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This present publication comprises the first part of Volume 3 of *Semănătorul* (The Sower): The Emanuel Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research. In spite of the fallout from the pandemic in Romania, with all its challenges, the Journal has continued to present submissions by the Faculty of Theology of Emanuel University, Oradea, plus contributions from International scholars. They are not only published here but have been shared on line with Faculty members and are available on the Emanuel website.

The publication of the Journal has been made possible through the commitment of members of the Emanuel Faculty, the contribution of distinguished colleagues from the Irish Baptist College, Moira, Spurgeon's College, London, UK, MidAmerica Baptist Theological Seminary, Cordova, Tennessee, and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

The mission of the journal is to include a range of articles on various aspects broadly related to challenges in communicating Christian truth in a modern culture. It presents papers which address important biblical issues such as the nature of God, religion in the modern culture, and practical pastoral themes in preaching and ministry.

Editor,
Dr. Hamilton Moore

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The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Reformed Theology

Dinu Moga¹

ABSTRACT

Reformed Theology is concerned with the worship of a Triune God who created all things and who made Himself known in Jesus Christ and who, as the Holy Spirit, is the Lord and the Giver of life.

Discussing the doctrine of the Trinity more recent scholars have shown that the importance of this doctrine in Reformed theology will be understood better when we look at it, not in an isolated position to what was going on in the theological camps before the Reformation, but as a part of a theological tradition which precedes the Reformation and even the Middle Ages. Recent scholarship on the sixteenth century, while not blind to important areas of discontinuity, has brought attention to the important continuities that exist between Reformation thought and the patristic and medieval intellectual background.

We conclude that the confession of the Trinity is the sum of the Christian religion. Without it neither the creation nor the redemption nor sanctification can be purely maintained. Every departure from this confession leads to error in the other heads of doctrine. We can truly proclaim the mighty works of God only when we recognize and confess them as the one great work of Father, Son, and Spirit.

KEY WORDS

Reformed theology, tradition, the doctrine of the Trinity, Council of Nicea, Biblical revelation.

INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITION IN REFORMED THEOLOGY

It is appropriate to start with a brief discussion about the concept of tradition in Reformed theology. This is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, during the history of the Christian church the appeal to tradition has always played an

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important part in its approach to false teachings. During the church's challenges from various movements, the word 'tradition' (Latin, *traditio*) came to mean 'a traditional interpretation of Scripture or 'a traditional presentation of the Christian faith'². At the time of the early church the traditional presentation of the Christian faith has been reflected in the creeds of the church and its public doctrinal pronouncements which had found their expression in the canonical books of Scripture. The Reformed tradition is a continuation of that approach to Scripture. The reformers have seen tradition as a legacy from the Apostles, by which the church was guided and directed towards a correct interpretation of Scripture.

Secondly, according to a historian the study of tradition is also important for a consideration of the works and the spiritual thinking of various believing people prior to the Reformation period. Many evangelical believers tend to think that the Reformed doctrines started with the moment when Luther has nailed up his 95 theses. All these Christians see in the history of the church prior to this time total darkness, but, as the historian continues to explain, God has always had, and will always have, an uninterrupted succession of believing people on earth.³ In order to support his argument, the same historian continues to show that the Reformation itself was nurtured in the bosom of medieval Rome and that the great spiritual and theological movement set rolling by Luther and Zwingli was in fact 'the best element of Western medieval Christianity trying to correct the worst elements'.⁴

Therefore, the fact that the greatest doctrines of Reformed theology were formulated and presented best during the Reformation has not been due to the fact that those truths were completely absent from the thinking of various men from a more darker period of time, but it was due to the insistence of this tradition that every Christian should be a responsible theologian who can speak intelligibly about the faith. Such an insistence has been determined by the word of the Bible where Jesus Himself, and after Him His apostles, has urged the believers to 'love the Lord with all their mind' (Matthew 22:37) The Apostle Peter has urged his readers to be always prepared 'to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15).

² John H. Leith offers a more detailed discussion about tradition in *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1978), pp. 67-83. Cf. also Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 29ff.

³ N. R. Needham, *2000 years of Christ's Power*, Part II: The Middle Ages (London: Grace Publications, 2000), p. 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

These verses urged them to reflect, to meditate and then explain and present our Christian faith. Later the reformers argued, like Tertullian, that Scripture is capable of being understood clearly, provided that it is read as a whole. The right interpretation of Scripture was to be found where true Christian faith and discipline had been maintained. One of the ethos of the Reformed tradition was exactly the maintaining of a disciplined life in the study of God's Word and the practical living of the Christian life. Calvin has been the man who stood out not only in his personal achievements, but also in his insistence that discipline should characterize the Christian life and community.⁵

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY AND THE REFORMED TRADITION

One of the characteristics of the Reformed tradition was its interest in a theocentric theology. In other words, Reformed Theology is concerned with the worship of a Triune God who created all things and who made Himself known in Jesus Christ and who, as the Holy Spirit, is the Lord and the Giver of life.⁶

Discussing the doctrine of the Trinity more recent scholars have shown that the importance of this doctrine in Reformed theology will be understood better when we look at it, not in an isolated position to what was going on in the theological camps before the Reformation, but as a part of a theological tradition which precedes the Reformation and even the Middle Ages. Carl Trueman shows that 'recent scholarship on the sixteenth century, while not blind to important areas of discontinuity, has brought attention to the important continuities that exists between Reformation thought and the patristic and medieval intellectual background'.⁷ It has been pointed out that 'every mainstream Christian body—including the Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran Reformed and Roman Catholic churches—regards the patristic period as a definitive landmark in the development of Christian doctrine. Each of these churches regard themselves as continuing, extending and where necessary, criticizing the views of the early church writers.'⁸ As we shall see later, reformed thinkers like Calvin and Owen, Turretin and Bavinck were working their Trinitarian views, in terms set by

⁵ For more on Calvin's view on discipline see Leith, *op. cit.*, p. 82-83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁷ Carl. R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth, John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), pp. 9-10ff. Trueman makes an important reference to the scholarly work of Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), whose emphasis falls on the 'need to interpret individual theologians as existing and working within established traditions (exegetical, doctrinal, philosophical, etc.), and to understand specific formulations of doctrine historically rather than dogmatically' and continues to present a valuable account for the need to set theological development within the broad intellectual tradition.

⁸ McGrath, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

classic Trinitarian and Christological formulations of the early church. Their attempt was to work out the implications of Reformed theology ‘in terms set by classic Trinitarian and Christological formulations of the early church’.⁹

However, Trueman maintains that it needs to be said that in their use of the classic formulation they did not attempt to imply that these writings had any ultimate normative authority for them. These were important only because they faithfully reflected the position of the Scriptures themselves. In John Owen’s case, Trueman explains that while the words of Scripture were the ultimate norm of his theology, the great human formulations of the faith were regarded as useful to provide ‘a working doctrinal framework within which the theological task of scriptural interpretation can take place’.¹⁰

Therefore John Owen has proved extremely well a tremendous capacity to use various elements of the theological tradition prior to him in order to defend Reformed theology against the heretical attacks launched against the truth of the Scripture. An extremely helpful summary of the way in which Reformed theology sought to defend itself against the assaults of Arminianism and Socinianism is offered by Carl Trueman in his book on Owen’s Trinitarian Theology, where he asserts:

Reformed Orthodoxy in general engaged in an intensive restatement of the orthodox, patristic roots of its theology while also pressing forward to an extensive reappropriation of the technical language of medieval and Renaissance Scholasticism in order to give its theological formulations the rigorous precision needed to distinguish itself from the tenets of Arminianism and Socinianism.¹¹

A similar approach is noticeable much earlier in the writings of John Calvin. When Calvin’s attitude to the doctrines of the early church is considered, it is concluded that Calvin regarded himself as ‘a hearer of the Word who belongs to the multitude of those who have interpreted Scripture before him’.¹² Thus Calvin has established his doctrine of the Trinity in connexion with the witness of the early church. He expresses his appreciations for the ‘men of old’ who, ‘stirred up by various struggles over depraved dogmas, were compelled to set forth with

⁹ For a more detailed presentation of Owen roots in western tradition see Trueman, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹² Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 54ff.

consummate clarity what they felt, lest they leave any devious shift to the impious, who cloaked their errors in layers of verbiage'.¹³

Commenting on the way in which Calvin has organised his various editions of the *Institutes* the editor Hugh T. Kerr shows that the organising principle for the last edition 'was simply the Apostles' Creed'.¹⁴ In support to his argument, he draws attention to the fact that as the Apostles' Creed contains four major articles—God, Christ, Holy Spirit, Church—so Calvin's *Institutes* is divided into four corresponding books. For Calvin the Holy Scripture alone is authoritative. However, he acknowledges that nothing should hinder him to use words that express truth to which the Bible bears witness. When he addresses 'heretics' who have condemned him for using 'foreign terms fashioned by the human mind', Calvin answers by making a distinction between what can be rightly or wrongly called 'foreign'. Thus he says:

If they call a foreign word one that can not be shown to stand written syllable by syllable in Scripture, they are indeed imposing upon us an unjust law which condemns all interpretations not patched together out of the fabric of Scripture. But if that is 'foreign' which has been curiously devised and is superstitiously defended, which conduces more to contention than to edification, which is made use of either unseasonably or fruitlessly, which by its harshness offends pious ears, which detracts from simplicity of God's Word—I wholeheartedly embrace their soberness.¹⁵

By making these assertions Calvin and others reformers justify their right to take over from the early church fathers the doctrine of the Trinity with all the theological equipment which accompanied it.¹⁶

It is important, therefore, to underline the fact that all Reformed theologians have given sufficient proofs of their intellectual abilities to expound and make use of what has been produced before them by the early church and medieval theologians. Each one of them spoke for their time and addressed new questions which the patristic authors did not encounter in the same way. Calvin, Owen and others after them, in full awareness, proved a tremendous capacity to make use

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 1, Book 1, Ch. XIII, 4 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 124-125. We shall abbreviate reference to this work simply by citing the standard three-part reference to the *Institutes* followed by the page number.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Hugh T. Kerr (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. vi.

¹⁵ *Institutes* I, Ch. XIII, 3, p. 124.

¹⁶ For the use of words 'trinity' or 'person' see Calvin, *Institutes* I, Ch. XIII, 19, p. 144.

of the ideas contained in these theological principles, but expanded and brought them to a different level of refinement, while at the same time they exhorted us to seek from Scripture a sure rule for both thinking and speaking, to which both the thoughts of our minds and the words of our mouths should be conformed.¹⁷

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Before we discuss further the importance of this doctrine in Reformed Theology, it is important that we should reflect briefly upon the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity has been discussed in the history of the church. We won't be able to get into all the historical details, as this is not the purpose of this essay, but we shall attempt to follow broadly the way in which events took place in relation to this doctrine and the errors these events produced.

The doctrine of the Trinity has not been greatly discussed by the early Church Fathers. In Berkhof's historical presentation it is shown that until the time of Tertullian, Christ, or Logos, has been conceived by some as impersonal reason, while others regarded Him as personal and co-eternal with the Father, sharing the divine essence, and yet ascribing to him a certain subordination to the Father.¹⁸ The Holy Spirit has occupied no important place in their discussions at all. Some considered him to be subordinate, not only to the Father, but also to the Son.¹⁹ Other represented Him a divine influence or a mode of manifestation assumed by the Godhead. The fatal errors of Modalism and Subordinationism consist in the fact that they deny the personal relationship within the Trinity, the mediatorial work of the Son or the Holy Spirit and therefore ultimately lose the heart of the doctrine of the atonement.²⁰

Tertullian was the first to use the word 'Trinity' when he wrote his most significant theological writing *Against Praxeas*.²¹ But the way in which he formulated his Trinitarian doctrine was wrong as it involved an unwarranted subordination of the Son to the Father. The doctrine of the Trinity came to the fore for the first time in the Trinitarian controversy between Arius (c.250-c.336)

¹⁷ *Institutes* I, Ch. XIII, 3, p. 124.

¹⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1963), p. 82.

¹⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 245.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 242-245.

²¹ More details on Tertullian are offered by Needham, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-130.

and Athanasius.²² Arianism held that the Father alone was the eternal and true God, because He alone, in the full sense of the word, was ungenerated. Concerning the Son, the Logos, who had become flesh in Christ, Arius taught that, inasmuch as this Christ was generated, He could not be God but had to be a creature—a creature, it is true, who had been made before other creatures, but nevertheless was made as they were made through the will of God. And in the same way, Arius, held that the Holy Spirit was a creature or else a quality or attribute of God.

This teaching was nontrinitarian and ultimately destructive to the whole Christian faith. If Arian heresy is accepted, it means that Christ could not redeem fallen humanity. The Arian controversy—also called ‘the great trinitarian strife’²³ or ‘the greatest theological controversy in the history of Christianity’²⁴, of the fourth century has been opposed first of all by his own bishop, Alexander, who contended for the true deity of Christ, but subsequently received a hostile response from Athanasius, who argued that the divinity of Christ was of central importance to the Christian understanding of salvation. He maintained that to regard Christ a creature was to deny that faith in Him brings man into saving union with God. He strongly emphasised the unity of God and insisted on a construction of the doctrine of the trinity that would not endanger this unity. But while stressing the unity of God, Athanasius also recognized three distinct hypostases in God. According to him the unity of God as well as the distinctions in His Being are best expressed in the term ‘oneness of essence’.²⁵

His fundamental position stated that union with God is necessary unto salvation and that no creature but only one who is Himself God can unite us with God. Athanasius argued that the only possible solution is to accept Jesus as God incarnate. The logic of his argument would be that no creature can redeem another creature. If, according to Arius, Jesus Christ is a creature, Jesus Christ can not redeem humanity. Or to put it in another way, Athanasius argued that only God can save and if Jesus saves it means that Jesus is God.

When Constantine conquered the Eastern half of the Roman Empire in 324 A.D., he found the Eastern church divided by this controversy. In 325 A.D. Constantine called together the Council of Nicea in order to sort out the

²² Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 87-91. Other details regarding the controversy and the events which led to the Council of Nicaea are also offered by N. Needham, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-212. Cf. also Grudem, *op. cit.*, pp. 243-244.

²³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 88.

²⁴ Needham, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

²⁵ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 90.

Christological disagreements. The council settled the Arian controversy affirming that Jesus was *homoousios* (one in being or of one substance) with the Father, thus rejecting the Arian position and asserting the divinity of Christ.

Although the Council of Nicea seemed to have settled the Arian controversy and restored unity and peace to the Eastern Church, this appearance was deceptive. The Eastern Church was divided into three parties. Besides the Arian and Athanasian contending parties there was a third party called the *Origenist* party which accepted the traditional Eastern theology of Origen. Although at the Council of Nicea they have accepted the word *homoousios*, later they had serious doubts about its use due to the fear that it would open the door to Sabellianism. Sabellianism, or Modalism, held that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were but three names for one and the same God—a God who had made Himself known thus successively as His revelation progressed in various forms and manifestations. Thus, we see that while Arianism tries to maintain the oneness of God by placing Son and Spirit outside the Divine being and reducing these to the level of creatures, Sabellianism tries to arrive at the same end by robbing the three persons of the Godhead of their independence. This is done by metamorphosing the persons into three successive modes of revelation of the same Divine being.

Therefore, they came up with the suggestion that the word *homoousios* be replaced by the word *homoiousios*, so as to teach that the Son is *of a similar substance* with the Father not *the same substance*. This meant that the Son, although uncreated and divine, was inferior to the Father in His divine nature.

From here onwards we see how two distinctive approaches gradually emerged. The Origenist party formed the majority in the East and has continued to hold an important position within the Orthodox churches today. This position was developed by a group of three writers: Basil of Caesarea (c.330-379), Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-395), known as the *Cappadocian fathers*. The West, however, took a different view and was loyal to the Council of Nicea. They developed a type of theology that was more in harmony with the views of Athanasius.²⁶

The Cappadocians also settled the dispute about whether the Holy Spirit was God. Up to this time the Holy Spirit has not come into serious consideration. In 358 A.D. Athanasius had already argued that the Holy Spirit must be recognised as God alongside Father and Son, but it was the Cappadocians that carried this argument further, strengthened it, and laid the basis for extending the term

²⁶ A more detailed account of the two positions is presented in A. McGrath, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-72 and Berkhof, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-97.

homoousios to the Holy Spirit. In 381 A.D. the general Council of Constantinople met and under the guidance of Gregory of Nazianzus declared its approval of the Nicene Creed and affirmed the deity of the Holy Spirit. To express the doctrine of the Trinity the Cappadocians came up with the formula: God is three *hypostases* in one *ousia* or God is three *persons* existing eternally in one single *being*.

In the East the final formulation of the doctrine was given by John of Damascus who maintained that there is but one divine essence and three *hypostases*. They are one in every respect, except in their mode of existence. In the West the doctrine of the Trinity reached its final statement in the great work of Augustine, *De Trinitate*. He too stressed the unity of essence and the Trinity of persons. But Augustine defined God's unity or oneness in terms of the divine essence shared fully and equally by the three persons of the Trinity. This was in contrast to the Eastern view, which located God's unity or oneness in the person of the Father. The difference between the Eastern and the Western view of the Trinity is important, because it lays the theological basis on which the Eastern and Western branches of the Church finally split up into two separate Churches with very different traditions of theology and spirituality.

We notice, therefore, that what had started as a dispute about the status of Christ finally became a search for a full doctrine of the Trinity.

Latter theology did not add materially to the doctrine of the Trinity. There were deviations from the truth and consequent restatements of it. When we come to the Reformation period we noted that John Calvin discusses the doctrine of the Trinity at length in his *Institutes* I.13 and defends the doctrine as formulated by the early Church. Although at first he himself avoided them, he defends the use of the terms 'person' and 'trinity', and criticised those who opposed their use. The doctrine of the Trinity, as formulated by the Church, finds expression in all Reformed Confessions, most completely and with the greatest precision in chapter III of the *Second Helvetic Confession*.

Having established this very general historical context, we can move ahead to discuss four representative Reformed theologians. We shall start with John Calvin.

REPRESENTATIVE REFORMED THEOLOGIANS AND THEIR VIEW ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

John Calvin (1509-1564)

John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is the most influential statement of Reformed theology in particular and of Protestant theology in general. When we consider Calvin's writings on the Trinity in his *Institutes*, the first thing we need to draw attention to is the fact that the purpose of Calvin's Trinitarianism is to secure the Biblical message. His *Institutes* represent, in fact, the effort to state the message of the Bible in a coherent and orderly way and in the language of an ordinary discussion.

Calvin writes as a churchman concerned with organisation, preaching, worship and pastoral care. But above all he writes as an exegete of Scripture, something that is well reflected in his exposition on the Trinity. His aim is to defend the Biblical message against the 'great battles' always instigated by Satan in order to 'tear our faith from its very roots'.²⁷ Calvin sees the problem as being a spiritual battle between the forces of evil and the truth of God's Word. Satan is working in the world through his ungodly spirits who stir up certain persons to fabricate wrong teachings.

According to Calvin's view, an incorrect presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity will directly affect the standing ground of the believer—the message of the Bible. When he proposes resistance to these wrong teachings, Calvin cautions his readers not to let their 'thoughts and speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends'.²⁸

At this point we must draw attention to the fact that Calvin's 'great battles'²⁹ are fought against the writings of Servetus who came up with all sorts of soteriological presuppositions and inferences. So, Calvin writes in order to refute the Christology of Servetus, and his debate turns upon the question of the true Godhead of Jesus Christ. The problem with Servetus is that he presents us, says Calvin, with a 'monstrous fabrication' that 'person' is nothing else than a visible manifestation of the glory of God.³⁰ For Servetus the second divine being is somehow derivative from God, or a part of the one Godhead, so that God the Father would thus have an additional element.

²⁷ *Institutes* I, Ch. XIII, 21, p. 145.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

For Calvin such an incorrect presentation of this doctrine would result in an overthrow of ‘the whole glory of God’ and is a means through which the uninstructed are brought into a state of alarm and confusion.³¹ All these sects, as Calvin calls them, had done nothing else but to tear apart God’s essence and to confuse the distinction that exists between the Persons of the Trinity. Therefore, Calvin sees as being vital, the establishing of a correct representation of the doctrine of the Trinity. For him this is the only way in which the gate can be closed not only to ‘Arius and Sabellius, but to other ancient authors of errors’.³²

How can we do this, asks Calvin? His answer is by ‘holding fast to what has been sufficiently shown from Scripture: that the essence of the one God is simple and undivided, and that it belongs to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit; and on the other hand that by a certain characteristic the Father differs from the Son, and the Son from the Spirit.’³³ Calvin proceeds to use the Scripture in order to prove what he has just said. Therefore, he sees the divinity of Christ in texts such as John 1:1 where although the Word is said to have been God when the universe was not yet created, John utterly distinguishes the concept of Word from idea. Calvin concludes that if the Word was with God from eternity and had His own glory with the Father (John 17:5), it means that He could not have been an outward or figurative splendour, but of necessity it follows that He was a *hypostasis* that resides in God himself. In Genesis’ narrative Moses presents the Spirit as well, not as a shadow, but as the essential creative power of God. For Calvin this leads to the conclusion that the eternal Spirit had always been in God, while with tender care he supported the confused matter of heaven and earth, until beauty and order were added. Calvin therefore asserts with confidence that the being of God is one.

In conclusion, reading Calvin’s work on the Trinity we realise that his intention is to say that whoever does not pay attention to this doctrine, no matter how often the words of Scripture are in his mouth nor how frequently he speaks of Christ, he is not preaching the incarnate God but emptying the gospel of its specific content.

John Owen (1616-1683)

Describing the polemical context in which Owen has been involved, Carl Trueman classifies his opponents in three general categories: Papists, Arminians and Socinians, but shows that from all these three Papists were the least

³¹ Ibid., p. 147.

³² Idem.

³³ Idem.

important to Owen.³⁴ It is concluded therefore that Owen's writings are a direct attack on the doctrines of the Arminians and Socinians.³⁵ This is not surprising when we take into account the fact that from his early ministry Owen has started to exhibit his father's Puritan convictions and found very difficult to avoid debates over controversial doctrinal matters such as election and predestination which, for him, lay at the very heart of the gospel.³⁶

As Calvin before him, Owen charges the Arminians for their 'disputes of carnal reason against the Word of God'.³⁷ His writings against the Arminians began with the publication of *A Display of Arminianism* in 1642.³⁸

When Owen discusses the emphasis they placed on the teaching of Scripture about man, sin, Christ, atonement, salvation, he shows that they deny some of the basic tenets of the faith and therefore must be regarded as heretics. He describes them as 'modern blinded patrons of human self-sufficiency'³⁹ Reflecting on their doctrines, Owen calls them 'innovations in the received doctrines of the reformed churches' and views them as a direct attack on the doctrine of the Trinity.

In Owen's conflict with the Socinians the main topic of debate is Christology and consubstantiality of the Father and the Son with serious implications on the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.⁴⁰ To do this they refer to Scripture passages, also quoted by the Arians, which seem to represent the Son as inferior to the Father.⁴¹ Their basic idea is that Christ is not essentially God, but earns his position as Son of God through his work.⁴²

In their attacks on the divinity of Christ the Socinians denied His equality with the Father and the possibility of the existence of two substances in one person—

³⁴ Trueman, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

³⁵ Philip Eveson produced a valuable summary of the historical context for John Owen's doctrine of Justification in his paper "The Case for Forensic Justification in John Owen", *Seeing the Lord* (Published by The Westminster Conference, 2000), pp. 28-31.

³⁶ For a more detailed summary of Owen's Christian life see Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), pp. 1-19. Trueman also shows that Owen engaged specifically with domestic manifestations of Arminianism, particularly the 1651 writings of John Goodwin, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³⁷ *Works* X, p. 11.

³⁸ John Owen, *The Death of Christ*, vol. X (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), p. 11ff.

³⁹ *Works* X, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Trueman, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

⁴¹ For a list of the passages used by Arians see Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁴² See Trueman's detailed discussion about the Socinian criticisms of orthodox Christology, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-154.

one human one divine—without any conflict between them. The issue of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son points towards two other important theological issues which Socinians deny: the eternal pre-existence of Christ and the role of Christ in creation.⁴³ Such attacks were viewed by Owen as attempts to undermine Trinitarianisms, because the denial of the consubstantiality of the Father with the Son led to a denial of the full humanity of Christ and his agency in creation and in the work of redemption.

Therefore, for Owen the defence of the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely vital. Without a defence of this doctrine a whole range of other doctrines are severely affected. Owen sees the doctrine of the Trinity as being important for a correct understanding of other doctrines, such as the doctrine of God and His providence, the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of the covenants, the doctrine of salvation and the believer's communion with God, to mention just a few. In all these Owen sees that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have their distinctive roles to play. All three Persons of the Trinity work together for the salvation of sinners. These points are foundational in Owen's fight against Socinianism as well as against those with Arminian leanings.⁴⁴

In his work on the doctrine of the Trinity, Owen's first attempt is to defend the doctrine of Christ and he does this in his magisterial work *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (1655). In his writings Owen responds to the attacks against the divinity of Christ and His participation in the work of creation and salvation. In doing this Owen points towards the Trinitarian structure of his soteriology.

His first attempt is to prove the two natures of Jesus Christ subsisting within the one person.⁴⁵ In his fight against the Socinian denial of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, Owen shows that such a denial is due to an incorrect usage of human rationality in theological thinking and points to the importance of God's revelation.

One serious effect of the denial of the doctrine of the Trinity by the Arminians is seen in the doctrine of God the Father and His providence. Owen sees that the problems raised by the Arminians focused upon the relationship between God and His creation.

The Arminians questioned the foreknowledge of God and denied the all-governing providence of the King of nations, replacing it with a general power and influence limited and used according to the inclination and will of every

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 157-164.

⁴⁴ Eveson, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁴⁵ *Works* XII, pp. 210ff.

particular individual. Thus, Arminians deny the irresistibility and uncontrollable power of God's will, affirming that often God wills and intends what He cannot accomplish. Owen sees that the Arminians' attempt is to free themselves from 'the supreme dominion of His all-ruling providence'⁴⁶ so that they can gain their own power in every action. This means that they deny the eternity and the unchangeableness of God's decree. They are doing this because 'they fear they should be kept within bounds from doing any thing but what his counsel hath determined should be done.'⁴⁷ When God is eternal and unchangeable, human free will is limited and its independency prejudiced. In order to deny these limitations, they choose to affirm that God's decrees are temporary and changeable.

In his defence of these doctrines against Socinians, Owen shows that in creation as well as in providence the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely foundational. Carl Trueman draws attention to the fact that in Owen's theology, the Trinity does not have the status of an optional extra, but represent the necessary ontological framework of his entire soteriology.⁴⁸ For Owen, both the divine plan of salvation and Christ's work in accomplishing that salvation rest ultimately upon a correct understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Dealing with the importance of the Trinity in creation and salvation Trueman continues to shows that fundamental to Owen's doctrine of God is the traditional idea that all acts of God are acts of the whole God. Within each act, he says, there exists a specific economy in which each person of the Godhead plays a particular part. In creation and in providence the Trinity is absolutely foundational: The Father creates and governs through the Son by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹ Owen explains Trinitarian unity in the act of creation in the following words:

So it is said God made all things; and so of all other works, whether in nature and in grace. And the reason hereof is, because the several persons are undivided in their operations, acting all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power. Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, because each person is God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations; and this ariseth from the unity of the persons in the same essence.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *Works X*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ *Works X*, p. 12.

⁴⁸ Trueman, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁵⁰ *Works III*, p. 93.

He then continues to explain the distinction of this relation and order within the Trinity and then concludes saying that:

The reasons why the works of God are thus distinctly ascribed unto each person is because, in the undivided operation of the divine nature, each person doth the same work in the order of their subsistence; not one as instrument of the other, or merely employed by the other, but as one common principle of authority, wisdom, love and power.⁵¹

When Owen debates with the Socinians who, consistent with their anti-trinitarianism, ascribe the act of creation to the Father alone, based on Genesis 1:1, he answers again by asserting that ‘the Scripture plentifully ascribes this work also to the Son and the Holy Spirit.’⁵² In order to establish the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity in the work of creation, Trueman concludes very effectively saying that ‘God’s external acts may, in one sense be acts of God in unity, but they presuppose the nature of God as Trinity.’⁵³

The principle applied in creation is also applied by Owen in salvation. When Owen discusses God’s plan of salvation, he sees it as being ‘the great work of our blessed Trinity’.⁵⁴ The accomplishment of salvation is based upon specific, individual roles for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This was possible because within the unity of the Trinity there is the activity of distinct persons which Owen viewed as the result of a ‘transaction’ in eternity between the Father and the Son. At this point the doctrine of the Trinity becomes very important for Owen’s treatment on the Covenant of Redemption, which he thinks is the foundation of the covenant of grace.⁵⁵ In salvation the Father sends the Son and lays upon Him the punishment due to our sin. The Son comes into the world to offer Himself up to God for us and to intercede for all those for whom he gave Himself as an oblation.⁵⁶ The part ascribed to the Holy Spirit consists in His operation in the incarnation, the death and the resurrection of Jesus.⁵⁷ For each of these situations Owen rests his arguments on biblical texts and stands firmly within the framework of Reformed theology.

But this notion of the unity of the three persons plays also a key role in his understanding of Christ’s role in predestination. Owen’s major point of

⁵¹ *Works* III, p. 93.

⁵² *Works* XII, p. 142.

⁵³ Trueman, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁵⁴ *Works* X, p. 163.

⁵⁵ See S. Ferguson’s treatment on Owen’s Covenant of Redemption, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-27.

⁵⁶ *Works* X, pp. 174-177.

⁵⁷ *Works* X, pp. 178-179.

disagreement on this issue with the Arminians is that he regards predestination as originating solely in the being of God and not as a result of God's foreknowledge or of any human act of faith. He charges the Arminians for their attempt to 'demolish this rock of our salvation'.⁵⁸ And they do this in order to 'vindicate unto themselves a power and independent ability of doing good, of making themselves to differ from others, of attaining everlasting happiness, without going one step from without themselves'.⁵⁹ Owen sees predestination as being 'a part of God's providence concerning his creatures'.⁶⁰

Finally, the doctrine of the Trinity plays for Owen an important part in the believer's communion with God. The Christian is the object of a great work of God the Spirit. Expounding on John Owen's *Communion with God*, Sinclair Ferguson shows that in terms of status and experience, he has been brought from a condition of alienation from God to communion with Him. Therefore, he concludes, the Christian life is nothing less than fellowship with God the Trinity, leading to the full assurance of faith.⁶¹ Owen shows that our communion is a distinct one with each person of the Trinity.⁶² With God the Father it is 'in free, undeserved and eternal love'⁶³, with the Son it is in grace, as we receive from Him 'all manner of grace whatever; and therein have we fellowship with Him'⁶⁴, and with the Spirit our communion is known through His various ministries performed in our life: His indwelling, anointing and sealing.⁶⁵ The apex of the Christian's communion with the Trinity is worship according to the rule of Scripture and under the guidance of the Spirit. Owen is careful to show that the Christian cannot worship one person and not worship the other two in the Trinity. True fellowship takes place only when each person of the Trinity is worshipped. This is the high calling and privilege of the Christian.

In conclusion, we see that for John Owen all God's dealing with men and all true knowledge of God are Trinitarian. In the work of salvation all three Persons of the Trinity work together for the salvation of sinners. With respect to men the Bible clearly emphasizes that no one knows the Father unless it is through Jesus, His Son and no one, comes to the Son unless he is led by the Spirit. So, the Holy Spirit leads us to the Son through whom we have access to the Father.

⁵⁸ *Works* X, p. 53.

⁵⁹ *Works* X, p. 53.

⁶⁰ *Works* X, p. 53.

⁶¹ Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁶² *Works* II, pp. 9ff.

⁶³ *Works* II, p. 19. See also Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.

⁶⁴ *Works* II, p.47. See also Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-92.

⁶⁵ Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-98.

Trinitarianism is the way in which God revealed Himself to men and the way in which man is able to know God the Father.

Francis Turretin (1623-1687)

Francis Turretin did his theological work one century after Calvin.⁶⁶ His intention was to consolidate and preserve Reformed theology. His endeavour to achieve that has won him the description of a ‘orthodox zealot’.⁶⁷ He sought to do so by using the theological methods of scholasticism, which laid emphasis on definition, logic and method. This development was necessary because Calvin had written his theology out of the exuberance of a revival of faith without time for sufficient attention to theological niceties. During the century after Calvin, the Lutherans, the Anabaptists and among the Reformed themselves a premium was placed upon definition and logic.

As a churchman, Turretin also felt an obligation to battle the rising tides of rationalism, tolerance and secularism which were about to engulf Europe.⁶⁸ When Turretin proposes to deal with the subject of the Holy Trinity he sees the subject as being important for discussions not because this ‘adorable mystery’ can be proved, but because the authority of the divine revelation alone proposes it to be received by faith and adored with love.⁶⁹ While he does this, Turretin explains the meaning of the words which describe the Trinity.⁷⁰ He is likewise concerned to say a few things about their use. This concern has arisen from the importunity of the heretics whom he identifies as the Arians, Sabellians and other anti-Trinitarians. In his treatment on the Trinity he also sees the Socinians and the Arminians, as being in fact in agreement with them in their thinking.⁷¹

Like Calvin before him, Turretin argues for the justifiable use of these terms in the church despite the fact that they do not occur in the Scriptures. Turretin suggests that these opponents reject the use of these words because they are ‘unwilling to receive the things designed by them’. Once the cause of their rejection is identified Turretin sets up as objective to give reasons for their use, saying:

⁶⁶ Leith, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

⁶⁷ James T. Dennison, Jr., ‘The Twilight of Scholasticism: Francis Turretin at the Dawn of the Enlightenment’, in *Protestant Scholasticism*, edited by Carl Trueman and R. S. Clark (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1999), p. 245.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

⁶⁹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, translated by George Musgrave Ginger and edited by James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburgh: P&R, 1992), p. 253.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 253-257.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

Knowing that with the words they might abolish the doctrine also, we therefore did right in retaining them and insist on their use being not only lawful, but also beneficial and necessary for repressing the pertinacity of heretics and for bringing them out of their lurking places.⁷²

The first allusions made by Turretin to the importance of this doctrine is expressed in his concern that by the rejection of these words, and implicitly the rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, the church can be contaminated by the seed of dissension and new doctrines veiled under new words.⁷³ Thus Turretin proceeds to show why the doctrine of the Trinity is a fundamental article of our faith. Its importance is first established not only against the Socinians, who deny it to be an article of faith, but also against the Remonstrants, who deny its place among the fundamental articles and its importance for the doctrine of salvation. For Turretin not only the denial, but also the simple ignorance of the Trinity is damnable and inconsistent with salvation.⁷⁴ Thus Turretin maintains that the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely important for at least a few reasons.

Firstly, the doctrine of the Trinity is important for the possession of our eternal life. Based on the text of Scripture to have eternal life is conditioned by a knowledge of the Trinity. Or to put it in other words, eternal life is contained within the knowledge of the Trinity. The biblical text suggested by Turretin in support of this argument is the one where Christ asserted: ‘And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent’ (John 17:3). Here Jesus is not just a human being but the second Person of the Trinity sent by the Father in the world. For those who object that Jesus is here spoken of not as God, but as the Mediator sent by God, Turretin employs parallel passages where Scripture speaks of Him as of the true God, the primary object of faith.⁷⁵

Secondly, Turretin explains that the doctrine of the Trinity is important because it contains the primary object of faith and worship, the confession of which our baptism necessarily includes (Matthew 29:19). He shows that those that are saved and confess their faith must know who God is and how He presents Himself to us in His word. For Turretin God is revealed in His word as one in essence and three in Persons. Whoever denies this does nothing else but to prove that he does not know God. A denial of the doctrine of the Trinity has a direct effect upon the worship. Turretin explains this aspect drawing attention to the

⁷² Ibid., pp. 258-259.

⁷³ Idem.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 261.

⁷⁵ Scripture texts are given in Ibid., p. 262.

fact that His deity is proven from invocation, because ‘grace and peace and other spiritual blessings (which can be expected from God alone) are sought from Christ no less than from the Father in the epistles of Paul.’⁷⁶ So far we notice that in his treatment of this doctrine, Turretin draws attention to a theoretical aspect of the Trinity as well as to a practical one. In the same context of worship, Turretin explains that the practical aspect of the doctrine is seen in the fact that it contributes to the gratitude and worship of God and to the consolation so that we may know that Christ has truly redeemed us and that our salvation is securely positioned. Thus we devote our faith and service to the Triune God who has revealed Himself to us.⁷⁷

Thirdly, Turretin shows that the doctrine of the Trinity is important because it influences many other vital doctrines that are related to the mission and work of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Therefore a denial of the Trinity would automatically lead to a denial of these doctrines. Without them, says Turretin, we would not know the principal causes of salvation: the grace of the Father, the merit of the Son and the sanctification of the Holy Spirit, and consequently we would not know salvation itself. For Turretin to ascribe these qualities to a created being amounts to blasphemy, therefore the conclusion is that the Person to which these are ascribed can only be divine.

And fourthly and finally this doctrine is important because it distinguishes us from other religions such as Jews, Mohammedans and the heathen. Below Bavinck will say the same thing but using the expression ‘the differentiating earmark of our religion’.⁷⁸

In conclusion, we see a striking similarity between the way in which all reformed theologians present the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. The emphasis is on its importance for salvation and man’s relationship with God the Father.

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)

Herman Bavinck was a leading theologian of the neo-Calvinist revival initiated a century ago in the Dutch Reformed Church.⁷⁹ In his scholarly work he showed a remarkable sensitivity to nineteenth century developments. His first concern was to apply the full scholarly resources of his own age to a renewal of the

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 289.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 263.

⁷⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 145.

⁷⁹ Walter, A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p.129.

dogmatic tradition represented by seventeenth century Reformed scholastic theology.

Like most reformed theologians before him, Bavinck always insisted on the primacy of Scripture. Bavinck traces back the historical battle against the doctrine of the Trinity and speaks about two major views which contradict this truth—Arianism and Sabellianism—and then cautions the church with regard to the importance of guarding the truth against these anti-trinitarian views.⁸⁰

Bavinck makes sure to clarify that we are not dealing here with an abstract concept or a scientific proposition about the nature of Divinity, but with God who reveals Himself in His word as a Triune God.⁸¹ He contests against those people who see no value in it for religious life. His attack against them is constructed upon the history of God's revelation as a Triune God. He proves that this doctrine is not the product of human discovery but a confession which was materially concluded in the Gospel and in the whole Word of God. In short, it is a doctrine which was inferred by Christian faith from the revelation of God.⁸²

Such an approach makes this subject important for our study, and due to its nature demands from us an attitude characterised by holy respect, holy reverence and childlike awe. Bavinck considers this subject in the context of the Christian church which always confessed the revelation of God as the Triune God. He makes allusion to the Twelve Article of the Apostles' Creed, and in doing so he applies the principal established here from the outset, namely that all the reformed theologians have dealt with this doctrine in its historical context and in connection with what was going on in the tradition of the church before their time. The confession of the believer is that he believes in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ His only begotten Son, and in the Holy Spirit: he believes in the Triune God.⁸³

The believer confesses that he has surrendered his life to God as Father, God as Son, and God as Holy Spirit. God has created him, redeemed him, sanctified him and glorified him as Father, Son and Spirit. In other words, what we have here is very similar to what we saw earlier in Turretin's treatment on this doctrine. At this point we can, therefore, say that the doctrine of the Trinity is important for our intellectual and practical aspects of our faith. The Triune God is important for our life and salvation.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 156-158.

⁸¹ Bavinck, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

⁸² Ibid., p. 147.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 144.

In order to deal with the subject in some more detail we need to show that Bavinck, like Turretin before him, asserts right from the beginning that the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely vital for a correct knowledge of who and what God is.⁸⁴ The fullest content and the profoundest meaning of all the attributes of His being are to be achieved only in this holy Trinity. Bavinck continues to describe the unity that exists in the Divine Being. He does that by alluding to the works and order of creation and then concludes with a sharp affirmation regarding the importance of this doctrine, saying: ‘Therefore, the article of the holy trinity is the heart and core of our confession, the differentiating earmark of our religion, and the praise and comfort of all true believers of Christ.’⁸⁵

Bavinck also makes clear that the doctrine of the Trinity is important for the work of creation and salvation given to the people of Israel in the Old Testament.⁸⁶ He supports this affirmation making reference to the teaching of the Old Testament where God brings everything into being by His Word and Spirit. This truth is expressed most gloriously in the words and songs of the Psalms. God speaks and is done; He commands and it stands fast.

But alongside this word of power and wisdom comes the Spirit of God as the Mediator of the creation. Just as God is power and wisdom He Himself is Spirit in His being, that Spirit by which He can dwell in the world and be always and everywhere present in it. At the beginning that Spirit moved upon the face of the waters and He remains active in all that was created.

And this self-diversity of God comes out even more in the works of re-creation. Then it is not Elohim, but Jehovah, not God in general, but the Lord, the God of the covenant, who reveals Himself and who makes Himself known in wonders of redemption and salvation. Referring to the Angel of the Lord, Bavinck distinguishes Him from God, and yet presents him one in Name with God Himself, and in power, in redemption and blessing in worshipfulness and honour.

Bavinck proceeds to explain how much more evident is the importance of this doctrine in the New Testament and points to the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is important for a correct understanding of incarnation, atonement and resurrection. The promises and announcements made in the Old Testament are

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 143.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 145.

⁸⁶ A detail account about the specific works performed by each Person of the Trinity in the Old Testament is given in Ibid., pp. 146-151.

fully satisfied in the New Testament. In this respect Bavinck shows that the unity or oneness of God is the point of departure of all New Testament revelation. But in the New Testament out of this oneness the difference in the Divine being comes out into much clearer light. This happens first in the great redemptive events of incarnation, satisfaction and outpouring. Bavinck maintains that the work of salvation is a work of God from beginning to end, but there are three high moments in it: election, forgiveness and renewal, and these three point to a threefold cause in the Divine being: that is, to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁸⁷ Father, Son and Spirit are in their oneness and their distinction the fullness of the perfected revelation of God. According to the apostles the whole good and salvation of man is contained in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁸

Just as all things are *of* the Father and *through* the Son, they all exist and rest *in* the Holy Spirit. The good pleasure, the foreknowledge, the power, the love, the kingdom and the strength are the Father's. The Mediatorship, the reconciliation, the grace, and the redemption are the Son's. The regeneration, the renewal, the sanctification, the redemption are the Spirit's. Just as no one comes to the Father but through the Son, so no one can say that Jesus is the Lord except through the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit we have fellowship with the Father and the Son. It is in the Holy Spirit that God Himself through Christ dwells in our hearts. And if this all be so, then the Holy Spirit is, together with the Son and the Father, the one, true God, and is to be eternally lauded and praised as such.⁸⁹

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

There are several conclusions that we could draw from our consideration of this doctrine. The main purpose of all the Reformed theologians in their study on the doctrine of the Trinity was to secure the Biblical message and to safeguard the Biblical truth with respect to this teaching. They spoke and wrote according the Scriptures. Their desire was to prove from Scripture that Reformed theology has to do with one God who is personally and always related to his creation in three ways: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The insistence that the object of faith is the Triune God has been a characteristic of Reformed theology. The God whom Christians worship is the Lord God who creates the heavens and the earth and the Holy Spirit who gives comfort, as well as the God who encounters his people and redeems them in Jesus Christ.

⁸⁷ For full details see *Ibid.*, pp. 151-158.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Although sometimes it is difficult even for Christians to hold the Trinity of Persons together in the unity of a single divine being, yet, as Gerald Bray shows, without the Trinity there would be no Christianity.⁹⁰ Our belief in the saving work of Christ the Son of God, and in the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit demands that we worship God in this Trinitarian way. All the reformed theologians studied in the content of this article agree that the doctrine of the Trinity points towards the importance of the Holy Trinity both for our mind and heart. All the reformed theologians wrote as churchmen, concerned with preaching, worship and pastoral care. But they also wrote as good exegetes of Scripture which was stimulating intellectually and challenging spiritually. They were all aware of the fact that an incorrect presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity will directly affect the standing ground of the believer—the message of the Bible. And without a defence of this doctrine a whole range of other doctrines are severely affected.

Therefore, the reformed theologians knew that by its confession the church is able, on the one hand, to take a strong position against the heresies of Arianism, Modalism, Socinianism, and on the other hand, to influence a correct understanding of other important doctrines of the Bible.

Reformed theology maintains both the unity and diversity in the being of God. The Divine being is one: there is but one Being that is God and that may be called God. They showed that the unity of the world, of mankind, of truth, of virtue, of justice, and of beauty depends upon the unity of God. The moment that unity of God is denied or understressed the door is open to polytheism. The reformed theologians explained that according to Scripture, this unity comprises difference, or distinction, or diversity. It is that diversity which comes to expression in the three persons or modes of being of God. These three persons are not merely three modes of revelation. They are modes of being. Father, Son and Spirit share one and the same Divine nature and characteristics. God is our Creator who brought us into being by His will as creatures distinct from Him in kind. He is our Redeemer who saves us by the riches of grace. He is our Sanctifier who dwells in us as in His temple. As the triune God He is one God and is above us, for us, and in us.

But in Reformed theology the doctrine of the Trinity is also of the greatest importance for the spiritual life of the believer. Quite unjustifiably it is sometimes maintained that the doctrine of the trinity is merely a philosophically

⁹⁰ Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 111. See also the discussion “All Analogies have Shortcomings”, in Grudem, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-241.

abstracted dogma and that it possesses no value for religion and life. But when we believe in the trinity we notice that this doctrine stands in an intimate relationship with our experience as the children of God. We believe that God the Father is the Creator of all things and He supplies for every need of body and soul. He is faithful and Almighty and will do He has promised to do. He has sent the Son who was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit. He is our Saviour, who redeemed us with His own blood, died and rose again and is now ascended in glory and constantly intercedes for us with the Father. Christ has sent His Spirit who is working in us and leads us into all truth, preserving us for our eternal inheritance.

Thus, the confession of the Trinity is the sum of the Christian religion. Without it neither the creation nor the redemption nor the sanctification can be purely maintained. Every departure from this confession leads to error in the other vital and fundamental doctrines. We can truly proclaim the mighty works of God only when we recognize and confess them as the one great work of Father, Son and Spirit.

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Adiaphora: A Christian response to a culture of tolerance, censorship, and ostracism¹

Ovidiu Hanc²

ABSTRACT

The society in which we live is marked by various social upheavals despite the fact that one of the fundamental values is *tolerance*. The phenomenon of cancel culture, hate culture, censorship, and ostracism, is propagated by all modern means of communication and is apparently very difficult to combat or eradicate. The problem of differences of opinion and dogmatic and practical dissent can also be found in the first century church. The Apostle Paul stresses the need for doctrinal unity in fundamental beliefs, but in secondary matters he writes to the church in Rome to seek mutual acceptance and avoid mutual judgment. The problem of dissension in small things is called *adiaphora* and has to do with those matters in the area which are neither forbidden nor commanded.

The present paper seeks to examine the aspect of Christian acceptance in relation to secular tolerance and to highlight the paradigm that Paul proposes in seeking a solution to the alienation that can arise in a community due to differences of opinion. The Pauline paradigm is one worth considering as a social model in the context where conflicts of opinion arise.

KEY WORDS

Adiaphora, cancel culture, Christian acceptance, tolerance, disagreement.

INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest problems in life is how to live in harmony with someone who is totally different. Today's society heralds *tolerance* as a fundamental value, nevertheless the society is often characterised by various forms of hate culture and intolerance. The phenomenon of “cancel culture” is increasingly present and increasingly recognised. The expression “cancel culture” is a method of censoring and ostracising a person. “The term is shambolically applied to

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incidents both online and off that range from vigilante justice to hostile debate to stalking, intimidation and harassment.”³ Cancel culture is a social phenomenon that is facilitated mainly through social media, but the problem of criticism and ostracism has always existed in society.

This problem of relating to those who have different views was also present in the Christian society of the first century. In the case of Christians, there are things that can cause disputes over different interpretation of various teachings and dogmas. Disagreement over unimportant issues (issues that have no theological major implications) is called *adiaphora* (‘things indifferent’), things that are neither forbidden nor commanded.⁴ These are the things that are not important in the process of salvation. Paul writes about these things that are related to personal beliefs in Romans 14, things like food and special days.⁵ The command Paul gives to the Romans about things that are not essential to faith⁶ points to acceptance and unity in the Church. On the other hand, when we talk about the relationship between a Christian and a non-Christian, the way of relating to those outside the community of faith is based on the duty to present the Gospel of Christ and his righteousness (Romans 1.14-17).

The objectives of this paper are to examine how Paul encourages the Christian community to deal with disputes within a community. This can provide a model for how to relate in any community when dissension and divergent or even contradictory views arise. In order to do so, it is important to establish the boundaries between Christian acceptance and secular tolerance. What are the boundaries between tolerance and compromise? Should Christians seek unity with someone living in sin? In a context of pluralism and syncretism, how should Christians develop relationships without rejecting the person, but rejecting their sin? How should we present an objective and universal truth in a society that hates those who believe in absolutes? What are the limits of Christian freedom? What is the common ground when you disagree with your brother in faith?

³ Ligaya Mishan, ‘The Long and Tortured History of Cancel Culture’, *The New York Times*, 3 December 2020, sec. T Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/t-magazine/cancel-culture-history.html>.

⁴ Lucy Winkett, “‘Things Indifferent’ or ‘Necessary for Salvation’?: Reading Scripture in an Age of Slogans and Tweets’, *Modern Believing* 61, no. 4 (2020): 329; P. Toon, ‘Adiaphora’, in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 5; F. F Bruce, ‘Freedom, Christian’, in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 264.

⁵ Gundry-Volf, Judith M, ‘Conscience’, in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 155.

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, ‘Romans’, in *New Bible Commentary*, ed. Gordon J. Wenham et al. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1994), 1491.

The methodology we use is primarily analytical and descriptive of the historical context of the Church in Rome. Roman society in the first century was a pluralistic society based on polytheistic tolerance. The state religion was the cult of the emperor, but society was made up of a diversity of religious beliefs and philosophical ideas. When Christianity emerged from within Judaism, the problem was not that it was not accepted, but that Christians accepted no other way of salvation and worship than Jesus Christ. Religious exclusivism, as found in Judaism and Christianity, was unthinkable to the Roman religious mind. The conflict between Roman polytheism and Christian monotheism marked the history of Christianity by strong persecution. Roman polytheistic tolerance did not accept the exclusivism of Christian dogma. In this research the focus is on how Christian acceptance was understood and applied within the Christian community. In addition, it is important to analyse today's *tolerance* to see how we should apply the teachings of Scripture in a society that rejects the fundamental values and basic assumptions of Christianity.

CHRISTIAN ACCEPTANCE – ROMANS 14

The *weak* and the *strong*

In Romans 14, Paul deals with the subject of accepting one another despite our differences on certain issues. In Rome there were two different groups of Christians that Paul describes, namely the weak and the strong. Paul dealt with a similar subject in 1 Corinthians, when he answered questions about food offered to idols. The issues that are discussed here relate to food (vv. 2, 6, 21), special days (vv. 5-6 - probably feast days or even the Sabbath) and drinking wine (vv. 17, 21).⁷

Those portrayed as weak were Jewish converts and Gentile proselytes. In a Jewish context, matters of food and special days were about personal integrity. Some believers who received Christ found it difficult to regard some food as appropriate, so they began to question the spiritual integrity of those who regarded these matters as totally unimportant. The command Paul gives is not to make their beliefs the standard for others (v.19).

Those who considered themselves strong were those who considered salvation by grace alone and not by the Law. Those that were weak perceived the others as living against the Christian faith and compromising the teaching, while the strong ones viewed the weak in a judgmental manner through the freedom found

⁷ It's not certain if this was a real issue Paul was addressing or just an example he gives to build his argument.

in Christ and began to ridicule them. The problem was judgement over small and unimportant things destroyed unity of the Body of Christ: the Church.

THE SEARCH FOR A COMMON GROUND

In the search for common ground of acceptance, we need to mention a few important aspects: First, the difference between Paul's emphasis on this topic and the tone he used in his letter to the Galatians is due to the fact that convictions on the disputed issues were not constrained to following the law as a means of salvation. Paul's response is that these issues are really irrelevant and that they pertain to personal convictions (Rom. 14:3, 5, 6, 14). He is one of the strong (Rom. 15:1) and believes that everyone lives to please the Lord. Paul does not discuss his reasons for holding one position or another. Personal motives are not the issue (Rom.14.6). Second, he asks the strong not to impose their freedom on the weak brother, and he asks the weak not to judge the strong. If reconciliation is not possible, then he asks the strong not to benefit from their freedom, because this makes the weak sin. Conduct that is not sinful can lead to sin. We somehow expect to hear Paul asking those that are weak to grow up and become mature in their faith, but this is not so. Paul is referring primarily to the strong to take the first step toward reconciliation. The strong are not to be cornered by the limits of personal ambition or the taboos of the week but are to be sensitive so that no one is compromised. (Rom. 14:15). Such conduct is based on the example Christ set.

Third, the effect of disagreement influences not only those in the church, but also those who are not saved, and for this reason everyone must seek righteousness and peace and joy (v.17). Fourth, the reason for Paul's argument is the work of Christ for both Jew and Gentile, weak and strong, male and female, and the result must be the glory of God. The essence of unity is found in Christ, who came to die for all. Paul's goal was mutual respect and acceptance of one another. Jaquette noted that Paul's view of life and death is secondary to honouring and living with Christ. "But because all Christians exist in relation to Christ and thus are oriented towards one another the decisions of their conscience are not the sole litigants in matters of conduct related to the ἀδιάφορα."⁸ The main point of the argument is not to let anyone create hindrances for a brother. Christian freedom is limited to the personal conviction of the weakest believer, so unity within the Church must be built at the cost of personal freedom.

In analysing this argument it is important to ask whether the concept of Christian tolerance should be defined on the basis of this text. This call for acceptance can very easily be taken as an argument for tolerance, but the difference between

⁸ James L. Jaquette, 'Life and Death, Adiaphora, and Paul's Rhetorical Strategies', *Novum Testamentum* 38, no. 1 (1996): 22.

Christian acceptance and secular tolerance is made by the salvation found in Christ. Christianity seeks peace, understanding and respect, but not at the price of theological compromise. D. A. Carson rightly pointed out that the undeniable aspects such as the resurrection of Christ represents the essential, bedrock elements of the Christian faith that are not to be negotiated. Carson outlines ten extremely valid criteria that define disputable theological issues.⁹ It is absolutely vital to distinguish between the fundamental and secondary elements of the Christian faith, otherwise it is impossible to develop a biblical practice of mutual acceptance.

FROM TOLERANCE TO CENSORSHIP

Since the postmodern period, one of the core values of society today is tolerance. Postmodernism is a movement based on relativism and pluralism.¹⁰ It gives great importance to social entities and subjectivity within the local community. There is no objective, absolute truth, but local truths. Belief in absolute truth makes one guilty of intolerance and arrogance. Truth is a product of local society, and something is true if it is true for the individual or a community. Not just specific beliefs, but our understanding of truth itself is rooted in community.¹¹ Thus, *truth* is not discovered but constructed, therefore it is subjective, relative, and situational. Since postmodern epistemology holds that truth does not exist, any attempt to discover it is futile. Moreover, the claim to know the truth is seen today as arrogant and dangerous because it will end in a wrong attitude towards others. Truth is described as persuasive and normative.

In order to avoid conflict between communities, the greatest virtue must be tolerance. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Alan Bloom writes: “The point is not to correct wrongs and be truly right; rather, it is not to believe you are right at all.”¹² In such a setting, Christians are seen as chauvinistic because of their belief in the Bible as the Word of God – an absolute truth.

The rejection of metanarratives is essential to postmodernism because the rejection of universal truth is the cornerstone of its ideology. Metanarrative implies that there is a universal truth that defines the world. As far as the text of any writing is concerned, it is the reader who gives meaning to the text, not the

⁹ Donald A Carson, ‘On Disputable Matters’, *Themelios* 40, no. 3 (2015): 384.

¹⁰ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1994), 13.

¹¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 14.

¹² Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 25.

text itself. Narratives are about interpretation, not truth. The social narrative has no legitimacy beyond the community.

The philosophical problem with postmodernism's tolerance is that it is built against the law of non-contradiction. Truth is exclusivist par excellence. Two different ideas can exist, but two opposing ideas cannot coexist. In the labyrinth of tolerance, assertions are against the law of non-contradiction. Two contradictory facts cannot both be true. Both can be wrong, but only one can be true.

Another problem of postmodern philosophy is not only dogmatic, but also ethical. Without truth we cannot have morality, and without morality we cannot have justice. Truth and justice cannot exist without each other. In the name of tolerance we should destroy all courts of law, because all judgement is built on a moral basis and on universal truth.

SOCIAL VALUES

To provide an answer to the conflicts that can arise between 'truths', the solution that emerges is pluralism and relativism. Postmodern consciousness presupposes a radical kind of relativism and pluralism. Nowadays, tolerance is no longer about having one belief system and respecting those who have another but is the mixing of all beliefs. Common ground is not only desirable, but also mandatory. Tolerance is often confused with respect, but the two attitudes are different because one can tolerate a person but not respect them.

The new emphasis on pluralism is not individual but communal. In order for this idea to work, the epistemological paradigm had to shift from universal truth based on logic to subjective interpretation of truth. The biggest problem from this point of view is not being wrong but being intolerant. For tolerance, intolerance is not tolerated. If tolerance is the core value, then the greatest evil is intolerance. Jürgen Habermas, a strong critic of the philosophical postmodernism argued convincingly that postmodernism contradicts itself through self-reference.¹³ Habermas is correct not only in his reasoning by stating that postmodernism is an illicit aestheticization of knowledge and public discourse.¹⁴ Postmodernism has not been universally well received within sociology. From a social point of view, tolerance has turned out to be rather utopian. When tolerance moves beyond mutual respect towards relativism,

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Kenneth H. Tucker, 'Aesthetics, Play, and Cultural Memory: Giddens and Habermas on the Postmodern Challenge', *Sociological Theory* 11, no. 2 (1993): 194–211.

tolerance becomes intolerant. Relativism becomes the Trojan horse for the concept of tolerance.

From a Christian point of view, today's tolerance represents the first step towards ethical relativism and sin. Secular tolerance is compatible with Christian acceptance, but Christian acceptance is not compatible with secular tolerance. The difference is made by sin. The Christian acceptance Paul speaks of in Romans is something totally different from today's tolerance. The problem facing the believer today in the context of modern tolerance is that the proclamation of Christian beliefs tends to become something that can no longer be accepted. Christian beliefs in their essence are perceived as intolerant on the basis that they proclaim an absolute truth. Thus, proclaiming religious truths is dangerous. Pluralism today is understood not in terms of the tolerance of other's view but in terms of duty to render other's view as equal in value. The outcome of this pluralism is relativism

The result of this pluralism is relativism, and any deviation from this relativism must be censored. In this way, tolerance turns into censorship, starting from mutual acceptance. The problem with this transition from mutual acceptance to relativism is the sacrifice of truth. It is as if we were forced to accept that one plus two equals four, simply because anyone who claims that the result is three is exclusivist and expresses an arrogance of knowledge.

A PRACTICAL APPROACH

The end product of today's tolerance is not changing things that are wrong, but trying to eliminate right/wrong categories. People are thus unable to know the truth. Tolerance thus becomes the virtue of those who no longer believe in truth but only in mutual acceptance.

Christianity believes that truth is not created by a society and is not bound to a particular culture. The truthfulness of Christian truth from the point of view of tolerance is arrogance. However, to affirm something that is true is not the hallmark of arrogance, but of honesty. A person who proclaims a truth may be arrogant, but this does not undermine the value of the truth declared. From a Christian point of view, arrogance is a sin, and truth must be affirmed in love. The goal of Christians should be to present the message of salvation found in Christ. Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to try to live in peace (Rom. 12:18), so from the point of view of tolerance, peace and mutual respect is a fundamental good ground for the Christian mandate.

RELATIONSHIP WITHIN THE CHURCH: ACCEPTANCE

Paul's call for unity within the church should be based on unity on big issues. When we speak of *adiaphora*, both the weak and the strong should seek acceptance, and when this is not possible, the strong should limit their freedom. Believers need to accept those who hold a different view on various secondary beliefs. A Christian might have prejudices about the whole Christian freedom to which others are completely committed.¹⁵ When talking about differences between Christian groups, the approach should be based on loving people; building relationships based on similar values/dogmas and respect based on different ideas.

RELATIONSHIP OUTSIDE THE CHURCH: RESPECT VS. OSTRACISM

When there is a disagreement with someone outside the Christian church, the process of reconciliation must start from mutual respect. The approach of the Christian believer must be based first and foremost on loving people (individual relational approach); a strong apologetic strategy and a wise missiological strategy (lovingly towards people and hatefully towards sin).

In reality, the whole philosophical system of today's tolerance is aimed at protecting sin. Because of this, it is difficult to relate to someone who hides this under the umbrella of tolerance. The real outcome of tolerance is the protection of sin. Today's tolerance is an artifact to get rid of the problems of the soul called sin. In spite of this, the truth of the Gospel is really the only solution for peace (Rom. 14:17), a truth that has the power to change people (Romans 15:18-19).

Besides all this, openness to a soteriological truth is found in a relationship based on love. The paradigm of Paul's response to the church in Rome, where there were differences, is that the knowledge of truth should determine the believer to live a loving and truthful life. The Gospel is the only way an individual can be transformed, a change that will impact the community.

When we speak of *adiaphora*, a Christian must seek unity and if the truth of salvation is not in danger he must limit even his freedom to build a Christ-like brotherly love. When we speak of tolerance, the Christian must build wise relationship, must have a strong apologetic and missiological strategy to proclaim the universal truth of salvation. Diluting Christian truth in the pot of syncretistic tolerance in order to have unity is not an option.

¹⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38b (Dallas: Word, 2002), 803.

CONCLUSION

Disagreement about small things is what we call *adiaphora*, things that are neither forbidden nor commanded. When Paul writes to the Romans about these, he is asking for acceptance and unity in the Church. The objective of this article was to draw the line between Christian acceptance and secular tolerance. What is the common ground when you disagree with your brother in faith? What is the common ground when you disagree with a tolerant postmodernist?

First century Roman society was a pluralistic society based on tolerance and bears many similarities to postmodern society. In Romans 14, Paul deals with the subject of accepting the other despite differences on some issues. The problem was judgement over small and unimportant things that destroyed unity around the main thing: salvation.

The main thrust of the argument is not to let anyone create obstacles for a brother. Christian freedom is limited to the personal conviction of the weakest believer, so unity within the Church must be built at the cost of personal freedom.

Christianity seeks peace, understanding and respect, but not at any price. Today's tolerance seeks peace, understanding and respect, even if the price is truth itself. The rejection of Christian dogma is not based on demonstrating its falsity, but on its claims to be true. The social unrest of recent decades has shown that postmodern tolerance has not delivered what it promised. Rather, movements such as cancel culture, hate culture, woke culture, etc. attest to the fact that political, social, and philosophical solutions have not been able to resolve the alienation that exists in any community.

When we speak of *adiaphora*, a Christian must seek unity and, if the truth of salvation is not at stake, must limit even his freedom in order to build a Christ-like brotherly love.

When we speak of postmodern tolerance, the Christian must build a wise relationship, a strong apologetic and a sensitive missiological strategy with postmodern man in order to proclaim the universal truth of salvation.

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Preaching Gospel Parables: Some Guidelines.

Hamilton Moore¹

ABSTRACT

Jesus taught in many different situations and used various form of teaching, including often parables. This article discusses the nature of parables and the history of their interpretation. This history outlines early allegorical interpretation, the Middle Ages, the time of the reformation, and their treatment in modern Biblical scholarship in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century. With modern approaches to the study of the text we find recent existentialist, artistic and literary approaches to the parables. Often the reconstructing of any historical context for the parables is understood as a misguided goal since the parables ought to be understood solely as units of literature. Yet this article still wishes to hold to authorial intent, to place the story in the culture and context of the life of Jesus and to endeavour to look for the point of the parable which Jesus intended it to make. All this leads to guidelines as to how these Gospel parables ought to be approached today.

KEY WORDS

Parables, allegory, the new hermeneutic, Palestinian culture, preaching.

JESUS' PREACHING

Jesus taught in many different situations; in the synagogues, (Mark 1:21); the temple, (Mark 11:15-17; Luke 21:37-38); in cities and villages, (Matthew 9:35); by the sea, (Mark 2:13); in the street, (Luke 13:26); on a mountain, (Matthew 5:1-2); in a home, (Mark 14:3; Luke 22:11; John 13:1-14:31). His teaching was arresting, simple and intelligible, permanently memorable. The common people thronged to hear him, (Mark 12:37).

His teaching reflected arresting forms. He used sharp black and white contrasts, hyperbole, shocking statements to awaken men, e.g., speaks of hating father and mother, (Luke 14:26), which was an overstatement typical of Eastern speech (the parallel in Matthew 10:37 uses "more than me" i.e., loving Jesus less). He speaks of things which would be ridiculous e.g., the speck and the log in

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Matthew 7:3. He did not dilute uncompromising statements e.g., “Sell all” in Luke 18:22 does not mean 50%.

He used proverbs, e.g., Matthew 7:6 “Do not cast pearls before swine”; Mark 3:25 the house divided against itself; Matthew 26:52, “all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” There is poetic parallelism, e.g., Mark 8:35, saving one’s life but losing it; losing life to save it. Luke 6:27f. loving enemies, doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse, praying for those who abuse. There are Epigrams, unforgettable sayings which stay in the mind, e.g., Luke 9:62 “No man who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” There is the use of paradoxes where a statement seems incredible until it is thought through e.g., in the Beatitudes, the poor in spirit have the kingdom of heaven, (Matthew 5:3), where the world’s standards are contradicted. Or we find *reductio ad absurdum*, where Satan casts out Satan, (Mark 3:23-26; a *fortiori* argument, using “How much more...” Matthew 7:11. But on many occasions, one finds with Jesus the use of Parables.

THE NATURE OF PARABLES

“Parable” comes from the Greek word *parabolē* which generally is defined as a comparison or an analogy.² It is derived from two Greek words *para*, “beside” and *ballō* “to throw” meaning literally, “to place alongside” suggesting a comparison in some way between the two; between something commonplace, well known and a spiritual reality i.e., to teach a spiritual truth.³ Wenham⁴ points out that the equivalent word in Hebrew is *mâshâl* stating that “the Greek word ‘parable’ (*parabole*), and particularly the Hebrew and Aramaic word (*mashal/mathla*) are very broad terms, which can be used of pictorial sayings and stories of all sorts.” Parables were used in the OT also, e.g., 2 Samuel 12:1-14 (Nathan to David) and by the Jewish rabbis.

Parables occupy up to one-third of Jesus’ recorded teaching. Some claim there are 60 parables but others only 30. The issue concerns how many of Jesus’ figurative sayings are really identified as parables. Jesus used nature and

² The word *parabolē* used in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, is found 50 times in 48 verses. Twice it appears in Hebrews for the tabernacle as a symbol “for the present age” (9:9) and for Abraham’s belief that God could even raise Isaac from the dead, “from which figuratively speaking he did receive him back,” (11:19).

³ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove Il.,: InterVarsity Press; London: InterVarsity Press, 2017), quotes the definition of parables published in BDAG, 759, “a narrative or saying of varying length, designed to illustrate a truth especially through comparison or ‘simile.’” It can be translated as “comparison, illustration, parable, proverb, maxim,” 93.

⁴ D. Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 12.

incidents in daily life to illuminate spiritual truth thus going from known to the unknown. Each parable challenges men to think out and then apply its meaning, as Jesus said in Mark 4:9, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." A verdict is demanded.

Many of Jesus' parables follow the rules of popular story telling; (1) the rule of contrast, e.g., Five wise and five foolish virgins; (2) The rule of three, e.g., three travelers in the Good Samaritan, and the three excuse makers in the parable of the Great Banquet; (3) Rule of end stress e.g., the last servant in The Talents, the son in the Wicked Husbandmen. The Gospel parables are either similitudes or story parables. The similitude bases itself on some familiar truth or process but the story parable describes not what men commonly do but what one man did. We think in pictures and their meaning is easier to understand than abstract truths. They can employ the use of metaphor, a simile, proverb; and may even have some elements of allegory, as we will explain. They will include true to life illustrations which can in fact happen in the culture of the day. So, they can be a means through the power of the Holy Spirit of helping men to discover truth.

Some scholars claim that as the parables were handed down orally, the early church influenced the parables by providing a different context or by supplying some details of interpretation i.e., the early church reaudied and reapplied the parables. But Jesus can use a parabolic story in a different context e.g., the story of lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-14, seeking the recovery of an erring brother. It can be maintained that we have the parables as Jesus told them. This is clear because of their Palestinian background and Aramaic idiom, and because they reflect Jesus' highly individual way of thinking and speaking. Furthermore, great parables are so hard to create that it is difficult to name another person in history with more than one or two good ones to his credit.

HISTORY OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLES

There have been many diverse answers with regard to interpretation depending upon one's theology. By way of summary, from the end of the Apostolic Age to the end of the Middle Ages, allegory was the usual method of interpretation. Irenaeus (130-200 CE) in his teaching on the Parable of the Hid Treasure saw the field as the Scriptures and the treasure as Christ.⁵ Tertullian (160-220 CE) interpreted the Prodigal son as follows, "The parable of the prodigal shows us the Jew and the Heathen - the heathen becoming a believer, and receiving the ring of salvation, whereas the elder brother symbolises the upright Jew who envies the return of the heathen." The citizen is the devil and the robe, sonship

⁵ *Adversus Haereses* Book IV. 26. 1.

lost at the fall. The salvation in the ring was through baptism and the feast, the Lord's supper, the fatted calf being Christ!⁶

As an individual person was thought to consist of a body, a soul, and a spirit (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:23), so Scripture was seen as containing a body (the literal meaning of the text), a soul (the moral meaning), and a spirit (the spiritual meaning). Robert Stein⁷ explained concerning Origen (185-253 CE), "In searching for the spiritual meaning of the parables, the allegorical method of interpretation was used, and the interpretation of a parable such as the good Samaritan became for Origen an allegory of the history of the world." So, the man going down to Jericho was Adam. Jerusalem from which he was going was paradise, while Jericho was the world. The robbers he saw as hostile influences, wounds pointed to disobedience or sins. The priest was the law and the Levite the prophets. The good Samaritan was Christ and the inn, the church, the return of the good Samaritan pointed to the second coming of Christ. During the Middle Ages (540-1500 CE) the main concern focused not so much on Biblical exegesis as in the construction of systematic theologies. In general, the scholastics were building upon or following the work of the early church exegetes. Stein states, "Thus the threefold method of interpretation was not only accepted but 'improved,' and Scripture was seen as having not three but four meanings or senses: the literal, the moral, the spiritual, and the heavenly. As a result, the parables continued to be interpreted allegorically."

Augustine (354-430), as Origen, said he enjoyed the ingenuity which this sort of exegesis involved and commented that it gripped the hearers' attention. Every detail of the story was given special meanings by the readers; indeed, these special meanings kept accumulating over time. Stein⁸ gives a list of Augustine's allegorizations:

The man going down to Jericho is Adam.

Jerusalem, from which he was going, was the City of Heavenly Peace.

Jericho is the moon which signifies our mortality (this is a play on the Hebrew terms for Jericho and moon which both look and sound alike).

The Robbers are the Devil and his angels.

⁶ *De pudicitia*, Ch. 9.

⁷ Robert H. Stein, "The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," 248-57, *Word & World*, 5/3 (1985), 248.

⁸ Stein's *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1981), 46.

Stripping him is taking away his immortality and beating him is persuading him to sin.

Leaving him half dead because of sin, means he was dead spiritually, but half alive, because of the knowledge of God.

The Priest represents the priesthood of the Old Testament, (the Law), the Levite is the ministry of the Old Testament, (Prophets).

The Good Samaritan is the Christ and the binding of wounds, the restraint of sin.

Oil is the comfort of good hope and the wine the exhortation to spirited work.

The Animal represents the body of Christ and the Inn is the church.

The Two denarii are the two commandments to love and the Innkeeper is the Apostle Paul.

The Return of the Good Samaritan is the Resurrection of Christ.

Allegorizing was popular among the exegetes of Alexandria, while those in Antioch were concerned with the intention of the Biblical writer and rejected allegorization. However, the Alexandrian method was more popular. Generally, this kind of interpretation actually made no attempt to see parables in the purpose of Jesus or the life setting of his ministry.

The Protestant Reformation made Scripture the supreme authority and interpretation was liberated from church tradition. There was a new stress being laid on the plain and obvious meaning of Scripture. There should be no interest in subtle meanings which would not be in Jesus' mind. Martin Luther called the allegorizers "clerical jugglers performing monkey tricks." But the fact is that he himself sometimes allegorized. Stein⁹ points out that Luther "tended to allegorize the parables and find in them examples of the doctrine of justification by faith," propagating that which had been revealed to him. Calvin¹⁰ also, (1509-64) would emphasise the need to have a deeper reverence for Scripture than to allow ourselves the liberty to alter its natural meaning. "Some commentators, I am aware, carry their ingenious inquiries into every minute phrase; but as there is reason to fear that subtleties, which rest on no solid grounds, may lead us into idle fooleries, I choose to philosophize more sparingly, and to rest satisfied with the plain and natural meaning." The author must speak for himself and we must

⁹ Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, 48-49.

¹⁰ See John Calvin, "Commentary on Matthew 13:42." in "Calvin's Commentary on the Bible." <https://www.studydrive.net/commentaries/cal/matthew-13.html>. 1840-57. Accessed October 2022.

seek to find the plain and obvious meaning. He set out in his own expositions in one short sentence what he considered to be the central point. He did not look to interpret every detail, endeavouring to interpret the Bible grammatically and historically to focus upon the plain or literal sense.

With the rise of modern Biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century, many scholars studied the Biblical books in light of the latest knowledge. We should however mention Archbishop Trench's *Notes on the Parables* (1841) which was a mine of information, but was still influenced by the Fathers as he spiritualized many details. It was Adolf Jülicher¹¹ (1857-1938), Professor of Church History and New Testament Exegesis, at the University of Marburg, who sounded the death knell to allegorizing. He changed the understanding of the parables of Jesus for many scholars, emphasizing that there was usually one central, single point of comparison between the story and what it represented; the rest being only necessary for the sake of the story. The parables functioned more like extended similes (the Kingdom of God is *like*) rather than an allegory and that each parable was concerned to make a point about morals that should be universally practiced. As Wenham¹² explained, Jülicher saw the allegorical details like those found in the parable of the Wheat and the Tares, which was explained to Jesus disciples (Matthew 13:37-43), as deriving "not from Jesus, but from the later Christian church." He reduced parables to prudential platitudes, e.g., he said that the Talents means that a reward is only earned by performance! Wenham¹³ however, maintained, "the view that Jesus never used allegory is seen to be arbitrary and improbable. Jesus was a Jew steeped in the Old Testament, and both in the Old Testament and later Jewish writings allegory is an important rhetorical/literary form."

In the twentieth century it was C.H. Dodd¹⁴ with his *Parables of the Kingdom* (first published in 1935) which made exegetical history, supported by Jeremias' work also on the Parables (1947).¹⁵ Dodd's achievement was to put parables back into their true setting – the ministry of Jesus which was concerned to stress in-breaking of the kingdom of God. So, the Gospel parables must be related to the kingdom and understood in the light of its coming in Jesus Christ. As

¹¹ Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (2 vols; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1888, 1899).

¹² Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 228.

¹³ Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 228. He mentions C. A. Bugge, *Die Haupt-Parabeln Jesu*. (Giessen: J. Rickerische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1903) and Paul Fiebig, *Alt-jüdische Gleichnisse und die Gleichnisse Jesu*. (Tübingen, Leipzig: Mohr, 1904) who also highlighted this fact.

¹⁴ C.H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*. (London: Nesbet, 1935, rev. 1961). In Dodd's view, Jesus explicit teachings of the kingdom all supported realized eschatology.

¹⁵ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*. Tr. S. H. Hooke. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955).

Wenham¹⁶ stated, “The kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus’ preaching and indeed of his whole ministry and the parables should all be seen and understood in that context.”

Dodd advocacy of realized eschatology was applied fully in his interpretation of the parables. Those that were generally accepted as eschatological parables like the Fig Tree (Mark 13:28-30); the Wise and Faithful Servant (Matthew 24:45-51); the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13); and the Watchful Servants (Luke 12:35-38), were denied their futuristic import. He repeatedly argued that Jesus was not expecting a future apocalyptic kingdom, and re-affirmed his belief that the apocalyptic interpretation of these parables is a secondary addition developed by the early church. Many scholars came to reject this view, which saw parables which seem to be “apocalyptic” as later additions and not from the historical Jesus. Stein¹⁷ clarifies the point:

It is evident today that Dodd’s interpretation of the eschatological teachings of Jesus is only partially correct. Jesus did not teach either a purely “realized” eschatology or a purely “consistent” eschatology. Rather, he taught both! For Jesus, the kingdom of God had both come in the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and was at the same time a future reality that awaited consummation.

Jeremias’ contribution was also an important and influential work since it took the historical setting of Jesus’ parables seriously, seeking to establish each parable in the world of first-century Judaism. This is something that still remains the first step in accurately reading a parable. Jeremias employed form criticism, seeking the “original” parable by stripping away introductions, conclusions and interpretation. He attempted to detect the “transformation” of the parables from their original form to the form found in the gospels. So, the early church had adapted the parables, placing them in a new context to better fit the Gospel author’s theological tendency.

The interpretation of parables was affected by the theological perspectives which developed in twentieth century thinking generally in the movements from form criticism to redaction, narrative and literary criticism. Form criticism, as we have just noted, examined the forms or units of text found in the Gospels, e.g., pronouncement stories, miracle stories, parables, proverbs, wisdom sayings, etc. The writers were “scissors and paste men,” who put the Gospels together. This approach was often linked with historical scepticism

¹⁶ Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*. 20.

¹⁷ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*. 60. Dodd came eventually to concede that the parables reflect “an eschatology that is in the process of realization”.

which accepted that the origin of the Gospels is to be found in the faith of the early church. Redaction criticism saw the individual authors more as theologians in their own right each selecting (for some scholars, creating) material and writing for the needs of the Church to convey a particular message. Also, narrative criticism gave full weight to the Bible focusing on literary techniques, plot, structure, ordering of events, dramatic tension and the intended impact upon the reader. Again, there has often been discussion as to what type of literature the Gospels represented, biography, poetry or even parable. In addition, often reader response theories shifted the approach to Scripture from “what happened back then” to “what is happening now to me as I read the text.” When the focus on the reader is pushed to the limit it results in deconstructionism. The text then really loses all objective meaning, becoming whatever the reader understands it to mean.

It is here in these modern approaches to the study of the text that we find recent existentialist, artistic and literary approaches to the parables, involving scholars, for example as Ernst Fuchs, Eta Linnemann and Eberhard Jüngel.¹⁸ The parables are actually “language events” (*sprachereignisse*). Language is not merely a tool that describes, it actually enacts and imparts, bringing into being something that was not been there before the words were spoken. Jesus’ parables have the potential and power to bring about the desired change in the hearer’s existence and his relationship to reality. There is an “interlocking” where in the parable the verdict of the narrator on the situation in question “interlocks” with that of the listener.¹⁹ Eberhard Jüngel followed the tradition of new hermeneutics like Fuchs and Linnemann when he discussed the parables of Jesus in his book *Paulus und Jesus*. Jesus, though he never defined the kingdom of God, brought it to speech and that most clearly in the parables. His main contribution to the interpretation of Jesus’ parables is his insistence that the kingdom of God is their central message and that parables are language events.

Just to be clear, this New Hermeneutic was based on the presupposition of the timelessness of the text and claims that this timelessness necessarily means that it holds new meaning for each new reader. In this way it is similar to “reader-response criticism” which focuses on how a person will experience the text in

¹⁸ Ernst Fuchs, “The New Testament and the Hermeneutical Problem,” in *The New Hermeneutic*, Vol. II of *New Frontiers in Theology*, James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., eds. (New York; Harper& Row, 1964); *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (Naperville: Allenson, 1964); Eberhard Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus* (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr,1962).

¹⁹ This was the particular contribution of Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1966), 27.

question.²⁰ This timelessness also means that the text transcends original historical context, authorial intent, or other dimensions across which a text is evaluated. It is incomplete until a listener hears the text and discovers the meaning in some way. The act of listening to a parable, therefore, creates meaning out of the text. Since meaning is grounded in the act of listening, each listener may discover a unique meaning as they encounter the text.

Taking this approach means that the possibility of reconstructing any historical context for the parables is a misguided goal since the parables ought to be understood solely as units of literature. There is clearly a marked trend away from authorial intent as a valid goal of interpretation. Simply put, the original author and historical context no longer have a bearing on the interpretation of the parable. But, at least today's readers and interpreters are being pushed to consider the parables of Jesus not as mere artifacts of the first century but as also contemporary events with power to force them to a decision about the kingdom of God and a new experience which can transform them.

Other artistic, and literary approaches can be noted with Jones,²¹ Via²² and also Crossan.²³ Hultgren²⁴ asks us to remember that that the term "literary" should be understood to include a number of methodologies that go by other names as well: rhetorical criticism, structural analysis, reader response criticism and more. First, Jones focused on the artistic and literary form of the parables and their existential significance as appealing universally to the human condition. Via's quest, like that of Jones, is to recover the humanity of the parables, to demonstrate their universal appeal to the human condition and make them

²⁰ There are significantly different approaches in the whole discussion of reader-response criticism, yet all are unified in their belief that the meaning of a text is derived from the reader through the reading process, i.e., it is the recipient, not the author who creates the meaning of any text or narrative. Some scholars mention the following books as useful for understanding this approach: Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991);

²¹ Geraint V. Jones, *The Art and Truth of the Parables*. (London: S.P.C.K., 1964).

²² Dan Otto Via, Jr. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

²³ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*. (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

²⁴ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus, A Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing House, Cambridge, UK, 2000), 16. He mentions also that the methods in reference to parable study are surveyed by William A. Beardslee, "Recent Literary Criticism," in *The New Testament and its Modern Interpreters*. ed. Eldon J. Epp and George W. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 177–83.

communicate to the present or modern man.²⁵ He maintains that the parables partake of the criteria of an adequate metaphysical system and have a high potential for becoming language events able to place the hearer or reader in a position of faith or evoke the willingness to take a risk.²⁶ For Crossan, famous in the theological world for his work on the historical Jesus, his treatment of the parables has led to some provocative interpretations. In “*The Power of Parable*” he begins by noteworthy statements of his understanding of what he considers to be Jesus’ most distinctive teaching vehicle, i.e., the parable. He suggests that the Gospel authors did something very similar to that of Jesus: Jesus made up stories about ordinary people and situations to convey his counter-cultural vision of the kingdom of God. The Gospel authors made up stories about Jesus to convey their compelling visions of who Jesus was and why he was significant. Jesus’ stories involved “*fictional* events about *fictional* characters”; the Gospels include “*fictional* events about *factual* characters.”²⁷ Not many scholars are prepared to concede that in the Gospels in the teaching of Jesus in the parables, as Crossan proposes, one can only find fictional stories from the historical Jesus, a peasant, who is no more than equivalent to a Cynic teacher and not the Son of God.

Robert Plummer²⁸ gives us insight into the prevailing situation regarding interpretation of parables among modern scholars.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, there has been somewhat of a regress towards early allegorical tendencies. On one front, some reader-response and “aesthetic” critics insist on reading the parables apart from the original historical context. The parables are taken as having a dynamic meaning-producing polyvalent life of their own. While this description may sound somewhat appealing in the abstract, in real life it means parables can mean whatever the reader wants them to mean. Clearly, however, Jesus used parables to convey specific, definable truths.

Therefore, in sum, we can note that some reader response approaches tend to emphasize or overemphasize the literary, existential, artistic qualities of the parable and the power of language. Some of them also argue in favour of polyvalence – that Jesus intended to convey several different messages to his hearers in his parables. But often the end result is actually to reduce the parables

²⁵ Via, Jr. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*, 21-24,32-56.

²⁶ Via, Jr. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*, 68.

²⁷ Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*, 5.

²⁸ Robert L. Plummer, “Parables in the Gospels: History of Interpretation and Hermeneutical Guidelines,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13.3 (2009), 6.

of Jesus to banal explanations.²⁹ A number of most recent works have gone back to reassess the scholarly positions on the allegorical nature of the parables of Jesus and the need to take seriously historical and scriptural contexts. They are also directing attention back to the context of Jesus' ministry and to parallels that exist in the Jewish parables. Such reassessments are important and timely.

In the existentialist, artistic and literary approaches scholars who advocate such lay emphasis on what the parables mean to the present reader rather than on what they meant for Jesus, his audience and the Gospel authors themselves. For them, the original author and historical context no longer have a bearing on the interpretation of the parable. Philip Long³⁰ affirms that one ought rather to hold to "authorial intent" when we approach the parables. We must endeavour "to place the story in the context of the Life of Jesus. The point of the parable is exactly the point which Jesus intended." This is where we ought to start. The parables of Jesus certainly have aesthetic, poetic and artistic beauty, but that should not rob them of their historicity. Indeed, these qualities can only be better appreciated when the parables are interpreted in their historical, biblical contexts and the context of Jesus' ministry. G.B. Caird's³¹ definition and distinction between parables is helpful. Parables either are in the form of (1) Simple simile, "the kingdom of heaven is like..." (Matthew 13:33); (2) Simple metaphor, "do not throw your pearls before swine," (Matthew 7:6); (3) Simile story, "the kingdom of heaven is like a master who went out early...to hire laborers..." (Matthew 20:1-16); (4) Metaphorical story, e.g., the prodigal son, (Luke 15:11-32); Example story, e.g., the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, Dives and Lazarus, the Pharisee and the Publican, (Luke 10:25-37; 12:17-21; 16:19-31; 18:9-14).

²⁹ E.g., Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). The second part of Scott's work, which deals with the actual interpretation of the parables, brings out more clearly his tendency to reduce the parables to rather simplistic statements, which are often reminiscent of Jülicher's reduction of the parables to pious moralisms. Charles Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), explicitly states that Jesus' parables were banal but the evangelists have inserted theological and kingdom significance into the parables to make them relevant. They were not metaphors/symbols, but radical poetic fictions. The specific situation in life where they were told is irretrievably lost. The original stories were meant to be open to a wide range of possible meanings, 3-8, 27, 35.

³⁰ Philip Long, "The Parables of Jesus: Literary Approaches," in <https://readingacts.com/2010/10/14/the-parables-of-jesus-literary-approaches>. Accessed October 2022.

³¹ G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. (London: Duckworth, 1980), 162-63. Some scholars will question the inclusion of Dives and Lazarus among the parables as a actual person is named.

Another scholar we should take note of is Kenneth Bailey.³² He was formerly Theologian in Residence in the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East (Cyprus) and Research Professor of Middle Eastern NT Studies (Jerusalem). Therefore, he has had personal experience of living within Middle Eastern peasant culture for over twenty years. This extensive experience of Middle Eastern life means he was admirably equipped to examine the culture and traditions that lie behind the Synoptic Gospels. Bailey maintains that cultural assumptions and values which informed the first century CE Palestinian context of the parables can still be found today in peasant communities in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Bailey contends that informal oral controlled tradition is an oral methodology employed historically by Middle Eastern societies to preserve and transmit accurately the essential, fundamental components of their oral traditions. This methodology was to be expected of the followers of Jesus throughout his public ministry in order to preserve accurately and transmit faithfully among other teachings, the parables of their Master and Lord. There are various scholars which have been unconvinced regarding his comparisons between the culture of first century peasant communities and such societies in the present day. For example, Snodgrass³³ comments, “Unfortunately one cannot always assume that the attitudes and practices of modern, peasant life in either Lebanon or Palestine are the same as they were in Jesus’ day, or that such modern contexts should be taken as keys to the interpretation of Jesus’ parables.” But why should we deny the evidence of this comparison when it still exists? Certainly, the Palestinian and Middle Eastern context remains the closest and best illustration of the cultural situation where the parables of Jesus were told.

Note Bailey’s example of what was told of John Hogg, a Scottish missionary who was the founder of many of the Protestant churches in the south of Egypt in the nineteenth century. A biography of John Hogg was published by his daughter in 1914, primarily from his letters and papers, but also using oral sources. Each village had and has its own stories of what he said and did. The more dramatic of these stories have moved from village to village among evangelicals, but each account is primarily preserved in the village of origin. In the late fifties Bailey encountered this same tradition. He could comment “Rena Hogg dipped into that tradition in 1910. I dipped into the same tradition in 1955-65 and found the same stories told in almost the same way. The tradition will last in those villages

³² Kenneth E. Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” in *Themelios* 20.2, 1995, 4-11. This article was originally published in the *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991), 34-54.

³³ Snodgrass, “From Allegorizing to Allegorizing: A History of the Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus,” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, 17.

as long as the community he founded survives or until they acquire electricity and television.”³⁴ So, whether it was the twentieth century or the first century oral tradition, the comparison ought to be considered valid.

The good thing about this is that it takes seriously the relevance of the word of God to all generations of people. The word of God is the word of God no matter when it was spoken and it has the power to address people of different ages anew in their different situations. It has the power to change people lives today just as when it was first spoken. It possesses a beauty that abides for all time. But the main weakness evident in modern, particularly literary approaches is that they ignore the significance of this historical context in which the parables were spoken. They either take that context for granted or they completely undermine its importance. However, knowledge of the historical contexts in which the parables were told and written and of how they were understood by the first century speaker, writer and audience, is essential. Understanding that will enable the reader and student to appreciate their own perception of the parables in the situation today. The historicity and the contemporaneity of the parables need to be held together. Recently Lee-Barnewell³⁵ in her work *Surprised by the Parables: Growing in Grace through the Stories of Jesus*, seeks to distract the didactic elements from the parables she has chosen hopeful to bring about their “transformative impact.” She stresses that a study of the parables is a “most powerful means of spiritual formation, since they were intended not just to teach a lesson but also to confront and challenge the audience.” Schnabel³⁶ goes back to Jülicher’s approach to one point per parable. “This theory has been critiqued and abandoned by many if not most scholars today, both in the light of modern literary study of metaphors and in the light of more than three hundred rabbinic parables which usually contain allegorical elements and application of more than one ‘point’ that the parable teaches.” He points to the work of Weder³⁷ and also Blomberg³⁸ who suggests that these allegorical elements could be related to the

³⁴ Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” 9.

³⁵ Michelle Lee-Barnewell, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 1-2, 6. Her book is a study of ten parables said to have an overall emphasis on the grace of God. This exploration serves not only as a means to extract the didactic element of a parable but, more importantly, as a tool to assist readers in discovering an appropriate response to the parable, which she understands as grace-oriented transformation. We must remember of course that not every parable has grace as a central theme.

³⁶ Schnabel, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 99.

³⁷ Hans Weder, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu als Metaphern*, 3rd edition, FRLANT 120 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 1984), 11-98.

³⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 13-167. In the second edition (Apollos, IVP Academic, 2012) of this work, Blomberg covers interpretative methods and controversies, including Structuralism, Postmodernism, Marxism,

main characters of a parable; they are also found in the rabbinic parables. For Bloomberg one discovers in parables generally two or three main characters i.e., the wise and the foolish, with God as the third evaluating or judging their actions. By way of comment, if one interprets any of the parables with a specific rule, such as finding only three key points from each character, it will certainly control excesses of the allegorical method. But is this being over restrictive? Could we still miss out on what the true meaning of the parable may have been? Each parable must be considered in light of what Jesus meant by it, in the context in which he was speaking and also by considering that Jesus' central message was the Kingdom of God. There may be several ways to interpret a parable and Blomberg's method for some scholars will appear too rigid. Should we not rather approach the parables with an open mind that will objectively take all the facts, culturally or otherwise and not come at a passage with preconceived formulas for how to interpret any section of scripture?

Therefore, as Schnabel³⁹ affirms:

the specific elements of Jesus' parables, including the allegorical elements, must be related to the context of Jesus' ministry and of the message of the kingdom of God, not to the context of the later church or the church today. We can apply Jesus' parables to the church today only *after* we have interpreted them in the context of Jesus' ministry.

To emphasise, parables should be interpreted from the perspective of first-century Jews and disciples hearing the parable - from the context of the culture of the day. As Culpepper,⁴⁰ many scholars are prepared to follow the traditional interpretation of the parables and find each "as an allegory." Earlier Hultgren⁴¹ in response to Jülicher pointed out that:

Terms like "father" and "servant" have metaphorical meanings in the parables of Jesus that are to be noticed by the interpreter, and as soon as this is done, a given parable may well be seen to have other allegorical elements within it. The figure of a king in a parable of Jesus can surely be a pictorial representation for

Feminism, and more. He expounds the meaning and significance of individual three, two, and one-point parables and evaluates them - including those that appeared in the twenty years since his first edition was published. As far as the views of Dodd and Jeremias, Blomberg argues for a limited allegorical approach to the parables. He provides brief interpretations of all the major parables.

³⁹ Schnabel, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 100.

⁴⁰ R.A. Culpepper, *Matthew: A Commentary*. The New Testament Library, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 253.

⁴¹ Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 13. He mentions also Louis I. Robinowitz, "Parable: In the Talmud and Midrash," *EncJud*, 13:74.

God, as in various OT texts (Exod. 15:18; 1 Chron. 16:31; Ps. 93:1; Isa. 24:23) and in many rabbinic parables.

Therefore, parable interpretation should not be limited to only one theme or three themes or even multiple themes. Each parable should be looked at separately in light of their message in the context of Jesus' ministry and the kingdom of God.

PREACHING THE PARABLES: SOME GUIDELINES

Keep in mind from the beginning, as we have noted, there are two great moments dealt with in parables, the fulfillment of the kingdom within history and its consummation at the end of history. Also, look for the meaning of the parable in the "life setting" of the ministry of Jesus. Take for example, how Mark has set out his "Gospel," – not creating stories or sayings of Jesus but drawing upon authentic oral tradition, including what have been called "Peter's memoirs" to set out his own story of the significance of his Master's coming.⁴² First, in his preface he introduces a number of themes which are later spelled out in the rest of the gospel. Scholars⁴³ see it as "theologically loaded," introducing the authority and credentials of Jesus. The preface has the important themes of the forerunner of the Messiah, Jesus' baptism and the gift of the Spirit, the fact that he was the servant Messiah and Son of God and his preliminary victory over the adversary of God and man. Mark's readers are made aware of the significance of Jesus' coming and that God's Kingdom is at hand. The evangelist starts his story of Jesus proper with a report about discipleship. The good news is accompanied by a call to follow. In Mark 1:21-45 we are confronted with Jesus' Authority over demons and disease. the transition and introduction to the conflict stories follow in 2:1-3:12. Mark has included here 5 conflict stories (2:1-3:6) between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. Opposition to Jesus is not from ordinary people but the Jewish leaders. We have recorded two conflict stories regarding Sabbath breaking, one regarding the forgiveness of sins, one eating with sinners and one concerning fasting. Mark 3:6 shows the shadow of the cross already falls across this segment of the gospel. This series of conflict stories presented by Mark emphasize the growth of opposition and here we find typical grounds on which eventually religious leaders and secular authorities combine to destroy Jesus.

⁴² Peter is often associated with Mark in the writing of his Gospel. Eusebius, in his history of the early church completed about 323 CE, *Ecclesiastical History* III. 39. 15-16, refers to the views of Papias on the origin of Mark. "Mark indeed having been the interpreter of Peter wrote accurately but not in order all that he recalled of what was either said or done by the Lord." Some scholars have highlighted internal evidence in the Gospel itself for linking Mark with Peter and this evidence should not be played down.

⁴³ H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark*, New Century Bible (London, Oliphants, 1976), 63.

Anderson⁴⁴ comments, “Jewish hostility has reached its zenith. The breach with Judaism that will eventually accomplish Jesus’ death is now irreparable.” This is supported by 3:22-28 where we have the “official” accusation coming from the “scribes who came down from Jerusalem” that he had “an unclean spirit” and was “possessed by Beelzebul.”

Now we can understand why the parables are in chapter 4. Here Mark gives us three parables suitable to the context of the story of Jesus that he is unfolding which is one of rejection at this point. Matthew’s Gospel reveals the same narration of the story of Jesus. The parables in chapter 13 follow the account of Jesus’ rejection in the privileged cities in 11:20-24 and the same conflict stories involving grain on the Sabbath and the healing of the man with the withered hand, leading to the conspiracy to put Jesus to death, (12:1-14), Jesus’ withdrawal, the Isaiah 42 prophecy bringing hope to the Gentiles, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the rejection of Jesus’ ministry, the Tree known by its fruit, the sign of Jonah, the repentance of the men of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba, travelling such a distance to know the truth, while the men of “this generation” did not repent or respond to the far greater revelation which was occurring in their very midst, (12:15-42). Therefore, in both Gospels we can see that by Jesus’ rejection there has been a hardening so that only those who by grace have been “given” ears to hear (Matthew 13:10-17; Mark 4:11-12) understand and respond to him. Writing in the context of Mark 4 Cole⁴⁵ considers that Jesus taught parables as a system of instruction specially designed to sift the wheat from the chaff among his hearers. Other teachers might rejoice when great crowds followed them but not so the Lord. He knew the mixed motives of the human heart. His parables were designed to test not the intelligence but the spiritual responsiveness of his hearers. The basic message of the parables here is that for anyone to see or listen, God’s reign is already discernible in the everyday world men inhabit. His Kingdom is already present in veiled form and will one day reach glorious manifestation and consummation.

Regarding Mark 4:11-12, there have been different interpretations of this statement. Everything hinges on the words “so that ...” We can doubt that the whole statement is from later church theology to explain why the Jews as a whole rejected the Gospel. Also, the suggestion that *Hina* is a mistranslation of the Aramaic *de* which can be both a relative pronoun (“who”) or a conjunction

⁴⁴ H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark*, 112.

⁴⁵ R. A. Cole, *The Gospel according to Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Cambridge UK Reprinted December 1987 edition (1 Jan. 1990), 88.

("that"). Mark should have written "who" not "that." We can rather note the suggestion that in Hebraic idiom, result can often be expressed ironically as purpose. This is based on Isaiah 6:9f. where the form of a command ironically describes what in fact was the result of Isaiah's ministry. The nation's rejection of Isaiah's preaching of repentance led to a hardening, a judgment. Here in Mark 4 there is a further fulfilment in light of the rejection of Jesus' authority and message of the coming of the kingdom. But is his mercy - while all men deserve judgment – God has in his grace "given" ears for the disciples to "hear," (4:11, 20, 23-24). Hendriksen⁴⁶ affirms:

If God even surrenders to the lusts of their hearts the unenlightened heathen when they hold back the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18,26), will he not punish more severely the impenitents before whom the Light of the world is constantly confirming the truthfulness of his message?

Hendriksen⁴⁷ explains further that "it was *because* by their own choice these impenitent Pharisees and their followers had refused to see and hear, that, as a punishment for this refusal they are now addressed in parables." They must "endure the blame of their own blindness and hardness (quoting Calvin). God had given these people a wonderful opportunity. It is his sovereign will to remove what man is unwilling to improve, to darken the heart that refuses to hearken. He hardens those who have hardened themselves." Therefore, from what we have set out we learn that the context in which these parables in Mark 4 and Matthew 13 – and of course later parables - were told by Jesus was so important. We should never ignore the context or the life setting in the ministry of Jesus.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, New Testament Commentary, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 154.

⁴⁷ Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, 154. See also Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 244, who sees this as the pattern of Jesus' whole ministry. By God's grace to sinners who only deserve the judgment of God the disciples' understanding of the mystery of the kingdom of heaven, "is not their own achievement but the gift of God. The outsiders' failure to understand is a sign of God's judgment on people's hardness of heart, as it was in the prophetic ministry of people such as Isaiah. Jesus parabolic ministry therefore comes as God's gift to some and as his judgment to others."

⁴⁸ Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament*, (Nashville. Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 147, sets out "Homiletical Suggestions" for Matthew 13:10-17 setting out God's grace and our responsibility. They could equally be applied to same teaching in Mark 4. 1. God's grace enables hearers to understand the message of the kingdom (13:11,16). 2. Sinner's hardness prevents them from understanding the message of the kingdom (13:13-15). 3. Those who hear the message and reject it often lose their opportunity 13:12; cf. 13:19). 4. Witnessing the ministry of Jesus and hearing the teaching of Jesus is a privilege

Again, we should not miss the fact that there are also often clues as to what the parable is about – at the beginning, (Luke 18:1; 18:9), or at the end, (Matthew 22:14; 25:13), or in both, (Luke 12:15,21), occasionally in the middle, (Mark 12:1-12), where we have “a beloved son.”

We should ask ourselves what we consider is the main point that the parable is trying to teach. We have noted the danger of treating the parables as allegories in which every detail has a spiritual meaning. But we also must not miss elements that we are meant to discern and teach. It must be recognised that there are some “extended” parables in which there can be additional truth to be found, e.g., Mark 4, the Parable of the Sower, 4:3-9; 14-20; the Parable of the Weeds, Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43. In his exposition of the parables of Mark 4 Anderson⁴⁹ maintains that the view of one point per parable has now been held to be excessively rigid. “One should concede that for Jesus’ first listeners around the several items in a story would cluster constellations of images giving rise to various trains of thought in accordance with the customs and traditions of their time and place.” So, while as a general rule a parable may be concerned with one main point, individual features can also have symbolical meaning in the light of OT or Jewish teaching, e.g., a vineyard stands for Israel, a harvest refers to the day of the Lord, and the birds of the air represent Gentiles. We noted above that in Mark 12 it is difficult to avoid the inference that Jesus is the Son in the Parable of the Tenants (cf. Matthew 21:37). Other points in providing guidelines here are:

We should accept that we ought not to make doctrinal statements on the basis of the parables for that is not their purpose. In doing so some, on the basis of the five wise and five foolish virgins, have argued that half the world will be lost and half saved, and others that people can be saved and afterwards lost. Therefore, the purpose of a parable is to amplify a doctrine rather than set it out. But we should not seek to *formulate* a doctrine from a parable. It will rather emphasise a truth taught elsewhere. It should be clear that a parable cannot teach what is contrary to a truth expressed in a didactic passage. As we highlighted, one can find much implicit Christology in a parable. The truths they teach find their perfect illustration in the person, work, teaching and example of Jesus. But these insights will be stated clearly in other parts of scripture. In the parables of the kingdom Jesus is hidden behind the kingdom as its secret content.

coveted by prophets and saints (13:17). These suggestions will be helpful in preaching this passage in context.

⁴⁹ Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark*, 127.

We should beware of reading later theology into the parables. The context shows that the parable of the Good Samaritan was told to explain the meaning of the word “neighbour” and not to teach the plan of salvation – as some of the early Fathers claimed. But we have already acknowledged that the Gospels show that one parable can have several meanings, again, according to context. We pointed out that the lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-17 stresses the need for pastoral care in the recovery of a brother who has wronged another, while in Luke 15:3-7 it explains why Jesus mixed with sinners and answers the criticisms of the Scribes and Pharisees for doing so. Jesus by his ministry is challenging them to ask whether they are not also lost. So, Jesus could use certain elements of a parable to suit the occasion.

Interpret every parable in the culture of the times and not in our culture, e.g., Matthew 25:1-13, the parable of the Ten Virgins and, Luke 15:11-32, the Prodigal Son.⁵⁰

Finally, we must think about how we can apply the parable now – since it was meant to get a response, a reaction. But as Wenham⁵¹ insists, “Base reflection about the contemporary message of the parable on the historical meaning of the parable.”

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⁵⁰ See for example the following insights of Kenneth Bailey, *Poet & Peasant; and, through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983); *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2008); *Jacob & the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005); *The Cross & the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005). In spite of the criticisms of various scholars, (e.g., Snodgrass earlier and Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fiction*, 45-46), the use of many contemporary cultural observations appear valid.

⁵¹ Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 238.

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He Must Increase: Ministry Lessons from John the Baptist¹

Paul Coulter²

ABSTRACT

John, son of Zechariah, commonly called ‘John the Baptist’ is a significant figure on the pages of the New Testament, not only in the Gospels, but also in Acts. Rather than focusing upon questions concerning John’s relationship to first Century Judaism or to Jesus, or on his theological function within the Gospel narratives, this article explores the relevance of John’s words for ministry in the twenty-first century. John’s words play a vital role in the Gospels in establishing Jesus’ identity and mission and also serve as a model for Christian ministers in how they think about themselves and speak about the Lord Jesus. In a context of high-profile leadership failings and a culture emphasising the ‘self’, John provides vital lessons for ministry.

KEY WORDS

John the Baptist, Christian leadership, burn out, servanthood, Christ-centered proclamation.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is John, son of Zechariah and relative of the Lord Jesus, generally known to us as ‘John the Baptist’. When Christians think of John, they tend to be distracted by his unusual appearance and lifestyle – camel-hair clothes and a diet of locusts and honey – or to skim over him in their eagerness to read about Jesus. Yet John is a significant figure on the pages of the New Testament, not only in the Gospels, but also in Acts because of his enduring legacy.

Theological studies about John tend to explore his relationship to the various Jewish groups active in the region of Judea at his time,³ or to compare his actions, baptism or theology with those of Jesus and his disciples,⁴ or to examine his

¹ The ministry lessons discussed in this article are more fully developed along with wider lessons for Christian living in Dr. Coulter’s book, *Clarion Call: Finding Joy in Christ With John the Baptist* (PESIOD, 2021).

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³ See, for example, Hopkins (2021), Kelhoffer (2004), Lupieri (2001)

⁴ See, for example, Marcus (2018), Shafer (2006), Ferda (2020)

function within the theological intent of the Gospel writers.⁵ John has also been presented as an instructive example for contemporary mission.⁶ The purpose of this article is not to contribute to any of these discussions, still less to re-examine the historical setting and significance of John the Baptist.⁷ Rather, it aims to explore the relevance of John's words for ministry in the twenty-first century.

John's words are significant, playing a vital role in the Gospels in establishing the identity of Jesus and preparing the way for his mission. They also serve as a model for Christian ministers in how they think about themselves and speak about the Lord Jesus. These lessons are vital for contemporary ministry in light of numerous high-profile abuses of power and moral failures by people in positions of leadership. They also speak more widely into a culture excessively concerned with the 'self, to which Christian ministers are not immune.

This article focuses not on John's message to the crowds, but on his words about himself. One of the most famous of John's statements inspires the title of this article: "He must increase, but I must decrease".⁸ John's aim was to make much of Jesus and little of himself. The significance of this saying can be explored by considering three other statements of John. It is not possible to reconstruct a reliable chronological order for John's statements from the four Gospels, so the sayings considered here will be arranged in an order chosen by the author to build a picture of the implications of John's words for the minister's self-understanding, beginning with John's understanding of who he was not, then considering his understanding of Jesus' superiority and his own servanthood, and finally his appreciation of his responsibility to God within the limits set upon him.

I am Not the Christ (John 1:19-23)

John's Gospel introduces the response of John the Baptist to the enquiries of delegates from Jerusalem about his identity as follows: "this is the testimony of John ..."⁹ The reader may be excused for expecting a grand declaration of John's manifesto for change or a bold declaration about his place in God's purposes. John did speak of such things, but not in response to this question. His "testimony" was a refutation of a potential misunderstanding. The Gospel writer

⁵ See, for example, Burnett (2013), Evans (2010), Martinez (2012), Vande Vrede (2014)

⁶ See, for example, MacLeod (2003), King (2009), Van der Merwe (1999)

⁷ One of the best sources for a detailed study of John remains Wink (1968)

⁸ John 3:30

⁹ John 1:19

states it in no uncertain terms: “He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”¹⁰

John’s testimony was a negative comment, a statement of who he is not. There was a real risk that people would reach a wrong conclusion about John the Baptist on the question of whether John was the Messiah, even at the time when John’s Gospel was written, perhaps 60 years after his death. Many people in Jerusalem regarded John as a prophet. In the week leading up to Jesus’ death – at least one year after John’s execution – Jesus used this widespread belief to avoid traps set by the chief priests and elders, who could not denounce John without provoking an angry reaction from the crowd.¹¹ Another twenty or more years later, the apostle Paul met a dozen disciples of John in Ephesus,¹² while Apollos of Alexandria was also a disciple of John until Priscilla and Aquila led him to understand the significance of Jesus.¹³ It seems likely that John the Gospel writer, who tradition places in Ephesus in his later years, was deliberately countering wrong ideas about John in that city in the way he recorded John’s words.

This enduring legacy of John’s ministry is testimony to his charisma of personality and preaching style. In contemporary churches and parachurch movements, these qualities are often sought in leaders. We expect leaders to have strong personalities – full of confidence and certainty – and to be dynamic communicators. Yet, these are not the qualities presented as requirements of Christian leaders in the New Testament. There, the emphasis is on self-control and ability to teach people patiently through both words and example.¹⁴ It seems ironic that we should prize the quality we call ‘charisma’¹⁵ when it could almost be defined as the antithesis of the self-control that is the pinnacle of the fruit of the Spirit.¹⁶ Godly leaders learn to rein in their personalities for the sake of others and faithful teachers will be most effective by modelling faithfulness rather than by performing in the pulpit.

John’s testimony started with an emphatic denial that he was the Christ. He did not even want to be identified with Elijah, even though the Lord Jesus would

¹⁰ John 1:20

¹¹ Matthew 21:23-27

¹² Acts 19:1ff.

¹³ Acts 18:26

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 4:11-16; Titus 1:5-9

¹⁵ The modern English meaning of the word is a corruption of its apparently original usage by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 to describe a grace gift to the Church.

¹⁶ Galatians 5:23

make that connection, presumably indicating that John did not have complete self-awareness of his part in God's plan.¹⁷ Contemporary Western culture is obsessed with identity and seeks authenticity. Hypocrisy is seen as the great sin, closely followed by lack of self-awareness. Self-knowledge is precious, but John's example warns us that our pursuit of self-awareness will be futile until we learn first who we are not. We are not the Christ.

Many Christian ministers have Messiah complexes. They take on burdens they cannot bear both in the home and in the church. They think they can love their spouses perfectly and mislead them into having those false expectations. They believe they can right the wrongs of the world or the Church through ingenious strategies or hard work. When leaders take a saviour stance, they end up instead becoming everyone's judge. A sense of superiority develops. They slip into language such as saying they will build or extend God's kingdom, but Scripture never uses such verbs to describe our relationship to the kingdom. It is God who builds and grows the kingdom – our part is to seek it, receive it, welcome it, demonstrate it and testify to it. We are not the giver but the recipients.

Until Christian ministers realise they cannot save the world, change people, or build God's kingdom, they will suffer endless misery and disappointment. When Christian leaders burn out, it is common to find that they allowed themselves to be driven by unrealistic expectations about what they could do. They mistakenly think that they can transgress the limits of their created nature by working longer hours and never saying no. They do not practice Sabbath rest and do not set boundaries. They have forgotten who they are not. Indeed, even Christ in his ministry on earth modelled rest and bounded living. If the incarnate Son of God was not infinite in his availability, we must not think we can be.

God has entrusted many resources and gifts to his servants in ministry, which can bring great blessing to others, but the only thing we have of ultimate value to give anyone is Jesus. He alone can save them from themselves, present them to God, and carry them through death into his inheritance. This is why our churches must keep mercy ministries (acts of compassion to people in need) closely integrated with evangelism. Unless we give people Jesus, we leave them in their sins and without hope. If we show them love without explaining that he is its source, we distract their focus from him and keep their gaze on ourselves. John knew who he was not, and so must we.

Mightier than I (Matthew 3:11-12)

¹⁷ Matthew 11:13-14

In the ranking of servant tasks in first century Judea, carrying a person's sandals was close to washing their feet. Given the unsanitary conditions of the time, this was most unpleasant, and reserved for the lowest of servants. That is the position John takes for himself in this passage. Two other Gospels record a slightly different but related saying of John in which he says he is unworthy to loosen the straps of Jesus' sandals.¹⁸ John is clearly saying that Jesus is so much greater than him that John deserves no association with him whatsoever. Jesus is infinitely mightier because unlike John's baptism, which washed the body in symbolism of repentance, Jesus could transform the soul by baptising in the Spirit who is God Himself or bring final judgement through baptism in fire.¹⁹

This servant stance is the only honest starting point for ministry. Indeed, we would do well to remember that 'ministry' means 'service' and 'minister' means 'servant'. When we start from the understanding of our own inadequacy to achieve spiritual change, any service for Jesus is revealed as what it is – a gift of pure grace. Christian ministers must never allow a sense of entitlement to develop. Yet we easily slip I not thinking we have a right to serve in certain ways because we are gifted, or have proven ourselves faithful, or have won the right through sacrifice. Such thoughts are deceptions of the evil one. We have no right to serve in even the most menial ways. It is all joy!

Servanthood is not a common image in our contemporary culture. We are unlikely to call people servants, even if we employ them to perform tasks like cleaning, which we prefer not to spend our own time on. We have rightly understood the biblical principle of the equal worth and rights of every person (even if we do not act consistently in line with it). In emphasising this truth, however, we have lost the equally important biblical principle that joy is found in submitting to others and serving people without consideration for self.

We can hardly consider what John the Baptist said about servanthood and feet without thinking of the Lord Jesus in the upper room washing the feet of his disciples.²⁰ This episode is the most succinct expression in the Gospels of a principle that marked Jesus' ministry throughout. He described himself as being "among you as the one who serves".²¹ In these words as in his action with the basin and towel, he turned the expectations of their culture, and ours, on their

¹⁸ Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16

¹⁹ I have taken the view here that the baptism with fire refers to judgement rather than being a synonym for Spirit baptism, although I recognise that biblical scholars take varied views on this question.

²⁰ John 13:1-20

²¹ Luke 22:27

head. The greatest person, he said, is the one who serves and it is this to which the one who leads must aspire.²² Here, leaders acknowledge the one Lord and show an example of service for him. They must stand over people, taking responsibility for watching over their souls, and their shepherding function of protecting the sheep will include discipline and decision-making, but they do this *among* people in the way Jesus was.

This pattern of ministry among people continued with the apostle Paul and his associates as he describes their work with the church in Thessalonica. He tells those believers, “You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake”,²³ and says “we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children”.²⁴ This gentle, motherly care was the context in which they could also bring fatherly challenge with encouragement and exhortation.²⁵ It is the pattern he expects from those who continue as leaders in the church and in response to which proper submission from the other believers is appropriate. As Paul writes, “respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you”.²⁶ We must not dare to stand *over* people, responsible for their purity and growth, unless we also labour *among* them, committed to their wellbeing. We must be among our people as ones who serve.

When we encounter Jesus and understand how much mightier he is than us, we begin to relate to him not on the basis of demands for our rights, but of delight at the very idea that he might beckon us to come close and grant us the privilege of serving Him. When we see him as the One who served in washing his disciple’s feet, we are inspired to do likewise. We learn from him what true service means. In my ministry supporting leaders, I often find that they are overworking and have poorly defined boundaries, but in working with them to establish healthier rhythms of life and work, I am always eager not to undermine their understanding that they are servants of others for Christ’s sake,²⁷ and this will entail sacrifice.

Unless it is Given (John 3:22-27)

One of the hardest questions to answer about Christian ministry is why some people seem to be given much bigger platforms than others. How do some speakers and writers, seemingly no more gifted than others, rise to prominence?

²² Luke 22:26

²³ 1 Thessalonians 1:5

²⁴ 1 Thessalonians 2:7

²⁵ 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12

²⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:12

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:5

In my experience listening to Christian ministers, wrestling with this fact is a common experience, even if it is seldom voiced. I should add, that whilst there is clearly a temptation to unhealthy comparisons and pride in this thought, it is also challenging for humble leaders whose concern is with the unrealistic expectations of the ministry in their home churches that celebrity speakers and large gatherings can create in believers. Awareness of failures by some high-profile speakers and less dramatic character flaws in others compounds this concern further.

In contemporary culture, we are inclined to think success and recognition result from one of two sources: either the person's qualities and efforts or their upbringing and connections. These alternative explanations reflect the classic right-left political spectrum and they both seem plausible in this fallen world. From a Christian perspective, however, they are inadequate. They rest on a measurement of success in terms of visible results in this age that is counter to the gospel and they neglect the sovereignty of God altogether.

John the Baptist calls us to think differently. John was a sensation. He drew crowds – proof of his gifting. He upset the authorities – a sure sign of genius. By all human measures, he was successful in his chosen field. Today we would call him an 'influencer'. Until, that is, a rival preacher appeared on the scene. Jesus 'stole' John's modus operandi, getting his disciples to baptise people, and his best lines, speaking of the kingdom of God. Jesus did not immediately catch people's attention like the wild-haired, camel-clad John but, what he lacked in appearance, he made up for in other ways, teaching with authority that made John's seem a mere shadow and performing miracles that John did not.

When faced with a rival who seems greater than them, most people try to justify their jealousy and excuse their envy. They highlight the rival's flaws, question his motives, and work, often manipulatively, to keep him off platforms they can control. Sadly, this can even happen among Christian ministers. John presents a radically different attitude. This preacher of repentance, set apart from before his birth, knew the deceptiveness of the human heart. John did not seek the limelight by pursuing followers, promoting himself or flattering potential patrons. The outward 'success' he had was not grasped by him but given to him. He simply did what God called him to do and left the results to God. And he knew the truth that we seldom like to acknowledge, that any influence is only for a time and for a purpose.

When God lifts us up, it is at the right time, for the right purpose and for the right duration. Sadly, many Christian ministers do not grasp this. They too readily

take praise without directing it back to the giver of their gifts. They too seldom hand over ministry opportunities to others, failing to plan well for succession or to invest in training others for ministry. They do not know how to let go of authority in areas that others could readily lead in and so constrict the gifts of others. They pay lip service to the idea of plural leadership, but they know how to manipulate the outcome they want by forming inner circles or by force of personality. These behaviours reflect a lack of faith in the sovereignty of God over our ministries and an idolatrous view of one's own indispensability.

We get this insight into John's attitude in his response to the kind of thing that happens on social media every day: the 'debate' that is not a debate. People talking past each other, not acknowledging the real motivations for their mutual hostility. John's disciples were in such an exchange about purification with an unnamed Jew. As often happens in such situations, the two sides found common ground in suspicion of a third party who was not in the discussion. So, they laid their dispute aside and John's disciples came to express their concern to him that Jesus was gathering a crowd greater than his.

Ironically, they acknowledge that John had borne witness to Jesus. Despite knowing this, it seems they had not expected the mass turning of disciples from John to Jesus. Surely John's demise was not what John had expected or what God intended? John's response is, I suggest, one of the most profound statements in all of Scripture: "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven".²⁸ John's status was simply a gift from heaven for a time. God gave it and God could take it away. John knew it had never truly been his. John's response reflects a deeper theological conviction that everything we have is a gift from God, including our abilities, our upbringing, our social connections and the opportunities to use them to effect.

John's response should not cause us to take a deterministic view of ministry progression. We cannot say to someone whose gift is not being used as fully as it might, "You must just accept this is what God has given you". Human factors *can* and *do* limit the opportunities people are given. Injustices happen in ministry appointments and advancement as in every sphere of life. Indeed, it seems that they may be even more common in ministry given the tendency to promote those who promote themselves. It is vital that we recognise this and seek to change unhealthy cultures where we find them. What John's words do tell us, however,

²⁸ John 3:27

is that we must receive everything we have as a gift from God and be sure to use it as God intends.

We may be on the wrong side of unfair decisions about who is invited into certain ministry opportunities or given a particular appointment, but we must not be perpetrators of such injustice when we are the ones making the decision. Furthermore, we must remember that we will answer to the Lord not for what we had no opportunity to do but for what we did with what we were given. When we compare our own ministry ‘success’ (or lack of it) with that of others, we are distracted from our responsibility to serve faithfully in what we have, making the most of every opportunity given to us.²⁹ We can acknowledge God’s sovereignty and generosity even as we weep at human sins of unfairness.

Above all, we must remember that all that has been given to every person will one day be returned to its true owner – Christ himself. Then he will sit in judgement on the deeds done in the body,³⁰ and we will see the beauty of what was built on his foundation, whether we noticed it in this life or not, while all that was unworthy will be burnt.³¹ His assessment on that day is the only evaluation of our ministry that will ultimately matter. That should not cause us to be resistant to ministry reviews and scrutiny – quite the opposite, we should seek true accountability because we know we will give account to him – but it should reassure us that the world’s metrics of success are not those of the kingdom of Christ.

Conclusion: Ministry in the Way of the Forerunner

John the Baptist has much to teach us about the shape of Christian ministry. He expressed a clear understanding of his role as forerunner to Jesus. It was this understanding that enabled him to confess his own limitations (“I am not the Christ”), to point to Jesus (“He is mightier than I”) and to deny any desire to cling to recognition and fame (“He must increase, I must decrease”). In this, John is an example for we who come after Jesus with the ministry of testifying to him as Saviour and Lord. We must know our own limitations, both so that we remain dependent on the power of Christ and so that we do not burn out. We must guard our hearts against entitlement and maintain a stance of sacrificial service. We must remember that all we have is a gift from God for a time and that it will all be returned to Jesus in the right time.

²⁹ Ephesians 5:16

³⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:10

³¹ 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

With these principles underpinning ministry, we can learn to maintain joy in Christ and so serve him through a lifetime. Perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn from John is to speak much of Jesus. Christ was the constant theme of his words. I find that Christians generally, and even ministers, speak many words about many things with barely the slightest connection to Jesus. Even in accountability meetings, the expectation is often to talk about our own struggles and temptations more than we do about the Lord in his glory. What we most need to be held accountable in is that “we proclaim [...] not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as [others’] servants for Jesus' sake”.³² We have nothing to offer a weary world of suffering sinners other than him. No one else to inspire sacrificial service from weak people like us. So, in our ministries, as in John’s, may we become less and Jesus become more.

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A Social Status Change: An Examination of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24

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ABSTRACT

The text in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 poses a challenge to the idea that one should actively improve his or her social standing. A surface reading of this text could lead to the conclusion that a person should remain in their place in society without seeking opportunity for improvement. The researcher's position is that through an exegetical study of the text in 1 Cor. 7:17-24 and related passages that biblical teachings do not preclude changes in social standing. The article will also touch upon Paul's perspective on matters as ethnicity, the rite of circumcision, slavery and the call of God. Paul proposes with regard to seeking to change or not to change one's social status for the believer must be their understanding of God's sovereign purpose and will for them. The furtherance of the gospel and the advance of the kingdom should be the primary concern.

KEY WORDS

Social status, circumcision, slavery, the gracious call of God, the unity of the church and advance of the kingdom.

INTRODUCTION

An important tenet of most modern cultures is opportunity. With opportunity, a person through hard work, sacrifice, and character can improve his or her lot in life. Books, seminars, and other self-help methods exist in abundance to assist people in their quest for improvement.

Social conditions are an inevitable part of the human condition. Wherever people coexist in a society, that social order contains people who live under different social conditions. Some people have a stronger or higher social standing than others. For example, the wealthy have a higher social standing than others who have a lesser financial standing. In some societies, a particular ethnicity may have a higher social standing than other ethnicities. Other factors such as gender and family background can determine one's social standing. A functioning society will have people of various social standings. Regardless of one's social

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standing, an implied ethic exists in many cultures that a person should have the opportunity to improve their social standing.

Yet in an initial reading of the text in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 can one find a challenge to this idea that the believer ought to seek to actively improve his or her social standing? The researcher's position is that this passage does not teach that one must remain in a certain social condition without seeking improvement. Careful exegesis of the chosen text and related passages will demonstrate that biblical teachings do not preclude changes in social standing.

THE BIBLICAL TEXT

The translation by the English Standard Version (ESV) of 1 Corinthian 7:17-24 is as follows:

¹⁷ Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. ¹⁸ Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. ¹⁹ For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. ²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. ²¹ Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. ²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.²

The research revealed no textual variants in this passage.³

THE DIFFICULTY OF THE TEXT

First Corinthians 7:17-24 poses some difficulties in a couple of ways. In one sense, the text seems to teach that believers should be content with their lot in life realizing that their social situation is what “the Lord has assigned to him” (1

²Unless indicated otherwise, English translations of biblical text quoted from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

³Bruce Manning Metzger and United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*, 4th Rev. Ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), s. v., “1 Corinthians 7:15.” Metzger provided no commentary on any of the verses within the pericope that the passage text studied in this paper.

Cor. 7:17). At a surface level, Paul prescribes a universal practice of this teaching as the “rule in all the churches” (1 Cor. 7:17b). If this text teaches contentment in social status, then the person who seeks to improve his or her social situation could sin in doing so. Other verses in this passage seem to substantiate this idea. For example, verse 20 states that “each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.” Verse 24 further states, “in whatever the condition each was called, there let him remain with God.”

The teaching that one should never change their social status poses some difficulties in modern application. Could one seek to improve their financial standing through a better paying job? Is it wrong to move to a neighborhood with a higher social standing in the community? What about a young man who wants to pursue his call to ministry by leaving a career and going to seminary or serves in a different social environment?

Other biblical passages such as Ephesians 6:5-8 seem to corroborate the position of one remaining in a particular social standing. This passage presents a challenge in trying to understand the Bible’s teaching on the particularly sensitive subject of slavery. Slavery is an issue where slaves and masters are in vastly different social statuses. The masters’ social status puts them in place of power where they can exploit or oppress the socially weaker slave. Does the Bible condone or condemn the social practice of slavery? One who does a surface reading of 1 Cor. 7:17-24 and Ephesians 6:5-8 could wrongly interpret these texts to justify the system of slavery and the absolute and unmitigated subjugation to the elitists of a higher social status.

The other way that this passage seems difficult is the parenthetical statement in verse 21 that states “But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.” This statement seems contradictory and paradoxical to the predominant teaching in this passage. So, what is the text really teaching? On the one hand, the text exhorts the Christian to remain in a particular social situation. On the other hand, the text gives one the liberty to seek opportunity for change if it is available.

CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE

Sociological Context

The Corinthian culture, similar to any historical or modern culture, contained social stratification. Christians within the Hellenistic culture of Corinth existed in every class of this social stratification. Therefore, the fellowship of the church contained an eclectic mix of believers of different social statuses. Gerd Theissen

commented that the social makeup of “the Corinthian congregation is marked by internal stratification.”⁴ This internal stratification was a natural result of the church members who functioned within a stratified society. Theissen stated, “the social makeup of the Corinthian congregation may, therefore, be characteristic of the Hellenistic congregation as such.”⁵ Although the fellowship of believers in Christ transcends temporal statuses or classism found within a society (Gal. 3:28), these social distinctions do not easily subside.

Marriage Matters

The Epistle of First Corinthians addresses several matters that concerned and affected the local church. One of the critical issues that the apostle Paul, the author of this epistle, covered was the matter of marriage. He addressed various subjects on marriage and put forth some principles for the Christian in 1 Corinthians 7. The first verse in the chapter provides the premise for Paul’s discourse. Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 7:1, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’” The issues that Paul addressed in this chapter likely stemmed from ascetics who “were consequently advocated celibacy in marriage, divorce from unbelieving partners, and remaining single if you were a ‘virgin’ or a widow.”⁶ The topics that Paul discussed were those critical to marriage relationships such as conjugal rights (7:1-5), singleness (7:6-8), divorce (7:10-16), purity (7:7-9), and betrothals (7:25-31, 36-38).

The passage in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 seems like a digression from the stream of discussion throughout the chapter. This passage, however, is not a complete diversion from the primary discussion since it buttresses Paul’s arguments he makes throughout this chapter. Scholars such as David Garland suggested that this section of the text functions as a “*digressio (egressus, egressio)*, which does not wander away from the main theme but amplifies or illustrates the main topic.”⁷ With the overarching theme of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul seems to be advising believers that their marital status is insignificant in their relationship to God. A change of social status, therefore, should not be the foremost pursuit for the believer in his or her relationship with God. In giving

⁴Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, ed. and trans. John H. Schütz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 69.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, edited by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 310.

⁷David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 298.

explanations and illustrations for his advice, he used as analogies two social distinctions in the Corinthian culture—circumcision and slavery.

Analogy of Circumcision

The first analogy was circumcision, social status based primarily on ethnicity. A man's status of being circumcised or uncircumcised had social implications. A circumcised man could be one cultured and esteemed in the Jewish culture but marginalized in the Greco-Roman culture. If a circumcised man desired to hold an office of public leadership or participate in the socially elite activities of the culture such as baths or gymnasiums, his circumcision could be a hindrance. The circumcised man could seek uncircumcision through epispasm⁸ in order to improve his social standing. Brad Ronnell Braxton commented, "without removing the marks of circumcision, a Jewish man in Corinth may not have full access to Corinthian social life and power, and he would also have been the object of potentially severe social ridicule."⁹

An uncircumcised man could also have aspirations where his uncircumcision could be a hindrance. Greco-Roman societies contained Jewish proselytes who were attracted to Jewish practices and institutions.¹⁰ The uncircumcised men could have sought benefits from the Jewish culture such as building or maintaining the synagogue or membership into the synagogue assembly.

Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 7:19 (King James Version), "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God." Paul wanted believers to know that the social identities that circumcision or uncircumcision created did not matter in their spiritual standing as a child of God. Braxton commented:

To submit to epispasm so as to scale more swiftly the ladder of Greco-Roman life or to seek circumcision so as to be more fully incorporated into the synagogue are equivalent actions for Paul. They are two manifestations of the same problem, a denial of the most important identity bestowed upon the believer by the call of God, membership in the *ekklēsia* [*sic*].¹¹

Analogy of Slavery

⁸Epispasm is the process of reversing circumcision.

⁹Brad Ronnell Braxton, "The Role of Ethnicity in the Social Location of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24," in *Yet With a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Randall C. Bailey (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 26.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 29.

The second social issue that Paul used as an illustration in this pericope of Scripture was slavery. Slavery was a more vivid illustration since it was an integral part of the Roman culture and applied to a broader perspective of the society. Ben Witherington III commented on slavery in Roman Corinth: “The Roman Empire was dependent on slave labor. Slavery was a burgeoning enterprise. The more territory the Romans captured, the more prisoners they sold as slaves. Corinth, due to its location and its status as a colony, was a significant center for the buying and selling of slaves.”¹² The prevalence of slavery in the Corinthian church likely meant that members of the church included slaves and slave masters. Therefore, the social dynamics of Christians in these contrasting and possibly conflicting social classes presented a challenge to the unity and health of the church.

The allusion to slavery would serve as a strong and relevant illustration in Paul’s teaching on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. Biblical internal and external evidence provides no clear motive for Paul using a provocative topic as slavery as an illustration in relation to marriage. Some scholars, however, believed that Paul’s allusion to slavery was more than an illustration. In connection with the overall theme of marriage and sexual relations in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul could be addressing these issues as they pertain to Christians who are slaves. Jennifer Glancy stated, “As he sets forth the second example, however, he is aware of the problematic ramifications of slavery with respect to sexual expectations and marital status, so he also offers one of the many exceptions that he scatters throughout the chapter.”¹³ Slavery contributed to social conundrums in many ways.

Since slaves had not legal standing in the culture, their marriage and family life were unstable. Slaves were unable to marry in Roman culture. If they did marry, their marriages were unrecognized within the society. As a result, their families were at risk of separation and breakdown due to the potential of their master selling them. The slaves’ lack of legal standing in society made them vulnerable to abuse and sexual exploitation by their masters.

While many slaves functioned in the lower classes of society, not all slaves shared the same social standing. Slaves held various positions within the occupational ranks of the society. Their jobs ranged from the lower status positions of agricultural labors and menial household servants to the higher

¹²Ben Witherington III, *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 181.

¹³Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 69.

status positions of bureaucratic, professional, or managerial jobs.¹⁴ Slaves in the higher status positions had opportunity for social advancement that was not available to some free people. Dale Martin stated, “being connected to someone in power, even if only a slave, was the next best thing to being in power oneself.”¹⁵

The social situations of slaves in the Roman culture were complex with no consensus among scholars as to their treatment in society and opportunities for manumission. Byron summarized the practice of slavery within the New Testament context:

As appalling as the notion of slavery is in any society, the fact remains that, in the context of the New Testament, slavery did take on some positive aspects. This is not to suggest, of course, that Paul was a supporter of slavery. But he and other New Testament authors were able to find something that was of ‘redeeming’ value for their theology.¹⁶

The redemptive purpose of the New Testament would overshadow these social situations.

INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS

Remaining as Called

Paul used the word translated as *call* or *called* eight times throughout this passage (1 Cor. 7:17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24). This word deserves further attention. What does the text mean through its repetitive use of the word? Does its use mean that God calls a person into a particular social status? A careful study of the original language and context reveals the potential of a couple of different meanings. The correct understanding of this word establishes the biblical principle that this text puts forth. The thesis of this article depends on the hermeneutical analysis of this word that specifies a call.

Each instance of the word translated as call comes from the Greek word καλέω. The word καλέω as an action verb within this context means to “invite or summon [in] the extended sense [to] choose for receipt of a special benefit or experience.”¹⁷ The word call can have a soteriological or situational meaning.

¹⁴Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 11.

¹⁵Ibid., 30.

¹⁶Byron, John. “Paul and the Background of Slavery: The Status Quaestionis New Testament Scholarship.” *Currents in Biblical Research* 3 (October 2004): 136.

¹⁷Frederick W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s. v., “καλέω.”

Several instances of καλέω throughout the New Testament occur where the word has soteriological connotations.¹⁸ The word καλέω can also have a secondary meaning where it applies to certain circumstances to which the Christian's call occurs and continues.¹⁹ If the secondary meaning applies to the circumstances in this text—circumcision and slavery—then the Christian's social status is one where he or she should remain in obedience to the call of God. Such an idea favors the status quo of a particular social situation regardless of its merits. To change one's status, therefore, would be disobedience to God.

The literary use of call in the passage under study supports the idea of the call to salvation. Verses 18, 20, and 22 refer to situations (circumcision, slavery) that existed during the call of the Christian. The Christian's call would not be to these situations since they were already in these situations. Obviously, the call referred to another event besides their current situation. Such a literary construction supports the idea that the call in these verses has a soteriological meaning—the moment the believer came to faith in Jesus Christ. Richard B. Hays affirmed this view by referring the Christians' "position in life at the time they first accepted the preaching of the good news about Christ."²⁰ The call within the text refers to the experience in which God graciously called the believer to faith in Jesus Christ.

Adhering to the idea of the Christian's salvation call is important in understanding this text and avoiding incorrect application. Anthony C. Thiselton stated, "To attempt to make the primary meaning coincide with a mere notion of 'vocation' to a particular kind of work would risk clouding Paul's meaning."²¹ Thiselton acknowledged that, "Yet in v. 20a τῆ κλήσει comes very close to the notion of a calling to a specific state or role. The very use of the phrase ἐμέρισεν ὁ κύριος in v. 17a should make us wary of claiming that Paul did not regard some prior role in society as a matter of divine vocation." In consideration of the sovereignty of God, one can still deem his or her social status as the call of God.

¹⁸Romans 8:28, 30 and Ephesians 4:1,4 are New Testament instances where καλέω refers to the salvation call.

¹⁹In 1 Cor. 15:9, Paul used καλέω in a vocational sense to describe his call to be an apostle. Peter used καλέω in 1 Pet. 2:21 in a situational sense to describe the believers' call to suffering. Paul's use in 1 Cor. 7:15b indicates a call to peace that could be applied to salvation or a situation.

²⁰Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, in *Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, eds. James Luther Mays, Patrick D. Miller, and Paul J. Actemeier (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 122.

²¹Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, in *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 549.

The call of salvation is the priority to which Paul exhorts the believer to remain committed. Frederick Fyvie Bruce commented that the calling in verse 20 “is the divine call from darkness to light (cf. verse 17); it is to this, not to one’s social status, that every one should remain faithful.”²² The call to remain faithful to a social situation does not fit the emphasis that Paul is making in this text. The emphasis, rather, is faithfulness to God in a social situation. The positives or negatives of a social standing should not affect one’s faithfulness to God. Bruce stated, “The man who was called to faith in Christ as a slave, for example, is exhorted not to remain faithful to his slavery but to remain faithful as a slave to the call which came to him in slavery. If he does that he will indeed be a faithful slave, but that is not the primary point.”²³

Opportunity for Freedom

First Corinthians 7:21 states, “Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)” This verse seems paradoxical in its appeal for the believer to avoid concern about their social situation as a slave but allows them the option to escape that social situation through seeking freedom.

Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthian believer was not to allow their social situation to trouble them. The text states that the Christian should “not be concerned about it [being a slave when called]” (1 Cor. 7:21).²⁴ This statement is a key one where Paul seems to address the issue of believers being anxious about their social status. Such worry and stress could cause them unnecessary hindrances in living out their faith. Garland stated that, “Since they lacked human worth in the world’s eyes, they could easily anguish that they also lacked worth before God.”²⁵ Anxiety over the social situation would consume the believers’ lives and distract them from the weightier matters in life—living the Christ-centered life that transcends the issues of life. W. Harold Mare stated, “Paul is not speaking against human betterment or social service, but he is stressing that the Christian in Corinth is to live for the Lord without anxiety in his present situation.”²⁶ The Bible teaches that anxiety should not be a part of the believer’s life experience (Matt. 6:25-34; Phil. 4:6-7).

²²Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, edited by Ronald Clements and Matthew Black (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), 71.

²³Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 71.

²⁴The NASB states, “Do not worry about it;” the KJV states, “care not for it.”

²⁵Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 308.

²⁶W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” in *Romans Through Galatians*, vol. 10 in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 233.

The desire for a change in social status may have a correlation to the marriage theme of 1 Corinthians 7. The slaves would have sought freedom to marry legally and have a family without the potential problems that their social conditions posed. Ciampa and Rosner stated, “One of the many motivations behind slaves’ desire to achieve freedom (besides the obvious benefits) would have been the ability to exercise some sovereignty over their own sexual behavior and the freedom to enter into a legal and formal marriage.”²⁷ A concern to change one’s social situation under these circumstances seems reasonable. Although Paul does not acknowledge the problems that slavery posed to the Christian, he is not overlooking or denying that they exist. He sets the priority for the Christian in that seeking a change in social status for even the most valid reasons should not usurp the call to serve Christ in the current situation. Faithful living in any social condition is preeminent.

Although faithful living does not depend on the Christian’s social status, it does not necessarily preempt the Christian from seeking a change if an opportunity exists. The statement in 1 Cor. 7:21b provides the believer who is a slave the liberty to seek freedom if they have an opportunity. Paul is not being inconsistent or contradictory in his teaching but giving further substance to his overall theme of faithful Christian living independent of social status.

The Greek construction of 1 Cor. 7:21b states literally, “but if you are able to become free, rather make use.” The interesting and challenging part of this construction is the absence of the direct object of *μᾶλλον χρῆσαι*. Many English Bible translations simply supply the word *it* as the object. The challenge is to determine the object of *μᾶλλον χρῆσαι* to understand what Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians to use —slavery or freedom.

Use Your Slavery

The first option holds the position that the text tells the enslaved Christians to make use of their present condition, which is their slavery. The *New Revised Standard Version* translates this verse as, “Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition [slavery] now more than ever.”²⁸ This translation asserts an interpretation upon the text that goes beyond the original text itself. The argument in favor of this interpretation is that it aligns with Paul’s theme for the Christians to remain in the condition in which they were called.²⁹

²⁷Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 318.

²⁸*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), s. v., “1 Co 7:21.”

²⁹Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 309. Garland also asserted that the grammar could support this view.

Another factor that supports this interpretation is that μᾶλλον as contrasting comparative could mean, “rather make use of your slavery.”³⁰

Simon Kistemaker and William Hendriksen identified two issues with this interpretation—one grammatical and the other cultural.³¹ The grammatical issue is the verb χρῆσαι, which is an aorist middle imperative of the verb χράομαι. The aorist imperative of χράομαι “signifies a new beginning in life and not a continuation of slavery.”³² Bruce affirmed that the aorist imperative of χράομαι suggests, “making use of a definite opportunity.”³³ The cultural issue with this interpretation is that the slave did not possess the authority or autonomy to acquire his or her own freedom. In the manner of manumission, it was “not the slave but the master made the decision to free the servant.”³⁴ This position makes a questionable and simplistic assumption about the Corinthian culture that “the slave who wanted to stay in slavery could simply inform his owner of his decision and that the owner would quickly agree.”³⁵ The interpretation that supplies slavery as the object of μᾶλλον χρῆσαι could also assume Paul’s support of slavery.

Use Your Freedom

The second option for the object of μᾶλλον χρῆσαι is τῆ ἐλευθερίᾳ (freedom) based on the use of ἐλεύθερος in the previous part of the verse. More scholars hold this interpretation rather than the former. A linguistical, lexical-grammatical, and historical-cultural analysis provides adequate support for this view. The first grammatical reason for supporting this view is that for elliptical sentences, “one would ordinarily supply a word from that sentence—in this case ‘freedom’—not a word from an earlier sentence.”³⁶ Another reason in support of this view is χρῆσαι as an aorist imperative suggests a one-time event rather than a continual one where the believer continually makes use of his or her slavery. A present tense verb would be more applicable if Paul intended to convey that the Christian should continue in their slavery. The meaning of the

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 18 in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 232-3.

³²Kistemaker and Hendriksen, *Exposition*, 233.

³³Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 72.

³⁴Kistemaker and Hendriksen, *Exposition*, 233.

³⁵S. Scott Bartchy, *Μᾶλλον Χρῆσαι: First-Century Slavery and The Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21*, SBL Dissertation Series (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 97.

³⁶Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Edited by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 317.

verb χρῆσαι also supports this view. The word χρῆσαι means, “to make use of, employ”³⁷ and “does not mean ‘make the most of’ or ‘put up with.’”³⁸ Another key factor is the use of ἀλλά that often has an adversative effect. The adversative force “suggests that the statement qualifies what precedes: ‘If you were called as a slave, don’t worry about it, *but* ...’”³⁹

A contextual analysis provides even more convincing support that the text encouraged the believers to make use of their freedom. Paul’s arguments in 1 Cor. 7:18-19 followed a pattern of rhetorical question, imperative, and explanation. The reader would expect that this interjection meant some kind of exception. Will Deming commented, “the imperative in this diatribe pattern functions not so much as a command, but as a rebuff. Its effectiveness lies in its demand that a person do the very opposite of what he or she is inclined to do.”⁴⁰ Per this view, the original reader of this text would understand Paul’s exhortation to make use of their freedom if they had such an opportunity for manumission. The text is less clear on who could initiate the manumission—the master or the slave.

Gregory Dawes noted the pattern that Paul used in pairing illustrations in other Scripture texts.⁴¹ These pairings were necessary for Paul to maximize the effect of the point or idea that he wants to convey. When Paul chose more than one image to illustrate his point, “it is because one image alone would have been inadequate.”⁴² The two examples in this pericope, circumcision and slavery, follow this pattern but with an exception. Dawes commented, “This second example illustrates both the ultimate indifference of one’s state of life (v 21a) and the possibility of having a preference where circumstances allow (v 21b).”⁴³ The insertion of this exception and its uniqueness in Paul’s pattern of illustrations indicates its significance.

Slaves typically could not initiate their freedom since this was the prerogative of their masters. The use of δύνασαι in this verse, however, indicates that the Christian slave possessed some ability in the potential of manumission. If the

³⁷Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s. v., “χρᾶσμαι.”

³⁸Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 309.

³⁹Ibid., 310. Italics were those of the author.

⁴⁰Will Deming, “A Diatribe Pattern in 1 Cor 7:21-22: A New Perspective on Paul’s Directions to Slaves,” *Novum Testamentum* 37 (April 1995): 135.

⁴¹Gregory W. Dawes, “But If You Can Gain Your Freedom (1 Corinthians 7:17-24),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (October 1990): 686-9. Dawes noted Paul’s paired illustrations of 1 Cor. 3:5-7 (field and building) and 15:35-44a (sowing and different kind of bodies).

⁴²Dawes, “But If You Can Gain Your Freedom,” 688.

⁴³Ibid., 697.

master freed his slave, the slave could not refuse. Paul may be alluding to this possibility if the slaves obtained their freedom in such a way.

Another instance that supports the view that Paul allows the Christian to seek freedom from slavery is his statement in 1 Cor. 7:35 where he would speak “for [their] own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon [them], but to promote good order and secure their undivided devotion to the Lord.” That Paul would advise the Corinthian Christians to remain in slavery is antithetical to this statement in 1 Cor. 7:35.

Some scholars rebut this position based on their analysis of slaves’ liberty under Roman law. Since slaves were not legal persons under Roman law, they could not legally choose freedom. Witherington held that “it seems unlikely that Paul means in 1 Cor. 7:21 that if one has a chance to *choose* freedom one should take it.”⁴⁴

The above evidence arguably indicates that Paul did not prevent the Corinthian Christians from seeking or receiving freedom from slavery that would effectively change their social status. This evidence supports the author’s position that the Bible does not preclude a person from changing their social status if given the opportunity. The text evidently teaches that one should improve their social status if the opportunity avails.

Eschatological View

Another perspective to interpret this passage is that Paul was speaking from an eschatological point of view. Paul and other Christians were “convinced that the eschaton, the climax of God’s redemptive intervention was very near.”⁴⁵ Ciampa and Rosner stated that Paul’s universal rule in the latter part of verse 17 provides a hint:

The second of four such statements in the letter (4:17; 11:16; 14:33), it emerges not just from a pragmatic impulse but from eschatological convictions. As announced in 1:2 (alluding to Mal. 1:11), Paul’s open agenda is to contribute to the end-time worship *universal* worship of the one true God by Gentiles. This involves helping them to live holy lives, to walk before God, and to please him in every respect.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 184.

⁴⁵Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 593.

⁴⁶Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 310.

Statements in other verses such as 1 Cor. 7:26 (“in view of the present distress”) and 1 Cor. 7:29 (“the appointed time has grown very short”) also provide clues to the eschatological underpinnings of this passage.⁴⁷

Status as Secondary

Noticeably absent from Paul’s arguments is a stated position on the ethics of these social conditions particularly on slavery. Paul did not provide an extended commentary on the ethics of the social conditions in which believers existed. He did not condone nor condemn the social statuses that he discussed in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24. Paul’s silence indicated that his main concern was not the ethics of these social conditions, but the ethics of the believers who lived in these social conditions. Fee stated, “The very lack of urgency in these matters indicates that they are not at issue.”⁴⁸ Bartchy affirmed Paul’s priority of the believers’ ethics when he stated, “no particular activity of the Jews or the slaves in the congregation had move Paul to write [1 Cor. 7:17-24]. It was rather the behavior of men and women as such which stimulated him to write ch. 7 in the letter.”⁴⁹ Paul’s priority is clear from the study of this text.

In 1 Corinthians 7:24, Paul summarized the point of this digression in stating, “So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him *remain with God* (italics the author’s).” Bruce stated, “While the examples adduced in verses 17-24 are circumcision or uncircumcision, slavery or freedom, the point Paul is making in the wider context is that those who were married when they were called should remain married, while those who were single should remain single.”⁵⁰

The analogy of Scripture corroborates Paul’s teaching in this text on dealing with social statuses. The scriptural analogy accords with the findings within this article. Ephesians 6:5-8 supports the emphasis of faithful Christian living in any social status—slave or master. Paul in like manner avoids commentary or criticism of the social conditions of slavery. He instead focused on the believer “doing the will of God from the heart” (Eph. 6:6). In Philemon, Paul seemed more concern with the reconciliation of brothers in Christ rather than a critique of his friend’s participation in slave ownership. The Exodus account demonstrated God’s higher purpose for His people than simply a release from

⁴⁷Kaiser, *Hard Sayings*, 593.

⁴⁸Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 307-8.

⁴⁹Bartchy, *Μάλλον Χρήσαι*, 140.

⁵⁰Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 72.

oppressive bondage under the Egyptians. God declared that His ultimate purpose would be that they would “serve [Him]” (Ex. 4:23).

APPLICATION

Believers who come to faith in Christ acquire a new citizenship that is not temporal and transcends their social conditions. Theissen stated, “faith in the exalted Lord was an offer of advancement loyalty for everyone, whatever his or her existing social status.”⁵¹ One’s spiritual status before God is more important than one’s social status in society. Theissen further declared, “works and achievements do not decide anything at all about a person’s status before God. All that counts is πίστις—that is, loyalty to the crucified Master who is now above all masters.”⁵² Achieving a higher status in society does not put people in a better position to serve God. Greater status can often become a distraction and deterrent to godly living. Such was the case of the rich young ruler in his encounter with Jesus as recorded in the Gospels (Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31).

The Lord Jesus Christ calls His people to seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33). The person who seeks a change in status must beware of the temptation to allow the cares of the world to cause him or her to wane in their fervor for God.

What about the one who desires to change their circumstances? Through fervent prayer and waiting on God, the believer must have a sense or conviction of God’s purpose and place for them. The believer does not necessarily divert from God’s will if he or she earnestly desires a change in social status. Richard Pratt commented,

It is important to remember that Paul did not suggest that believers should never change their status. He said that they should seek to know how God has called them, and to retain the places God has assigned them. His general rule was: Christians should remain as they are in relationships and service unless God assigns them new tasks.⁵³

Believers should regard their place, current or potential, as places of service to God. If one desires a change, service to God should increase and not lessen.

⁵¹Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament*, trans Margartet Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 194.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 195.

⁵³Richard L. Pratt, Jr. *I & II Corinthians*, Vol. 7 in *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 117.

One concerning point for many is Paul's silence on the ethics of slavery. Does Paul's silence indicate his support for the status quo? H. W. Mare affirmed:

It is not that Paul is for the subjugation or elevation of certain segments of society, but he wants individual Christians to realize and accept God's sovereign purpose in saving and keeping them regardless of the level of society they are in. Paul is more afraid of the spirit of anarchy and rebellion, personal and national (cf. Rom 12:3; 13:1-7; 1 Cor 12:4-11; 2 Cor 10:13) than of social inequality.⁵⁴

Paul understood clearly that faithful living should be inconsequential to one's place in society. Galatians 3:28 puts forth the equality of essence and worth of all people before God. Paul himself learned the value of contentment in any situation (Phil. 4:11).

The eschatological view holds that believers should not seek changes in social status because of the critical need to fulfill the missionary call. Why should believers allow temporal matters to usurp the more critical matter of the spread of the gospel and the furtherance of God's kingdom? One's temporal standings are inconsequential to his or her eternal standing in God through Christ. Kaiser summarized "this belief created a tremendous missionary urgency. The good news had to get out to as many as possible while they could yet be saved (see 1 Cor. 10:33). This expectation of the imminent end was surely an important factor for the Pauline norm 'remain where you are.'"⁵⁵ Realizing the missionary mandate in Matt. 28:19-20, believers should subject their secular ambitions to the greater potential for service and spiritual growth.

Social status is a temporal matter and should have no effect, positively or negatively, on the Christian's walk with God. Witherington summarized the teaching of this passage:

One of the themes of the chapter [1 Cor. 7] is that one should not try to change one's status just *because* one is in Christ. This sort of approach amounts to saying that no social status of whatever kind prevents one from becoming or being a Christian, and therefore is not necessary to change one's social status to become or be a Christian. Even a slave in Roman Corinth can be a Christian, and thus how much more anyone else.⁵⁶

⁵⁴W. Harold Mare, "1 Corinthians," 232.

⁵⁵Kaiser, *Hard Sayings*, 593.

⁵⁶Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 185. Italics were those of the author.

While the Christian may seek a change in status, such a change in social status is not necessary to be more faithful to God.

What about the idea that Christians should pursue social change in the broader society to improve the social conditions for others? Concerning this idea, Christians should be discerning and exercise caution. Witherington noted, “Paul’s approach is to put the leaven of the gospel into the structure of the Christian community, not into the larger society directly, and let it do its work over the course of time.”⁵⁷ Christians can seek societal changes out of their call to be salt and light to society and to show love and common grace to others. The approach of social activism, however, can lead to a misplaced hope from which real change comes and a misunderstanding of how real change happens. Witherington’s provided a helpful summary: “Apparently, no early Christian, by litigation or by appeal to governing authorities or by revolt, ever tried to change the social fabric of ancient society. It was by means of witness and change *within* the Christian community that a new worldview was promulgated.”⁵⁸ The discipleship and fellowship within the church inherently has the power and witness to effect positive change in society.

What’s most important for the believer? He or she should realize that the life that they live on earth is fleeting. It does not make sense to consume oneself with such matters that may be important but not ultimate. Status changes may be important but they are not ultimate. Above all, the believer should seek the Lord. Whatever the social status—high or low—it should affect one’s devotion to God either positively or negatively.

CONCLUSION

This article presented a study on the idea of social status change for the believer with an exegetical study of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 and other supporting biblical texts. The theme of the text was that each believer “should remain in the condition in which he was called” (1 Cor. 7:20). Paul primarily used this text for illustrative purposes in the broader context of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 where he exhorts the believers to remain with their spouses unless they depart. There is more to this text, however, than just illustrations. The contents of the text in its linguistic, literary, grammatical, and historical context reveals some key

⁵⁷Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 185.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

insights and wisdom for the Christian in dealing with social conditions or circumstances.

The Bible does not preclude believers from seeking social change and could encourage it when the opportunity presents itself. This textual study offered several points of application. Ciampa and Rosner provided a helpful summary for applying the lessons of this text:

Like the Corinthians believers they need to know that they should not nurture the belief that God would be more pleased with them or more willing to use them if only their circumstance would change. And like the Corinthians, they need to know that if opportunities arise that would allow them to transition to a more empowering and less oppressive situation without compromising their Christian integrity, they should feel free to do so.⁵⁹

Believers should realize their opportunities and make the best of them. The believers' best opportunities may exist in their current social situation. God's promotional ways are different and far better than any status change that one perceives as necessary. Faithfulness to God does not depend on a place on earth but on a Person in heaven.

⁵⁹Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter*, 322.

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“*Spiritus sanctum adoramus*”: The ontology of the Spirit in Theodore of Mopsuestia¹

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ABSTRACT

The article begins with reference to the creedal declaration of the Council of Constantinople (381). The God of the Scriptures has revealed himself as three co-equal persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who share one divine being to the full. The creed affirms that the Holy Spirit, ought to be worshipped and confessed together with the Father and with the Son. There follows a brief survey of the status of the Spirit from Athanasius in the late 50’s and also Basil of Caesarea in 375 to the precise wording of the pneumatological article of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, which was issued in 381. Reference is made to those who opposed this direction of Trinitarian thought, i.e., the Pneumatomachi, later known also as “Macedonians,” who in the 370’s denied the full deity of the Spirit. The article focuses upon Theodore of Mopsuestia (352–428), who produced a number of exegetical and dogmatic works which were preserved among the Churches of the East, in Syriac and other Oriental languages. Theodore’s *Disputation with the Macedonians*, which was the record of a debate between Theodore and some Pneumatomachian bishops held at Anazarbus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia Secunda, is particularly highlighted here. Theodore spoke of the Holy Spirit’s hypostatic existence within the Godhead. While others could affirm that whereas the Son is eternally generated from the Father, the Spirit eternally proceeds from God, Theodore did not employ this description, but simply affirmed the Spirit’s divine nature and left the mode of his distinct existence as a mystery.

¹ The cited phrase is from Theodore of Mopsuestia, Letter to Artemius of Alexandria, which can be found in H.B. Swete, *Theodori Episcopi Mopsuesteni in Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1880), 2:338. This article was originally a paper given at an online conference, October 30, 2021, part of a series of annual conferences in *The Nicaea 1700 Project—I. Nicaea & its Legacy*, which is being sponsored by The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY. For help with various aspects of writing this article, I am indebted to: Drs Lewis Ayres, Matthew R. Crawford, and Roy Paul; Prof Kirk Wellum; David Zhou, Caleb Neel, and Zachariah M. Carter.

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FIVE KEY WORDS

The deity of the Holy Spirit, Trinitarian thought, Binitarianism, the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit.

According to a survey of American Christianity conducted in 2021 by George Barna with regard to what is meant by the confession that one is a Christian, “58% [of those surveyed] contend that the Holy Spirit is not a real, living being but is merely a symbol of God’s power, presence, or purity.”³ This is a shocking statistic that calls into question much of what passes for Christianity in America. In the broad spectrum of ecclesial traditions, being an authentic Christian surely entails a commitment to the theological orientation that informs the creedal declaration of the Council of Constantinople (381), namely, that the God of the Scriptures has revealed himself as three co-equal persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who share one divine being to the full. Specifically with regard to the Holy Spirit, this creed confesses that he is “Lord and Giver of life,” and as such, he is to be worshipped and glorified together with the Father and with the Son.⁴

The fourth-century pneumatological landscape

Historically, this creedal statement brought formal closure to a long debate that had been initiated in 318 when the Alexandrian heresiarch Arius (d.336) had denied the full deity of the Son and the Spirit. It was only in the three decades prior to the Council of Constantinople, however, that the ontological status of the Spirit had become a centrepiece of discussion. Athanasius (c.299–373) had to face the issue head-on in the late 350s when his friend Serapion of Thmuis (d. after 362) informed him that there were certain individuals with whom he had contact in the Nile Delta who regarded the Spirit as an angelic being and thus a creature. Athanasius’ exegetically-rich response in three letters to Serapion was the first of a number of treatises written on the subject of the Spirit’s nature in this era.⁵ Not long after, probably in the early 360s, Didymus the Blind (313–

³ George Barna, “American Worldview Inventory 2021: Release #6: What Does It Mean When People Say They Are ‘Christian’?” (https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CRC_AWVI2021_Release06_Digital_01_20210831.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1B6frV93zMO5iVhlnZj5ZfIW5vH91TXCwBneb4EnFNFm5IJprMWb9Qaw; released August 31, 2021, and accessed September 25, 2021).

⁴ On this confession, see Adolf-Martin Ritter, *Das Konzil von Konstantinopel und sein Symbol. Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des II. Ökumenischen Konzils* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965).

⁵ For these letters, see C.R.B. Shapland, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit* (London: Epworth Press, 1951) or Mark DelCogliano, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, and Lewis Ayres, ed. and trans., *Works on the Spirit: Athanasius’s Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*

398) wrote his book on the Spirit in Alexandria,⁶ and then in 375 the Cappadocian theologian, Basil of Caesarea (c.329–379), penned his *On the Holy Spirit*, the product of a painful break with his one-time mentor Eustathius of Sebaste (c.300–c.377) over the rectitude of the conglorification of the Spirit with the Father and the Son.⁷ This emphasis of Basil’s treatise played a major rôle in shaping the precise wording of the pneumatological article of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, which was issued in 381, two years after Basil’s death.

Opposing this direction of Trinitarian thought were the Pneumatomachi, later known also as “Macedonians,”⁸ who denied the full deity of the Spirit. In the 370s their most prominent leader was the afore-mentioned Eustathius, who had played a major rôle in the development of monasticism in Asia Minor.⁹

and Didymus’s *On the Holy Spirit*, Popular Patristics Series, no.43 (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 51–137. For a study of their pneumatology, see also Adolf Laminski, *Der Heilige Geist als Geist Christi und Geist der Gläubigen: Der Beitrag des Athanasios von Alexandrien zur Formulierung des trinitarischen Dogmas im vierten Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag GMBH, 1969) and Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Spirit of God: The Exegesis of 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. XXVII (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), *passim*.

⁶ For Didymus the Blind’s *On the Holy Spirit*, see DelCogliano, Radde-Gallwitz, and Ayres, ed. and trans., *Works on the Spirit*, 139–227. For the date, see DelCogliano, Radde-Gallwitz, and Ayres, ed. and trans., *Works on the Spirit*, 37–42. See also Mark DelCogliano, “Basil of Caesarea, Didymus the Blind, and the Anti-Pneumatomachian Exegesis of Amos 4:13 and John 1:3,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 61 (2010): 644–658; Lewis Ayres, “The Holy Spirit as the ‘Undiminished Giver’: Didymus the Blind’s *De spiritu sancto* and the development of Nicene pneumatology” in D. Vincent Twomey and Janet E. Rutherford, ed., *The Holy Spirit in the Fathers of the Church. The Proceedings of the Seventh International Patristic Conference, Maynooth, 2008* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 57–72.

⁷ For Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit*, see Stephen Hildebrand, *St Basil the Great: On the Holy Spirit* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011). For studies of this treatise, see Hermann Dörries, *De Spiritu Sancto. Der Beitrag des Basiliius zum Abschluß des trinitarischen Dogmas* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956); J. Verhees, “Die Bedeutung der Transzendenz des Pneuma bei Basiliius,” *Ostkirchliche Studien* 25 (1976): 285–302; Pia Luislampe, *Spiritus Vivificans: Grundzüge einer Theologie des Heiligen Geistes nach Basiliius von Caesarea* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 1981); Haykin, *Spirit of God*; Hermann Josef Sieben, trans. *Basiliius von Cäsarea: De Spiritu Sancto/Über den Heiligen Geist* (Freiburg; Basle; Vienna: Herder, 1993), 7–70; Volker H. Drecoll, *Die Entwicklung der Trinitätslehre des Basiliius von Cäsarea. Sein Weg vom Homöusianer zum Neonizäner* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 183–269; Stephen M. Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea: A Synthesis of Greek Thought and Biblical Truth* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

⁸ For a discussion of the term “Macedonian” in this regard, see W.-D. Hauschild, “Die Pneumatomachen: Eine Untersuchung zur Dogmengeschichte des vierten Jahrhunderts” (Theological dissertation, University of Hamburg. 1967), 236–239.

⁹ On Eustathius and his pneumatology, see especially Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, “Eustathios von Sebaste,” *Theologische Realencyklopädie* 10 (1982): 548–549 and Haykin, *The Spirit of God*, 27, n.86. On Eustathius’ career, see also Jean Gribomont, “Eustathe de Sébaste,” *Dictionnaire*

Eustathius was largely unconcerned about questions of dogma such as the nature and status of Spirit, and it was undoubtedly because he was not a theologian that no written works of his have been transmitted. As Wolf-Dieter Hauschild has described the keynote of his pneumatology: the Holy Spirit was “a charismatic reality primarily to be experienced.”¹⁰ Eustathius appears to have been quite happy to affirm the Nicene Creed as it stood, but he had a deep aversion to expanding it to include a dogmatic assertion with regard to the Spirit. He was, for lack of a better term, committed to a Binitarianism that was hostile to any conglorification of the Spirit with the Father and the Son. His refusal to take a clear position as to the Spirit’s deity is captured by a remark that he reputedly made at a synod in 364 when the question of the Spirit’s ontological status was raised: “I neither choose to name the Holy Spirit God nor dare to call him a creature.”¹¹ Theodore of Mopsuestia (352–428) noted forty or fifty years later that there were still some Pneumatomachi who adhered to this agnosticism about the status of the Spirit, though others openly referred to him as a creature.¹² Indeed, the textual focus of this article, Theodore’s *Disputation with the Macedonians*, makes it patent that controversy about the Spirit’s nature continued for some years beyond the Council of Constantinople.

Being: Theodore of Mopsuestia

Theodore came from a prominent Antiochene family.¹³ He studied with John Chrysostom (c.347–407), initially in Antioch under the famous rhetorician

de Spiritualité IV/2 (1961): 1708–1712; C.A. Frazee, “Anatolian Asceticism in the Fourth Century: Eustathios of Sebastea and Basil of Caesarea,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 66 (1980): 16–33; Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles, CA; London: University of California Press, 1994), 73–76, 239–245.

¹⁰ Hauschild, “Eustathios von Sebaste,” 548–549.

¹¹ Socrates, *Church History* 2.45.

¹² Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Nicene Creed* 9: “it is only men of ill will who ... call the Holy Spirit a servant or a creature, while some others amongst them although refraining from these words yet refuse to call him God” (A. Mingana, ed. and trans. *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Nicene Creed*, Woodbrooke Studies, vol.5 [Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd., 1932], 100).

¹³ For the life, writings, and thought of Theodore, see especially H.B. Swete, “Theodorus (26), bishop of Mopsuestia” in William Smith and Henry Wace, ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines* (London: John Murray, 1887), 4:934–948; F. Loofs, “Theodore of Mopsuestia” in Samuel Macauley Jackson et al., ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1911, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1950), 11:320–322; R. Devreesse, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1948); Rowan A. Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Exegete and Theologian* (London: The Faith Press, 1961); R.A. Norris, *Manhood and Christ: A Study in the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963); Joanne McWilliam Dewart, *The Theology of Grace in Theodore of Mopsuestia*, The Catholic University of America Studies in

Libanius (c.314–392) from 366 to around 370, and then later in a monastic school presided over by the biblical exegete Diodore of Tarsus (d. before 394). Theodore entered this school in 370 or 371. Seven or eight years later, when Diodore was elected bishop of Tarsus in 378, Theodore appears to have assumed the direction of the school. He was ordained a presbyter in 383 by Flavian of Antioch and he probably spent the late 380s in Tarsus with his mentor Diodore.

By the time that Theodore was appointed bishop of Mopsuestia in 392, he had written a number of theological treatises, including his *On the Incarnation*, which was a significant expression of Antiochene Christology. Over the next thirty-six years, till his death in 428, Theodore poured forth a veritable stream of exegetical and dogmatic works, which led H.B. Swete to rightly describe him as “the great Antiochene Interpreter” of Scripture.¹⁴ In fact, so prominent a theologian and Bible commentator did Theodore become during his lifetime and in the years immediately following that there were many in the Eastern Mediterranean who asserted their orthodoxy by simply saying, as Cyril of Alexandria (376–444) later reported, “We believe as Theodore.”¹⁵

Christian Antiquity, no.16 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1971), 3–17; Simon Gerber, *Theodor von Mopsuestia und das Nicänum: Studien zu den katechetischen Homilien*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, vol. LI (Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2000); Frederick G. McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009).

For the monastic setting of Theodore’s study under Diodore, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom—Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 18–20. John T. Fitzgerald has an extremely helpful overview of Theodore’s life and writings in his “Theodore of Mopsuestia on Paul’s Letter to Philemon” in D. Francois Tolmie with Alfred Friedl, *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter* (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 333–345. For ancient expressions of esteem for Theodore, see also A. Mingana, ed. and trans. *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Nicene Creed*, Woodbrooke Studies, vol.5 (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd., 1932), 1–5.

See also the valuable reviews of Devreesse’s work by G.W.H. Lampe, “Reviews: *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste* by Robert Devreesse,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 50, no. 199/200 (July/October 1949): 224–227; Ernest Honigmann, “Robert Devreesse, *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste*,” *Traditio* 7 (1949–1951): 478–480; John L. McKenzie, “A New Study of Theodore of Mopsuestia,” *Theological Studies* 10 (1949): 394–408; Francis A. Sullivan, “Some Reactions to Devreesse’s New Study of Theodore of Mopsuestia,” *Theological Studies* 12 (1951): 179–207.

For the chronology of Theodore’s early life, I have relied upon Robert E. Carter, “Chrysostom’s *Ad Theodorum Lapsum* and the Early Chronology of Theodore of Mopsuestia,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 16 (1962): 87–101 and Fitzgerald, “Theodore of Mopsuestia on Paul’s Letter to Philemon,” 333–337.

¹⁴ H.B. Swete, *Theodori Episcopi Mopsuesteni in Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1880), 1:x.

¹⁵ πιστεύομεν ὡς Θεόδωρος; Cyril of Alexandria, *Letter* 69 (PG 77.340C). Theodoret of Cyrhus remembered Theodore as a “teacher of the whole church, who excelled in the fight against every heretical phalanx” (*Church History* 5.39 [PG 82.1277A]).

However, owing to Theodore's supposed links to Nestorianism and his subsequent condemnation during the reign of Justinian I (482–565), virtually none of his works have survived in their original Greek. Thankfully, they found, in Swete's words, a "shelter and an eager acceptance" among the Churches of the East, "who at an early date translated them into Syriac and other Oriental languages."¹⁶ Among these theological works was Theodore's *Disputation with the Macedonians*, which was the record of a debate between Theodore and some Pneumatomachian bishops held at Anazarbus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia Secunda, around the year 392. It is probable that Theodore was asked to present the biblical case for the full deity of the Spirit at this colloquy because of his growing renown as a theologian. Initially, the Pneumatomachian bishops were reluctant to participate since Theodore was not a bishop but only an elder. Arrangements to have Theodore ordained bishop of Mopsuestia, which was around twenty miles south and west of Anazarbus, were soon afoot. Theodore kept detailed notes of his debate with the Pneumatomachi and published them some years later at the request of Patrophilus, bishop of Aegae, a maritime town also in Cilicia. This Greek text was later translated into Syriac and has been preserved in a single Syriac manuscript housed in the British Museum.¹⁷

The Pneumatomachi at Anazarbus

Following the Council of Constantinople, legislation had been passed by the government of Theodosius I that proscribed a list of heresies, including that of the Pneumatomachi, forbidding them to assemble, construct churches, or ordain ministers.¹⁸ Theodore's treatise thus provides for us, in the words of Matthew R. Crawford, "a rare glimpse into the fate of the Macedonians following the Council of Constantinople in 381."¹⁹ Moreover, as a record of a public disputation about the nature of the Godhead after the Theodosian legislation, it implies that the implementation of these laws allowed room for such debates. Theodore had to

¹⁶ Swete, *Theodori Episcopi Mopsuesteni in Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii*, 1:x. For a discussion of one key pathway of the transmission of Theodore's works, see Ute Possek, "Transmitting Theodore to the Church of the East: The Contribution of Thomas of Edessa," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 71, no.4 (October 2020): 712–737.

¹⁷ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Une controverse avec les Macédoniens*, ed. and trans. F. Nau, *Patrologia Orientalis*, vol. 9 (1913, Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1983), 635. Patrophilus may well be the same figure who had been a correspondent of Basil of Caesarea (c.329–379). See F. Nau, "Introduction" to Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Une controverse avec les Macédoniens*, 635, n.2.

¹⁸ *Codex Theodosianus* 16.5.11–13.

¹⁹ Matthew R. Crawford, "Introduction" to his and Lewis Ayres' translation of Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Dispute with the Macedonians* in Lewis Ayres and Mark DelCogliano, ed., *Varieties of Nicene Theology in East and West (AD 360–420)*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

convince his audience, the residents of Anazarbus, of the rectitude of pro-Nicene pneumatology, which in turn would reinforce the imperial legislation.²⁰

The Anazarbus Pneumatomachi did not have a church building but met in house churches, as Christians had done prior to the Constantinian revolution.²¹ Once Theodore had been ordained bishop, the Pneumatomachi appear to have been eager for a debate in the capital of Cilicia Secunda. Theodore recalled them coming to the discussion, filled with pride, confident that “everyone gathered together agreed with them,” since up to the time of the debate they had been spreading their views in the city.²²

They began by telling Theodore in no uncertain terms that they rejected the idea that the Holy Spirit is God.²³ In talking about the Spirit, they were happy to identify him by a Johannine epithet: he is the “Comforter.”²⁴ A further objection that they had to Theodore’s position concerned the origin of the Spirit. At some point in the debate they posed the question to the bishop of Mopsuestia, “How is he from God?”²⁵ In their minds, there were only two modes of existence within the Godhead: that of fatherhood and that of sonship. As they told Theodore, “If he [that is, the Spirit] is divine by nature, then he would also by all means be the Son of God.”²⁶ In other words, they appear to have been Binitarians like Basil of Caesarea’s opponent, Eustathius of Sebaste.²⁷ If the Spirit were God, what then is his relationship to the Father? Is he another Son? Both the Anazarbus Pneumatomachi and Theodore rejected this possibility as foolish talk, which, in the minds of the former, must mean the Spirit is not to be enumerated as divine with the Father and the Son.²⁸ Theodore, though, was convinced otherwise and that because of a number of pneumatological texts from the New Testament, one

²⁰ Crawford, “Introduction” to his and Ayres’ translation of Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Dispute with the Macedonians* in Ayres and DelCogliano, ed., *Varieties of Nicene Theology in East and West*.

²¹ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 2. I am deeply indebted to Profs Lewis Ayres and Matthew R. Crawford for the use of their translation of this text in Ayres and Mark DelCogliano, ed., *Varieties of Nicene Theology in East and West*.

²² Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 3.

²³ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 3.

²⁴ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 3. See John 14:16, for example, which was cited in the debate.

²⁵ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 11 and 17.

²⁶ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 18.

²⁷ For this position of the Pneumatomachi, see Basil of Caesarea, *Homily 24* (PG 31.600A–617B), which Basil drew up between 373 and 375

²⁸ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 18.

of which, 1 Corinthians 2:10–12, was especially central to his defence of the Spirit’s divinity.

“The Spirit who is from God”

Beyond these Pneumatomachian assertions Theodore did not record anything further that was said by his opponents at Anazarbus.²⁹ What he recorded of his own words began with the affirmation of the uniqueness of the Spirit’s being. He is unique in his holiness, for he is holy by nature, while all other beings receive their “holiness through communion with presence of God.”³⁰ And since the Holy Spirit is “naturally holy,” he is “alone numbered with the Father and with the Son.”³¹ Theodore insisted on the Spirit’s unique deity, he asserted, because he had learned this from the tradition that Christ had “delivered to the Apostles through instruction and baptism” as well as from a study of Holy Scripture, which he described as the “words that are defining for all things.”³² The Pneumatomachian bishops may well have responded to this claim by asking him what particular Scriptures taught the Spirit’s deity.

Theodore began by insisting that all creatures are from God in the sense that they are called “from non-existence to existence” by divine fiat.³³ The Pauline texts of 1 Corinthians 11:12 (“everything is from God”) and 8:6 (“there is one God, the Father from whom are all things”) clearly affirmed this. By contrast, the Spirit of God “exists eternally.”³⁴ Theodore thus argued, the Spirit’s being “from God” is qualitatively different from that of the creatures’ being “from God.” To prove his point Theodore turned to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 2:12: “We have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God.” Theodore saw a distinction in this verse between the world and God. The world is the entirety of the created realm and any “spirit of the world” is by definition, then, a created being. But the Holy Spirit, Theodore argued, is from God, that is “from his nature,” and this entails a necessary ontological difference with all that is

²⁹ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 2.

³⁰ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 4.

³¹ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 5.

³² Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 6.

³³ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 9.

³⁴ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 10. It is noteworthy that 1 Corinthians 11:12 was a proof-text in the arsenal of the Pneumatomachi for the Spirit not being divine. See, for example, Basil of Caesarea, *Homily 24.7* (PG 31.616B): “If the Spirit is from God (ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ), with what right do you place him among the creatures? By no means produce that [text of Scripture]: ‘all things are from God’.” See further the discussion in Michael G.A. Haykin, “‘A Sense of Awe in the Presence of the Ineffable’: I Cor. 2.11–12 in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1988): 341–357.

from the world.³⁵ Indeed, Paul's words here in 1 Corinthians 2:12 imply nothing less than "the majesty of the Holy Spirit," whose "grandeur" is such that he is "greatly exalted above the spirits of the world."³⁶ Theodore's exegesis of this Pauline text is identical to that of Athanasius in his *Letters to Serapion*: both theologians employ the verse to demonstrate that the Spirit is not a creature.³⁷ For Athanasius, 1 Corinthians 2:12 is one of a number of biblical passages that he uses to uphold the Spirit's deity. Theodore, though, makes this verse absolutely central to his case against the Anazarbus Pneumatomachi. In some ways, the debate with the Pneumatomachi was about the interpretation of this one Pauline verse. As Matthew Crawford notes, "it was Paul ... who gave the definitive proof-text of the Spirit's deity and relationship with the Father."³⁸

The Pneumatomachi pressed Theodore to explain exactly how the Holy Spirit is "from God." To Theodore, such a query could only mean that his theological opponents had abandoned a posture of humbly listening to the Scriptures, which clearly taught that the recognition of the ultimate incomprehensibility of God is fundamental to proper thinking about him. 1 Corinthians 13:12, where Paul said, "For now I know partially, but then I will know as I am known," was clear proof to Theodore that Paul was aware of the limitations of human knowledge. And in the Old Testament, Theodore maintained that David was convinced of the same, for as he stated in Psalm 139:6, "Knowledge of you surpasses me."³⁹

The bishop of Mopsuestia then gave a number of biblical examples in support of his affirmation of divine incomprehensibility. For example, do not Christians affirm their faith in the resurrection of the body, but who among them can explain exactly how that is going to take place?⁴⁰ Moreover, Theodore argued:

How many things were there that occurred during the economy of our Lord in the flesh, which we accept and confess in this manner? And if someone should ask us about each of those things that happened, we are unable to say in what way it occurred. Consider, for example, that the leper was cleansed because our Lord simply said to him, "I will it, be cleansed" [Matthew 8:3]. Or that Lazarus arose when he said, "Lazarus, come out!" [John 11:43]. Or that the eyes of the

³⁵ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 9–10.

³⁶ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 10.

³⁷ Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion* 1.22.1–2; 2.10.3; 2.11.2. On these passages, see also Haykin, *Spirit of God*, 77–83.

³⁸ Crawford, "Introduction" to his and Ayres' translation of Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Dispute with the Macedonians* in Ayres and DelCogliano, ed., *Varieties of Nicene Theology in East and West*.

³⁹ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 11–13.

⁴⁰ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 14.

blind were opened because he merely smeared clay upon them. Or the fact that with five loaves he nourished five thousand. Or that, while the doors were closed he went in to the disciples. For we are unable to say how the body of the leper received an entire transformation, nor how the body of Lazarus, after being dissolved and corrupted, returned again to life, nor how from five loaves alone all those pieces were multiplied.⁴¹

Such examples from Scripture reveal distinct limits to what human beings can know about divine activity and thus Theodore had to conclude:

How is it not folly that we should ask, only for the Holy Spirit, in what manner he is from God? Even though we argue that Scripture clearly affirms about him *that* he is from God, we are unable to say *how* he is from God. For the manner of his being is so far above explanation that we are not even able to speak of the manner of his working, though we are persuaded that he works constantly. ... Who, therefore, is so foolish as to entertain a thought such as this, that they ask us how the Spirit is from God, seeking to make the truth of the matter void if we are unable to say in what way he is from God.⁴²

If Christians are in the dark to some degree about the Spirit's activities, it was only natural to admit ignorance regarding certain details of his being. As Theodore said later in the discussion, "we avoid inquiring into how he [i.e. the Spirit] is from God."⁴³

It must have been at this point in the discussion that the Pneumatomachi posed what they, and Theodore, regarded as a ridiculous alternative: if the Spirit be divine, then he must relate to God the Father as another Son.⁴⁴ For the Pneumatomachi, there were only two modes of divine hypostatic existence that were conceivable: fatherhood and sonship. Since it was manifestly silly to regard the Spirit's relationship to God as one of sonship, they concluded that the Spirit must be regarded as a created being. Theodore's response to this argument was subtle. He insisted that not "everything that is from the nature of something else ought to be called its 'son'."⁴⁵ For instance, Eve was created from Adam—Theodore described her as being "consubstantial with him"—yet it was manifestly wrong to call her Adam's son.⁴⁶ Theodore thus confessed to being untroubled by the statement that "the Spirit is from God naturally," as he did not think "it was impossible for something to come from another nature but not be a

⁴¹ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 15.

⁴² Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 16, 17.

⁴³ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 21.

⁴⁴ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 18.

⁴⁵ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 18.

⁴⁶ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 19.

son.” Of course, he hastened to add, the Spirit is “from the same nature” as God. He is “united to him in an equality of nature.”⁴⁷ As 1 Corinthians 2:10–11 indicated, the Spirit “searches everything, even the deep things of God” and has a relationship with God that can be likened to that of a human being and his spirit: even as the latter are inseparable, so are God and his Spirit.⁴⁸

In the final sections of this treatise Theodore reiterated his conviction that he had drawn from 1 Corinthians 2:12 that the Holy Spirit, since he is the Spirit of God, is:

One who in no way is proper to the world, since he has no beginning to existence. Indeed, it is believed that he is from God in a relation that is exalted above those, that is, he is from the nature of God, and it is for this reason that he alone is called his own Spirit. This kind of relationship which the Spirit has with God does not belong to any of the spirits of the world. For all of them had a beginning to their existence, in that when they did not exist they came into existence, and for this very reason we believe that they are part of the world. Therefore, not a single one of them is said to be proper to God in distinction from their fellows, in a unique and preeminent relation in which they are said to exist.⁴⁹

Concluding note

At the very close of the debate as recorded in his treatise, Theodore mentioned the verse that Athanasius and the Cappadocians had employed to speak of the Holy Spirit’s hypostatic existence within the Godhead, namely, John 15:26, “When the Comforter comes, he whom I will send to you from the presence of my Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the presence of my Father.” For Athanasius and the Cappadocians, this verse provided them a way to explain in part the relationship between the Holy Spirit and God: whereas the Son is eternally generated from the Father, the Spirit eternally proceeds from God. This description of the Spirit’s mode of existence was enshrined in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed when it declared the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father.” But Theodore did not employ this description. He was content to simply

⁴⁷ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 20, 22.

⁴⁸ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 23.

⁴⁹ Theodore, *Disputation with the Macedonians* 23. In the following section, Theodore again stated his conviction that when Paul says, “ ‘We have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God,’ he does not allow absolutely any communion to exist between the creation and the Spirit. In fact, the Spirit is separated from the whole creation, since it is known that he is from God naturally” (*Disputation with the Macedonians* 24).

affirm the Spirit's divine nature and leave the mode of his distinct existence as a mystery.

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Religion in the Public Sphere: The Role and Function of Military Chaplains

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ABSTRACT

The focus is the specific question of religion in the public sphere and the role and function of military chaplains. These will be explored in three distinct sections. In *Religion in the Public Sphere* the key issues will be examined by looking closely at what some of the leading international thinkers have contributed to the debate. The second section *Aspects of Societal Change and the Implications for the Military* will consider: a, the increasing fluidity of ideas and concepts; b, the hollowing out of traditional ideas; c, morality, moral beliefs and moral reasoning among emerging adults; and d, some implications for the military. The third section *The Role of and Function of Military Chaplains* will consider two specific areas: a, *Religion provides substance for moral thought*; and b, *the theology of chaplaincy and basic human rights*.

KEY WORDS

Religion, secularism, the public sphere, morality, chaplaincy.

The role of religion in modern, twenty-first century life is contentious and generates significant discussion. It is hoped that this article will provide a modest contribution to the overall dialogue.

RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

There is a diversity of views on exactly what is meant by the word religion even when people of faith gather together. The situation is no less precise in academia. For example, in one approach 'the reader is simply asked to accept as 'religious' any phenomena which the author happens to select for treatment under this heading. The second type treats 'Religion' as referring to a class of metaphorical statements and actions obliquely denoting social relationships and claims to social status. The third type treats the term as referring to commerce with a specific class of objects, i.e., 'Religion is the belief in spirits' or 'Religion is the

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belief in the supernatural'.² The situation is no more precise even in the realm of International Law. TJ Gunn argues that 'although many international and regional human rights instruments guarantee rights related to freedom of religion or belief, none attempts to define the term "religion"... 'the term "religion" remains undefined as a matter of international law'.³ The use of language is complex and this article is not the occasion to explore in depth how it is constructed or used in any particular cultural setting. It is worth noting, however, that the 'normal' use of language in everyday life is underpinned by certain shared assumptions. For example, when a word or phrase is used in a specific cultural setting, the speaker frequently assumes those present will understand its basic meaning and any of its subtle nuances. For the purpose of this article, the word religion is used as a reference to the major world faiths in general but the central focus will be upon Christianity in particular. The reason for this focus is derived from the writer's understanding that the tension surrounding religion in the public sphere is particularly intense in the West, whereas the rest of the world is much less concerned about the separation of the public and the private spheres.

In the book *Religious America, Secular Europe*⁴, the American sociologist Peter Berger notes that while Europe had become increasingly secular in the twentieth century (we will explore the idea of secular shortly) he also observes that 'most of the world today is characterized by an explosion of passionate religious movements'.⁵ Like most sociologists Berger accepted the idea that modernity brings about a decline of religion, 'a notion' Berger comments was, 'dignified by the term "secularization theory"'.⁶ He accepted this theory until, he says, 'the data made it increasingly difficult to do so', rendering it empirically false.⁷ Other eminent sociologists, like Steve Bruce (*God is Dead: Secularization in the West*), still hold to the contention that religion in the United Kingdom is in terminal decline.⁸ He rejects the idea that there was a single secularization theory and maintains that the significant decline in church attendance is unlikely to change its downward trajectory. In contrast the equally eminent British sociologist Grace Davie contended that 'believing not belonging' was the likely

² R Horton, 'A Definition of Religion, and its Uses' in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* (1960) Vol.90, No2, p201.

³ TJ Gunn, 'The complexity of religion and the definition of religion in international law', in *Harvard Human Rights Journal* (2003) Vol. 16, p189.

⁴ P Berger, G Davie, E Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p10.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ S Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

future of religion in the UK.⁹ The main thrust of her argument is that ‘a large majority of people in contemporary Britain continue to believe but have ceased to belong to religious institutions in any meaningful sense’.¹⁰ Church attendance across the United Kingdom is varied. In the official census figures, 59.3% of the population described themselves as Christian. There are positive signs that the rapid decline has bottomed out and in cities like London, there has been growth. For example, ‘700 places of worship sprang up in London between 2005 and 2012, of which more than half have black majorities’.¹¹

What role, if any, should religious faith have in the life of a modern, Western society, especially when religious attendance has demonstrated a pattern of decline through the later part of the twentieth and early stages of the twenty-first centuries? The former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams began his address at the Pontifical Academy of Social Science in Rome by saying that:

Most people who would call themselves secularists would probably defend their position with reference to certain ideals of freedom and equality in society. They are opposing, they say, any kind of theocracy, any privilege given to an authority that is not accountable to ordinary processes of reasoning and evidence.¹²

This is echoed on the National Secular Society’s website:

Secularism is a principle that involves two basic propositions. The first is the strict separation of the state from religious institutions. The second is that people of different religions and beliefs are equal before the law.

The separation of religion and state is the foundation of secularism. It ensures that religious groups don’t interfere in affairs of state, and makes sure the state doesn’t interfere in religious affairs.

If Britain were truly a secular democracy, political structures would reflect the reality of changing times by separating religion from the state.¹³

⁹ G Davie, ‘Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?’, in *Social Compass* (1990) Vol 37, No 4, p455-469.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p457.

¹¹ B Juda, ‘London’s religious awakening’ in the *Catholic Herald* (10th March 2016) available from <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/issues/march-11th-2016/londons-religious-awakening/> (accessed 27 Jan 17).

¹² R Williams, Rome Lecture: ‘Secularism, Faith and Freedom’ (Rome: Thursday 23rd November 2006) available from <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1175/rome-lecture-secularism-faith-and-freedom> (accessed 27 Jan 17).

¹³ See <http://www.secularism.org.uk/what-is-secularism.html> (accessed 27 Nov 22).

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues that ‘one of our basic difficulties in dealing with these problems is that we have the wrong model, which has a continuing hold on our minds. We think that secularism (or *laïcité*) has to do with the relation of the state and religion; whereas in fact it has to do with the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity’.¹⁴ This reference to diversity is important, and we shall return to it shortly. Many who argue for a secularist position contend that it is one marked by neutrality and equality. Taylor’s observation, however, that at the time of the Separation in France (1905) ‘the notion stuck that *laïcité* was all about controlling and managing religion’ is instructive.¹⁵ As a philosopher he sees no intellectual reason to single out religion as against nonreligious or atheist viewpoints.¹⁶ Despite the references to freedom from those who proclaim the merits of secularism, it is difficult not to ask the question: ‘is the secularist agenda still essentially about controlling religion?’

At this point, it is important to define what is meant when the word secular(ism) is used in this article. I am indebted to the work of the Indian political theorist Rajeev Bhargava.¹⁷ Bhargava distinguishes three senses of the term secularism: 1) secular humanism; 2) ethical secularism; and 3) political secularism.¹⁸ It is political secularism, he contends that is ‘usually thought of as involving the separation of state and church’, which he observes is ‘true of the French and American versions’.¹⁹ ‘A crucial requirement of a secular state,’ he argues, ‘is that it has no constitutive links with religion and that the ends of any religion should not be installed as the ends of the state’. For example, it cannot be the

¹⁴ C Taylor, ‘Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism’ in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed., E Mendieta and J Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) p36.

¹⁵ Ibid., p40.

¹⁶ Ibid., p37.

¹⁷ Bhargava was a Professor at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He took his BA in economics from the University of Delhi, and MPhil and DPhil from Oxford University. See https://www.csds.in/secularism_and_post_secularism_podcast_rajeev_bhargava (accessed 27 Nov 22).

¹⁸ Rajeev Bhargava, ‘How Secular is European Secularism?’ in *European Societies* (2014) Vol 16, No 3, p330.

¹⁹ Ibid. The situation with regard to India, according to Bhargava is more nuanced. ‘Indian secularism does not erect a wall of separation between religion and state. There are boundaries of course, but they are porous. This situation allows the state to intervene in religions in order to help or hinder them without the impulse to control or destroy them’ (p334). ‘In short, Indian secularism interprets separation to mean not strict exclusion or strict neutrality but what I call principled distance, which is poles apart from one-sided exclusion, mutual exclusion, strict neutrality, and equidistance’ (p344).

constitutive objective of the state to ensure salvation.²⁰ Saying there should be ‘no constitutive links with religion’ means, in effect, that religion should have no power to appoint or establish the distinct functions of government.

The classic discussions on the separation of powers within a government or the state are those contained in John Locke’s influential work *Two Treatises of Government*²¹ (1689) and the equally influential work of the French jurist Montesquieu,²² *L’Esprit des Lois (The Spirit of Laws; 1748)*²³. Locke ‘claims that legitimate government is based on the idea of separation of powers.’²⁴ The familiar articulation of this principle, however, comes from Montesquieu²⁵ who gives the division or separation of functions/powers of government as legislative, executive and judicial.²⁶ Both Locke and Montesquieu held that the legislative was the supreme power (function) of the state;²⁷ any difference between Locke and Montesquieu is more about terminology than concepts.²⁸

In the United Kingdom, for example, the church has no power to appoint or establish the distinct functions of government. Locke’s principle concerning the sovereignty of the people²⁹ in choosing their government is the constitutional reality; the people choose the government they wish to govern and to make laws. The church in contrast, does not choose the government; neither does it establish

²⁰ Ibid., p330.

²¹ J Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) available from <http://www.efm.bris.ac.uk/het/locke/government.pdf> (accessed 3 July 14).

²² E Barendt, *An Introduction to Constitutional Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p14. Although simply known as Montesquieu, his full name was Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu.

²³ Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, *L’Esprit des Lois*, (1748) trans. T Nugent (1752) available from <http://www.efm.bris.ac.uk/het/montesquieu/spiritoflaws.pdf> (accessed 3 July 14).

²⁴ A Tuckness, ‘Locke’s Political Philosophy’ (2010) <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/locke-political/> (accessed 27 Nov 22) ‘6. Separation of Powers and the Dissolution of Government’.

²⁵ Barendt, *An Introduction to Constitutional Law*, p14.

²⁶ Montesquieu, *L’Esprit des Lois*, ‘6. Of the Constitution of England’: ‘In every government there are three sorts of power: the legislative; the executive in respect to things dependent on the law of nations; and the executive in regard to matters that depend on the civil law’ (p173).

²⁷ See Locke, *Two Treatises*, Essay 2 Chapter XI ‘Of the Extent of the Legislative Power’. He states that, ‘This legislative is not only the supreme power of the commonwealth, but sacred and unalterable in the hands where the community have once placed it’ (p162); Montesquieu, *L’Esprit des Lois*, ‘6. Of the Constitution of England’ where he argues that ‘As in a country of liberty, every man who is supposed a free agent ought to be his own governor; the legislative power should reside in the whole body of the people’ (p176).

²⁸ Tuckness, ‘Locke’s Political Philosophy: 6. Separation of Powers and the Dissolution of Government’.

²⁹ Locke, *Two Treatises*, Essay 2 Chapter II ‘Of the State of Nature’ (p106).

its functions or operate as a secular judiciary. Rowan Williams refers to this as ‘procedural secularism’, which he distinguishes from ‘programmatic secularism’. The German political theorist Jürgen Habermas also makes a clear distinction between the secular functions of the ‘state’ and any attempt to politically manipulate or push through by law a social change.³⁰ ‘The secularization of the state’, he contends, ‘is not the same as the secularization of society’.³¹ Williams maintains that it ‘is possible to imagine a ‘procedurally’ secular society and legal system which is always open to being persuaded by confessional or ideological argument on particular issues, but is not committed to privileging permanently any one confessional group.’³² Programmatic secularism in contrast involves the creation of a public sphere that has been emptied of any religious voice as a result of the deliberate privatisation of religion. José Casanova, the Spanish sociologist, has argued that the secularisation of Western Europe has become a self-fulfilling prophecy:

Western European societies are deeply secular societies, shaped by the hegemonic knowledge regime of secularism. As liberal democratic societies they tolerate and respect individual religious freedom. But due to the pressure towards the privatization of religion, which among European societies has become a taken-for granted characteristic of the self-definition of a modern secular society, those societies have a much greater difficulty in recognizing some legitimate role for religion in public life and in the organization and mobilization of collective group identities.³³

For Williams, programmatic secularism threatens to end up in political bankruptcy. To appreciate the strength of this warning, it is necessary to explore the concept of the public sphere or as it is sometimes referred to, the public square.

The public sphere, according to Taylor, ‘is a common space in which members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about these.’³⁴ It is “‘a common space”’ because although the media are multiple, as well as the exchanges which take place in

³⁰ J Habermas, ‘Notes on a post-secular society’ available from <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html> (accessed 27 Nov 22).

³¹ J Habermas, ‘The Political’ in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed., E Mendieta and J Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) p23.

³² Williams, ‘Rome Lecture’.

³³ J Casanova, ‘Religion, European secular identities, and European integration’, in T Byrnes and P Katzenstein (eds), *Religion in an Expanding Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p65-92.

³⁴ C Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 2007) p185.

them' those active in the common space are understood, as a matter of principle, to be activity communicating or intercommunicating.³⁵ According to Taylor and Habermas³⁶ the concept of the public sphere began to emerge in the seventeenth century, developed in the eighteenth century and was a significant feature of the nineteenth century. Habermas comments that 'the state-governed public sphere was appropriated by the private people making use of their reason and was established as a sphere of criticism of public authority.'³⁷ In a very real sense, it is inextricably bound up with the emergence of social contract theory that placed a much greater requirement of consent at a more fundamental level. Political society had to be derived from the consent of those bound by it.³⁸ Although the public square was the locus of a discussion potentially engaging everyone, in reality it was more closely associated with the idea of the 'World of Letters'³⁹ or a Republic of Letters.⁴⁰ According to Taylor, 'government is then not only wise to follow opinion; it is morally bound to do so,' in other words, 'governments ought to legislate and rule in the midst of a reasoning public'.⁴¹ It is important to note that the public sphere was self-consciously understood as being outside power. Power does not own it. Power should listen to it, but the public sphere is not an exercise of power.⁴² As the significance of this to the question of religion in the public sphere is unpacked, it is critical to grasp that the public sphere is extrapolitical.⁴³

Political freedom, according to Rowan Williams, 'must involve the possibility of questioning the way things are administered - not simply in the name of self-interest ... but in the name of some broader vision of what political humanity looks like, a vision of optimal exchange and mutual calling to account and challenging between persons.'⁴⁴ Liberty cannot simply be reduced to the notion of consumer choice.⁴⁵ If the Enlightenment ideal of liberty is reduced to consumer choice, it becomes mere instrumentalism. Instrumentalism is a 'philosophical approach which regards an activity (such as science, law, or

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ J Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991).

³⁷ Ibid., p51.

³⁸ See, C Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004) p87.

³⁹ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p51.

⁴⁰ See, <http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/> (accessed 27 Nov 22).

⁴¹ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, p88.

⁴² Ibid., p89.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Williams, 'Rome Lecture'.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

education) chiefly as an instrument or tool for some practical purpose, rather than in more absolute or ideal terms.’⁴⁶ The philosopher John Dewey supposed that thought is an instrument for solving practical problems, and that truth is not fixed but changes as the problems change.⁴⁷ In other words, we have no need of fixed absolutes and neither is there any requirement for the idea of a divine Being or universal principles derived from that Being. Programmatic secularism, maintains Williams, assumes ‘that any religious or ideological system demanding a hearing in the public sphere is aiming to seize control of the political realm and to override and nullify opposing convictions. It finds specific views of the human good outside a minimal account of material security and relative social stability unsettling, and concludes that they need to be relegated to the purely private sphere. It assumes that the public expression of specific conviction is automatically offensive to people of other (or no) conviction.’⁴⁸

Those who advocate that religious views have no place in the public sphere, will often strenuously maintain that they will defend an individual’s right to believe what they want, as long as it is kept firmly private and harms no one. On this account, although it is rarely expressed in quite these terms, there is public reason and private prejudice, with no means of negotiating or reasonable means of exploring real difference.⁴⁹ Many philosophers and commentators have challenged the premise of this argument. Habermas, for example, observes that ‘the liberal constitution itself must not ignore the contributions that religious groups can well make to the democratic process *within civil society*’ [emphasis original].⁵⁰ It is not at all obvious why the demand is made only of one specific group of citizens to keep certain deeply held beliefs private and removed from the public sphere. The idea of the public sphere was that it was an open environment where ideas could be discussed, out-with power. It is this idea of exclusion that lies at the heart of Williams’ lecture in Rome. Programmatic secularism (to use Williams’ phrase) or the secularization of society (to use Habermas’ phrase) can exclude or prohibit minority voices whose understanding of life cannot be reduced to a secular instrumentalism. This concept of exclusion runs contrary to the very premise of the social contract theories that underpin modern Western liberal democracy. The situation where only one worldview is permitted genuine or meaningful access to the public sphere, sails dangerously close to approximating totalitarianism. For Habermas, ‘secular and religious

⁴⁶ See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/instrumentalism> (accessed 28 Jan 17).

⁴⁷ Ibid. See also P Singer (ed) *A Companion To Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) p154.

⁴⁸ Williams, ‘Rome Lecture’.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Habermas, ‘The Political’ p24.

citizens must meet in their public use of reason at eye level.’⁵¹ It is worth hearing what this secular philosopher says about the value of religion in the public sphere:

The insight that vibrant world religions may be bearers of “truth contents”, in the sense of suppressed or untapped moral intuitions is by no means a given for the secular portion of the population. A genealogical awareness of the religious origins of the morality of equal respect for everybody is helpful in the context. The occidental development has been shaped by the fact that philosophy continuously appropriates semantic contents from the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁵²

In other words, Habermas is concerned that moral concepts that come from religion will not be heard in a purely secularized public sphere and that this would be to the detriment of society itself. To his credit, and this is not always recognised whenever the question of religion in the public sphere is discussed, Habermas not only recognises but publically states that philosophy continually appropriates ideas from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The danger involved with the programmatic secularization of the public sphere is not only will certain minority voices be rendered increasingly silent through their inadmissibility, but that the very intellectual basis upon which Western liberal democracy has been built may be hollowed out. Individual religious, civil, political, and moral liberty is, the author would contend, one of the greatest achievements in human history. If liberty has been reduced effectively to consumer choice, it not only commodifies human beings, it reduces this immensely rich and sustaining concept to a largely empty hollow husk.

ASPECTS OF SOCIETAL CHANGE AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MILITARY

Few would disagree that the pace of change since the 1950s has been a phenomenon. In the iconic 1973 American film *Serpico*, starring Al Pacino, it is striking that there are no personal computers and needless to say, there are no mobile phones and everything is done manually by the characters in the film. In police dramas set in our contemporary world, there is a computer on almost every police officer’s desk and every character has their own personal mobile phone. Popular programmes like *NCIS* would have the viewer believe that ‘the police system’ stores vast quantities of data on every citizen, easily accessible by the average agent.

⁵¹ Ibid., p26.

⁵² Ibid., p27.

The history of humanity is intertwined with the historical development of technology. The argument that to be human is to have some form of relationship with technology, regardless of whether that is a flint knife, bladed farming tool, sword or clock is difficult to resist.⁵³ Andy Clarke in his book *Natural Born Cyborgs* argues forcefully that humans are natural-born cyborgs.⁵⁴ ‘When our technologies actively, automatically, and continually tailor themselves to us and we to them – then the line between tool and user becomes flimsy indeed’.⁵⁵ In his book *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* Peter Singer comments that ‘a knight of the Middle Ages could go their entire life with maybe one new technology changing the way they lived.’⁵⁶ The rapid development of technology and questions regarding humanity’s ability to cope with, let alone master, these changes is not the main focus of this section. While it may be true that computers ‘are now re-wiring our minds in subtle but important ways,’⁵⁷ other less obvious aspects of societal change and some practical implications for the military will be the main focus.

2a. *Increasing fluidity of ideas and concepts.* The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman introduced the idea of *Liquid Modernity*.⁵⁸ Mark Davis comments that ‘Bauman has employed the metaphor of ‘liquidity’ in order to capture the dramatic social changes taking place in our everyday lives. In this way, he seeks to convey the increasing absence of ‘solid’ structures that once provided the foundations for human societies.’⁵⁹ Bauman argued that Modernity melted those foundational ‘solids’ that gave pre-modern social structure its essential character in-order-to reshape and mould them to fit its needs. In this late-modern period, as a consequence of the interaction between globalisation and individuality, Bauman maintains that ‘the solids whose turn has come to be thrown into the melting pot and which are in the process of being melted at the present time, the time of fluid modernity, are the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective

⁵³ T Taylor’s, *The Artificial Ape: How Technology Changed the Course of Human Evolution* (London: Palgrave, 2010), p77.

⁵⁴ A Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p3. In this book he seeks to establish one of his main points in the first few pages. ‘The human mind’ he states, ‘if it is to be the physical organ of human reason, simply cannot be seen as bound and restricted by the biological skinbag’ (p4).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p7.

⁵⁶ PW Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* (London: Penguin, 2009) p101.

⁵⁷ C Coker, *Warrior Geeks: How 21st Century Technology is Changing the Way We Fight and Think About War* (London: Hurst, 2013) p131.

⁵⁸ Z Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

⁵⁹ Mark Davis, ‘Liquid Sociology – What For?’, in *Liquid Sociology: Metaphor in Zygmunt Bauman’s Analysis of Modernity*, ed., Mark Davis (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013) p1.

projects and actions - the patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life policies on the one hand and political actions of human collectivities on the other.’⁶⁰ In other words, the same process that overtook pre-modern life has been increasingly active in the second half of the twentieth and accelerating in the twenty-first century. This time rather than new ‘solids’ taking the place of that which had been melted and reshaped, concepts like love, fear, social structure resemble the characteristic of a liquid in that they do not stand still for long and keep its shape for long.⁶¹

One visual example of how modernity took aspects of the pre-modern world and fundamentally reshaped them is the transformation of a rural-based economy to an industrialised economy. What suited a small-scale, cottage industry based approach to commerce was unsuited to the increasing demands of modernity. Enormous sociological change reshaped the lived experience for millions. This pictorial imagery helps to visualize how a concept could be melted and remoulded into a new solid, to meet new needs. The idea of liquidity modernity can be illustrated in the topical issue of gender fluidity. Today, many believe that there is an enormous array of gender identities.⁶²

The women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, also described as second wave feminism,⁶³ had as one of its principle projects the application of a deconstructionist methodology with the intention of undoing gender or what Gardiner calls a ‘feminist degendering movement.’⁶⁴ Mary Evans contends that ‘the influence of Michel Foucault was pivotal in determining arguments which accounted for sexual identity in terms of constructed “discourses” rather than naturalistic givens.’⁶⁵ For many feminists, gender itself was a socially constructed discourse and many of the gender inequalities evident in Western societies were the result of men and women being socialised into different roles.⁶⁶ Since gender does not exist outside of history and culture, argues Brittan, both masculinity and femininity are subject to a process of reinterpretation.⁶⁷ ‘Rather than seeing sex as biologically determined and gender as culturally

⁶⁰ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* p6.

⁶¹ Davis, ‘Liquid Sociology’ p2.

⁶² See <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220914-gender-fluidity-the-ever-shifting-shape-of-identity> (accessed 27 Nov 22).

⁶³ JK Gardiner, ‘Introduction’, in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*, ed JK Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) p2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p3.

⁶⁵ M Evans, *Gender and Social Theory* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003) p84.

⁶⁶ A Giddens, *Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p460.

⁶⁷ A Brittan, *Masculinity and Power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p1.

learned’ we should ‘view both sex and gender as socially constructed products.’⁶⁸ Older binaries, comments Gardiner, seem simplistic and potentially distorting.⁶⁹

2b. *The hollowing out of traditional ideas.* The striking idea, associated with the eminent sociologist Ulrich Beck and ‘zombie categories’ in twenty-first century life, offers a critical clue of what is meant by the hollowing out of traditional ideas.⁷⁰ Beck explained his idea of ‘zombie categories’ in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford in London on the 3rd of February 1999. Beck uses what he describes as ‘individualization’ to explain what he refers to as ‘disembedding of the ways of life of industrial society’, for example class, family, gender and nation. Individualization does not, he maintains, mean individualism.⁷¹

Individualization liberates people from traditional roles and constraints in a number of ways. First, individuals are removed from status-based classes. Social classes have been detraditionalized. We can see this in the changes in family structures, housing conditions, leisure activities, geographical distribution of populations, trade union and club membership, voting patterns etc. Secondly, women are cut loose from their ‘status fate’ of compulsory housework and support by a husband. Industrial society has been dependent upon the unequal positions of men and women, but modernity does not hesitate at the front door of family life. The entire structure of family ties has come under pressure from individualization and a new negotiated provisional family composed of multiple relationships — a ‘post-family’ — is emerging.⁷²

‘The liberated individual becomes dependent upon the labour market and because of that’, he argues, ‘is dependent on, for example, education, consumption, welfare state regulations and support... Dependency upon the market extends into every area of life.’⁷³ It is because of individualization people live with a number of zombie categories which are dead and still alive.⁷⁴ When asked for illustrations of ‘zombie categories’ Beck cited family, class and neighbourhood as examples. It is striking to think that one of the most distinguished sociologists of our age, described institutions, traditionally

⁶⁸ Giddens, *Sociology*, p461.

⁶⁹ Gardiner, ‘Introduction’ p12.

⁷⁰ U Beck & E Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* (London: Sage, 2001), chapter 14 ‘Zombie categories: Interview with Ulrich Beck’ p202-213. See also Ulrich Beck, ‘The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies’, in *Theory, Culture & Society* (2012) Vol 19 (1-2), p17-44.

⁷¹ Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*, p202.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

understood as being critical to modern life, as husks whose life has been hollowed out: transformed into the living dead.

c. *Morality, moral beliefs and moral reasoning among emerging adults.* In this sub-section we will focus on the work of Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson and Patricia Snell Herzog and their book *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*.⁷⁵ The main conclusion from this research and subsequent book 'is that – notwithstanding all that is genuinely good in emerging adulthood – emerging adult life in the United States today is beset with real problems.'⁷⁶ For the purpose of this article, the focus will specifically be on the work that Smith and his colleagues did on how emerging adults understand moral questions and morality in general. Who are emerging adults and why is a ten-year study in the US into the lives of American young people relevant to those outside of the US? In essence, it is that period in an individual's life between 18 and 30. Sociological studies have demonstrated that 'the transition to adulthood today is more complex, disjointed, and confusing than it was in the past decades.'⁷⁷ Smith and his colleagues choose the phrase 'emerging adulthood' from the array of labels that have been variously used to describe this phase in the lives of young men and women. One example of the social changes crucial to the rise of emerging adulthood is the delay in marriage by young people. 'Between 1950 and 2006, the median age of the first marriage for women rose from 20.3 to 25.9 years old. For men during that same time the median age rose from 22.8 to 27.5 years old. The sharpest increase for both took place after 1970.'⁷⁸ The figures for the UK in 2013 are higher,⁷⁹ with the average age for a woman getting married being 30 and 32 for a man.⁸⁰ While one should exercise caution in transposing an academic study from one country to another, the themes are, it could be maintained, identifiable in the UK and quite possibly, in other Western democracies.

⁷⁵ Christian Smith, et.al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷⁶ Ibid., p3.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p15.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p13.

⁷⁹ For a detailed breakdown see, *Marriage in England and Wales: 2013*, Office of National Statistics (April 2016), available from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2013> (accessed 28 Jan 17).

⁸⁰ See <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/marriage/a-young-persons-guide-to-i-do-whats-it-like-to-get-married-in-your-mid-20s-9496937.html> (accessed 28 Jan 17).

The first thing that struck Smith and his team was how strongly individualistic most emerging adults were when it came to morality.⁸¹ 60% of those interviewed thought that morality was a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision. Moral rights and wrongs were essentially a matter of individual opinion.⁸² The majority also expressed the belief that it is wrong for people to morally judge other people.⁸³ What became very clear to the researchers was that the majority had a live-and-let-live lifestyle, underpinned by a profound moral relativism.⁸⁴ Despite this, more than half of emerging adults wanted to resist moral relativism.⁸⁵ What Smith and his team realised, however, is that they appeared ‘to possess few moral-reasoning skills with which to do that’.⁸⁶ This became evident whenever the sociologists asked questions on the source of morality. ‘Where does morality come from? What is morality’s basis?’⁸⁷ 34% of emerging adults interviewed said that ‘*they simply did not know what makes anything morally right or wrong* [emphasis original]. They had no idea about the basis of morality’.⁸⁸ Some of those questioned did not understand the question. For others it was framed by their understanding of what other people might think about their action or choice,⁸⁹ or whether or not it functionally improved their situation (like cheating in an exam).⁹⁰ Emerging adults demonstrated a clear distinction between hurting individuals, which they thought was wrong, and organisations, such as a business or social groups.⁹¹ Smith and his team also noted that ‘the majority of emerging adults report that they believe that people ought to do what they think is the morally right thing in any situation and obey the law, and that they usually try to do that themselves – to the extent that they understand morality.’⁹²

Smith and his team are at pains to stress that are not suggesting that all or most emerging adults are reprobates.⁹³ Rather, they contend that emerging adults live in a world where very little counts as moral and where their moral blindness has

⁸¹ Smith, et.al., *Lost in Transition*, p21

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., p23.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p25.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p33.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p36.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p37.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p38.

⁹¹ Ibid., p40-41.

⁹² Ibid., p47.

⁹³ Ibid., p68.

been learned.⁹⁴ Emerging adults are not therefore morally corrupt, but they are morally lost. Smith argues that ‘they do not adequately know the moral landscape of the real world that they inhabit. And they do not adequately understand where they themselves stand in that real moral world.’⁹⁵ What they need, according to Smith, are ‘better moral maps and better equipped guides to show them the way around.’⁹⁶ They lack, and neither have they been, given sufficient moral tools with which to make genuine moral choices. In their concluding summary and explanation the sociologists quote Charles Taylor and his magisterial *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Taylor observes that ‘we have to fight uphill to rediscover the obvious, to counteract the layers of suppression of moral consciousness. It’s a difficult thing to do.’⁹⁷

The use of Taylor’s descriptive imagery of having to fight uphill to rediscover the obvious, to counteract the layers of suppression of moral consciousness, is helpful. While the language used to describe critical aspects of social life have been retained, there has been a hollowing out of substance. Concepts like family, neighbourhood and society are still in wide use but they have become either fluid or malleable or they have become zombie categories. The language has been largely retained but not the deep underlying foundations that gave rise to them taking on the characteristic of being ‘obvious.’ The irony is that the ‘obvious’ needs to be rediscovered. The author’s experience of delivering hundreds of lectures on ethics or running ethics training days, for a wide variety of public groups, has impressed upon me the nature of the uphill struggle that lies ahead. People enjoy discussing and debating ethics and they are quick to share their views. This is good and positive. When pressed, however, to explain why something is good or right, it is clear that strong opinions are not derived from normative reference points. There is a profound shallowness.

This shallowness is hemmed in, at least to some degree, by the residual moral consciousness contained in societal behavioural norms, although this residual moral consciousness cannot survive, in my view, without a rediscovery of the substance that once provided moral authority. There is a profound practical implication here for Western militaries and uniformed organisations. Emerging adults are the demographic that uniformed organisations draw their manning from. While military personnel operate within, or in close proximity to, the residual moral consciousness that is still located in societal behavioural norms,

⁹⁴ Ibid., p60.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p69.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ C Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p90.

the vast majority of military personnel will conduct themselves appropriately and professionally. The problem of learned moral blindness is mitigated by societal pressures. What about situations that involve deployments into unfamiliar societal environments, where behavioural practices of the indigenous population appear strange or confusing? In the recent Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts the conduct of the overwhelming majority gave little cause for concern. My concern is based on the idea that when travelling downhill the law of physics would indicate an increase in velocity and that sliding downhill usually takes a lot less time than the hike back up. Smith's observation of emerging adults being morally lost with no adequate understanding of the moral landscape of the world they inhabit was of young people living normal civilian lives. Reasons to imagine that the situation will improve without significant intervention are not plentiful. What is more, it is these young people that are recruited into militaries and will be in the vanguard of the forces deployed in service to their country, possibly in places of extreme danger. The question is will they deploy with sufficient moral resources to enable them to navigate complex moral situations?

THE ROLE OF AND FUNCTION OF MILITARY CHAPLAINS

Shortly after the start of hostilities in the first Gulf War, President George Bush delivered his famous 'New World Order Speech.'⁹⁸ However, far from an anticipated and hugely optimistic 'New World Order', following on from the hoped for peace dividend at the end of the Cold War,⁹⁹ the general consensus today is that the trend is towards increasing instability and opportunity for confrontation and conflict.¹⁰⁰ 'Arguably, the world is becoming more complex

⁹⁸ For a copy of the full text, see <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/bush-war.htm> (accessed 12 Apr 13). In it Bush contends that:

This is an historic moment. We have in this past year made great progress in ending the long era of conflict and cold war. We have before us the opportunity to forge for ourselves and for future generations a new world order -- a world where the rule of law, not the law of the jungle, governs the conduct of nations. When we are successful -- and we will be -- we have a real chance at this new world order, an order in which a credible United Nations can use its peacekeeping role to fulfil the promise and vision of the U.N.'s founders.

⁹⁹ See D Braddon, *Exploding the Myth The Peace Dividend, Regions and Market Adjustment* (Bristol: University of the West of England, 2000). Braddon maintains that, with few notable exceptions, the expected peace dividend after the end of the Cold War failed to materialise (p182).

¹⁰⁰ See DCDC, *Future Character of Conflict* (MOD UK, 2010) p4; DCDC, *Global Strategic Trends – Out to 2040* (MOD UK, 2010) p15.

with, *inter alia*, the rapid movement of ideas, people, capital and information.’¹⁰¹ As a consequence, national governments and world bodies, such as the UN, face what scholars refer to as ‘wicked problems’¹⁰² that defy simplistic answers or approaches. The reality in many instances, according to Christopher Coker, is that they cannot be solved, only ‘managed until someone finally decides to stop managing it, or the managers run out of resources, time or money.’¹⁰³ We live in an age of substantial financial pressure upon public finances and spending on defence has come under intense scrutiny in many Western democracies. Military chaplaincy is not immune to these forces or the pressure to justify to an increasingly vocal secular voice why the state should fund spiritual and pastoral support. This section will set out two roles or functions that military chaplaincy offers to the military community in the twenty-first century.

3a. *Religion provides substance for moral thought.* As an ethicist, I have been asked many times if a purely secular, non-religious moral ethic is possible. My answer is that of course it is possible. Notable thinkers like Emmanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham and John Sturt Mill sought to achieve just that. Kant’s formulation of his categorical imperative was based on reason and logic. It was rationally necessary and an unconditional principle that he believed must always be followed despite any natural desires or inclinations we may have to the contrary.¹⁰⁴ Bentham and Mill’s consequentialism / utilitarianism is considered one of the most powerful and persuasive approaches to normative ethics in the history of philosophy.¹⁰⁵ It is generally held to be the view that the morally right action is that which produces the ‘most good.’ It is also distinguished by impartiality and agent-neutrality; in other words, everyone’s happiness counts the same. When thinking about the good, it is ‘good’ impartially considered.¹⁰⁶ But there are a few problems. The first problem, is the intellectual criticism of the whole Enlightenment project in regard to ethics.

¹⁰¹ DCDS, *Joint Concept Note 2/12: Future Land Operating Concept* (MOD UK, 2012) p2.

¹⁰² See HWJ Rittel and MM Webber, ‘Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning’, in *Policy Science* (1973) Vol 4, p155-169 and C Coker, *War in an Age of Risk* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009) p128-129.

¹⁰³ Coker, *War in an Age of Risk* p156.

¹⁰⁴ See, R Johnson, and A Cureton, ‘Kant’s Moral Philosophy’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/kant-moral/> (accessed 30 Jan 17).

¹⁰⁵ See, J Driver, ‘The History of Utilitarianism’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/utilitarianism-history/> (accessed 30 Jan 17).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

In 1981 the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre published his well-known work *After Virtue*.¹⁰⁷ The ‘Disquieting Suggestion’ of chapter 1 used by MacIntyre is an allegory to explain the impact of Enlightenment philosophy, from his perspective, upon moral theory. He maintained that this project was doomed from the start precisely because it used ethical language that had been detached from its source, namely Aristotelianism with its teleological idea about human life. This, according to MacIntyre led to the fragmentation of moral language and its detachment from the substance it was derived from. A significant contributory reason the project was doomed to failure was, for MacIntyre, the invention and role of the individual in moral discourse. He contended that the individual moral agent ‘conceives of himself and is conceived of by moral philosophers as sovereign in moral philosophy.’¹⁰⁸ This inevitably led, he argued, to moral emotivism. I would like to contend that not only has the process of fragmentation continued, even the ethical frameworks created by the Enlightenment philosophers and their successors are now largely unknown by members of the general public. What little knowledge of them that remains, among the general public, is disjointed at best.

This ‘unknownness’ of Enlightenment moral frameworks is part of the second problem we will discuss briefly. It is not simply that Christianity provided the intellectual and philosophical background to Enlightenment ideas, which scholars like Habermas recognise, it was the cultural *Sitz im Leben* or life setting from which they sprang. Take John Stuart Mill’s superb work *On Liberty*. In this, Mill sets out what he describes as the struggle between the liberty of the individual over against the authority of the government and what he famously described as ‘the tyranny of the majority.’¹⁰⁹ It is one of the great explorations of individual liberty within a democracy. What is often overlooked, however, is that Mill’s individual liberty existed in relationship to the community within which the individual was socially located. He states that ‘there are many positive acts for the benefit of others, which he may rightfully be compelled to perform; such as, to give evidence in a court of justice; to bear his far share in common defence, or in any other joint work necessary to the interest of the society of which he enjoys the protection.’¹¹⁰ Or to use theological language, his cultural world understood that the Royal Law ‘to love our neighbour as yourself’ was a

¹⁰⁷ A MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p62.

¹⁰⁹ J S Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Penguin, 2010) p9. *On Liberty* was first published in 1859.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p19.

part of the ‘obvious’ that Charles Taylor talks about and would have been a profound societal ideal.

The fragmentation of ethical knowledge and its increasing ‘unknownness’, in my view, is directly related to the programmatic secularisation increasingly evident in Western democracies. I believe that there is a direct correlation. The learned ethical blindness identified in emerging adults did not occur in a vacuum. There is a history to that process. I contend that, the fragmentation of ethical knowledge is as a result of the dislocation of those ethical concepts from a Christian tradition that provided the rich soil from which they could be expressed and grow. Separated from that soil, they have faded and become largely forgotten. Military chaplains are for the most part, representatives of faith groups and as such come from religious communities whose moral foundation is derived from that faith. As such their religious training and formation is derived from the substance that once infused and gave life to basic moral goods.

3b. *The theology of chaplaincy and basic human rights*. In a well-known episode of Hard Talk by the BBC, the moral philosopher Peter Singer dismissed talk of a human right to life as essentially deriving from a religious basis and that such talk should be challenged.¹¹¹ The following is an extract from the UN Declaration of Human Rights:

Preamble

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Article 3

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

The UN Declaration of Human Rights is not a Christian document. Singer is correct, however, in his recognition that the idea of the sanctity of human life, formulated as a human right, is derived from a deeply held religious belief; a belief shared by each of the major World Faiths. Rowan Williams makes the same basic connection between religious faith and human rights.¹¹² In a lecture at the London School of Economics, he seeks to ground human rights thinking

¹¹¹ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07f49hs> (accessed 30 Jan 17).

¹¹² See, R Williams, ‘Religious Faith and Human Rights’ available from https://www.lse.ac.uk/assets/richmedia/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/transcripts/20080501RowanWilliams_tr.pdf (accessed 27 Nov 22).

so that it did not descend into moral relativism or political utility. Williams agrees with Alistair MacIntyre that human rights cannot be allowed to become a list of entitlements ‘dropped into the cradle.’¹¹³ ‘Equal liberty is at root inseparable from the equality of being embodied. Rights belong not to the person who can demonstrate capacity or rationality but to any organism that can be recognised as a human body, at any stage of its organic development.’¹¹⁴ Williams argues that our human bodies are a means of profound moral communication. By this he does not simply mean, what someone says. Rather, it is the body itself, regardless of the ability of the individual to physically speak or express thought that communicates in a profound manner to another who themselves possess a human body.

It does not matter whether it was in the trenches of the First World War or at a Forward Operating Base or a Check Point in Afghanistan, one aspect of the chaplain’s ministry is to see the soldier as a person; someone with a dignity and a value because they are and not because of any concept of utility. In Helmand Province, Afghanistan 2009, I spoke to a young soldier keeping guard at the very outer edge of the location the company had just recently captured and then occupied. What really struck me was that he wanted to talk to me about his family. He had been involved in heavy fighting and a significant number of British soldiers had been killed or injured. Yet what this particular young soldier wanted to talk about was his family. I am certain that this has always been a consistent feature of the chaplain’s ministry with soldiers.

Why is this important? In a context where societal norms begin to become distorted, there is real danger that individuals can become morally disorientated and begin to contemplate the notion that the ‘norms’ they have lived by their whole lives do not apply in that context. Locating the humanity of the individual within the context of their human relationships, which have shaped their sense of themselves, is, I contend, absolutely vital. The soldier must always understand themselves in terms not simply of what they do but who they are: a son, a brother, a husband, a father, a daughter, a sister, a wife and a mother. However, imagine the situation where someone has behaved in a manner in which they had, in effect, set their humanity aside and allowed themselves to be shaped by situational forces in opposition to the societal norms that had shaped their lives up to that point. How do they deal with that narrative part of their evolving life story?

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

The interrelationship between the human body and our most basic human rights is, at least in seems to me, a powerful idea. I fully accept that non-religious people can hold the same or similar position. What Singer, albeit in a negative sense, and Williams recognise is that there is a demonstrable link between faith and a human rights ethic. The theological concept of incarnational ministry, of being with people where they are, offers a deep and substantial basis for military ethics, precisely because man is made in the image of God. The presence of religious chaplains with military personnel in barracks, on operations or on the battlefield provides a living link for the humanity of the individual and a basic human rights ethic.

CONCLUSION

What is role of religion in the public sphere? I would contend it is absolutely vital if our most precious ideas are to be secured for future generations. The former President Ronald Regan memorably said that:

Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free.¹¹⁵

The creation of a free society is a moral achievement and owes its origin to the Judeo-Christian tradition. It did not happen overnight and took hundreds of years to evolve. One vital contribution to the creation of a free society was the role of the public sphere. Programmatic secularism has as its goal the radical privatisation of religion and its exclusion from the public domain. Not only is this a fundamental denial of the freedom democracy which emerged from, it is in great danger of excluding any alternative voice. This is not a plea for special privilege; it is plea for the public sphere to be public and remain separate from power.

Incredible social changes have taken place since the 1950s and the implications of these are profound. I believe that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, can assist in any attempt to 'fight uphill to rediscover the obvious.' My own view is that the hill facing us is considerable because what was once 'the obvious' has become largely forgotten and fundamentally dislocated from

¹¹⁵ R Regan address to the annual meeting of the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce (30 March 1961).

the substance that gave it meaning. I do not think that uniformed organisations have much of a choice. Either they address the learned blindness of emerging adulthood or face the likely consequences. I am not advocating some form of return to compulsory religious instruction. That would be counterproductive. What I am suggesting is that an important role and function of military chaplains can be located in the moral education of emerging adults because of their grounding in the theology from which the major forms of normative ethics emerged. There is a direct link between a human rights-based ethic and religious belief, specifically that mankind was created in the image of God. For Christian chaplains, the theology of the incarnation underpins their ministerial conviction to be with service people wherever they may find themselves and to face whatever they must face. It is the love of God for humanity that compels military chaplains to a ministry of self-sacrifice and from that encounter with their people to help locate a basic human ethic even on the battlefield.

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