century. During those days, there was a paradigm shift in practical theology. Ecclesiology and systematic theology lost their influence in practical theology, and, as a matter of fact, theories from the social sciences or from hermeneutical philosophy took the lead in practical theological discourse. One of the reasons was the legitimate interest in the practical functioning of faith. Indeed, faith is embedded in the social and psychological infrastructure of the human being, and, consequently, sociology and psychology can tell us important things about the functioning of religion. However, as theologians, we should be aware of two restrictions. First, social and psychological theories also have their a priori’s, related to the specific field they are analyzing, and more often than not these theories originate in a philosophy of suspicion with respect to God. Second, in their analysis of the practice of faith, theologians need a theoretical framework in which the divine-human encounter is not reduced to an anthropological

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process. It is worth noticing that the dominant theory in Western practical theology since the 1970s is the theory of action, and that paradigm is mainly derived from the social theorist Jürgen Habermas. A second trend is the hermeneutical approach, quite in accordance with a cultural movement in which the human being forms the focal point. In the Enlightenment tradition human consciousness was seen as the center of religion and morality, which resulted finally in a subjective picture of reality. In this way of thinking, religion is mainly understood as a human interpretation of reality. So, the idea is that there cannot be a straightforward application from tradition or from the Bible to our modern situation. Instead, from our modern point of view we reinterpret the old data.

The Encounter between God and the Human Being

How do we do practical theology in such a scholarly and cultural climate? We do indeed live in the midst of a highly secularized culture, and it is not easy to find adequate language to communicate the Christian faith. Our human consciousness and mind lost their receptivity for things divine. It seems to me that the human mind in the Western world is rather flattened. It lost its feeling for the depth and the height of life. With the loss of religion, we lose the wider perspective beyond our daily needs. If there is no awareness of the Holy One, we easily end up in some form of naturalism: We are just a part of nature and so is our human soul.

How could we present practical theology as a theological discipline when the reality of God is so much beyond the horizon? Indeed, in practical theology, there was a radical anthropological turn and recently — especially in Germany — a turn to see theology as the study of religion-as-it-is-lived (Gräß: "gelebter Religion"). The leading theological discourse is rather post-Barthian with a, so to say, pre-Barthian anthropological interest. In the closing years of the twentieth century, the theological emphasis was not on divine revelation but rather on human experience and religious symbols. Both Schleiermacher and Tillich once again determine, for a great deal, the agenda of theological discourse. It seems that Barth’s theology was an intermezzo. From a Reformed perspective, we must acknowledge that the shift to anthropology is not only bad, but it also brings in the legitimate interest for the experiential dimension. Faith is a human act indeed. It affects me deep down in the center of my consciousness. It is one-sided when we only speak about revelation and not about faith. Indeed, faith matters. Faith is a link between God’s redemptive acts of the past and my present situation. On the other hand, this appraisal of the experiential dimension of faith should not lead to the anthropological reductionism of Enlightenment theology. Barth indeed rightly observed the a priori act of God in the Christian practice: If God were not the acting subject, then there would be no salvation and no new world. For our salvation, we are wholly dependent upon God. In my view, the anthropological and revelational dimensions in the practice of faith must not be played off against each other. In order to have a full understanding of the practice of faith, we must be aware of the fact that faith is a
dynamic relationship between God and humankind. You cannot fully understand that relationship if you only see it from the human perspective. Two subjects are involved: God and the human being. God, too, is acting and speaking, and I think this theocentric dimension is basic in Calvinism. God is depicted as a personal center of consciousness: He promises, He calls, He elects. Hence, God’s freedom and sovereignty forbid an anthropological reduction. On the other hand, faith is accomplished in the concrete life of real people. Faith is an act in which our personal biography and the circumstances in which we live are involved. In particular, when we confess that the Holy Spirit works in nobis—such that we are not only justified by God through faith but are also regenerated by the Spirit unto a life of obedience and sanctification—then we must concede that the human subject is an important component in the practice of faith. A practical theological theory must do justice to the vicissitudes of life and should not be detached from our daily ups and downs. In practical theology, we reflect on faith as it is lived by people—not on Christian doctrine as such.

Faith as a Key Concept

It seems to me that the concept of faith must receive a more prominent place in practical theology. Faith is enacted in daily life. It is part of us when we worry about our jobs or about the people around us; it is part of us when we make plans for the future. Whenever we mourn or suffer, faith sustains us—but not in the sense that we possess it, for how could we ever domesticate God? More than once the believer lives in temptation and has to struggle with experiences that contradict God’s love. That is all in the game. To live in faith is not a human capacity or ability; it remains a free gift from God, but when it is there, it is truly human. So faith has a subject side; it mingles with our personal biography. It is the unsubstitutable human self who lives in faith.

If we put faith in the middle, are we not making the gospel too human-dependent? In Barth’s theology, revelation received the central position. To live in faith means, according to him, that we consider the world and ourselves as we are in Jesus Christ. All the emphasis is put on the object side of faith: God’s decisive, unique, and unsubstitutable act in Christ. Faith is secondary (“nachher”); it is not a primary constitutive in God’s salvation because Christ took our place.

Faith, indeed, emerges in the dynamic encounter between God and the human being, but we should not create a false dilemma here. There is a reciprocity between God and the human being, and we must always speak in the duality of Word and Spirit, revelation and faith. On the one hand, one might wish to emphasize that God plays the leading role—without revelation there is no faith. God called Abraham, and without that divine self-revelation there would not have been a new community of faith. Indeed, God came down to the earth to deliver the Israelites from Egypt (Ex. 2:8). In our modern culture, the priority of the divine initiative in the matter of faith has lost its self-evidence. Yet, it is central to the Protestant concept of faith because faith is not primarily a
work we accomplish. Faith is a personal relationship between God and the human being, but it is a relationship that originates in God's justification of the sinner. How strange it may sound. Faith is primarily understood as a divine act and not as a human act. However, it is an act in the human consciousness. Otherwise we would be completely unaware of it and consequently in no way personally involved. The crucial problem is: How should we understand the divine act in the human mind? It is a regenerating act of the Holy Spirit, such that the human spirit is liberated from the power of sin and is restored in the image of God. As the apostle Paul said: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Thus, justification means: communion with Jesus Christ, the birth of the new self, and, consequently, a struggle with the old sinful self. God’s justification of the sinner is the foundational act in the encounter between God and the human being; and, at the same time, this very act regenerates the human self to such an extent that a true reciprocity is actualized. The regeneration of the human self—implied by the divine act of justification—brings about that the human heart receives a new longing for God. Consequently, it is not inappropriate to say that the human subject does indeed become an important participant in the divine-human encounter. This anthropological and pneumatological dimension in the concept of faith is unfortunately neglected in Barthian theology. In practical theology, however, it is important to realize that our human faculties, including the habits of the heart, fully operate and exercise their functions in the act of faith. Indeed, it is God who works his grace, but he does so by the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, we as human subjects come to know and love God. Which mental functions are primarily involved? When we reconsider the Reformed tradition, different types of faith can be recognized. Neo-orthodox theologians emphasized the cognitive aspects of faith: Faith is the true knowledge of God. The more socially engaged tradition stressed the moral aspects of faith: To live in faith means to follow the will of God. Finally, the more experiential wing finds that the spiritual aspect of faith is located in the affections of the heart.

Do we really acquire a new self and a new existence? We should keep in mind that the Spirit works in a provisional and fragmentary way. It is more in the mood of struggle than victory. In the Reformed faith, there is a constant tension between justification and regeneration. We rejoice in God’s judgement: We are righteous in Christ. There is a new situation between God and the human being. It is true as an anticipation; it is true as a judgment. It is not yet realized in the sense that we fully participate in that new world. We know about it in faith, we celebrate and enjoy it in communion with Christ, and we expect it in hope.

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6cf. H. Berkhof, Christelijk geloof (Nijkerk, 1985), 430.
The Practice of Faith

Practical theology deals with the practice of faith, but there still is an ambiguity in this term. We can think of practice in terms of the celebration of faith in liturgy, or in personal prayer, or in a practical Christian lifestyle. Then, we think of faith as it is lived by the members of the community. However, the practice of faith, because it is the practice of a community, is also the practice of the communication of faith. The life of faith needs a constant nurturing, and the church uses quite a few media to enrich and foster faith. Especially in the Reformed tradition, the instruction of faith has always been an important notion. The Sunday service, for example, is not primarily understood as a celebration of faith (as it is in the more cultic liturgical models) but rather as an instruction of the community in how to practice faith.

How should we understand this notion of mediation and communication? First of all, we realize that Christianity is a historical religion. We confess that God revealed himself in the history of Israel and in the person and the work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The Bible is the witness of the decisive historical encounter between God and humankind. Protestants, especially, emphasize the once-and-forever character of the (historical) redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Then the question arises: How can each new person and each new age benefit from the redemptive work of Jesus Christ? Well, I would say that the salvation of Christ is mediated. How is that accomplished? We know that in the Christian tradition there is considerable disagreement on this issue. In the Roman Catholic Church, the emphasis is on the sacramental representation of Christ in an apostolic succession. In the Reformed tradition, Scripture is seen as the authoritative witness to salvation in Christ and the preaching of Scripture as the essential medium of the church. The Reformers believed that the proclamation of salvation in Christ would be effective as the Holy Spirit communicated the benefits of Christ in the heart of the faithful believer. Word and Spirit are, so to speak, the bridge between the past and the present. The Spirit not only accomplishes the representation of the Christ-event but also the reception of Christ in the heart of the believer.

Let us have a closer look at the practice of preaching. When we preach, we speak about things that really concern us. We express our human needs and desires, we name our failures and our guilt. Equally, we express God's forgiveness and his eternal love, his promises and redemption. Moreover, in the context of worship, we are not merely talking about these issues. We use language to proclaim worlds of meaning. We name realities such that we see them in our mind's eye. We use language to present and re-present. When we speak about God's love and justice, we become aware of that love and justice—not simply as human awareness but even stronger: That named love surrounds us and changes us. Words are not merely words; they also disclose the realities expressed by the words. Human speech mediates the divine-human encounter. We proclaim God's salvific actions from the past, and, by naming these acts and facts, their effects are somehow present.
Is preaching a sacramental act? It comes quite close. As Oberman once observed: “The Reformation returned to an understanding of the Holy Spirit as the dynamic presence of God in Jesus Christ.” Preaching must be understood in that perspective. Bullinger once said that “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.” He did not assert a simple identity between Scripture and the sermon but rather the fundamental trust that the promise of God is still powerful through the mouth of the preacher.

The Practice of Communication

The practice of faith is exercised as a practice of communication. Preaching, for example, is a communicative act, and the interhuman dialogue forms an important aspect of the theory of preaching. Therefore, we must consider the act of preaching as a rhetorical act. We must also reflect on theories of language and on the noetic functioning of the human mind. We have to ask ourselves: How is the process of interaction accomplished and how is this interhuman communication related to the idea that we mediate faith? Thus, in practical theology, we have to consider a certain practice from different perspectives. It is a practice of faith that certainly needs our theological reflection; and it is a practice of interhuman communication that also needs further theoretical reflection. This latter part is not purely technical; for nontheological theories on rhetoric and communication have their own anthropological presuppositions. Mostly, theological and theoretical presuppositions influence each other in the development of theories of practice.

Let me mention a few points. Homileticians who rejected the overinflated idea that preaching is proclamation, de-emphasized the idea that preaching is the communication of a true message and underlined the role of the hearer in the communication process. Henning Luther, for example, described preaching in terms of speech-act theories. It is a prerequisite for effective preaching, he said, that we stress the importance of the speaker-hearer interdependence. When we pay attention to the hearer, we will not primarily focus on a true message, for we intend to create a certain effect in the life of the hearer. In order to be effective, the preacher must also analyze the world of the hearer. As Lange would say: The hearer is my theme. In this approach, the performative aspect of preaching receives more attention. Preaching can never be authoritarian because the freedom of the hearer is a most important issue. So, it seems that the analysis of speech-act theories caused a change in the theological view on preaching, namely the rejection of preaching as proclamation. I could also argue the other way around, namely that homileticians noticed that the herald model of preaching could not do full justice to the communicative aspect of preaching. Hence, they started an alternative theory that built from the perspective of communication.

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Likewise, other homileticians turned to a more hermeneutical approach. Hermeneutical models wrestle with the impact of the tradition on our modern time; they maintain that there is not a straightforward continuity. Traditions, so runs the argument, can be criticized and stand in need of a new interpretation. Consequently, Scripture was no longer understood as an authoritative Word of God, and we all know how, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, historical criticism penetrated into the theological faculties. The leading motives were: (1) Scripture should be approached from the standpoint of reason alone, and further (2) only that which is proven to be historically valid can count as trustworthy. Another far-reaching principle was the idea that a direct divine action in the world must be precluded; thus, no interference of transcendent powers, no miracles, no special inspiration, no resurrection. The real Jesus is the Jesus before his death. Resurrection must be seen in terms of a visionary experience or as a continuation of the “empowerment” of the hope for a better future.9

These principles pushed theology in a rather anthropological direction. Scripture is no longer seen as a testimony of divine revelation but rather as an expression of religious people. When we read the Bible, we hear how religious people in their days perceived their world. The biblical text is seen as an interpretation by the biblical author of the world and of the matters of faith in his days, and we cannot transmit that as an objective message to our world. What we need is a new understanding that is adequate and relevant in our situation. Consequently, in homiletics, the kerygmatic model was rejected as being a linear model of communication. How could we ever think that the Bible contains an objective message that is transmitted through the sermon to people who live in a modern world? Hermeneutical models work with so-called circular models of communication. Old texts receive meaning when there is a fusion of the horizons of the author and of our modern situation. Thus, there is a certain priority of our modern experience over against the classical text. We decide whether the classical text makes sense, so runs the argument.

An Old Conflict

In theology, we carry the burden of a rather human-centered way of thinking that has left deep traces in our modern culture. One of the main characteristics is its emphasis on human consciousness as the center of all human reasoning, knowledge, and morality. So, Descartes thought that the reasoning subject is the one and only foundation in matters of science and even in religion. Others not only emphasized the reasoning subject but also emphasized empirical sense per-

9Alvin Plantinga quotes a Bible scholar who writes: “Historical critics thus rightly insist that the tribunal before which interpretations are argued cannot be confessional or ‘dogmatic’; the arguments offered must be historically valid, able, that is, to compel the assent of historians whatever their religion or lack thereof, whatever their backgrounds, spiritual experiences, or personal beliefs, and without privileging any claim of revelation. Alvin Plantinga, “Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship,” Modern Theology (1998): 251.
ception as the foundation of true knowledge. In later developments (especially in the twentieth century), there was a shift from the human subject to human language. This resulted in a new interest in hermeneutical questions. Anyway, the shift to the human being as a focal point resulted in a subjective and representational picture of reality. When we perceive reality, so one argues, we form ideas in our minds—a sort of mental representation of an outside world. When we communicate, we communicate our invisible ideas, thoughts, or mental representations. We do not, so to speak, communicate what is said of the object; rather we communicate the mental representation caused by the object. Consequently, speech and communication are understood in a rather expressive and subjective way. This cultural trend had an enormous influence on theology and especially on our God-language. We are not speaking about God, so runs the argument. Instead we are speaking about images of God, about subjective representations. God himself does not belong to the realm of being and remains beyond the limits of true knowledge.

This way of thinking gave rise to a model of preaching that I would like to call expressive symbolic. The idea is that in a communicative act one is expressing his or her inner state. In preaching, so Schleiermacher observed, we re-present our religious consciousness. In order to avoid the negative pitfalls of Enlightenment rationality, Schleiermacher claimed that faith does not belong to the realm of reason, neither to that of morality. Faith, so he suggests, is a genuine and direct movement of our consciousness; it is a feeling of absolute dependence. Religion is an awareness and a taste of the Ultimate. In preaching, we communicate our religious awareness in the form of a mental expression (Mitteilung des zum Gedanken gewordenen frommen Selbstbewußtseins). According to Schleiermacher, we are urged to such an expression by the overwhelming experience of faith, and, besides, it is truly human to express oneself. So, preaching is a communicative act in which we express what we have experienced, and, in doing so, we re-present it for other people.

In recent homiletical models, we can still find similar movements. In Homiletic: Moves and Structures, David Buttrick argues that preaching “mediates some structured understanding in consciousness to a congregation.” He speaks of structures of consciousness, and he maintains that preaching presents and evokes fields of understanding. Although, according to Buttrick, preaching as self-expression places too much burden on the self and on religious affections, he nonetheless holds that religious language is bound up with deep levels of

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11Unpublished paper of Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Is it possible to talk about God?”
12Friedrich Schleiermacher, Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums zum Behuf einleitender Vorlesungen (Darmstadt, 1993), §280.
human experience. Expressive models have been popular in periods when romanticism has been at odds with rationalism, as, for example, in conversionist and pietist traditions and in the liberal tradition where religious language received a symbolic explanation.14

Kerygmatic models of preaching reject this emphasis on the human consciousness. According to Barth, the key image for the preacher is the herald: "Proclamation is human language in and through which God himself speaks, like a king through the mouth of his herald."15 The first and principal locus of divine performance is not human consciousness but the event of Jesus Christ. In the heyday of dialectical theology, Thurneysen insisted that preaching as a communicative act is never the communication of human experiences, whether pious or not. Instead, preaching is about God, that is, about his salvific acts in history. In preaching, we proclaim these acts.

A comparable critique on our individual experience as normative for preaching is presented by the Yale school of theology. Hans Frei, in his postliberal reconstruction of narrative theology, rejects the presuppositions of the Enlightenment and existentialist traditions by denying that the individual self and his or her experience constitute the criterion of meaning. According to Frei, the uniqueness and particularity of Jesus Christ cannot be reduced to the categories of human experience. Claims about God are not identical to claims about the experience of human beings. When we observe Christ primarily in human experience, we lose "the unique, unsubstiutable identity of Jesus as the ascriptive subject of his own predicates."16 So, there is an "extratextual" reality that activates and regenerates us: God's saving presence in and for the world. That event is proclaimed in preaching.

Regeneration through the Spirit

So it seems we have an unsolvable problem here. However, it seems to me that it is the unsolvability of two models that both have flaws. On the one hand, the expressive model has too many biases with respect to our knowledge of God. It is as if God, as the one who is Holy and transcendent, is beyond existence and beyond our knowledge. At this point, modern theology has fallen victim to the a priori's of Enlightenment philosophy, especially to the philosophy of Kant, with the result that we think that we can only speak of God in terms of human experiences of the ultimate or in terms of symbolic language. It is not the moment now to discuss these matters at length. I am highly indebted in these matters to the work of two excellent scholars who worked at Calvin

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14Ibid., 178.
16Charles L. Campbell, Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology (Grand Rapids, 1997), 142.
College in the 1970s and 1980s: Alvin Plantinga and Nick Wolterstorff.\(^{17}\) They hold a form of metaphysical realism in which it is not inadequate to say that in human discourse we can refer to God. Further, they endorse an epistemology in which belief in God is warranted. So, I hold that the expressive model fails because it is exclusively expressive. Religious language is also referential. Thus, when we speak about God, we are not merely speaking about our images of God but rather about God as a true self, as a subject of speech and action. This means that, in preaching, we do proclaim the divine initiative and the divine salvific actions. The divine calling and the divine revelatory acts precede human faith. Of course, faith is also a matter of the heart, an act of our human consciousness. As I argued, although faith is an act of God, it is—because of the indwelling of the Spirit—an act in the human subject and as such an act of the human subject. The expressive model intends to do justice to this part of faith, namely to the effective work of the Spirit in the human realm.

It is exactly at this point that the Barthian model has its biases. Although this model has its strength in the emphasis on God’s redemptive work in Christ, it fails with respect to the constitutive role of faith in the process of salvation. Its Christocentric concentration strains the anthropological aspect of faith. In this type of theology, the act of faith is not considered to be an independent act in the salvation process. Barth rightly claims that God’s redemptive work in Christ is essential to Christian preaching, but the point is: Is that the whole story? Should we not consider the divine-human encounter in a broader perspective? Are we not created in the image of God? That is: Are we not created for an encounter with God? Does not the Spirit regenerate us so that we actually come to know God and live with him? Without any doubt, the Spirit testifies to Jesus Christ. We are strengthened by God’s grace through Jesus Christ, and this can only be accomplished by a powerful presentation of the once-and-for-all character of the divine act in Jesus Christ. However, that is not the whole story because God is also acting in and through the practice of communication, through the act of preaching. He is performing a new act, an act of application and inhabitation in human existence. In this act, God is dealing with humanity in a new way, and that is really at stake in the practice of faith. In preaching, we deal with people: We preach so that those who hear may come to a fuller understanding of the gospel, and we hope for the strengthening of their faith. We preach so that people are encouraged and their trust is intensified. We preach so that they may endure the hardships of life. Moreover, preaching aims at renewal, conversion, a lifestyle according to the promises and demands of God. All those processes and events—such as encouragement, endurance, conversion, and renewal—really do take place here and now in the lives of human beings. Why do we preach? Because we believe that preaching is one of the

\(^{17}\)In 1979, I had the privilege to study at Calvin College with Alvin Plantinga. I wrote my dissertation on Divine Simplicity (Kampen: Kok, 1987).
instruments of the Holy Spirit. Whenever we speak faithfully about the matters of faith, we trust that God’s Spirit is at work. So, preaching presupposes that God’s Spirit is a creative Spirit, a Spirit who creates understanding, trust, and longsuffering in the human realm. Accordingly, preachers should have an anthropological interest. They not only proclaim God’s redemptive work in Christ but also point to the Spirit’s work in our human heart and in daily life.

The Dutch theologian Arnold Van Ruler argued that we must differentiate between God’s presence in Christ and God’s presence in the Holy Spirit. Christ must not only be preached, so he argues, he must also be accepted in faith, and this reception is a divine work too. So we have to think about the human-divine encounter not only in terms of Christology but also in terms of pneumatology. One of the key notions in Van Ruler’s theology is that the Holy Spirit dwells among us in the mode of inhabitation. In this mode, the relationship between God and the human being is such that the human subject receives full credit. Jesus Christ came in our place. He accomplished redemption for us and without us, but the Spirit works in such a way that I am fully involved—both as a person with all my natural capacities and as a subject. It is me who is at stake! I become the place where God’s Spirit dwells. That implies, for example, that the human being and the human heart are of major concern in the process of salvation. According to Van Ruler, the decision in the human heart is as important as God’s decision on Calvary. When we put it this way, the human being (including human history and culture) is a constitutive factor in the process of salvation.

Practical theology deals with the practice of faith. Faith, however, must be understood from the dynamics of an encounter between God and humankind. This is primarily an act of God but an act of God in which the human subject is regenerated and activated. Further, the practice of faith is a communicative practice: interhuman communication is an important instrument in the mediation of God’s revelation and in the sharing of our faith as it is lived. The indwelling of the Spirit implies that God intends to use our human faculties in the communication of faith.

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19The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is, according to Van Ruler, broader than the human heart. The Spirit dwells in the church, both in the institutions and in community-life, but also in nations and cultures when they are touched by the apostolic Word. Ibid., 185.