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“The Nations” and “the World”: Progressive Development in Biblical Theology

Jonathan M. Cheek¹

Several NT texts present a strong contrast between believers and the world.² “I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19).³ “Do not be conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2a). “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world” (Eph 2:1-2). “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is . . . to keep oneself unstained from the world” (Jas 1:27). “Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas 4:4). “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). “Do not be surprised, brothers, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13). Such texts undeniably play a significant role in the theology of the NT and in the life of the church.⁴

The church, however, has failed to adequately teach and apply the biblical teaching on “the world” with the result that evangelical churches have become too much like the world.⁵ This failure to

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² Unless otherwise noted, this paper is referring to the concept of the “world” in terms of the evil people of the world or the evil system of the world rather than the world in a cosmological sense or in the sense of “all humanity.”

³ Translations of Scripture are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Most theological dictionaries and major works on New Testament theology devote some meaningful discussion to the topic. For example, see Donald Guthrie’s lengthy section on “the world” in *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1981), 121-50; and T. Renz, “World,” in *NDBT*, ed. T. D. Alexander, B. S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and G. Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 853-55.

⁵ For example, see James Davidson Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 63; David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland:*

correctly understand the church's relationship with the world is primarily a theological, rather than a sociological, issue.⁶ A well-developed biblical theology of the world is lacking in scholarly literature. Theological literature that does address the topic of the world focuses almost entirely on NT texts and rarely addresses the OT development of the theological concept of the world in a meaningful way. Generally, these studies point out some cosmological references to creation in the OT and then move on to NT texts,⁷ giving the impression that the NT is suddenly introducing a new concept when it distinguishes believers from the world. A few studies correctly discuss the OT conceptual foundation for the NT concept of the world as describing sinful humanity in opposition to God.⁸ These studies, however, are brief and do not thoroughly develop the OT background. Two of these works (correctly) draw a connection between the OT contrast of "the nations" in opposition to Israel and the NT contrast of "the world" in opposition to "the church."⁹ Apart from these few exceptions, this connection

The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 29; *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 11–12; Robert H. Gundry, *Jesus the Word According to John the Sectarian: A Paleofundamentalist Manifesto for Contemporary Evangelicalism, Especially Its Elites, in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 73–78; John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 31; C. J. Mahaney, "Is This Verse in Your Bible?" in *Worldliness: Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 22; Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 1–10; Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2018), 12.

⁶ See Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 37.

⁷ Most Bible/theological dictionaries handle the topic this way. See, for example, T. V. G. Tasker, "World," in *NBD*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, et al., (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 1249–50; J. Painter, "World, Cosmology," in *DPL*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 979–82; Carl Bridges, Jr, "World," in *EDBT*, ed. W. A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 837.

⁸ Renz, 853–55; Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 281; Randy Leedy, *Love Not the World: Winning the War Against Worldliness* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2012), 13–33; William Edgar, *Created & Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2017), 100. Of these, Leedy is the only author who writes more than a paragraph on this topic.

⁹ Renz, 854; and Leedy, 13–33.

between “the nations” in the OT and “the world” in the NT has gone almost entirely unnoticed in scholarly literature.¹⁰ In examining the biblical data, however, the relationship between “the nations” and “the world” is striking. Some NT authors initially adapt OT terminology referring to “the nations” (or “the Gentiles”) in contrast to the people of God but other NT authors begin discussing this concept by referring to the contrast between the people of God and the world.

This paper will first summarize the OT usage of the concept of “the nations” in contrast to Israel; this paper will then examine how some NT authors refer to “the nations” or “the Gentiles” to speak of the contrast between believers and sinful humanity, while other NT authors refer to “the world” to refer to this same distinction. When analyzing the way the different NT authors use these terms, (1) there is significant overlap in meaning and (2) the concepts spoken of in relation to these terms are close parallels to the OT presentation of the distinction between Israel and the nations. The NT concept of the world in contrast to the church represents the progressive development of the OT concept of the nations in contrast to Israel. This understanding of the OT foundation for the NT concept of the world will provide a strong theological foundation for a more thorough understanding of the church’s relationship with the world.

Israel and the Nations in the Old Testament

The post-fall narrative of Genesis begins with the development of two contrasting seed lines originating from the promise in Genesis 3:15.¹¹

¹⁰ Studies on “the nations” or “Gentiles” in Bible/theological dictionaries never develop a discussion of “the world” in the NT. For example, see Andreas Köstenberger, “Nations,” in *NDBT*, 676–78; K. R. Iverson, “Gentiles,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. B. Green, J. K. Brown, and N. Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 302–9; and Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, LNTS (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

¹¹ See T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 101–113; and James Hamilton,

One of the seed lines includes Seth, Noah, and Shem, and represents the royal lineage that will lead ultimately to the coming Messiah.¹² After the scattering of people into various nations after the Babel event (Gen 10–11), God chooses Abraham out from among those nations to be the progenitor of a great nation through whom God will bless all the nations of the earth (Gen 12:1–3). From this point forward, much of the conflict in the plot line of the OT narrative focuses on the relationship between Abraham’s offspring and the surrounding nations. Israel’s identity in its relationship with Yahweh is reflected in its relationship to the other nations.

The OT uses two key terms to refer to peoples (עַם) and nations (גוֹי). The terms are often used in a generic, non-theological sense, but the OT often uses plural forms of both גוֹי (foreign, often pagan, nations) and עַם (“peoples”) to refer to the other nations in contrast to Israel. The former more often carries the sense of “nations” whereas the latter often refers to “families” though they are mostly interchangeable. It seems that עַם rather stresses the blood relationship, often hardly different than גוֹי, which often refers to pagans or “the heathen” (e.g., Exod 34:24; Lev 18:24).¹³ The early patriarchal promises refer to the influence of Abraham’s descendants over both “nations” (use of גוֹי in Gen 17:4,5,16; 25:23; and 35:11) and “peoples” (use of עַם in Gen 17:16; 27:29; 28:3; 48:4; 49:10). The OT uses גוֹי in a plural form 427 times and עַם in a plural form 240 times.¹⁴ Alexander proposes a subtle distinction between the two terms: “Whereas the latter [עַם] merely designates a group of human beings having something in common, the former [גוֹי]

“The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15,” *SBJT* 10, No. 2 (2006): 30–34.

¹² See Alexander, “Messianic Ideology in the Book of Genesis,” in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995), 19–39.

¹³ גוֹי, HALOT.

¹⁴ The ESV uses the plural terms “nations” 452 times and “peoples” 226 times in the OT. It generally translates גוֹי as “nation(s)” and עַם as “people(s).”

denotes a group of people inhabiting a specific geographical location and forming a political unit.”¹⁵ It is noteworthy, though, that the OT frequently uses these terms as essentially synonymous technical terms for the unbelieving, pagan peoples in the surrounding nations in contrast to Yahweh’s holy יִשְׂרָאֵל, Israel (Exod 19:6). Israel is his “treasured possession among all ‘peoples’” (19:5). In this sense, Israel functions as the visible people of God, whereas the nations/the peoples function as the collective group of unbelievers opposed to Yahweh and his people. It is readily acknowledged that not all ethnic Israelites were truly devoted to Yahweh and that non-Israelites were able to exercise saving faith and become the people of Yahweh.¹⁶ The OT routinely uses the term “the nations” to refer to those (predominantly Gentiles) who are set in contrast to the visible people of God. When reviewing the references to the peoples and the nations in contrast to Israel in the OT, four key themes emerge: (1) Yahweh’s people as distinct from the nations, (2) Yahweh’s promise to bless the nations through his people, (3) being distinct from the peculiarly sinful ways of the nation, and (4) judgment on the nations.

Yahweh’s People as Distinct from the Nations

God’s call of Abraham and his offspring in Genesis marks them out as a nation distinct from the other nations. In Exodus, Yahweh delivers Jacob’s descendants from bondage in order to lead them to the Promised Land, where they will be surrounded by pagan nations. Yahweh constitutes Israel as a nation and presents her “mission statement” (Exod 19:4–6).¹⁷ Israel is his “treasured possession among all peoples”

¹⁵ *Exodus*, AOTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 369.

¹⁶ Eckhard J. Schnabel notes, though, that “when pagans find salvation, they join Israel (cf. Naaman), and when pagan nations find salvation, they will come to Zion (cf. Isa 40–66).” “Israel, the People of God, and the Nations,” *JETS* 45, No. 1 (March 2002): 36.

¹⁷ W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*, NSBT (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 87.

(19:5). The idea here is that Yahweh maintains a special relationship with Israel that he does not have with other nations.¹⁸ Yahweh then declares Israel's role as a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation." Both of these terms are critical in understanding Israel's identity as God's people among the other nations. As a kingdom of priests, Israel is to serve ontologically and functionally as mediators of the knowledge of God to the pagan nations.¹⁹ Israel, then, should be "committed to the extension throughout the world of the ministry of Yahweh's presence."²⁰ As the Levitical priests of Israel were to display the holiness of Yahweh and to make him known to Israel, so Israel should display the holiness of Yahweh and make him known to the nations (cf. Deut 4:5–9).

¹⁸ The Hebrew word translated "treasured possession" is תְּרֻמָּה and is used eight times in the Old Testament. Six of the uses refer to Israel as Yahweh's treasured possession (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps 135:4; Mal 3:17). Victor P. Hamilton points out that the significance of this concept is that "Israel has a special relationship with the Lord that no other nation can claim or experience. . . . Israel alone is Yahweh's *sēgullā*." *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 303.

¹⁹ John A. Davies identifies five different interpretations of the meaning of this priestly ministry: "service to the nations, mediation of blessing or redemption to the nations, intercession for the nations, teaching the will of God to the nations, or a liturgical mission to the nations." *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Intertextual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19:6*, JSOT Supplement Series (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 95. Davies argues that the correct understanding of "kingdom of priests" is ontological and does not refer to Israel's relationship to other nations. Priests are those who "draw near to Yhwh" (98). Though Davies' understanding of the ontological nature of priesthood may be accurate, there is no reason to limit the interpretation to merely the ontological definition of priesthood. When Peter alludes to Exodus 19:5–6 to describe the church as "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession," he explicitly states the *functional* purpose for these descriptive phrases: "that you may proclaim the excellencies of him" (1 Pet. 2:10) and to "keep your conduct among the Gentiles [ἔθων] honorable" so that they might "glorify God on the day of visitation" (2:12). If the Abrahamic Covenant speaks of Israel as a blessing to the nations, it is reasonable to expect the Mosaic Covenant to also speak of Israel's role among the nations. Paul R. Williamson correctly observes, "The whole nation has thus inherited the responsibility formerly conferred upon Abraham—that of mediating God's blessing to the nations of the earth." *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, NSBT (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 97.

²⁰ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 263.

The third description of Israel is that of a “holy nation.”²¹ Some interpreters assert that the phrases “holy nation” and “kingdom of priests” are virtually synonymous.²² Kaiser, however, argues correctly that the phrases are *not* synonymous.²³ “Kingdom of priests” refers to Israel’s role in her ministry to the surrounding nations; “holy nation”²⁴ refers to Israel’s responsibility toward Yahweh to be distinct from the other nations in behavior and worship. The significance of the coupling of these phrases is that the mission of Israel is to bring the nations to Yahweh, but while carrying out this mission, it is essential for them to be distinct from the nations in their theology and lifestyle. Though the suggested etymology of קדש meaning “to cut/separate” may or may not be relevant to the meaning of the word, most interpreters agree that the concept of “separateness” is fundamental to the meaning of holiness, or at least a “necessary consequence”²⁵ when referring to both divine and human holiness.²⁶ Holiness refers to God’s

²¹ The use of גוי instead of עם for “nation” may allude to God’s promise to make Abraham a great nation (גוי, Gen 12:2). Blackburn argues that the use of גוי generally refers to “an established political entity,” thus relating “Israel to the other nations of the earth by placing her in a similar category” (92–93).

²² For example, Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum argue that both statements taken together are “another way of saying, ‘God’s personal treasure.’” They explain that “both statements are saying the same thing, but each does it in a different way and looks at the topic from a different perspective.” *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), (p. 316).

²³ *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 76. See also Durham, 95.

²⁴ Forms of the word “holy” (קדוש, קדש, קדו) occur only one time in Genesis, but from this point forward, the word becomes prominent throughout the Old Testament with a particular emphasis in the Pentateuch. These three words occur 334 times in Exodus through Deuteronomy—44% of the 754 total occurrences in the Old Testament.

²⁵ Jackie A. Naudé, “קדש,” in *NIDOTTE*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:879.

²⁶ For this sense, see also Durham, 263; D. G. Peterson, “Holiness,” in *NDBT*, 550; Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*: 208–213; and Blackburn, 95. Peter J. Gentry is a notable exception to this. He argues that the “basic meaning of the word [קדש] is ‘consecrated’ or ‘devoted,’” rather than that of separateness or moral purity. “The Meaning of ‘Holy’ in the Old Testament,” *BibSac* 170 (2013): 417. It is difficult, though, to comprehend in what sense God himself is “consecrated” or “devoted,”

incomparable greatness in that he is set apart from all else in his transcendence (Exod 15:11-12; 19:10-25; Isa 6:1-4; 57:15), and human holiness refers to people being set apart from sin and to God. God's command to be holy in Leviticus 20:26 is based on the fact that he "separated" (בדל) them from the peoples. Separateness is an element of holiness, but as a kingdom of priests serving the other nations, Israel cannot be separate in a spatial sense. Thus, separateness or *distinctiveness* in both religion and lifestyle best captures the meaning of "holiness" for Israel. God's command for Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation means that in their priestly role they are to minister to the other nations and bring them to a knowledge of Yahweh. In their role as a "holy nation," however, they are to remain distinct from the behavior and worship of the other nations.

The rest of the OT continues to refer to Israel's special status as distinct from the nations. Though Israel will occupy land in the midst of other nations, Yahweh has separated Israel from "the peoples" (Lev 20:24, 26; 1 Kgs 8:53). Israel is Yahweh's "treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth," though they were the "fewest of all peoples" (Deut 7:6-7; cf. 14:2). Yahweh "set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples" (Deut 10:15). This distinction from the nations results in conflict with the nations. The surrounding nations serve their own gods and have little interest in Yahweh. Israel struggles to be faithful to Yahweh and, rather than ministering to the other nations, becomes like the other nations and serves their gods. From the time Israel becomes a nation in Exodus until the close of the Old Testament period, violent

particularly in statements which command people to be holy as Yahweh is holy (Lev 11:44-45). Gentry acknowledges that moral purity is a result of one's consecration to God, but he does not include the necessary element of separation from a sinful lifestyle. Gentry's attempt to explain how God is "consecrated" or "devoted" in Isaiah 6:3 seems to be quite forced: "'Holy' means that He is completely devoted and in this particular context, devoted to his justice and righteousness, which characterizes His instruction of the people of Israel in the covenant, showing them not only what it means to be devoted to Him but also what it means to trust each other in a genuinely human way, in short, social justice" (413).

enmity persists between Israel and the surrounding nations. The animosity of the nations toward Israel is prominent in the Psalms (79:1–13; 80:6; 83:1–4; 89:50–51) and in the Prophets (Mic 4:11–5:1; Joel 1:6; Jer 1:14–16; 10:25; Ezek 36:3; Zech 12:3; 14:2–3). It is difficult to find an extended period of time when Israel is at peace with the nations.

Yahweh’s Promise to Bless the Nations through His People

A central promise of the OT is the promise of blessing to the nations. Through Abraham and his offspring, God promises to bless “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3; 28:14) and “the nations” (גוֹיִם in Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). Andreas J. Köstenberger points out that this idea of salvation for the nations is “already implicit in the protevangelion of Genesis 3:15 (which predates the call of Abraham) and is made explicit in the blessing associated with Abraham (12:3) and his seed (22:18).”²⁷ A primary aspect of the blessing on the nations appears to include the fact that the other nations will serve Abraham’s offspring (Gen 24:60; 27:29; 49:10). This authority over the nations, however, results not in enslaving those nations but in blessing them (22:17–18). These promises indicate that the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will maintain a distinctive position among the other nations. Israel can be a blessing to the nations in their role as a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6).

The OT emphasizes Yahweh’s desire for the nations to know him and to be the recipients of the blessing of Abraham. Köstenberger observes, “Despite all the nations’ detestable practices, God is concerned also for their salvation.”²⁸ God himself rules over the nations (Ps 22:28; 96:10), and he is exalted over the peoples (Ps 99:2). God’s people will rule over the nations (Ps 18:43; 47:8–9). Yahweh’s servant will be “a light to the nations” (Isa 49:6) and to the peoples (Isa 51:4), so that his

²⁷ “Nations,” in *NDBT*, 677.

²⁸ “Nations,” in *NDBT*, 677.

“salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6).²⁹ Yahweh intends for his deeds to be made known among the peoples (1 Chr 16:8; Ps 96:3; 105:1; Isa 12:4) and praised among the nations (1 Chr 16:24; Ps. 18:49). When his deeds are made known among the peoples, the nations will “be glad and sing for joy” and the peoples will praise him (Ps 67:4–5). The peoples will see his glory (Ps 97:6), and “all the families of the nations shall worship before you” (Ps 22:27; cf. 86:9). In the latter days, the temple mount will be exalted, “all the nations shall flow to it,” and many peoples will go to this mountain to learn the ways of Yahweh (Isa 2:2–3; cf. Zech 8:22). In those times, “then the nations will know that” Yahweh is the God of Israel (Ezek 37:28; 39:7).

Being Distinct from the Sinful Ways of the Nations

Yahweh’s people must not follow the practices of the nations. Because Israel must be a holy nation (Exod 19:6), the OT includes numerous warnings against following the practices of the nations. Yahweh’s people are to be distinct from the nations because the nations are characteristically sinful. After giving laws regarding uncleanness and uncovering nakedness (Lev 18:1–23), Yahweh says that it is by these things that the nations have become unclean (Lev 18:24). Israel is not to “do as they do” in Egypt or in Canaan. Instead of walking in their statutes, they must follow Yahweh’s rules and keep his statutes (Lev 18:3–5). The customs of the nations are evil. “You shall not walk in the customs of the nations that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them” (Lev 20:23; Deut 18:9). Because the wickedness of the Canaanites is so great, God’s people must “destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess

²⁹ In spite of this emphasis on the fact of the future salvation of the nations, Schnabel argues that the OT indicates that OT authors did not understand their role as one of outreach to the nations. Though one might speak of God reaching out to the nations, there is “no exegetical evidence that allows us to speak of examples of an outreach of the people of God” (39).

served their gods” (Deut 12:2). The idolatry of the nations is evil. “You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you” (Deut 6:14). Moses warns that God’s people must resist the enticements to serve other gods, “the gods of the peoples who are around you” (Deut 13:7). Going after the gods of the peoples constitutes abandonment of Yahweh, and it provokes Yahweh to anger (Judg 2:12). This is such a serious offense to Yahweh that the penalty is death (Deut 13:9–11).

When the people enter Canaan, Yahweh allows some of these wicked nations to remain “to test Israel by them” (Judg 3:1). Israel frequently fails the test. Speaking of the time of the judges, Psalm 106 says that Israel “mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did” (Ps 106:35). They served their idols, sacrificed their children to Canaanite idols, and “became unclean by their acts and played the whore in their deeds” (Ps 106:36–39). One specific way God’s people emulate the nations is in their desire to have a king “like the nations that are around me” (Dt 17:14; 1 Sam 8:5, 20), thereby rejecting Yahweh’s rule (1 Sam 8:7–9). In Saul, Yahweh does indeed give his people a king “like the nations.”

Solomon later follows the ways of the nations by taking wives “from the nations” forbidden by God, and they turn his heart away after their gods (1 Kgs 11:2). Immediately after Solomon’s failed reign, his son Rehoboam oversees a nation that practices worship “according to all the abominations of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel” (1 Kgs 14:24). Other kings continue to follow in the ways of the nations. Ahaz “even burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practices of the nations” (2 Kgs 16:3; 2 Chr 28:1–4). The leaders of Israel and Judah continue to follow the religious practices of the nations, and they do even more evil than the nations (2 Kgs 21:9; 2 Chr 33:9), incurring God’s judgment through exile (2 Kgs 17:8–18; 2 Kgs 21:2–16; 2 Chr 33:2–9; 36:14–21).

The injunction to resist conformity to the nations continues into the exilic period, where Yahweh says, “Learn not the way of the

nations” (Jer 10:2). The specific example given here is a warning against being “dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them.” Yahweh’s people must not learn these ways “for the customs of the peoples are vanity” (Jer 10:3). This vanity is manifested in the idolatry of the people, who will cut down a tree and worship it (Jer 10:4–5). Indeed, “the gods of the peoples are worthless idols” in contrast to Yahweh who “made the heavens” (1 Chr 16:26; Ps 96:5; 135:15–18). Instead of following Yahweh’s rules, the people act “according to the rules of the nations” around them (Ezek 11:12). Not only do Yahweh’s people follow the customs of the nations, but they do “wickedness more than the nations, and against my statutes more than the countries all around her.” Therefore, Israel is “more turbulent than the nations” (Ezek 5:6–7; cf. 16:48, 51). In this case, Israel, “has not even lived up to *the standards of the nations*, that is, the mores and customs of her pagan neighbors.”³⁰

The theme continues in post-exilic times. Yahweh had brought his people into a land that is “impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness” (Ezra 9:11). However, “the people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations” (9:1). The primary example of this is intermarriage with the pagan peoples (9:2, 14), a sin which brings greater anger from Yahweh (9:14–15). The sin was so serious that Ezra urges the people to do Yahweh’s will by separating “from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (10:11).

Judgment on the Nations

Even though Yahweh desires for the nations to know him, he must judge those who reject him. Before Israel reaches the Promised Land,

³⁰ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 201.

Yahweh promises, “I will cast out nations before you” (Exod 34:24). In Balaam’s oracle, he says that God will “eat up the nations, his adversaries, and shall break their bones in pieces and pierce them through with his arrows” (Num 24:8). The Psalms pray for judgment on the nations (Ps 9:5, 15–20; 56:7; 59:5; 79:6). Yahweh holds all the nations in derision (Ps 59:8), and “he will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses” (Ps 110:6; cf. 149:7). He will come to “judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness” (Ps 96:13). The prophetic books also anticipate Yahweh’s judgment on the nations (Isa 30:28; 34:2–8; 63:6; Jer 25:15; 30:11; 46:28; Mic 7:17).

To summarize, the OT presents four recurring themes related to Israel’s relationship to the nations. (1) Yahweh’s purpose for Israel is for them to be distinct from the other nations in order to (2) make Yahweh known to the other nations. (3) The recurring corresponding instruction in the OT is for Israel to be distinct from the nations, and (4) Yahweh promises to judge the nations who refuse to acknowledge him. Israel frequently fails to resist the inclination to idolatry and the practices of the nations. Next, we will examine how the NT uses these same four themes when it refers to the relationship between the people of God and the mass of unbelievers.

The Nations and the World in the Gospels and Acts

This same contrast between the people of God and the nations in the OT continues in the NT. Some NT authors refer to the people of God in contrast to “the nations” in a similar way to that which the OT authors do. This is evident primarily in the Synoptic Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul and Peter, and in Revelation.³¹ The NT usage of plural ἔθνη, in particular, as well as ἔθνικός, in these writings demonstrates a

³¹ The Synoptics use the plural ἔθνη 23 times. Matthew uses the plural ἔθνη 12 times, Mark 4 times, and Luke 7 times. Luke uses plural ἔθνη 32 times in Acts; Paul uses ἔθνη 52 times in his letters, and Peter uses ἔθνη two times. Matthew uses ἔθνικός three times, and John uses ἔθνικός once (in 3 John).

continuation of the OT theme of Israel as God's people in contrast to the nations.³² The NT, though, often presents the people of God (the church), rather than ethnic Israel, in contrast to the nations. Many times NT authors are using ἔθνη merely to refer to those of non-Jewish ethnicity, or "Gentiles" (e.g., Mark 7:26; Acts 11:1); in numerous NT examples, though, ἔθνη specifies the identity of a qualitatively distinctive kind of people rather than an ethnically distinctive people. "The Gentiles" in many cases are those who are the characteristically unbelieving people of the world in contrast to the people of God. This NT usage of "the Gentiles/the nations" is quite consistent with how the OT speaks of "the nations." For example, these statements sound quite similar to the OT warnings about following in the ways of "the nations":

- "When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do." (Matt 6:7)
- "You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds." (Eph 4:17)
- "The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry." (1 Pet 4:3)

Other NT writers, however, do not refer to the distinction between God's people and "the Gentiles." John, for example, presents distinctive terminology ("the world") to refer to the contrast between God's people and unbelievers. Scholars have recognized the key role of polarities, or dualisms, in John's theology, and John establishes a strong polarity between the church and the world.³³ The Johannine worldview

³² The singular ἔθνος always refers to a "nation." The plural ἔθνη may refer to "nations" or "Gentiles," depending on the context, though the English terms overlap. In this paper, I have chosen to use the more appropriate term for each context in the NT.

³³ Not to be confused with Gnostic dualism, Andreas J. Köstenberger defines this type of dualism as "a way of looking at the world in terms of polar opposites" (*A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, BTNT [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009], 277). For helpful studies of Johannine dualism, see G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand

presents a “cosmic conflict between the world of light and the world of darkness” demonstrated primarily in the “struggle between God and his Messiah on the one hand and Satan on the other.”³⁴ Prominent in John’s writings is the idea that Satan is the ruler of this κόσμος, and he opposes Christ and believers (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf., 1 John 5:19). Ladd perhaps provides the most succinct summary of John’s concept of the world: “Man at enmity with God.”³⁵ In John’s writings, this conflict begins with Jesus’s conflict with the world and extends into a further conflict between the followers of Jesus and the world—enmity between believers and unbelievers.³⁶

Distinctive Terminology in the Gospels & Acts

John’s writings provide a well-developed theology of “the world,” and he speaks about the world in concepts that parallel the way the Gospels and Acts speak of “the nations.” The Synoptics display a sharp contrast between God’s people and τὰ ἔθνη (“the Gentiles”), compared to John’s contrast between God’s people and the κόσμος. John’s key word in describing the world in opposition to the church is κόσμος. In general, scholars agree on three primary senses for κόσμος: (1) the created material world (John 17:5, 25), (2) humanity in general (John 1:29; 3:16–17), (3) sinful humanity in opposition to God and his people (John 14:27;

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 223–36; Judith Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 80–87; and Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 109–29.

³⁴ Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 281.

³⁵ Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 226.

³⁶ Bauckham defines this enmity as an “ethical dualism,” in which “two categories of humans, the righteous and the wicked, are contrasted” and a “soteriological dualism” in which “humanity is divided into two categories by people’s acceptance or rejection of a savior” (p. 120). He argues that these concepts develop as the enmity toward Jesus develops John’s Gospel. In the later chapters of John’s Gospel, “Jesus’s disciples, who are ‘not from the world’ and are ‘chosen from the world,’ become, along with Jesus, one of the two components of a dualistic contrast between them and the world” (*Gospel of Glory*, 128).

17:9). John uses κόσμος a total of 78 times in his Gospel. In comparison, the Synoptic writers use κόσμος only 15 times (8 in Matt; 3 in Mark; 4 in Luke-Acts)³⁷ and only in the general sense of the created universe (e.g., Matt 4:8; 16:26; 24:21; Mark 14:9; Luke 11:50; Acts 17:24) or the mass of humanity (e.g., Matt 18:7).

John's Gospel, on the other hand, never uses the plural ἔθνη (it uses singular ἔθνος a total of 5 times), whereas the Synoptics and Acts use plural ἔθνη ("nations") a total of 57 times (12 in Matt; 4 in Mark; 7 in Luke; and 34 in Acts).³⁸ Though the terminology is different, all of the Gospel writers agree in their assessment of the relationship between the world and believers, and they refer to "the nations" and "the world" in correlation with the same key themes. Table 1 (below) demonstrates that the Synoptics (with Acts) and John are using these two different terms in generally consistent ways and are conceptually parallel.

³⁷ The term κόσμος occurs 102 times combined in John's Gospel and Letters, demonstrating the importance of κόσμος in John's theology. The only nouns used more frequently in John's writings are Ἰησοῦς (258x), πατήρ (154x), and θεός (150x).

³⁸ It is interesting that Matthew uses the term ἐθνικός three times (5:47; 6:7; 18:17). This word is quite similar in meaning to τὰ ἔθνη and refers to non-Jewish people with the connotation that they are ungodly.

“The Nations” and “the World”

Table 1. κόσμος in John and ἔθνη in the Synoptic Gospels

Description	Synoptics/Acts - ἔθνη	John - κόσμος
Object of Christ's mission	Matt 4:15; 12:18,21; Luke 2:32; Mark 11:17; Acts 26:23	1:9; 3:17,19; 9:5; 12:46; 17:11
Rejects Christ	Matt 20:19; Luke 18:32; Mark 10:33; Acts 4:25, 27	1:10; 7:7; 15:18, 24
Rejects believers	Matt 24:9; Luke 21:24; Acts 14:2, 5; 21:11	15:18-19
Distinct from God's people	Matt 10:5,18	14:17,19,22; 17:6,9,16,25
Distinct behavior as sinners	Matt 6:32; 20:25; Luke 12:30; 22:25; Acts 14:16	14:27; 16:8,20
Object of mission of believers	Matt 24:14; 28:19; Luke 24:47; Mark 13:10; Acts 9:15; 10:45; 11:1, 18; 13:46-48; 14:27; 15:3, 7, 12, 14, 17, 19; 18:6; 21:19; 22:21; 26:17, 20; Acts 28:28	17:18-23
Object of impending judgment	Matt 25:32; Luke 21:25	9:39; 12:31; 16:8,11

The Synoptics, therefore, use different terminology to speak of a similar dualism/polarity between God's people and the unbelieving world to that of which John speaks.

Table 1 (above) shows that the Synoptics/Acts and John are speaking of quite similar concepts when they refer to the Gentiles (Synoptics/Acts) or the world (John) in contrast to the church. It is necessary, then, to ask why the Synoptics and Acts use different terminology than John to speak of this same basic distinction between God's people and the unbelieving world. Matthew, for example, writing at an earlier date,³⁹ is writing with "the Jewish Christian church and the Jewish people in mind."⁴⁰ In Matthew's Gospel in particular, "Jewish issues are uppermost."⁴¹ Matthew, therefore, seems to be continuing the OT distinction between God's people and "the nations" or "the Gentiles." John, however, likely writing after the destruction of the temple,⁴² no longer limits his focus to Jewish believers in contrast to the Gentiles; rather, John's focus is now on the relationship between Jesus and the world and between the church and the world. By the time John is writing, the church is no longer centralized in Jerusalem with the Gentiles as outsiders; rather, the church is established throughout mostly Gentile geographical locations. It is no longer relevant to speak of God's people in contrast to the Gentiles since the church is beginning to be

³⁹ Numerous factors are involved in determining the date of the Gospels of both Matthew and John. The author agrees with the conclusion of D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, which asserts the likelihood that Matthew's Gospel was written prior to AD 70. *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 152–56. Textual and historical evidence supports the idea that John's Gospel was almost certainly later than AD 70, possibly around AD 80–85 (264–67).

⁴⁰ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 31. Osborne argues that it is a "major consensus" that "Matthew writes a Jewish gospel" (31). Carson and Moo suggest that Matthew was written in "centers of large Jewish population," likely in Syria or Palestine. They note that Matthew's Gospel "betrays so many Jewish features" (*Introduction*, 156–57). Luke's contrast to John supports this concept as well. Luke uses the plural ἔθνη seven times in his Gospel and 32 times in Acts, mostly consistent with the way the Synoptics use it. In contrast, Luke uses κόσμος a total of 3 times in Luke and 1 time in Acts (Acts 17:24).

⁴¹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 31.

⁴² Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 264–67.

more and more Gentile in makeup.⁴³ The church is spreading throughout the world, and John accommodates his language to this fact. It is difficult, therefore, to avoid seeing the conceptual parallels in the relationship between Israel and the nations in the OT and the church and the world in the NT.⁴⁴

Parallel Concepts with the OT in the Gospels & Acts

The four primary themes identified in the OT concept of God’s people in contrast to the nations are prominent in the distinction between God’s people and “the Gentiles” in the Synoptics and Acts and between believers and the world in John’s Gospel.

God’s People as Distinct from the Gentiles/the World

The Synoptic Gospels present the “Gentiles” as a group of people set in distinctive contrast to God’s people. When Jesus commissions the twelve, he instructs them to “go nowhere among the Gentiles” but to go “rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:5). When Jesus expands these instructions to encompass the future ministry of his disciples, he clearly warns that they should expect to be dragged before the Gentiles (ἔθνη) for judgment for Jesus’s sake (Matt 10:18).

⁴³ At the same time, Matthew’s Gospel anticipates this type of transition. Jesus explains Psalm 118:22–23 by stating, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people [ἔθνος] producing its fruits” (Matt 21:43). Schnabel notes, “God’s presence and God’s salvific intervention are no longer localized in Israel but were given to another ‘people,’ that is, to another people than the biological descendants of Abraham” (45–46). The church, which includes Gentiles and Jews, receives the kingdom.

⁴⁴ It is important to note, too, that these parallels are relevant whether one interprets Scripture through a covenant or a dispensational framework. For covenant theology, it is natural to see the same distinctiveness between Israel and the nations to display itself in the church and the world. For dispensational theology, it is natural to see the discontinuity in that the distinction is no longer between Israel and the nations but now it is between the church and the world.

Because the people of God were primarily Israelites during the ministry of Jesus, Jesus still speaks of this future distinction between God's people and the unbelievers of the world as a Jew/Gentile distinction.⁴⁵ Similarly, in Jesus's teaching on church discipline, if the sinner is unresponsive to the correction given by the ἐκκλησία, the ἐκκλησία should treat the person as a "Gentile" (ἔθνικός) and a tax collector (Matt 18:17). The implication is that if the person is not an obedient member of the ἐκκλησία, he is a Gentile, a "person who has no place among the holy people of God."⁴⁶

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus tells the disciples that they "will be hated by all nations [ἔθνη]" for the sake of Jesus's name (Matt. 24:9). This instance certainly speaks of the nations as representative of unbelieving humanity in opposition to the people of God who are delivered up to tribulation. The distinction here cannot be a strict ethnic one between Jew and Gentile; it must be a qualitative distinction between the church and the unbelieving Gentiles (and Jews) among all nations since the church rather than Israel is now the entity through whom God is working to deliver the "gospel of the kingdom" to "the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (Matt 24:14).⁴⁷

John presents this same distinctiveness between God's people and the world. For example, the world is not able to receive the Spirit of truth "because it neither sees him nor knows him" (John 14:17). Jesus then says, "Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me" (14:19). Jesus is "comparing the (eschatological) experience of the disciples to the world. The departure of Jesus changes his

⁴⁵ Leon Morris notes, "These are terms that Jewish people would use rather than those in the church in which Matthew was writing. They point to a Palestinian origin of the saying" (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 469n52).

⁴⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 694.

⁴⁷ It is probably best to understand the Olivet Discourse in terms of an initial fulfillment in the events surrounding AD 70 as well as an ultimate fulfillment in the Tribulation period. For this view, see David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 566–67.

relationship to the world, but not to the disciples. . . . Once Jesus leaves, the world will no longer see him in the flesh, and they have never known him by the Spirit.”⁴⁸ Because the Jews were awaiting a Messiah who would reveal himself to the world,⁴⁹ Judas (not Iscariot) asks how Jesus can reveal himself to his disciples and not to the world (14:22). Those who love him keep his word and will have a home with Jesus and the Father (14:23–34). The Spirit has a distinctive ministry to believers that he does not have for the world.

This distinction between believers and the world is a prominent theme in Jesus’s prayer in John 17. The Father gave Jesus people “out of the world” (John 17:6; cf. 15:19). Jesus is praying specifically for these individuals and *not* for the world (17:9).⁵⁰ Jesus’s followers are not “of the world” just as Jesus is not “of the world.” Jesus is not asking the Father to take them out of the world but to protect them from the evil one (17:14–16). Jesus concludes the prayer distinguishing between the world, which does not know the Father, and believers, who know that the Father sent Jesus (17:25). Therefore, the Synoptics present the people of God in the church age in contrast to “the Gentiles,” whereas John presents the people of God in the church age in contrast to “the world.”

God’s Desire to Bless the Nations/the World

God desires to bring salvation to the nations/the world through Jesus and the church. In several instances, Matthew emphasizes Jesus’s mission to the nations. Matthew cites Jesus’s ministry in Capernaum as a

⁴⁸ Edward W. Klink, *John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 637.

⁴⁹ Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 305.

⁵⁰ J. Ramsey Michaels helpfully comments, “This does not mean that he is unconcerned about the world, only that his concern for the world is indirect rather than direct. His plans for the world, whatever they may be, are channeled through the disciples, and them alone (see vv. 21, 23). His mission to the world is over, even as theirs is about to begin (see v. 18)” (*The Gospel of John*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], 865).

fulfillment of Isaiah 9:1-2, in which “Galilee of the Gentiles [ἔθνη]” is a region which contains a “people dwelling in darkness” who “have seen a great light” (cf. Matt 4:15).⁵¹ France highlights the theme of Gentile mission in Matthew: “By including ‘Galilee of the nations’ in his quotation Matthew gives a further hint of the direction in which his story will develop until the mission which will be launched from Galilee in 28:16 is explicitly targeted at ‘all nations’ (28:19).”⁵² Later, Matthew cites Isaiah 42:1-3 in reference to Jesus as God’s Spirit-empowered Servant who will “proclaim justice to the Gentiles [ἔθνη]” (Matt. 12:18). It is in the name of this Servant that the Gentiles [ἔθνη] will hope (12:21). Similarly, in Luke 2, Simeon thanks God that his eyes have seen God’s salvation, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles [ἔθνη] and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:30-32; cf. Isa 42:6; 49:6). Simeon’s statement affirms that the expectation of a Messiah for the nations is alive and well prior to the ministry of Jesus and the inception of the church. Finally, in Mark’s gospel, after Jesus cleanses the temple, Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations” (Mark 11:17).⁵³

Since Jesus’s mission is ultimately to all nations, so he also commissions believers to witness to the nations. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus

⁵¹ France notes, “Galilee of the nations’ reflects the region’s greater openness to surrounding Gentile populations, and perhaps especially Isaiah’s Judean awareness of the deportation of Israelites from Galilee by the Assyrians” (142). Many of these Gentiles later converted to Judaism. “Galilee of the Gentiles” probably refers to the region East of the Jordan River. See R. Riesner, “Galilee,” in *DJG*, ed. J. B. Green, J. K. Brown, and N. Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 297. Gene R. Smillie argues that a “considerable pagan population” had been residing in Galilee ever since the Assyrian conquest (“Even the Dogs’: Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew,” *JETS* 45, No. 1 [March 2002], 78-85).

⁵² France, *Matthew*, 143.

⁵³ Mark is the only Gospel writer who includes “for all the nations.” Osborne suggests that Matthew removes the phrase to highlight the contrast between the metaphors. Other possibilities are that the impending destruction of the temple renders it insignificant for Gentiles or that for Matthew’s community, the temple is not the house of prayer (*Matthew*, 763n7). France concludes that Matthew “understands Jesus’s act to be concerned with the proper use of the temple as such rather than with the fact that it takes place specifically in the Court of the Gentiles” (786-87).

says that “this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations [ἔθνη], and then the end will come” (Matt 24:14; cf. Mark 13:10). In the Great Commission, Jesus tells the disciples that they are to go and “make disciples of all nations [ἔθνη]” (Matt 28:19–20). In Luke’s version of the Great Commission, Jesus says that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations [ἔθνη]” (Luke 24:47). Therefore, as in the Old Testament, so also the NT writers emphasize the role of the Messiah and the people of God in ministering to all nations.⁵⁴ This blessing to “the nations” is a key theme in Acts, where ministry to the Gentiles receives prominence. Paul is “a chosen instrument” to “carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15; cf. 22:21; 26:17). Though Paul’s custom was to go to the Jews first, he would then turn to the Gentiles (13:46–47; 18:6; 26:20). Paul’s mission to the Gentiles follows the pattern of the mission of Christ, who suffered and was raised that “he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (26:23). The Holy Spirit is poured out on the Gentiles (10:45), and the Gentiles receive salvation (11:1, 18; 13:48; 14:27; 15:3; 21:19; 28:28).

Parallel to Jesus’s ministry to the nations in the Synoptics is Jesus’s ministry to the world in John. Jesus is the true light, which gives light to everyone (John 1:9); Jesus frequently speaks of his mission in terms of “coming into the world” (John 1:9; cf. 3:19; 6:14; 9:5; 10:36; 11:27; 16:28; 17:18; 18:37). God sent his Son into the world “in order that the world might be saved through him” (3:17; cf. 3:16; 4:42; 12:47; 1 John 4:9, 14). Jesus is the bread of God who “gives life to the world” (John 6:33; cf. 6:51). Jesus says, “I have come into the world as light, so that

⁵⁴ Schnabel points out the difference in this mission to the nations in the NT compared to the expectation of the ingathering of the nations in the OT. Whereas the OT envisioned the nations coming to Jerusalem (Isa 2:2–5; Mic 4:1–5), Jesus is sending the church out from Jerusalem to the nations (Matt 28:19; Acts 1:8). “The anticipated movement from the periphery to the center is redirected in terms of a mission from the center (Jerusalem, where Jesus had died and was raised from the dead) toward the periphery (the ends of the earth)” (p 47).

whoever sees me sees him who sent me” (12:46; cf. 8:12; 11:9). Jesus is speaking to the world what he has heard from his Father (8:26; cf. 18:20), and he testifies to the truth (18:37). Similarly, as the Father sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus has also sent his followers into the world (17:18). Jesus declares that the mission of believers in the world is that people (in the world) “will believe in me through their word” (17:20) and “that the world may believe that you have sent me” (17:21).

John clearly presents the ministry of Jesus and the disciples as to the world, whereas the Synoptics and Acts consistently present the ministry of Jesus and the disciples as to the Gentiles. Table 2 (below) compares the similarities in key statements of the Synoptics and of John regarding the mission of Christ and believers to the nations/the world.

Being Distinct from the Gentiles/the World

The Gospels and Acts teach that God’s people must not emulate the sinful practices of the Gentiles/the World. The Synoptics present the idea that there is a certain stereotypical way of life, a certain mindset that “the Gentiles” engage in that is in opposition to the way in which God wants his people to live. Living like “the Gentiles” is in direct contradiction to living in a godly way. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his hearers not to be anxious about what they should eat, drink, or wear, “for the Gentiles [ἔθνη] seek after all these things” (Matt 6:32). In Luke’s parallel account, Jesus says that “all the nations [ἔθνη] of the world seek after these things” (Luke 12:30). Kingdom citizens should not greet only their brothers—even the Gentiles (ἔθνικός) do this (Matt 5:47). Also, when God’s people pray, they must not “heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles [ἔθνικός] do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matt 6:7). When Jesus is teaching the disciples about humility, he says that “the rulers of the Gentiles [ἔθνη] lord it over them. . . . It shall not be so among you” (Matt 20:25–26; Luke 22:25). Jesus, therefore, repeatedly urges his followers to

“The Nations” and “the World”

Table 2: Mission to the Nations/the World

Synoptics	John
“A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:30-32)	“The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” (John 1:9)
“I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.” (Matt 12:18)	“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17)
“Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, . . . on them a light has dawned.” (Matt 4:15-16)	“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever sees me sees him who sent me.” (John 12:46)
“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” (Matt 18:19)	“As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. . . that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:18-22)

resist being like “the Gentiles.” Smillie comments, “Insofar as the conventions reflect syllogistic Jewish logic—the unrighteous are those who do not know or do the Law of God, Gentiles do not know and thus cannot do the Law of God, therefore Gentiles are the unrighteous—Matthew is willing to use them, sparingly, to present stereotypical and characteristic behavior to be avoided by the new community.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Smillie, “Even the Dogs,” 75.

Additionally, in Acts, Paul tells the people at Lystra, “In past generations he allowed all the nations [ἔθνη] to walk in their own ways.” The Gentiles, therefore, exhibit certain behavioral characteristics that are distinct from how God’s people should behave.

Not only do the Gentiles live characteristically sinful lifestyles, but they clearly set themselves in opposition to Christ and his people. The Gentiles play a significant role in putting Jesus to death. Jesus foretells that priests and the scribes will “deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified” (Matt 20:18–19; cf. Luke 18:32). Mark adds that the Gentiles “will mock him and spit on him, and flog him, and kill him” (Mark 10:33). The Gentiles will also extend this hostility to believers as believers seek to minister to the Gentiles. As they go, believers will “be hated by all nations [ἔθνη]” because of Jesus’s name (Matt 24:9).

John’s Gospel highlights the sinful nature of this world in opposition to Christ and believers. John presents Satan as the ruler of this world. Jesus’s judgment on the world includes his exorcism of Satan from the world: “now will the ruler of this world be cast out” (John 12:31).⁵⁶ The ruler of this world has no claim on Christ (14:30) and will certainly be judged (16:11). Because the world follows the patterns of its ruler and it does not see or know the Father (14:17, 19), John speaks of the world as categorically sinful and opposed to Jesus’s ministry. The world gives a certain kind of peace that is inherently different from the kind of peace Jesus gives (14:27). Whereas the world speaks of peace merely in terms of “absence of conflict,”⁵⁷ Jesus provides internal peace in the midst of conflict (14:1ff.). When the Comforter comes, he will convict the world of sin because the world does not believe in Jesus (John 16:8–9).

⁵⁶ Michaels points out that ἐκβάλλω represents the “language of exorcism” (*Gospel of John*, 695). In contrast to the relatively frequent accounts of exorcisms of demons in the Synoptics, John does not speak of any exorcisms of demons. Instead, John presents Jesus in direct opposition to Satan.

⁵⁷ Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 792.

This distinctive behavior of the world displays itself prominently in the world’s rejection of Jesus. Jesus “was in the world, . . . yet the world did not know him” (John 1:10). Indeed, the world hates Jesus because he testifies that its works are evil (7:7; cf. 15:18). The world hates both Jesus and the Father (15:23–24). Because the world hates Jesus and Jesus chose believers out of the world, the world also hates believers (15:18–19). When Jesus departs from the world, the disciples will weep and lament, but “the world will rejoice” (16:20). John’s Gospel, therefore, clearly presents the world as a mass of unbelievers who have a distinctively sinful lifestyle and who by nature oppose Jesus and his followers. The Synoptics and Acts similarly speak of living like “the Gentiles” as a distinctively sinful lifestyle, and the Gentiles work to oppose Christ and his followers.

Judgment on the Nations/the World

The theme of judgment on “the nations” is not prominent in the Synoptic Gospels; it is, nevertheless, present.⁵⁸ Though God desires to bring salvation to the nations through Jesus and his people, those Gentiles who reject Christ will be judged in the last days. Luke’s Olivet Discourse indicates that the nations on the earth will be distressed and perplexed because of the roaring of the sea and the waves that precedes the coming of the Son of Man (Luke 21:25). Then at the second coming, Jesus will sit on his throne, and all the nations will be gathered before him. Out of the nations, Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats (Matt 25:31–32). The focus of the majority of the judgment passages in the Synoptics, however, involves judgment on those who reject Christ and his kingdom, and these are not identified as “Gentiles.” This is likely due to the fact that by the time the Gospel accounts were written, the church included numerous Gentiles and was geographically

⁵⁸ The focus of most of the judgment passages in the Synoptics involves judgment on those who reject Christ and his kingdom (Matt 3:7–10; 7:19; 8:11–12; 13:49–50; 18:23–35; 25:31–46).

spread across Gentile lands. Judgment on “the Gentiles” is only on those who are stereotypical Gentiles—those who reject faith in Christ.

In John’s Gospel, however, the world is destined for judgment. Jesus says, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (John 9:39). The judgment that is to come on the world comes through the death of Christ. This judgment presents the ultimate irony in that the ruler of this world executes judgment on Jesus, effecting the death of Jesus; but Satan’s judgment on Jesus is the ultimate means of Jesus’s judgment of the world and victory over the ruler of this world (John 12:31–32). When Jesus departs from the world, then the Comforter will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. Prominent here is that the Comforter’s conviction of the world is based on the judgment executed on the ruler of this world (16:8–11). Though believers will have tribulation in the world, Jesus assures them that he has overcome the world (16:33). In light of the “cosmic trial” motif, Jesus is both a witness and the judge who seeks to do the will of His Father (5:22–30; 9:39; 12:47–48). In a twist of Johannine irony, “it is not so much Jesus who is on trial as those to whom he has been sent, those who are acting as his judges.”⁵⁹ In the end, the world rejects Jesus, pronouncing their own condemnation in their condemnation of Jesus (3:18).

The Gentiles and the World in Paul’s Epistles

The NT epistles continue to distinguish between God’s people and the mass of unbelievers using the same terminological distinctions exemplified in the OT and in the Gospels and Acts. Paul employs both sets of

⁵⁹ Andrew T. Lincoln, “Trials, Plots, and the Narrative of the Fourth Gospel,” *JSNT* 56 (1994): 8. Lincoln has performed the most extensive work on this subject in *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000); and “Trials,” 3–30. See also Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 436–456; and Christopher A. Maronde, “Moses in the Gospel of John,” *CTQ* 77 (2013): 30–39.

terms in different places, and Peter consistently refers to “the Gentiles,” whereas James and John refer to “the world.”

Paul’s use of “the Gentiles” generally parallels the way the Synoptics refer to the Gentiles. Paul uses ἔθνος 54 times, 52 of which are the plural ἔθνη, often merely referring to the Gentiles as a non-Jewish ethnicity (e.g., Rom 1:13; 3:29; 11:11). Paul uses two key terms to refer to the world (αἰών and κόσμος). Paul uses αἰών primarily to refer to the arena over which Satan exercises influence. The basic sense of αἰών refers to a long period of time (Eph 1:21; Col 1:26), but Paul distinctively describes this present αἰών as categorically evil (Gal 1:4; Eph 2:2; 2 Tim. 4:10).⁶⁰ Paul uses κόσμος, on the other hand, to refer to either the created world in a geographical sense (e.g., Rom 1:8, 20; Eph 1:4) or to the mass of humanity in the world (Rom 3:19).⁶¹ Related to the latter sense, κόσμος can also carry a pejorative overtone in reference to unbelieving humanity and its thought/behavior patterns (e.g., 1 Cor 1:21; 3:19). Paul’s usage of “the Gentiles” and “the world” fit in the same categories as “the nations” and “the world” do in the OT and in the Gospels and Acts.

⁶⁰ Jesus also speaks of “the cares of this age” (Matt 13:22; Mark 4:19), but this does not specifically identify this age as categorically evil. In Luke 16:8, Jesus contrasts the shrewdness of “the sons of this age” with “the sons of light,” likely using the same sense Paul uses in identifying this present age as evil. For studies of Paul’s use of αἰών, see H. Sasse, “αἰών,” in *TDNT*, 1:203–07; T. Holtz, “αἰών,” in *EDNT*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 1:45–46; and Silva, ed., “αἰών,” in *NIDNTTE*, 1:197–200.

⁶¹ Paul uses κόσμος 47 times, 21 of which are in 1 Corinthians (45%), 9 are in Romans (19%), and the remaining 17 are scattered throughout his other letters. Edward Adams posits that “Paul uses the term κόσμος in a remarkably complex, varied, and subtle way, to an extent which has seldom been appreciated by scholars. The range of senses, nuances and associations with which Paul employs the word cannot be captured in a single, all-encompassing theological definition” (*Constructing the World: A Study of Paul’s Cosmological Language* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000], 242). For studies of κόσμος in Pauline literature, see Adams, 12–21; 41–76; 105–90; 221–36; Joel White, “Paul’s Cosmology: The Witness of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians,” in *Cosmology and NTT*, ed. Jonathan T. Pennington and Sean McDonough (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 90–106; and Robert L. Foster, “Reoriented to the Cosmos: Cosmology & Theology in Ephesians through Philemon,” in *Cosmology and NTT*, 107–24.

Distinct from the Gentiles/the World

Paul speaks of the Gentiles as distinct from the people of God in the sense that they are unbelievers who need the gospel and that they are known to be stereotypically sinful in their behavior (see the two subsequent sections below). The world did not know God through wisdom; God saves those who believe (1 Cor 1:20). The spirit of the world is contrasted with the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:12). Paul also differentiates between a godly grief and a worldly grief (2 Cor 7:10). Paul speaks of the life of a believer in contrast to the former life “as Gentiles” (Eph 4:17; 1 Th. 4:5) and in contrast to “this age” (αἰών; Rom 12:2) and “the world” (κόσμος; 1 Cor 1:20–21; 6:2). In Ephesians 2:2, Paul refers to a pre-conversion lifestyle characterized by “the age of this world” (τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου). Lincoln argues that this usage of both key terms in Ephesians 2:2 may be “a way of talking about both spatial and temporal aspects of fallen human existence.”⁶²

Mission to the Gentiles and the World

Paul declares himself to be “an apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom 11:13), and numerous Pauline passages speak of Paul’s desire to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (Rom 1:5, 13; 15:9–12, 16–18, 27; Gal 1:16; 2:2; 3:8, 14; Eph 3:6, 8; Col 1:27; 1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 4:17).⁶³ God is the God of the Gentiles

⁶² Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 95. Most interpreters argue that the relationship between κόσμος and αἰών is probably appositional, though since the terms are not exact synonyms, the words may be used together here to demonstrate the interconnectedness of κόσμος and αἰών—this evil world system (κόσμος) presently at work during this evil age on earth (αἰών). For example, see Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 131. Alternatively, Harold W. Hoehner argues convincingly that the genitive use is descriptive, referring to “the era characterized by this ungodly world in contrast to the age to come” (*Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002], 310).

⁶³ For an excellent discussion of Paul’s Gentile mission, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 49–60; 78–85.

also (Rom 3:29), and Abraham is the father of many nations (Rom 4:17–18). The OT “preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham” when God tells Abraham that all nations would be blessed in him (Gal 3:8). Therefore, Christ became a curse for us “so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles” (Gal 3:13–14). Similarly, Paul teaches that Christ came to bring salvation to the world. Jesus “came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim 1:15). Christ’s work on the cross includes reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19), and he encourages the Philippians to shine as lights in the world (Phil 2:15).

Being Distinct from the Gentiles/the World

Paul views the Gentiles as the paradigm for lost humanity (Rom 2:14, 24). There is a distinct behavior associated with the Gentiles (1 Cor. 5:1). And in their former lives, the Corinthians were “pagans” (ἔθνη in 1 Cor 12:2), and such Gentiles had been putting Paul’s life at risk (2 Cor 11:26). Paul asserts, “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners” (Gal 2:15). He instructs the Ephesians not to “walk as the Gentiles do” (Eph 4:17). The Thessalonians must not live “in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God” (1 Thess 4:5). Paul presents the Gentiles as those who are unconverted and live characteristically evil lifestyles.

As the church must not live as the Gentiles do, so Paul warns against living like the world. The unbelievers in this world are characteristically “sexually immoral . . . greedy and swindlers, or idolaters” (1 Cor 5:10). Before conversion, people are “following the course of this world,” which is equivalent to “following the prince of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2). Satan, therefore, is the driving force behind the world and its ways. Believers, however, have died to “the elemental spirits of the world (Col 2:8, 20). Paul’s most extensive discussion of the world is in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians. The world does not know God through its wisdom (1 Cor 1:21), and its wisdom is folly with God (3:19). Paul here is promoting a “response to the world which . . .

may be described as sectarian. This world, according to Paul in his statements on κόσμος, is a corrupt and hostile place.”⁶⁴ The problem in Corinth is that “the church is failing to maintain its distinctiveness within its wider social and cultural environment.”⁶⁵ Paul urges believers that they must live distinctly from the world.

Judgment on the Gentiles/the World

Paul never speaks of judgment on “the nations.” As with the Gospels, there is a concerted effort to avoid expressing that Gentiles are under God’s judgment, since many Gentiles are part of the church. Paul does speak of judgment on the “world.” For Paul, the judgment to come upon the world is certain (Rom 3:6; 19), and the sinful people of the world will be judged (1 Cor 6:2; 11:32).

The Gentiles and the World in the General Epistles

The General Epistles continue using the same distinctions used by the Gospel writers and Paul, but each author tends to use either “Gentiles” or “world” to speak of the contrast between God’s people and unbelievers. Peter prominently uses “Gentiles” according to the pattern set by the Synoptics and Paul, whereas James and John both refer solely to the church’s distinction from the “world.”⁶⁶

James and the World

James presents one of the key statements in the NT regarding the world (Jas 4:4), but he never uses ἔθνος. It could even be argued that

⁶⁴ Edward Adams, *Constructing the World: A Study of Paul’s Cosmological Language* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 148.

⁶⁵ Adams, *Constructing the World.*, 149.

⁶⁶ Hebrews does not focus on the distinction between the people of God with either the Gentiles or the world.

“enmity with the world” represents the “thematic center” for James’s theology, demonstrated in James’s “ethical and religious dualism.”⁶⁷ Darian Lockett argues that “James charts the universe via two competing world views, or systems of value. . . . Not only are these systems of measure set in opposition, but ‘the world’ is expressly marked off as contagious territory—polluting ground (Jas 1:27).”⁶⁸ James consistently refers to what is worldly or earthly to “refer to the world as a counter measure of order over against the order of God.”⁶⁹ Remaining unstained from the world requires believers to “maintain a particular boundary between themselves and the influences of ‘the world.’”⁷⁰ The world is “the agent of pollution” that “transmits a counter form of ‘religion’” that contaminates believers.⁷¹ These themes are consistent with the OT idea of the nations as “contagious territory” and representing the realm of humanity opposed to God.

As John and Paul both identify Satan as the ruler of this world, James also speaks of the ongoing warfare believers engage in with the devil (Jas 4:7). James contrasts wisdom that comes from above (from God) with wisdom that is “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” (Jas 3:15). The demonic nature of this wisdom indicates that it is “instigated by demons and the unwholesome spiritual world.”⁷² The reference to “world” (κόσμος) in 4:4 (as in 1:27) cannot refer to the mass of humanity in general or to the evil people of the world but rather to the way of life in which unbelievers characteristically engage. Believers must

⁶⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson argues that the “enmity” described in James 4:4 “offers us the best hope of finding a thematic center for [James’s] ethical and religious dualism. Indeed, 4:4 might be taken as thematic for the composition as a whole” (*The Letter of James*, AB [New York: Doubleday, 1995], 84). See also Darian Lockett, “God and ‘the World’: Cosmology and Theology in the Letter of James,” in *Cosmology and New Testament Theology*, 144–51. This is not a consensus view, though. For example, Peter H. Davids mentions James 4:4 only two times, commenting on the verse only briefly (*A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, BTNT [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014], 73, 81).

⁶⁸ Lockett, “God and ‘the World,’” 155–56.

⁶⁹ Lockett, “God and ‘the World,’” 150.

⁷⁰ Lockett, “God and ‘the World,’” 146.

⁷¹ Lockett, “God and ‘the World,’” 146.

⁷² David P. Nystrom, *James*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 208.

hold back from friendship with the world, which represents “the ethos of life in opposition to, or disregard of, God and his kingdom.”⁷³ In keeping with the recurring theme in the letter, the reference to friendship of the world relates to behaviors and lifestyle. James is urging the people to adopt a lifestyle distinct from the world.

Peter and the Gentiles

Peter wants believers to honor God through their fiery trials, and his exhortation for overcoming in the face of this enmity is grounded in God’s intention for them as specified in their identity as believers. First Peter 2:9 serves as “the basis for the following exhortation concerning the behavior of God’s family in society.”⁷⁴ Peter tells them that they are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (2:9), language that certainly alludes to Exodus 19:5–6.⁷⁵ Peter identifies the purpose of the church in this hostile, evil world as parallel to God’s purpose for Israel among the hostile, evil Gentiles.⁷⁶

⁷³ Dan G. McCartney, *James*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 209.

⁷⁴ John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, AB (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2000), 449; also 474–76. Paul J. Achtemeier agrees: “Taken together, vv. 9–10* are both climax and transition. As climax of the passage that has addressed itself to the nature of the community and its faith, it points out that those who suffer in their society as exiles and aliens are in fact the true people of God. As transition it prepares the chosen community for the hostile confrontation with its antagonistic environment” (*1 Peter*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 168).

⁷⁵ Davids argues that 1 Peter 2:9 also alludes to Isaiah 43:20–21, which speaks of God’s chosen people declaring his praise (*A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, 134–35).

⁷⁶ Though the similarities between Exodus 19 and 1 Peter 2 are prominent, it is important to note the dissimilarities between the two. Most notably, the distinct covenantal basis of each is different. The language of Exodus 19, under the Old Covenant, says, “If you will, . . . then you shall be” (19:5–6). Peter’s wording, under the New Covenant, says, “But you are, . . . that you should” (2:9). Thus, under the Old Covenant, the responsibility to obey precedes the privileged identity. Under the New Covenant, the privileged identity precedes and enables the responsibility. D. Edmond Hiebert notes that “the assignment given to the nation of Israel—to be God’s witness concerning Him to the nations—was frustrated by their unfaithfulness and sin.” The church now “has the same assignment to be God’s witness to the world” (*1 Peter* [Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1992], 147). Additionally, the fact that God desires the church and Israel to carry

Believers are to serve as witnesses to the unbelievers (the Gentiles), while they are to maintain holy lives before God. Peter’s ensuing exhortations address (1) living distinctively from the Gentiles (a holy nation) and (2) showing the unbelievers through words and actions how they may know God (royal priesthood). These two elements are the key principles in 2:11–12: “Abstain from the passions of the flesh. . . . Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that . . . they may see your good deeds and glorify God.” The remainder of the letter elaborates on these points.

Peter uses “Gentiles” to refer to a stereotypical, unconverted, sinful way of life. Before their conversion, believers had already spent enough time doing what “the Gentiles” do (1 Pet 4:3). This usage is similar to Paul’s instruction to “no longer walk as the Gentiles do” (Eph 4:17). Whereas Paul urges believers not to be conformed to “this world/age” (Rom 12:2), Peter urges believers not to be “conformed to the passions of your former ignorance” (1 Pet 1:14). Also, Peter refers to “the Gentiles” (τὰ ἔθνη) in the same way in which John sometimes refers to the “world” (κόσμος). Peter’s instructions to maintain honorable conduct among the Gentiles (1 Pet 2:12) and to avoid doing “what the Gentiles want to do” (1 Pet 4:3) are parallel with Jesus’s statements about being “in the world” but not “of the world” (John 17:11–18). Furthermore, God’s intention is to bring salvation to the Gentiles. When believers witness in this way to Gentiles, if the Gentiles believe, they will “glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet 2:12). If they refuse to believe, however, these Gentiles “will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Pet 4:5; cf. 4:17–18).

John and the World

As noted in the discussion of John’s Gospel above, John’s use of “world” is distinctive in the NT. John prominently uses “world” in his epistles

out similar functions among the Gentiles does not imply that the church has permanently replaced Israel.

as well, and he avoids referring to the “nations” or “Gentiles” (he refers to “Gentiles” only in 3 John 7). First John 2:15–17 pronounces the letter’s key statement on the world: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. . . . The world is passing away along with its desires.”⁷⁷ The things that are “of the world” are “not of the Father” because they are under the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). Those who are not among believers are “from the world” (1 John 4:5), and believers should not be surprised that the world hates them (1 John 3:13). John’s epistles, therefore, fully display the key themes from the OT and the NT surrounding the relationship between the people of God and the world. John identifies the world as a group distinct from God’s people (1 John 3:1; 4:5) and who are characteristically evil (1 John 3:13; 4:4; 2 John 7). God, however, has sent Jesus to save the world (1 John 2:2; 4:9, 14), but those who resist him will be overcome (1 John 5:4, 5).

The Gentiles and the World in Revelation

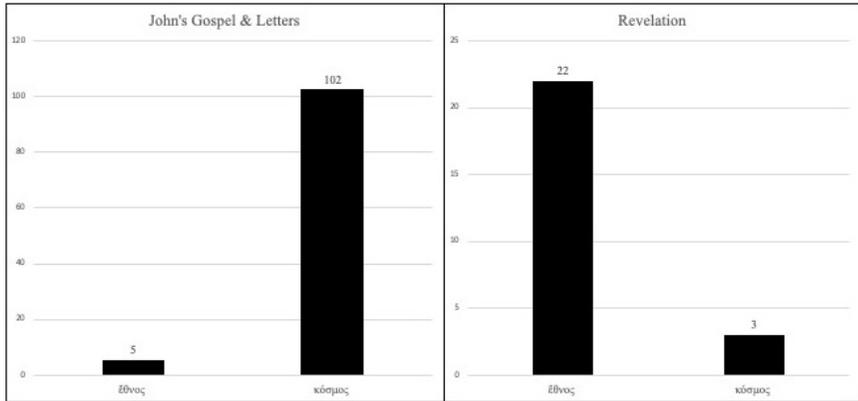
A fascinating development in a study of the NT use of ἔθνος and κόσμος is the frequency of John’s use of ἔθνος in Revelation (22x) compared to John’s Gospel and letters (5x). It appears that John is replacing his favored term κόσμος (which is used 102 times in John’s Gospel and Letters but only 3 times in Revelation) with ἔθνος. Two of the three uses of κόσμος in Revelation refer to the basic sense of the “world” as the created universe (“the foundation of the world” in 13:8 and 17:8). The third use of κόσμος, though, is quite significant and is more in line with John’s usage elsewhere: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever

⁷⁷ For a thorough treatment of this passage, see Jonathan M. Cheek, “Genesis 3:15 as the Root of a Biblical Theology of the Church and the World: The Commencement, Continuation, and Culmination of the Enmity between the Seeds” (PhD diss., Bob Jones Seminary, 2019), 312–19.

“The Nations” and “the World”

and ever” (11:15). Figure 1 displays the contrast in John’s usage of κόσμος and ἔθνος in John’s writings.

Figure 1: John’s Use of κόσμος and ἔθνος



The question of why John uses ἔθνος instead of κόσμος throughout Revelation is certainly worthy of discussion. Part of the reason is likely the overwhelming number of allusions to the OT in Revelation. Since the OT consistently uses ἔθνος instead of κόσμος to refer to the people who are in opposition to God, it is natural to expect John to continue with the OT usage. G. K. Beale points out John’s tendency in Revelation “to apply to the world what in the Old Testament was limited in reference to Israel or other entities.”⁷⁸ Additionally, Revelation, as the final installment of biblical revelation, is weaving together all the key threads of prior revelation. This prior revelation includes God’s

⁷⁸ G. K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, LNTS (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 100. One example Beale provides is the identification of the church as “kingdom of priests” in Rev 1:6 and 5:10. A title originally given to Israel is now given to this kingdom of priests “from every tribe and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). Beale points out that “this very phrase of universality in Rev. 5:9 is most likely taken from Dan. 7:14, where it referred to the nations of the world subjugated to Israel’s rule, which is now extended to the rule by all these very nations” (100). Beale points to other texts in Revelation in which John modifies the OT text to apply it in a more universal sense (e.g., the use of Dan 7:13 and Zech 12:10 in Rev 1:7; and the use of Zech 4:2–6 in Rev 1:12).

promise to bless all nations through Abraham, as well as the long-standing enmity between the people of God and the nations—and between the kings of the earth and his Anointed one (Ps. 2). John, therefore, may be using ἔθνος to highlight how Revelation demonstrates how these OT themes come to their final climax. Upon review of John’s use of ἔθνος in Revelation, the four key themes prominent in the OT and in the rest of the NT take prominence in Revelation as well.

“The Nations” as Distinct from the People of God

The people of God who are worshiping before the throne have come out “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9; cf. 5:9). The nations in Revelation are frequently seen as an entirely separate entity from God’s people. The points below demonstrate numerous ways in which “the nations” are a group that is distinct from the people of God.

Blessing to the Nations

God desires to bless the nations, and this promise of blessing is finally fulfilled in Revelation. Bauckham notes that “The question of the conversion of the nations—not only whether it will take place but also how it will take place—is at the centre of the prophetic message of Revelation.”⁷⁹ Representatives from every nation are ransomed by the Lamb (5:9) and stand before him worshiping (7:9). An angel later commands the nations to “fear God and give him glory” (14:7). In the song of Moses and of the Lamb, the multitude declares God to be the “King of the nations” (15:3) and that “all nations will come and worship” him (15:4). In this way, “John has interpreted the song of Moses in line with the most universalistic strain in Old Testament hope: the expectation

⁷⁹ Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 238. For a thorough treatment of the topic of the conversion of the nations, see Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 238–337.

that all the nations will come to acknowledge the God of Israel and worship him.”⁸⁰ Indeed, the church plays a crucial role in the salvation of the nations: “the church was not redeemed from all nations merely for its own sake, but to witness to all nations. . . . God’s kingdom will come, not simply by the deliverance of the church and the judgment of the nations, but primarily by the repentance of the nations as a result of the church’s witness.”⁸¹ In the heavenly city, the Lamb is the lamp that gives the light of the glory of God, and it is by this light that the nations will walk (21:24).⁸² Then on either side of the river, the tree of life stands, and “the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (22:2).

The Nations as Distinctively Sinful in Their Opposition to the People of God

The nations are distinctively sinful and opposed to God and his people. Revelation consistently aligns the nations with the “powers of evil” (14:8; 18:3, 23; 20:3).⁸³ Though some are called out from the nations to be God’s people, Revelation also speaks of the nations as categorically evil and under the influence of the beast. It is the beast that exercises authority over every tribe, people, tongue, and nation (14:6). The beast rules Babylon the great, who made “all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality” (14:8; 18:3). All nations were deceived by the sorcery of the great harlot, Babylon (18:23). The ultimate source of this deceit is the dragon, who is bound and thrown into a pit “so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended” (20:3). After the thousand years, Satan will be

⁸⁰ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, NTT (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101.

⁸¹ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 258.

⁸² For a helpful discussion on the reference to “the nations” in the new Jerusalem, see David Mathewson, “The Destiny of the Nations in Revelation 21:1–22:5: A Reconsideration,” *TynBul* 53, No. 1 (2002): 121–42.

⁸³ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 241.

released and “will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth” to gather them for battle against the saints (20:7–8).

Judgment on the Nations

Revelation displays God’s final judgment on the nations. At the seventh trumpet the twenty-four elders fall on their faces and worship God, saying, “The nations raged, but your wrath came” (Rev 11:18), a certain allusion to Psalm 2 and to the wicked opposition to the divine redemption plan accomplished through Messiah.⁸⁴ As in Psalm 2, this wicked opposition to the Messiah results in divine wrath. The child who is born from the woman is the “one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (12:5). At the seventh bowl judgment, “the great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath” (16:19). When the King of kings returns on his white horse, out of his mouth proceeds a sharp sword “with which to strike down the nations” (19:15).⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 444; see also Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 241.

⁸⁵ The language here seems to contradict the statements about the nations walking by the light of God in the heavenly city (21:24) and the healing of the nations (22:2). Bauckham points out that “John seems content to place indications of the universal conversion of the nations alongside references in equally universal terms to final judgment. But he is not making the kind of statements which need to be logically compatible to be valid. He is painting pictures which each portray a valid aspect of the truth. He depicts the faithful witness of the church leading to the repentance and faith of all the nations. He depicts the world which rejects their witness, unrepentant in its final adherence to the beast, necessarily subject to a final judgment. The two pictures correspond to the choice presented to the nations by the proclamations of the angels in 14:6–11” (Bauckham, *Revelation*, 102–03).

Summary and Implications

The OT presentation of the people of God in their relationship to the surrounding nations provides the conceptual foundation for the church’s relationship to the world. Four key themes become evident in the OT describing Israel’s relationship to the other nations. (1) The nation of Israel represents the people of God in the OT, and they are distinct from the pagan nations who do not know Yahweh. (2) God’s promise to Abraham, though, is that through his descendants he will bless the nations. When God constitutes Israel as a nation, he declares their purpose to be a kingdom of priests, representing him to the surrounding peoples. (3) At the same time, they must remain distinct from “the nations” in their worship and lifestyle. (4) The customs of the nations are repulsive to Yahweh, and they will suffer the impending judgment unless they turn to him. Much of the remainder of the OT demonstrates how Israel failed to accomplish her mission. The NT presents the same contrast between the church and the world that the OT presents between Israel and the nations. Some NT writers refer to “the Gentiles” or “the nations” in contrast to the church, whereas others refer to the world in contrast to the church. The NT manifests the same key themes as the OT. The church is fundamentally distinct from the world. God intends for the church to witness to the nations/the world, while remaining distinct from the world and a “Gentile” lifestyle. In the final judgment, the world/the nations will be judged for their rejection of God.

Because the OT provides the conceptual foundation for the distinction between the church and the world, the principles regarding this distinctiveness found in the OT provide continuing relevance for the church’s distinctiveness from the world. Therefore, key areas of OT teaching on the holiness of God’s people and their distinctiveness from the nations continue to be relevant and necessary for NT believers. Because the NT warns so seriously against conformity to the world and because of how terrible the judgment on OT Israel was for its

conformity to the nations, churches today must sincerely examine themselves to determine whether they are being seduced by “the evil enchantment of worldliness.”⁸⁶ In our post-Christian culture, Christians are tempted to compromise biblical truth to accommodate to the ungodly philosophy of the culture. The well-intentioned desire to transform the culture for Christ can create the impulse to be well-thought of by the culture in order to gain a hearing. Holding fast to unpopular “antiquated” views of complementarianism or anti-LGBTQ ideology creates a barrier between the Christian and the culture. The temptation then is either to render such unbiblical ideologies as unimportant or to adjust one’s position to make feminism and LGBTQ ideology compatible with Scripture. Christ, however, did not come to bring union between belief and unbelief. He came with a sword to divide them (Matt 10:34–36).

Another area of compromise with the world is in the philosophy of ministry of local churches. Even in churches that hold to orthodox doctrine and are not rejecting the Bible outright, the temptation to conform to the world is difficult to resist. As Israel looked to the nations to “enhance” its worship methods, many churches look to the unbelieving world to inform and enhance their worship services. The mindset for so many American seeker and consumer-centered churches is to “meet unchurched visitors where they are” and to “match your music to the kind of people God wants your church to reach.”⁸⁷ This mindset acknowledges the church’s willingness to look to the unbelievers of the world to determine the style of music the church should use. In an effort to be relevant and get more attendees in order to expand the

⁸⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 1980), 31.

⁸⁷ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 280. See also John M. Frame’s defense of contemporary worship methods, where he argues for the need to “meet unchurched visitors where they are: to speak their language, and thereby lead them toward a commitment to Christ.” *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 47.

kingdom, churches are tempted to ignore biblical precedent and principles, designing their ministry to look appealing or relevant or interesting to the masses. To accomplish this, churches shorten sermons, devote less time to pastoral prayer, incorporate dramas, and ensure that the “worship team” performs well for the people. Such churches may be able to entertain people and create an emotional experience; this is not the same thing as worshipping the holy God.

In discussing the church’s tendency to try to accommodate all of the varied preferences of a demographic and “to reach them where they are at,” Brett McCracken wisely comments, “A better approach is to call the congregation in its diversity, to meet Christ where *he* is, even if it means asking people to redirect or abandon their various self-defined paths.”⁸⁸ McCracken then argues that Christians will lose interest in churches “whose weakened position in a secular age leads them to seek survival by assuming they must adjust to the restless whims and new spiritual paths of the ‘marketplace.’ It’s an unsustainable approach for churches, because it’s also a self-defeating path for churchgoers.”⁸⁹ Churches are not relevant when they provide unbelievers the same style of empty entertainment that they get the rest of the week. Churches will find that they are most relevant in a post-Christian culture when they are truly offering an alternative to the barren, self-exalting, Christ-rejecting, Satan-serving world that actively seeks the destruction of God’s kingdom.

⁸⁸ Brett McCracken, “Church Shopping with Charles Taylor,” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading Charles Taylor*, ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 84.

⁸⁹ McCracken, “Church Shopping,” 85.

The Idea of Fundamentalism

Kevin T. Bauder¹

The word *fundamentalist* is increasingly showing up as the *mot juste* for narrowness, inflexibility, obscurantism, and bad manners. For example, David French has referred to vocal conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention as “fundamentalist pirates.” Similarly, Tim Keller took a public swipe at “the actions of American fundamentalists,” but without specifying exactly which actions he had in mind or who had done them. Roger Olson regularly blogs against fundamentalism, and he recently added this statement to his *oeuvre*: “I simply don’t have enough respect for true fundamentalism to take it on. Whenever I have tried to wrap my mind around it, I find it to be so strange, so disappointing, so untheological, that I can’t contemplate writing a book against it.”²

Ironically, many on the Left would not distinguish Keller or French from fundamentalism, and some might not even distinguish Olson. Perhaps that is what fuels their ire. Many of the evangelicals whom I know are eager not to be thought of as fundamentalists.

Does a similar stereotyping occur in more academic discussions of fundamentalism? Since the publication of George Marsden’s *Fundamentalism and American Culture* in 1980, the background and history of

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² David French, “Under Attack from Fundamentalist Pirates, Evangelical Baptists Refused to Give Up the Ship,” *The Dispatch* (June 20, 2021), accessed October 25, 2022, <https://thedispatch.com/newsletter/frenchpress/under-attack-from-fundamentalist/>; Timothy Keller, Twitter post (June 20, 2021), accessed October 25, 2022, <https://twitter.com/timkellernyc/status/1407008683960188931>; Roger Olson, “Why Not ‘Against Fundamentalism?’” *Patheos* (June 22, 2022), accessed November 8, 2022, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2022/06/why-not-against-fundamentalism/>.

American fundamentalism have become a topic of considerable academic analysis. Those of us who still call ourselves fundamentalists appreciate the attention, and we acknowledge our indebtedness not only to Marsden but also to such evangelical historians as Mark Noll, D. G. Hart, Nathan Hatch, and Joel Carpenter. Valuable as their contributions are, however, we fundamentalists often leave their writings feeling as if we have seen our reflection in a carnival-house mirror. The features are broadly recognizable, but at least some of the proportions seem wrong. Even in these publications, we fundamentalists feel as if we have been at least slightly stereotyped.³

A recent example comes from a recent issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, which includes an editorial by its president, R. Albert Mohler, Jr. The author opines that “the first generation of ETS members understood that they were *not* fundamentalists.” This was so because “the founders of the ETS rejected the fundamentalist idea of separationism,” instead favoring “cultural engagement.” Mohler alleges that, “Fundamentalists failed to engage the larger world of thought, thereby reducing the influence of conservative Christianity. The founders of the Society and other observers understood this theological failure to be endemic to fundamentalism.”⁴

In these remarks, Mohler seems to confuse fundamentalism with obscurantism and cultural disengagement—an old trope that needs to be laid to rest. The truth is that multiple founders of the ETS were

³ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 3rd ed., New York: Oxford, 2022; Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); idem, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000); D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale, 1989); Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford, 1999).

⁴ R. Albert Mohler, Jr. “Temptations of an Evangelical Theologian,” *JETS* 65, no. 1 (March 2022): 5–6. Mohler’s essay is a revision of his presidential address, delivered at the 2021 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Fort Worth, Texas. I was present for the address and heard Mohler offer multiple qualifications and conciliatory remarks that did not make it into the published essay.

fundamentalists. Of the first twelve ETS presidents, at least three (Charles Woodbridge, Allan MacRae, and R. Laird Harris) identified as fundamentalists. At the time of his presidency, MacRae was even working for Carl McIntire, the most visible and culturally-engaged fundamentalist of the era. Furthermore, many or most fundamentalist scholars still participate in ETS.

Why does this distortion occur? Not, I think, because of ill will. Part of the reason may be that outside observers of fundamentalism tend to perceive it in terms of its accouterments and unintended effects rather than its essence, much as if they defined a shovel as a device for producing blisters on the hand. Distortion is nearly inevitable whenever fundamentalism is treated *primarily* in terms of dispensationalism, premillennialism, common sense realism, populism, revivalism, or anti-intellectualism. Even granting that one can find fundamentalists who are characterized by each of these categories, and that such categories are useful for doing social and theological analyses of varieties within fundamentalism, none of them really gets to the point of fundamentalism. For example, there have always been fundamentalists who are not dispensationalists or obscurantists, and there are plenty of non-fundamentalists who are.

Another reason for distorted perceptions is that fundamentalism is not a single thing. It comes in several varieties, and each variety is represented by at least one movement or network. The term *fundamentalism* is not defined by any one of these movements or networks, or even by all of them together. Fundamentalism is not primarily a social phenomenon or a movement, but an *idea*. One is a fundamentalist if one holds the idea and attempts to practice this idea and its implications. In this essay, I wish to argue that fundamentalism was and is a great idea. It is furthermore an idea that is thoroughly in keeping with the best of Christian thought as mediated through the Reformation.

To begin with, fundamentalism has inherited the Reformation distinction between the invisible and the visible Church.⁵ In mainstream Protestant ecclesiology, the invisible church is the communion of the saints and the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit unites to this body as many as place their trust in Christ as Savior, joining them organically to Christ and to one another. The invisible church, then, is the church of those who possess saving faith in Christ. It is called the *invisible* church because its essential, constituting elements are not available for public inspection. A person's heart cannot be viewed for the presence of saving faith, nor can that person's union with Christ be directly examined. In Protestant thought, the invisible church is the true church, the church to which biblical promises, prerogatives, and predicates apply. It alone is unequivocally one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.⁶

If the invisible church is the body of those who possess true, saving faith in Jesus Christ, the visible church is the company of those who *profess* true faith. The visible church is the empirical church. Because profession does not necessarily equal possession, the visible church at its best only approximates the true (invisible) church. Biblical promises, prerogatives, and predicates apply to it only in a relative sense.⁷

⁵ Landmark Baptists do not accept an invisible church. Though the number of Landmarkers is small, some of them do consider themselves to be fundamentalists. The Landmark rejection of the invisible church has also influenced a few non-Landmark Baptists. Only a minority of Baptist fundamentalists, however, and therefore only a fraction of all fundamentalists, agree with Landmarkers on this point. Overwhelmingly, fundamentalists affirm the invisible body of Christ as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

⁶ To cite one example, the notion of an invisible church was a key to Charles Hodge's ecclesiology. Hodge argued that the idea of an invisible church was an important aspect of evangelical, and not merely Reformed, ecclesiology. He called it the "evangelical" theory of the church (as opposed to the ritualist and the rationalistic theories). Charles Hodge, "Idea of the Church," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 25 (April 1853): 249-90; idem, "Theories of the Church," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 18 (January 1846): 137-58.

⁷ For Hodge's treatment of the visible church, see his essay, "Visibility of the Church," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 25 (October 1853): 670-85. Some Baptists do not distinguish the visible church from particular local congregations. Other

Because we cannot infallibly judge who possesses true faith, we cannot say with certainty who is in the true, invisible church. A profession of faith, however, is an empirical thing. It can be heard and evaluated. The genius of Protestant ecclesiology is to recognize only those who profess faith in the true gospel as members of the visible church.⁸

When one professes faith, one claims to believe the gospel and to receive Jesus Christ as Savior. At first glance, it might appear that this profession ought to be evaluated purely on experiential grounds, perhaps by its fervency, but fervency alone does not speak to the content of one's faith. People may experience a fervent trust in and devotion to the wrong things. Consequently, we must ask questions about content. For example, we might ask, When you claim to believe in Jesus, do you mean the Jesus of Arius or the Jesus of Athanasius?

Such questions are irrecusably doctrinal. They imply a second insight that fundamentalists have inherited from the Reformation. This insight is that the gospel, and therefore the Christian faith, includes a doctrinal component. This does not mean that fundamentalists reduce Christianity to doctrine alone—far from it. With historic Protestants, fundamentalists recognize that the Christian faith also includes both practical duties and ordinate affections. Fundamentalists know that orthopraxy and orthopathy stand alongside orthodoxy as essential elements of the Christian faith.⁹ Still, even though fundamentalists see Christianity as more than doctrinal, they never see it as less.

Baptists, and most non-Baptist fundamentalists, do. While this difference is important for other reasons, it is not one that significantly alters the present argument.

⁸ Many pedobaptists, of course, include the children of those who profess faith as members of the visible church. While important for a whole series of questions, this inclusion does not greatly alter the present discussion.

⁹ For the distinction between doctrinal (theoretical) and practical fundamentals see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., tr. by George Musgrave Giger, ed. by James T. Denniston, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1992), 1.14.23. On the relationship between doctrine and the affections see Charles Hodge, "Address to the Students of the Theological Seminary," *Biblical Repository and Princeton Review* 5:1 (1829): 92.

This emphasis on doctrine does not imply that *all* doctrines are equally important. Most fundamentalists recognize multiple levels of importance between doctrines, but one level is especially significant for this discussion. All fundamentalists insist that certain doctrines are so important as to impinge upon the definition of Christianity. These doctrines are traditionally known as *essential* or *fundamental* doctrines.¹⁰

Fundamentalists did not invent the idea of fundamental doctrines. They inherited it. The distinction between fundamental (also called essential, capital, cardinal, or chief) doctrines (articles, heads) and non-fundamental doctrines is found in the Lutheran, Calvinist, and Arminian branches of Protestantism. This distinction was affirmed by the Reformers themselves, as well as by the Protestant thinkers who came after them.¹¹

¹⁰ On the importance of this distinction for fundamentalists see Mark Sidwell, *The Dividing Line: Understanding and Applying Biblical Separation* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1998), 42. For a brief but suggestive presentation of a doctrinal calculus from someone who might not wish to identify with fundamentalism see Robert A. Peterson, "The Case for Traditionalism," in Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 178–79. Peterson's view on this matter approximates the understanding of mainstream fundamentalists. A more recent recognition of this distinction by a non-fundamentalist can be found in Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die on: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020). Fundamentalists have long defended a version of what Ortlund calls "theological triage," the willingness to rank doctrines and practices according to multiple levels of importance.

¹¹ John Theodore Mueller, "A Survey of Luther's Theology: Part I," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 450 (April, 1956): 158; Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed., tr. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (n.p.: 1875, 1889; Minneapolis: Augsburg, n.d.), 582–99; Martin I. Klauber, "Calvin on Fundamental Articles and Ecclesiastical Union," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (Fall 1992): 341–348; *idem*, *Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671–1737) and Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), *passim*; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. by Ford Lewis Battles, ed. by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.2.1; James Arminius, *Works of James Arminius: The London Edition*, 3 vols., tr. by James Nichols and William Nichols (vols. 1, 2, London: James Nichols for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1825, 1828; vol. 3, London: William Nichols for Thomas Baker, 1875, repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1986), 1:713–17; Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.1–27.

In classical Protestantism, the fundamentals are doctrines upon which the gospel itself depends. This definition does not mean that people need to have a clear and distinct knowledge of every fundamental before they can be converted. A. A. Hodge drew an important distinction: “A fundamental doctrine . . . is either one which every soul must apprehend more or less clearly in order to be saved, or one which, when known, is so clearly involved with those the knowledge and belief of which is essential to salvation, that the one cannot be rejected while the other is really believed.”¹² In both cases, the denial of a fundamental doctrine implies a denial of the gospel itself. According to traditional Protestantism, any person who denies a fundamental doctrine is implicitly denying the gospel.

Incidentally, the Reformers and the theologians who followed them resisted the demand to draw up an exhaustive list of fundamentals. This reluctance persisted as late as the Princeton theologians, who preferred to articulate tests for recognizing the fundamentals. The problem was (and is) that fundamental doctrines are usually recognized in the face of heresies, and new heresies focus attention upon doctrines not previously considered in depth. Nevertheless, Protestant theologians have been willing to draw up truncated lists of doctrines positively identified as fundamentals.¹³

Since the visible church is the body of those who profess faith in the gospel, then persons who deny the gospel must not be reckoned as

¹² Archibald Alexander Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1865; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), 475–76. This distinction is reflected in Turretin’s dictum that some of the essential doctrines must be believed “formally and publicly, as the special and proper objects of faith,” while others must be believed “only implicitly and virtually.” Some subjects, says Turretin, are fundamental in themselves, while the latter become fundamentals “only accidentally when they run into some fundamental topic.” Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.5–9.

¹³ For an example of both reluctance and abbreviated listing, see Charles Hodge, “Principles of Church Union, and Reunion of Old and New School Presbyterians,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 37 (April 1865): 275; a similar list appears in Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1872–73; reprint Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 1:114. The problem of identifying and listing the fundamentals merits a separate discussion.

part of the visible church. This is easy to see in the case of a Saracen or a Brahmin: they should not be recognized as Christians. Protestants also apply this principle to people who deny fundamental doctrines while naming the name of Christ. We are not entitled to judge the salvation of such individuals, since we cannot observe their hearts. Nevertheless, we are obligated to evaluate their professions of faith for their consistency with the gospel. We cannot say with certainty whether they are members of the invisible church, but we can know whether they ought to be reckoned in the company of the visible church.

In historic Protestantism, the fundamentals were especially important for distinguishing true churches of Jesus Christ from spurious ones. According to Calvin, doctrine is a *sine qua non* for the existence of Christianity. This observation played directly into his discussion of how to distinguish a true church from a counterfeit one.¹⁴ The idea is not merely a Calvinistic one, however. Substantially the same argument shows up in the disputations of Arminius.¹⁵

Just as individuals who deny fundamental doctrines of the gospel cannot be reckoned as Christians, so organized congregations that deny fundamental doctrines of the gospel cannot rightly be regarded as true Christian churches. Luther put it this way: “Now the certain mark of the Christian congregation is the preaching of the Gospel in its purity. . . . [W]here the Gospel is not preached and the doctrines of men hold sway, there can be no Christians but only heathens, no matter how great their numbers or how saintly and good their lives.” Churches that do not preach the gospel in purity are engaging in “purely human affairs under cover of the name of a Christian congregation.”¹⁶ For Luther, the test of a true church, like the test of a true Christian, was first of all doctrinal.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.2.1–2.

¹⁵ Arminius, *Works*, 1:417–18.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, “The Right and Power of a Christian Congregation or Community to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and

This consideration is especially important for those who believe that Christians are obligated to unite with a particular church. Most Protestant ecclesologies stress that membership in a particular church is not optional.¹⁷ Franz Pieper, a conservative Lutheran theologian, argued that the local church is a divine institution from which individual Christians have no authority to exempt themselves.¹⁸ John Gerstner represented the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition when he wrote, “We must belong to a church if at all possible. That is our duty. We must therefore not separate from a church unless necessary. Not to join a church is a sin of omission; to separate unnecessarily from a church is a sin of commission.”¹⁹ Expressing an Arminian point of view, John Miley dedicated an entire page of his *Systematic Theology* to listing reasons for thinking that church membership is a duty.²⁰ Protestants in general have taken church membership very seriously.

If church membership is obligatory, then the existence of spurious churches poses a special problem. By definition, those who become members of false churches are not members of true churches. Not to be a member of a true church, however, violates a Christian duty. This was the insight that J. Gresham Machen grasped when thinking about his own church (the Presbyterian Church in the United States of

Proved from Scripture,” tr. by A. T. W. Steinhäuser, in *Works of Martin Luther*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1931), 4:75.

¹⁷ Of course, there have always been a few Christians who have regarded local church membership as an adiaphoron. This attitude appears to have become rather influential in some circles of American evangelicalism during the Twentieth Century. While not completely absent from fundamentalism, it is much less influential there. Fundamentalists tend to be separatists precisely because they take local church participation seriously. In any case, we should recognize that those who denigrate the importance of church membership are the ones who have departed from historic Protestant ecclesiology.

¹⁸ Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 3:420–21.

¹⁹ John H. Gerstner, “When Must a Person Leave a Church?” in *Onward, Christian Soldiers: Protestants Affirm the Church*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1999), 283–84.

²⁰ John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Eaton and Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1894), 2:388–89.

America), the councils of which he believed to be dominated by modernism. “Such a body is hardly what the Bible means by a church at all. The Bible commands Christian people to be members of a true church, even though it be an imperfect one. It represents the nurture provided by such a true church as a necessity, not a luxury, in the Christian life. There must therefore be a separation. . . .”²¹ Bluntly, people who prefer membership in false churches to membership in true churches are guilty of grave disobedience.

Machen preferred to reform his church by purging the modernists from its leadership. If reformation proved impossible, however, he was quite prepared to provoke a separation. Accused of being schismatic, Machen replied that not every separation is a schism. “All Protestants have made themselves party to a separation from an existing church organization.” Therefore, some separations are not only permissible, but are “an inescapable and very solemn Christian duty.” Machen summarized: “Here, then, is the principle of the thing—it is schism to leave a church if that church is true to the Bible, but it is not schism if that church is not true to the Bible. In the latter case, far from its being schism to separate from the church in question, it is schism to remain in it, since to remain in it means to disobey the Word of God and to separate oneself from the true Church of Jesus Christ.”²²

In these lines, Machen captured the core of the fundamentalist idea: the belief that Christian unity and fellowship are possible only with other Christians. This must be the case, because unity is a function of that which unites, and fellowship is a function of that which is held in common. Within the *visible* church, including organized churches, what must be held in common is the *profession* of the gospel, and the profession of the gospel can always be evaluated by the test of fundamental doctrines. To put it concisely, fundamentalists insist that

²¹ J. Gresham Machen, “What Should Be Done by Christian People Who Are in a Modernist Church?” *Presbyterian Guardian*, 21 October 1935, 22.

²² J. Gresham Machen, “Are We Schismatics?” *Presbyterian Guardian*, 20 April 1936, 22.

it is always wrong for Christians to pretend that they can enjoy Christian unity and fellowship with people who deny fundamental doctrines, for such persons really deny the gospel itself.

In other words, what we are now discussing is separatism. Separatism is the *differentia* that defines fundamentalism. Whatever else they may disagree about, all fundamentalists affirm that no Christian fellowship or union is possible with those who deny the gospel by denying fundamental doctrines. This separatism does not arise (as has sometimes been suggested) from dispensationalism, but from a thoroughly Protestant way of looking at the visible church.

Of course, fundamentalists also argue that this is a *biblical* way of looking at the church. I am not trying to make the biblical case for separatism here, though I think that it is compelling. What I am trying to do is to show that the core idea of fundamentalism is a (and perhaps *the only*) consistent implementation of the historically Protestant way of viewing the church. Fundamentalists did not invent their categories. They inherited them. When Edward John Carnell accused Machen of “ideological thinking,” called him “cultic,” and accused him of betraying the Reformed view of the church, he did not take proper account of the Protestant consensus on the visible church.²³

For fundamentalists, separatism works out in three ways. First, they insist upon purging from their churches and institutions all spokespersons who deny the gospel.²⁴ Second, they refuse Christian cooperation and fellowship with any person, institution or movement

²³ See Edward John Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), 114–17. For a sustained evaluation of Carnell’s criticisms (as well as those offered by others) see my dissertation, “Communion of the Saints: Antecedents of J. Gresham Machen’s Separatism in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge and the Princeton Theologians” (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001). For a discussion of the biblical evidence, see the sources that I suggest for further reading in the final footnote to this essay.

²⁴ This principle does not necessarily mean that Christian organizations are always obligated to expel members who are wrestling with fundamental doctrines. There is a difference between a learner who is wrestling with doubts about fundamentals and a teacher who is denying them.

that supports the denial of the gospel.²⁵ Third, they refuse to grant recognition as Christians to, or engage in any activity that would imply Christian commonality with, teachers or other leaders who deny the gospel.

Most fundamentalists love the church of Jesus Christ. They value church unity and Christian fellowship. But they are convinced that those who truly love the Lord Jesus cannot extend Christian unity, fellowship, and cooperation to people who deny the gospel. To do so is something akin to ecclesiastical treason. In other words, fundamentalist thought is dominated by a churchly emphasis. Something is supposed to transpire between people who are in the church that cannot transpire between people who are outside of it. Fundamentalists believe it is wrong to pretend to do churchly things with people whose profession places them outside of the church.

From the day of its birth at Fuller Seminary, the New Evangelicalism explicitly rejected this understanding of separatism. After two decades of ecclesiastical conflict, the New Evangelicals succeeded in capturing the leadership of mainstream American evangelicalism. I do not wish to revisit that struggle here.²⁶ I suggest, however, that the rejection of separatism has ushered certain undesirable consequences into American evangelicalism.

First came a tendency to minimize doctrine as an essential element of the gospel, replacing it with religious experience. That is why Edward John Carnell could write, "I suffered a rude shock when, in the course of graduate studies, I discovered a few modernists who gave more convincing evidence of devotion to Christ . . . than some who

²⁵ There is an old question about when a Christian organization becomes apostate. That question is subordinate to my main argument. There is no use asking when an organization becomes apostate unless there is agreement that separation from such an organization is necessary, at whatever point it occurs.

²⁶ The story has been ably told by George M. Marsden in *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism*, paperback edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995). This book is widely used in fundamentalist institutions, largely because it confirms so much of what fundamentalists have said about the new evangelical agenda.

were celebrated for their piety in fundamentalism. From experiences of this kind I was forced to conclude that a person may be a true Christian, and yet have a long way to go in the organization of his theological convictions.”²⁷ Carnell did admit that “modernism is a system which is contrary to the truth and should be resisted with every legitimate weapon,” but he also argued that many modernists “believe a lot more in their hearts than they will admit into their theology.”²⁸ Since these people give evidence of evangelical repentance, argued Carnell, they should not be denied Christian fellowship.

If Carnell only meant that some people receive truths in their hearts that they deny in their speculative systems, most fundamentalists would agree. But Carnell clearly meant more than that. What Carnell wanted to do was to extend some form of Christian recognition to religious leaders who were denying the gospel. For Carnell, fundamental doctrines did not play a defining role in the gospel or in Christian fellowship, at least in this instance.

Second, having minimized the role of doctrine in defining the gospel, evangelicals became uncertain about which doctrines qualified as fundamental. This was the core problem in the inerrancy debates of the 1970s and 1980s. Those debates were much more than just political skirmishes over the boundaries of evangelicalism. They were about the nature of biblical authority, and that problem is surely fundamental to the gospel. At the present moment, there is little consensus within American evangelicalism over just how much and what manner of biblical authority is fundamental to the gospel. This uncertainty also extends to other areas of fundamental doctrine. Is God’s exhaustive foreknowledge essential to the gospel? What about forensic justification through the imputed righteousness of Christ? American evangelicals as a bloc seem unable to answer these questions.

²⁷ Edward John Carnell, “How My Mind Has Changed,” in *How My Mind Has Changed*, ed. by Harold E. Fey (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1961):101-102.

²⁸ Edward John Carnell, “Christian Fellowship and the Unity of the Church,” in *The Case for Biblical Theology*, ed. by Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 21-22.

The foregoing tendencies have led to a third consequence that flows from the rejection of separatism. Given the present de-emphasis upon doctrine, evangelicals can no longer say exactly who they are. Attempts to define evangelicalism abound, and the lack of unanimity among those definitions is notable. I suggest that this confusion is unavoidable. By its very name, evangelicalism is supposed to be tied to an evangel. If the evangel cannot be defined (an irreducibly doctrinal exercise), then evangelicals are forced to define themselves by their relationship to they know not what. At best, they are reduced to some sort of historical/empirical definition.²⁹

The problem, however, is even more acute than that. Not only have many evangelicals lost a sense of who *they* are, some of them are no longer even sure what a *Christian* is. Richard Mouw (former president of Fuller Seminary) betrays this uncertainty in a chapter on “Understanding Sister Helen’s Tears,” in which he wonders whether one of his now-deceased Romanist teachers, a woman of considerable devotion, should be recognized as a Christian.³⁰ Two observations are in order. First, none of us is qualified to judge whether Sister Helen is in heaven. Her faith and union with Christ (if they existed) were not available for public inspection—nobody’s is. Granted that Sister Helen displayed piety and virtue, these nevertheless remain ambiguous if not accompanied by a clear profession of the gospel.

Second, the system of doctrine to which Sister Helen was committed was one that could not lead her to heaven. The Roman Catholic Church has not made a secret of its understanding of salvation. The way of salvation (the gospel) is also clearly revealed in Scripture. When we compare the two, we should be able to say without hesitation that, understood on its own terms and applied with consistency, the

²⁹ Perhaps the best-known sociological definition is the famed “Bebbington Quadrilateral” of biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism. See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s through the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 2–17.

³⁰ Richard Mouw, *The Smell of Sawdust: What Evangelicals Can Learn from their Fundamentalist Heritage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 105–114.

Romanist system does not save.³¹ The question is not (as Mouw seems to suggest) how we present the gospel or whether we appeal for a decision. The question is about the actual content of the gospel itself, of what the gospel is.³²

The current attitude toward Romanism is only one illustration of the inability of evangelicals to decide who should be recognized as a Christian. This inability was manifested as early as Carnell's speculation (noted above) that some modernists might be true Christians. Sometimes this inability can take startling forms. I was present at a Catholic-Evangelical dialogue in which an evangelical theologian distributed copies of the statement of faith of the National Association of Evangelicals. He then asked whether any of the Catholics in the meeting could really deny any of it. Given its vagueness, of course they

³¹ Edward John Carnell's analysis of Romanism was surprisingly similar to that which I present here. "If Christ is an authoritative revelation of the Father's will, Catholicism is anti-Christ. That much is lucidly clear. The gospel according to Christ and the gospel according to Rome cannot, in a rational universe, simultaneously be true. Romanism will fail." *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), 447-48.

³² Mouw also tries to appeal to Charles Hodge for precedent in recognizing Roman Catholics as Christians. His selective citing of Hodge, however, does not give the full picture. Hodge viewed the Roman Catholic structure in a binary way: it both was and was not a true church (a part of the visible church) depending upon what one meant by a church. Viewed as the papacy, the Roman church was mystical Babylon and the synagogue of Satan. Only when viewed as a congregation of people could it be called a true church, since the people could sometimes sift the gospel from the official accretions that had been added to it. Romish teachers, he said, do affirm fatal error, and the Council of Trent actually codified fatal doctrines. These observations are set forth in an earlier work, "Is the Church of Rome a Part of the Visible Church?" *Biblical Repository and Princeton Review* 18 (April 1846): 323-30. In his mature *Systematic Theology*, Hodge clarified his understanding of Romanism as a doctrinal system. "The doctrine of the sacrificial character of the eucharist, is an integral part of the great system of error, which must stand or fall as a whole. Romanism is another gospel. It proposes a different method of salvation from that presented in the word of God. . . . This whole theory hangs together. If one assumption is false, the whole is false." Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:135. Hodge's ambivalence reflects that of Turretin, who insisted that Romanism has added antichristian doctrines to the Christian fundamentals that it affirms. Rome was not a true church, but some "remains of the church" existed in it, and God had not wholly left it. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.21, 24; 18.10.11-15; 22-28; 32; 18.13.1-7; 18.14.24; 18.25.10; 19.25.3-7; 19.28.13-14.

could not.³³ At that point, the evangelical theologian explicitly invited the Roman Catholic Church to seek membership in the National Association of Evangelicals. The Catholic theologians were visibly uncomfortable with that kind of doctrinal imprecision. They knew that the core of both systems was at stake, and they were not willing to assume that the systems were compatible simply because of superficial similarities in wording. A second evangelical theologian introduced the distinction between imputed righteousness and imparted righteousness, and the conversation snapped into focus. “Ah, yes!” said one of the Romanist theologians. “We *knew* that was what you *really* meant. And that is what we do not accept!”

I appreciate the candor of that Romanist priest, but I wonder whether he was not mistaken about one thing. I wonder whether the first evangelical really *did* grasp the centrality of the notion that justification rests upon the imputed, alien righteousness of Christ. Indeed, I wonder how many of today’s evangelicals would be willing to distinguish a Christian from an anti-Christian system upon the basis of such a doctrine.

³³ The NAE statement of faith includes the following articles. It can be located on the National Association of Evangelicals’ web site (accessed October 19, 2022) <https://www.nae.org/statement-of-faith/>.

1. We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.

2. We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

3. We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.

4. We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful people, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential.

5. We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.

6. We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.

7. We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.

When you lose the ability to define the evangel, you lose the ability to define evangelicalism. More than that, you lose the ability to define Christianity. I do not wish to be impertinent, but I must ask: If we can no longer define Christianity, and if we no longer know what evangelicalism is, then how can we be sure that evangelicalism is still Christian?

What is the alternative? The first step is to recognize the centrality of the gospel to Christian faith. The second step is to remember the importance of fundamental doctrines in defining the gospel. The third step is to apply these fundamental doctrines as a *sine qua non* for the veracity of professions of the gospel. The fourth step is to refuse to pretend that anyone can enjoy Christian unity, fellowship, communion, or cooperation with people whose professions of faith deny the gospel and place them outside both the Christian faith and the visible church.

Following these principles will not make you an ecclesiological innovator. It will simply place you in the mainstream of Protestant ecclesiology. Furthermore, and disconcerting as it may seem, it will also take you on your first giant step toward becoming a fundamentalist.³⁴

³⁴ A full-scale theological (as opposed to popular) treatment of ecclesiastical separation remains to be written. The following volumes do make significant contributions, and those who wish to pursue further study on the subject will find them useful. Gary G. Cohen, *Biblical Separation Defended: A Biblical Critique of Ten New Evangelical Arguments* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1966); Fred Moritz, *Be Ye Holy: The Call to Christian Separation* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1994); Ernest Pickering, *Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church*, 2nd ed. (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2008); Mark Sidwell, *The Dividing Line: Understanding and Applying Biblical Separation* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1998). The present essay is a revision of Kevin T. Bauder, "What's That You Smell? A Response to Richard Mouw's *the Smell of Sawdust*," in *Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail Evangelical Ecumenism and the Quest for Evangelical Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) 45–56. See also Kevin T. Bauder, "Fundamentalism," in Andrew David Naselli and Colin Hansen (eds.) *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) 19–49.

Christ-Honoring Worship in the Home: Family Worship in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Paul D. Medved¹

The proper rearing of children was of paramount importance for early Protestants. For that reason, Martin Luther (1483–1546), himself a father of six, once declared, “There is no power on earth that is nobler or greater than that of parents.” Lutheran Reformer and Pastor, Justus Menius (1499–1558), wrote that “the diligent rearing of children is the greatest service to the world, both in spiritual and temporal affairs, both for present life and for posterity.”² Similar statements from Reformers and Puritans are seemingly endless.

Given its importance for both church and nation, vast amounts of ink were spilled in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries impressing upon parents the urgent business of properly educating their children. And the education which children were to receive was expansive, encompassing the mundane and the weighty, the internal and the external, the temporal and the spiritual. Parents were expected to instill in their children principles and practices which would govern every decision the child would make from waking in the morning until retiring at night. Sixteenth-century German theologian Otto Brunfels (1488–1534) provided an example of just such principles and practices. According to Brunfels, Children are to:

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² Martin Luther and Justus Menius quoted in: Ozment, Steven, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1983) 132.

Sleep neither too little nor too much [seven hours is the recommended amount]. Begin each day by blessing it in God's name and saying the Lord's Prayer. Thank God for keeping you through the night and ask his help for the new day. Greet your parents. Comb your hair and wash your face and hands. Before departing for school, ask Christ to send his Spirit, without whom there is no true understanding, remembering also, however, that the Spirit only helps those who help themselves.³

Even in children, self-government was expected and seemingly minor lapses could reveal a serious lack of character. A mouth gaping open, for example, indicated "a fool," while laughing until your body shook exposed a lack of self-discipline. Uncontrollable laughter was to be concealed "with a hand or a handkerchief." Hair must not be too long or it would "swish to and fro like the main of a wild horse." And table manners received special attention. Sixteenth-century Nuremberg poet and playwright Hans Sachs (1494–1576) provided a popular list. According to Sachs, children must not,

snort or smack like a pig. Reach violently for bread . . . cut bread on your chest . . ." or "rock back and forth on the bench, lest you let loose a stink." "Do not tear pieces [of food] for your plate with your teeth. . . . Do not pick your nose . . . Never . . . fish out lice . . . and do not fall upon your plate like an animal."

These were but a few examples from a much longer inventory.⁴

But the proper education of children had a far more serious dimension. Raising God fearing children who honored the Lord with their lives was of paramount importance. And, family worship was critical to a child's education and development.

³ Otto Brunfels quoted in: Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 139.

⁴ Hans Sachs quoted in: Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 143.

Thesis

Family worship in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is an extraordinarily complex topic. In this period, there was considerable diversity of opinion about the appropriate content, frequency, and time of family worship, whether prayer must be written or extemporaneous, and whether such worship should be enforced. Family worship also had political implications, and, in some decades in the seventeenth century, family worship was viewed as politically subversive. And there was yet another factor which makes examining family worship in this period difficult—the vast amount of source material including countless sermons, tracts, treatises, catechisms, monographs, and the like.

To provide just one example, there were dozens of household manuals and housefather books published in this period which, in part or in whole, dealt with family worship. Even a single author could produce a staggering volume of material on this subject. Take, for instance, Puritan minister Richard Baxter (1615–1691). Baxter composed multiple volumes addressing, in some measure, family worship, each having a different purpose. In his volume entitled *The Catechising of Families* (1683), Baxter wrote to those who had advanced beyond the *Westminster Smaller Catechism* and desired a more “rooted faith” and “fuller understanding.”⁵ In contrast, his *A Poor Man’s Family Book* (1674) was exactly that—a book for the poor householder. The title page includes this note: “With a request to Landlords and Rich men to give to their Tenants and poor Neighbours, either this or some fitter Book.”⁶ Then there was Baxter’s *A Christian Directory* (1673), a comprehensive four-part work of practical theology. The second part of the *Directory* is dedicated to “Christian Economics,” and the third chapter addresses

⁵ Baxter, *The Catechising of Families: A Teacher of Householders How to Teach Their Households* (London: Parkhurst, 1683) title page.

⁶ Baxter, *The Poor Man’s Family Book* (London: R. W., 1674) title page.

family worship specifically.⁷ In these three works alone, we find nearly 1500 pages on family worship—and Baxter had much more to say elsewhere. In short, the sheer volume of material makes any comprehensive treatment of the subject difficult.

It is my purpose to bring out the basic contours of Christ-honoring family worship in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I want to examine what Reformed and Puritan writers believed about the responsibility of parents to establish family worship in the home, the nature and elements of family worship, and the importance of family worship to the future of church and nation. I will close with a few words about why this history is instructive for modern Christians.

Family Worship

The place of home and family in the spiritual instruction of children was never more exalted than in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Seventeenth-century clergyman Thomas Manton (1620–1677) wrote, “A family is the seminary of church and state; and if children be not well principled there, all miscarrieth . . . if youth be bred ill in the family, they prove ill in the Church and Common-wealth.”⁸

Manton’s assessment was widespread among Reformed and Puritan clergy. Clergyman William Gouge (1675–1563) wrote, “A family is . . . a little commonwealth, a school wherein the first principles and grounds of government and subjection are learned.” Theologian and minister William Perkins (1558–1602) believed the family to be “the seminarie of all other societies, it followeth, that the holie and righteous government thereof, is a direct meane for the good ordering, both of church and commonwealth.”⁹ Puritan preacher Thomas Cartwright

⁷ Baxter, *A Christian Directory: or, A Body of Practical Divinity, and Cases of Conscience*, vol. III (London: Richard Edwards, 1825) vi.

⁸ Westminster Assembly, “Epistle to the Reader,” in *The Confession of Faith, Together with the Larger and Lesser Catechismes* (London: Stationers, 1646).

⁹ Counsell, Fiona Ann (2017) *Domestic Religion in Seventeenth Century English Gentry Households* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham] 40.

(1535–1603) declared, “Houses are the nurseries of the church,”¹⁰ while non-conformist pastor and Bible commentator Matthew Henry (1662–1714) explained that “Christian Families” should be “Nurseries and Seminaries of Piety.”¹¹

Who is Responsible for Establishing Family Worship?

If the home was the seminary of the church, then fathers were its principles and foremost instructors. Reformers and Puritans, as well as virtually all others of the period, believed that fathers were the heads, governors, and masters of the home. Male headship in the home was all but universally accepted.¹² And, although male headship included significant authority in the home, it also carried with it considerable responsibility. The master of the house was tasked with the spiritual welfare of their household, including that of their wife, children, servants, and others under their care. This responsibility which fathers bore in the religious instruction of their family is ubiquitous in the literature of the period.

On August 24, 1647, the General Assembly of the Church in Scotland published *The Directory of Family Worship*. *The Directory* placed the responsibility of family worship squarely on the shoulders of fathers, a responsibility for which they would be held accountable. Richard Baxter insisted, “It is the will of God that the rulers of families should

¹⁰ Thomas Cartwright quoted in: Hill, *Society & Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964) 392.

¹¹ Henry, Matthew, *Family-Hymns* (London: Tho. Parkhurst, 1702) “Epistle to the Reader,” para. 1.

¹² Durston, Christopher, *The Family in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 87; Morgan, Edmund S., *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper, 1966) 19. Elsewhere, Morgan adds, “The Puritan wife of New England occupied a relatively enviable position by comparison, say, with the wife of early Rome or of the Middle Ages or even of contemporary England . . . In one respect she was almost his equal, for she had ‘a joint Interest in governing the rest of the Family’” (45).

teach those who are under them the doctrine of salvation.” English Cleric Taylor Thomas (1576–1632) explained,

Let every master of a family see to what is called, namely, to make his house a little church, to instruct every one of his family in the fear of God, to contain every one of them under holy discipline, to pray with them and for them. . . . Many complain of evil times and general corruption: and many talk of want of discipline in the church But thou that [art] a careless master . . . will not mend things till thou mend thy family. If all families, where reformation must begin, were brought into this discipline, our eyes should see a happy change.¹³

The judgment of non-conformist Puritan minister Samuel Slater (1629–1704) was even more grave: “Masters . . .,” exclaimed Slater, “let it not be your desire only or chiefly that [your children and servants] may live well and comfortably, but that they may live holily; that they may live like Christians, as well as like Men.” According to Slater, men who reject the “Light of Nature” and “the dictates of Reason” and are without God in the world, are not men at all. Until children are taught by their fathers to “praise, extol and honor the King of Heaven,” they “are no better than Beasts in the shapes of Men.”¹⁴

The consequences were considerable when fathers failed to execute the divine call to instruct their children in matters of religion. Clergyman Oliver Heywood (1630–1702) insisted,

There is a general complaint of the decay of the power of godliness, and inundation of profaneness, and not without cause. I know no better remedy than domestic piety In vain do you complain of magistrates and ministers, while you that are householders are unfaithful to your trust. You complain that the world is in a bad state,

¹³ Thomas Taylor quoted in: Hill, *Society & Puritanism*, 393.

¹⁴ Slater, *An Earnest Call to Family-Religion: or, a Discourse Concerning Family-Worship* (London: Tho. Parkhurst, 1694) 11–2.

what do you do to mend it. Do not so much complain of others as of yourselves . . . and plead with [God] for reformation . . . sweep before your own doors; act for God within your sphere. . . . Oh sirs! have you not sin enough of your own, but you must draw upon yourselves the guilt of your whole families?¹⁵

In short, fathers were explicitly tasked with the religious instruction and welfare of their children. Yet, one must not conclude that mothers were unimportant in the spiritual development of their children. English Clergyman Thomas Manton (1620–1677) wrote,

Women should be careful of this duty (i.e., raising God-fearing children); because as they are most about their children, and have early and frequent opportunities to instruct them, so this is the principle service they can do to God in this world, being restrained from more public work. And doubtless many an excellent magistrate hath been sent into the Commonwealth, and many an excellent pastor into the Church, and many a precious saint to heaven, through the happy preparations of a holy education, perhaps by a woman that thought herself useless and unserviceable to the Church.¹⁶

Samuel Slater exclaimed,

Mafters and Miftreffes of Families have no fmall Charge, no little Truft, for their Families are committed to them . . . For you are to remember that you are intrufted with the Souls of your Families, as well as with their Bodies . . .¹⁷

¹⁵ Heywood, Oliver, *The Whole Works of the Rev. Oliver Heywood: Including Some Tracts Extremely Scarce, and Others From Unpublished Manuscripts* (London: F. Westley, 1826) 285–86.

¹⁶ Westminster Assembly, *Confession*, 3.

¹⁷ Again, Slater wrote, “I am perfuaded, there would much more good come of that precious Seed which the faithful Miniſters of Chriſt ſcatter in their ſeveral Congregations, were Mafters and Miftreffes of Families careful before they come [to public

Richard Baxter, John Bunyan (1628–1688), and countless others made the same point—mothers, like fathers, were tasked with the religious education and development of their children. Clearly, Reformed and Puritan authors, although having emphasized the role of the Master or Governor of the home (i.e. fathers) in the spiritual development of children, nevertheless understood that mothers were indispensable.¹⁸ In the words of historian Steven Ozment, “No age subscribed more completely to the notion that the hand that rocked the cradle ruled the world.”¹⁹

What is Family Worship?

But precisely how were parents to instruct their children in spiritual matters? What were the means by which children would learn both orthodoxy and orthopraxy (i.e., right belief and right practice) at home? How were sons and daughters to find redemption in Christ and to become knowledgeable, virtuous Christians? Certainly, presence at corporate worship was essential. But training went well beyond Sunday services. The most formative instruction took place in the home.

Richard Baxter explained that worship, in its most fundamental sense, was “honoring God as God” in all solemnity. So, ‘family worship’ was a solemn honoring of God as God among the members of one’s household. And worship, according to Baxter, involved more than

worship] to prepare the Soil for the Seed, and after it is fown, careful to cover it with Prayer, and to water it with fuitable difcourfes and exhortacions” (Slater, *An Earnest Call*, 53, 161).

¹⁸ John Bunyan explained, “If thou art a parent, a father, or a mother, then thou art to consider thy calling under this relation, Thy children have souls, and they must be begotten of God as well as of thee, or they perish. And know also, that unless thou be very circumspect in thy behaviour to and before them, they may perish through thee: the thoughts of which should provoke thee, both to instruct, and also to correct them” (Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan, with an Introduction to Each Treatise, Notes, and a Sketch of His Life, Times, and Contemporaries*, vol. 2 (London: Blackie and Son, 1855) 558).

¹⁹ Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 134.

simple obedience to basic commands. Rather, worship was “a religious performance of some sacred actions, with an intention of honoring God.” The sacred actions Baxter had in mind included Bible “reading, catechizing, all instructing, praying, praises,” and psalm singing.²⁰ Taken together, Protestants called this family worship.

In his *An Earnest Call to Family Religion*, Samuel Slater provided a similar list. He explained,

Prayer indeed is a very considerable part of a Christian’s duty, yet it is but a part. . . . There is reading of the Scriptures, singing of Psalms, hearing the Word, serious meditation, and self-examination as well as prayer. There is instructing of Youth, and Catechizing of Children, and exhorting one another, and provoking one another to Love and to good works, as well as praying.²¹

According to Richard Baxter, family worship was “required by the law of nature; therefore, it is of divine institution.”²² Baxter insisted that God, as “Father . . . Founder . . . Master . . . Owner . . . Governor . . . Lord and Ruler” of the family, must be honored as such. He argued,

As God is the proper Sovereign of every commonwealth and the Head of the church, so he is the Head of every family. Therefore, as every commonwealth should perform such worship or honor to their earthly sovereign as is due to a man, so each society should, according to its capacities, offer divine worship and honor God.” This honor is due Him because He is both Creator and Redeemer, not simply of persons, but of families.²³

Baxter also insisted that God, being ever-present, must be regularly worshiped by the gathered family. He explained,

²⁰ Baxter, *The Godly Home*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) 58, 62.

²¹ Slater, *An Earnest Call*, 21.

²² Baxter, *The Godly Home*, 63.

²³ Baxter, *The Godly Home*, 65.

When a king, a father, a master are absent, actual honor to be presented to them is not due because they are not capable of receiving it . . . ; yet when they stand near, it is a contemptuous subject, a disobedient child, who will not offer actual honor to them. Now God is ever present not only with each person . . . but also with every family.²⁴

Therefore, insisted Baxter, God must always be honored in the family, both privately as individuals and when the family is called together. Baxter's emphasis on the nature and necessity of family worship was reproduced time and again in other works of the period.

The Directory for Family Worship is a wonderful window into the place of family worship among Puritans. It provides its own list of practices which constituted Christ honoring family worship:

The ordinary duties comprehended under the exercise of piety, which should be in families, when they are convened to that effect, are these: First. Prayer and praises . . . Next, Reading of the scriptures, with catechising in a plain way . . . together with godly conferences tending to the edification of all the members in the most holy faith: as also, admonition and rebuke, upon just reasons, from those who have authority in the family.²⁵

So committed to family worship was the Westminster Assembly of Divines, a gathering of primarily English and Scottish theologians appointed to reorganize the Church of England, that "in 1646 [the Assembly] voted that those who neglected family prayer and instructions were guilty of sin."²⁶

²⁴ Baxter, *The Godly Home*, 66.

²⁵ Westminster, *The Directory for the Public Worship of God; Form of Presbyterial Church Government, Ordination of Ministers; and the Directory for Family Worship* (Halifax: J. Munro, 1828) 56. Archive.org

²⁶ Counsell, *Domestic Religion*, 52-3.

When was family worship to take place?

Family worship was to take place on the Lord's Day, but family worship was not simply a Lord's Day exercise. In fact, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), the Savoy Declaration (1658), and the 1689 London Baptist Confession—the Confessions of seventeenth-century Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists respectively—all contained the following statement: "God is to be worshiped everywhere in spirit and in truth; as in private families daily . . ." ²⁷

In his *An Earnest Call to Family Religion*, Samuel Slater wrote,

This indeed, as I have been informed, is the manner of some among us; upon a Lord's-day they will call their families together, and then they will do something for God. But they must give me leave to think, what they do then is pitifully, shamefully done; they are so seldom us'd to [prayer] that they must needs bungle at it; and let me ask you, my Friends, are these persons liberal to God? Nay, are they not very beggarly and penurious, who will give Him a visit upon that day which [the Lord] hath reserved wholly and entirely for himself But they will not part with any of that time which he hath allowed them for the dispatch of their own benefits; but their Work and Receptions, their Eating, Drinking and Sleeping shall ingross it all The truth is, Love to God should draw us frequently that we may have Communion with him, and necessity might drive us that we may have supplies from him; all your Springs are in him, with him is the Well of Life, therefore let down your Bucket of Prayer often, that you may draw Water with joy. ²⁸

Virtually all believed that family worship was to be practiced daily.

²⁷ WCF, XXI, vi; SDF, XXII, vi; 1689 LBC, XXII, vi.

²⁸ Slater, *An Earnest Call*, 177-78.

Prayer

Consider just one element of family worship—prayer. Reserving family prayer for the Lord’s Day alone would have been unthinkable. Listen again to Samuel Slater’s *An Earnest Call to Family Religion*: “Pray always, that is, pray daily, pray every day. This is to be not only a Sabbath-day’s work, as I am inform’d some pernicious professors make it, no, no, it ought to be your work.”²⁹ Among the reasons given by Slater was the following: “God loves your company, therefore do not be strangers to him.” Christians ought to be so moved by God’s love that they should “not content [themselves] with praying only upon the Lord’s-day.”³⁰

Richard Baxter, appealing to 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (“pray without ceasing”), believed family prayer ought to be conducted not less than twice daily. He wrote, “It is easy for a man that is willing to see, that less than twice a day, doth not answer the command of praying without ceasing.”³¹ Morning and evening prayer appears regularly in the literature of the period, for it was widely believed that morning and evening, specifically mealtimes, were the opportune time for family devotion. Lewis Bayly’s (1575–1631) *The Practice of Piety* (c. 1611) and Symon Patrick’s (1626–1707) *The Devout Christian* (1672) are but two examples. Oliver Heywood, in his *A Family Alter* provides another example. He writes,

What an honour is it, that the King of heaven gives you an admittance into his presence-chamber with your families twice a day! to confess your sins, beg pardon and supplies of mercy; to give him the glory of his goodness, and to lay your load on him, and get ease: I hope you will never be averse to it, or weary of it. God forbid you should.³²

²⁹ Slater, *An Earnest Call*, 23.

³⁰ Slater, *An Earnest Call*, 177.

³¹ Baxter, *The Godly Home*, 95.

³² Heywood, *A Family Alter*, 287.

Intentional twice-daily prayer would have satisfied John Calvin's (1509–1564) concern when he wrote, "Unless we fix certain hours in the day for prayer, it easily slips from our memory."³³ Family prayer intentionally practiced morning and evening were widely regarded as ideal.³⁴

If family prayer was ideally a twice-daily exercise, how were these times of prayer to be spent? What constituted prayer that was pleasing to God? Should prayer be extemporaneous or should set forms be used? What of those just learning to pray? The form and content of prayer were extraordinarily practical questions and were hotly debated among many theologians and ministers, some arguing for set forms of prayer while others defending extemporaneous prayer.³⁵

However, many had the wisdom to recognize that circumstances dictated the most appropriate type of prayer. Puritans like Richard Baxter and William Perkins (1558–1602) held this middle course.³⁶ Perkins asked, is it "lawful, when we pray, to read a set form of prayer? For some think that to do so is a sin. It is no sin. But a man may lawfully, and with good conscience, do it." To support his answer, Perkins appeals to the "set form of words" found in the book of Psalms, most of which, according to Perkins, are prayers. Perkins continued:

³³ John Calvin, "Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel" in *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. XII*, trans. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 362.

³⁴ However, as an institution, the Church of England was an outlier. *The Book of Common Prayer*, first published by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) in 1549, included daily services called Matins and Evensong (i.e. morning and evening prayer). This was corporate morning and evening prayer at the local parish church, not prayer in the home. Yet, twice-daily services were impractical for families, and, in rural churches, were often not offered at all. Thus, family prayer became important even among many committed to the Church of England. See, Church of England, *The Booke of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments, and other rites and ceremonies of the Church: after the use of the Church of England* (London: Edward Whitchurch, 1561), index. Archive.org; Ginn, Richard J., *The Politics of Prayer in Early Modern Britain: Church and State in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Taurus Academic Studies, 2007) 126–27.

³⁵ Counsell, *Domestic Religion*, 79.

³⁶ Counsell, *Domestic Religion*, 79–82.

To conceive a form of prayers requires gifts of memory, knowledge, utterance, and the gifts of grace. Now every Child and Servant of God . . . has not all these gifts. . . . Therefore, in want of them, [he] may lawfully use a set form of prayer. As a man with a weak back or a lame leg may lean on a crutch.³⁷

Laity, for their part, were undaunted by such debates. Fiona Ann Counsell writes,

Lay people selected and blended their prayers from a wide range of sources; memorizing set forms, conceiving their own prayers using detailed frameworks provided in the prayer books, and fleshing out skeleton prayers to their individual needs.³⁸

In the end, family prayer developed naturally according to the level of education, spiritual maturity, needs, and circumstances of each and every family. And, even the leading advocates of set form and extemporaneous prayer believed that some prayer, regardless of form, was better than no prayer at all.

Reading & Catechizing

But prayer was not the only element of Christ-honoring family worship to receive attention in sixteenth and seventeenth-century literature. Reading Scripture with the gathered family was basic to family worship. Scripture was God's Word, and therefore was to be impressed upon the hearts and minds of the family. According to Deuteronomy 6, God's Law was to be the subject of discourse "when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road and when you lie down and when you rise up."³⁹ Reformed and Puritan saints were unshakable in

³⁷ Perkins, William, *The Works of William Perkins*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2019) Archive.org

³⁸ Counsell, *Domestic Religion*, 83.

³⁹ Baxter, *The Godly Home*, 72; cf. Deut 6:6-9; 11:18-21.

their conviction that God’s Word was truth, and, therefore, reading the Scripture and being instructed therein was necessary if the family was to grow in their knowledge and love of the Lord.

Reading Scripture was also quite practical. For example, reading Scripture together taught Christians how to pray. The Rev. Oliver Heywood put it this way:

If you make it a daily custom to read the Bible, you will find appropriate expressions flowing into your mind in prayer, which will prove pertinent matter upon all occasions ; when you read scripture, think, now God is speaking to me, and thereby furnishing me with matter to speak to him in prayer; this passage suits my case, I will improve it in confession, petition, deprecation or thanksgiving, in my addresses to God, and thus you will arrive at a habit of free converse with God.⁴⁰

But it wasn’t enough to read God’s Word—Scripture must be taught. Richard Baxter believed that husbands were to sanctify and teach their wives (Eph. 5:26; 1 Cor. 14:35). Furthermore, Baxter appealed to Ephesians 6:4 (“Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”) and Proverbs 22:6 (“Train up a child in the way he should go”), insisting that parents must “carefully and constantly feed and nourish” their children spiritually by putting “doctrine into the mind,” “chiding,” and “sometimes correcting.”⁴¹ For his part, Baxter published several works intended to aid in such household instruction.⁴²

Family worship, according to *The Directory for Family Worship*, included the “Reading of Scriptures with Chatechizing in a plain way, that the understandings of the simpler may be . . . made more capable

⁴⁰ Heywood, *The Whole Works*, 380.

⁴¹ Baxter, *The Godly Home*, 73–74

⁴² Among these are *The Poor Man’s Family Book*, *The Catechizing of Families*, and *The Christian Directory*.

to understand the Scriptures when they are read.”⁴³ Catechesis was a form of theological instruction in which the student was asked, and then answered, questions. One thinks of the first, and oft quoted, question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer? “Man’s Chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”⁴⁴

The difficulty with catechesis was that every child was in a different place in terms of age, maturity, and spiritual understanding. No catechism suited every individual and family equally. Baxter, in his *The Catechizing of Families*, explains that catechisms “should be sorted into three degrees, suited to the Childhood, Youth and maturer Age of Christians.”⁴⁵

It is, therefore, unsurprising that Catechisms were written to instruct those of every age, educational level, and degree of spiritual maturity. Puritans did believe that even the youngest of children could be taught. A popular catechism used in the home for the very young was Cotton Mather’s (1663–1728) *Milk for Babes* first published in 1641. Mather’s catechism was later included in Benjamin Harris’s *The New England Primer* (formerly entitled *Protestant Tutor*) no later than 1710.⁴⁶ Of his catechism, Mather wrote,

I have laboured also to help your *Understandings*, by a *Scriptural Catechism* . . . and tho’ I am far from not encouraging any of you to prize and learn those, excellent *Catechisms* which are now commonly used among us; yet I was willing to offer you *one* more, because it pretends to these few little Singularities.

What were the singularities to which Cotton Mather referred? First, the answers in his catechism were short. Second, the answers

⁴³ Westminster Assembly, *The Directory*, 56

⁴⁴ WSC, q. 1.

⁴⁵ Baxter, *The Catechizing of Families*, para. 3, 4.

⁴⁶ Avery, Gillian, “Origins and English Predecessors of the New England Primer,” *The Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, vol. 108 (April 1998, 1) 33–61.

were the very words of Scripture. Finally, and remarkably, some of the questions in Mather's catechism were provided for the instruction of infants."⁴⁷

Catechisms for the youngest were very basic and often designed to cultivate a love for Jesus Christ above all else. Take, for instance, the German theologian and reformer Johann Eberlin von Günzburg (1470–1533). In von Günzburg's catechism, he instructed parents to teach their children that Christ is "their best, truest, and friendliest friend, more friendly, loving, and trustworthy to them than all the angels and saints."⁴⁸

Lutheran Pastor and poet Erasmus Alberus (1500–1553) composed his *Ten Dialogues for Children Who Have Begun to Speak*. "The reason so few people today are God-fearing," Alberus explained, "is that they were not raised to reverence God during childhood." Such parents were guilty of "spiritually abusing" and even "murdering" their own children. For his part, Alberus both instructed his own children at a very early age, and helped friends do the same. Listen to one of the dialogues Alberus composed for his three-and-a-half-year-old daughter Gertrude:

Alberus: Do you love Jesus?

Gertrude: Yes, father.

A: Who is the Lord Jesus?

G: God and Mary's son.

A: How is his dear Mother called?

G: Mary.

A: Why do you love Jesus? What has he done to make you love him?

G: He has shed his blood for me.

A: He has shed his blood for you?

G: Yes, father.

⁴⁷ Mather, Cotton, *Addresses to old men, and young men, and little children. In three discourses ... To which may be added, a short scriptural catechism, accommodated unto their capacities*, 93–4.

⁴⁸ Eberlin von Günzburg quoted in: Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 172.

A: Could you be saved if he had not shed his blood for you?

G: Oh no!

A: What would then have happened?

G: We would all be damned.

A: We would all be damned?

G: Yes, father.

A: O Lord God, it would have been bad for us poor people, if the
Lord had not shed his blood for us.

G: Had the child Jesus not been born, we would be lost altogether.

A: Do you thank the Lord Christ that he has shed his blood for you?

G: Yes, father.

A: How? Tell me, child.

G: I thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, that you have become my brother
and saved me from all want through your holy death. I praise
you eternally for your great goodness.

Alberus even used physical actions to teach his children. When his “beautiful little daughter Cecilia” approached the final moments of her life in this world, Alberus asked her, “How did Christ die for us?” Cecilia stretched out her arms as Christ has once stretched out his on the cross.⁴⁹ There was no age and no condition in which a child could not be taught.

Of course, catechesis was not reserved for the very young. The entire family benefitted from catechesis. Baptist minister Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), well-known for his *Keache’s Catechism*, wrote a primer entitled *Instructions for Children*. The title page of this slender work contained the following details: “Directing Parents in a Right and Spiritual manner to Educate their Children. WITH A SCRIPTURAL CATECHISM Wherein all the Chief Principles of True Christianity Are clearly Open’d.” The primer included not one, but three different catechisms intended for children of varying ages. The first of these catechisms, entitled “The Little Child’s Catechism,” was designed for

⁴⁹ Erasmus Alberus quoted in: Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 170–71.

children between the ages of three and four. The two additional catechisms, both entitled “The Youth’s Catechism,” were intended, in the first instance, for those around ten years of age, and in the second, for those “grown up to a mature age.” And, because it was the parent’s responsibility to “Educate their Children,” *Keach* clearly expected parents to know the material. In other words, this single work demonstrates that family religious devotion was for the benefit of the entire family.⁵⁰

Although most of these catechisms have been long since forgotten, there are a number of notable exceptions. Again, *Keach’s Catechism*, often called the *Baptist Catechism*, is still in use today, as are the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms*. But few of them are used in the home for the purpose of family instruction.

Singing

There is one more element of Christ-honoring family worship about which sixteenth and seventeenth-century Reformed and Puritan Christians had much to say—praising the Lord in song.

The Westminster Divines, in *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, explained, “It is the duty of Christians to praise God publicly, by singing of psalms together in the congregation, and also privately in the family.”⁵¹

The Whole Booke of Psalms, published by John Day in 1562, became “the most influential Psalter” for the next one-hundred-and-fifty years.⁵² The popular Psalter was intended for use, not only in the church, but in the home. The title page reads,

⁵⁰ Keach, Benjamin, *Instructions for Children: or, the child’s and youth’s delight. Teaching an easie way to spell and read true English* (London: John Marshall, 1723) title page, 11, 19, 64.

⁵¹ Westminster Assembly, *The Directory*, 34.

⁵² Counsell, *Domestic Religion*, 111-12.

The Whole Book of Psalms set forth and allowed to be sung in all Churches, of all the people together, and after Morning and Evening prayer: as also before and after Sermons: and moreover in private houses, for their godly solace and comfort; laying apart all ungodly songs and ballads, which tend only to the nourishing of vice, and corrupting of youth.⁵³

Psalm singing was an important discipline in the Christian life, for it was considered “the most proper ordinance for expressing of joy and thanksgiving.”⁵⁴ Samuel Slater wrote,

You have Family mercies in which you do all share, and of which you tast the sweetness, and therefore you should all bear your parts in a Song of Praise, and chearfully joyn together in your acknowledgments of them, and thankful returns to the God that gives them.⁵⁵

Minister and Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, published his own songbook entitled *Family-Hymns*. “My design in this essay,” he explained, “is to promote the singing of Psalms in Families, as a part of their Daily Worship, especially their Sabbath Worship.” According to Henry, family Psalm singing was the practice of the ancient church and fathers would “Sing Psalms with their Wives and Children, especially at and after their Meals.”⁵⁶

Care was in order when Psalms were sung. *The Directory for Public Worship* states that “the voice is to be tunably and gravely ordered; but the chief care must be to sing with understanding, and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord.”⁵⁷

Lewis Bayly, in his devotional manual *The Practice of Piety*, wrote,

⁵³ Sternhold, Thomas, and John Hopkins, *The Whole Book of Psalms: Collected into English Metre* (London: J.M., 1668) title page. Archive.org

⁵⁴ Westminster Assembly, *The Directory*, 33

⁵⁵ Slater, *An Earnest Call*, 168; cf. 275, 305

⁵⁶ Henry, *Family-Hymns* (London: Tho. Parkhurst, 1702) A2.

⁵⁷ Westminster Assembly, *The Directory*, 34.

At evening when the due time of repairing to rest approaches, call together again all thy family; read a chapter in the same manner that was prescribed in the morning ; then, in a holy imitation of our Lord and his disciples, sing a psalm: but in singing of psalms, either after supper, or at any other time, observe these rules:

1. Beware of singing divine psalms for an ordinary recreation. . . . They are God's word: take them not in thy mouth in vain.
2. Remember to sing David's psalms with David's spirit
3. Practise St. Paul's rule—" I will sing with the spirit, but I will sing with the understanding also." (1 Cor xiv. 15.)
4. As you sing uncover your heads (1 Cor xi. 4), and behave yourselves in comely reverence as in the sight of God, singing to God in God's own words; but be sure that the matter make more melody in your hearts (Eph v. 19; Col iii. 16) than the music in your ear
5. Thou mayest, if thou thinkest good, sing all the psalms over in order, for all are most divine and comfortable; but if thou wilt choose some special psalms, as more fit for some times and purposes, and such as, by the oft usage, thy people may the easier commit to memory.⁵⁸

In the late seventeenth-century, controversy arose over the use of hymns in private and public worship. As was mentioned earlier, the most popular Psalter of the period was *The Whole Book of Psalms*, also known as the *Sternhold & Hopkins Psalter*. The collected Psalms were to be sung in church and at home "for . . . godly solace and comfort," But the title page of the Psalter added the following note: "Laying apart all ungodly songs and ballads, which tend only to the nourishing of vice, and corrupting of youth."⁵⁹ Certainly, most Reformed and Puritan

⁵⁸ Bayly, *The Practice of Piety: A Puritan Devotional Manual* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 154–55. Archive.org

⁵⁹ Sternhold, Thomas, and John Hopkins, *The Whole Book of Psalms, Collected into English Metre* (London: Stationers, 1705) title page. Archive.org

Christians held to exclusive Psalmody. That was about to change. In 1647, John Cotton (1585–1652) was among the first to advocate hymn singing in the home, although not in public worship. But it was Benjamin Keach who was to bring the controversy most fully into public view. Between 1691 and 1696, Keach published several works advocating the singing of hymns in addition to the singing of Psalms. Keach himself composed nearly 500 hymns and also published the hymns of many others. A decade later, the controversy was largely concluded with the publication of Isaac Watts' (1674–1748) *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. Everafter, hymns were widely incorporated alongside Psalms in both home and congregational worship.

Conferences

But not every element of Christ honoring family worship was tightly scheduled. Take, for instance, conferences—i.e., godly discussion for the purpose of continued learning, encouraging, comforting, and ultimately growing spiritually.⁶⁰ While family conferences were an important element in family worship on the Lord's Day, they were somewhat impractical during morning and evening devotion given the limits of time. Rather, godly discussions was a form of worship which could be offered whenever opportunity presented itself, as is the case in Deuteronomy 6:7: this element of worship could be carried on “when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Westminster, *the Directory*, 57; Bunyan, *Christian Behavior*, 557. Cf. Heywood, *The Whole Works*, 387; Bayly, *The Practice of Piety*, 321. John Hooper explained, “To talk and renew among yourselves the truth of your religion. . . . Comfort one another, make prayers together, confer with one another.”; Henry Scudder remarked, “Let the manner of your talke be, either of God, or of his Word, and ways wherein you should walke; or of his workes . . . and of his mercies. . . . Impart also each to other the experiments & proofes you have had of God's grace and power in this your Christian warefare,” quoted in Ryrie, Alec, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 393–94.

⁶¹ Deut 6:7.

Certainly, godly conferences could be planned. But often, conferences occurred outside of morning and evening worship. And, although such godly discussions were beneficial to all, parents had a particular responsibility to use every opportunity to further instruct their children in the things of God—to help children think deeply about the Lord, to repeat sermons, to reinforce previous lessons, to strengthen, to encourage, to comfort, to instruct, and ultimately, to lead children to Christ.

Parents would not only directly instruct their children, but frequently children would carry on a dialogue with their parents. Cleric Immanuel Bourne (1590–1672) explained, “Let the husband with the wife, let the father with the child, talk together of these matters, and both to and fro let them enquire and give their judgments.⁶² Children learned by listening, reading, and memorizing. But they also grew in their knowledge and love of the Lord through godly discussion.

Richard Baxter provided wonderful guidance for parents. In his *Christian Economics*, He wrote,

You may employ a child . . . to read a chapter in the Bible, while you are dressing . . . and eating your breakfast . . . Else you may employ that time in some fruitful meditation, or conference with those about you, as far as your necessary occasions do give leave. As to think or speak of the mercy of a night’s rest, and of your renewed time, and how many spent that night in hell, and how many in prison, and how many in a colder, harder lodging, and how many in grievous pain and sickness, weary of their beds and of their lives, and how many in distracting terrors of their minds; and how many souls were that night called from their bodies, to appear before the dreadful God: and think how fast days and nights roll on! and how speedily your last night and day will come. And observe

⁶² Immanuel Bourne quoted in: Hill, *Society & Puritanism*, 390.

what is wanting in the readiness of your soul, for such a time, and seek it presently without delay.⁶³

There were times, however, when children simply listened. New England clergyman Cotton Mather provides a moving example in his diary. He wrote,

I took my little daughter, Katy, into my study; and there I told my Child, that I am to dy shortly, and shee must, when I am Dead, Remember every Thing, that I said unto her. I set before her, the sinful and woful Contition of her Nature, and I charg'd her, to pray in secret Places, every Day, without ceasing, that God for the Sake of Jesus Christ would give her a New Heart, and pardon Her sins, and make her a Servant of His. I gave her to understand, that when I am taken from her . . . shee has a careful and a tender Father to provide for her. . . .

At length, with many Tears, both on my Part, and hers, I told my Child, that God had from Heaven assured mee, and the good Angels of God had satisfied mee, that shee shall bee brought home unto the Lord Jesus Christ, and bee one of His forever. . . . I thereupon made the Child kneel down by mee; and I poured out my Cries unto the Lord, that Hee would lay His Hands upon her, and bless her and save her, and make her a Temple of His Glory. . . . I write this, the more particularly, that the Child may hereafter have the Benefit of reading it.⁶⁴

Conferences with children were not to be excessively complex but rather simple and memorable. This was, in fact, a mark of Puritan preaching. According to the *Westminster Directory for Public Worship* (in contrast to *The Directory for Family Worship*), preachers were to avoid

⁶³ Baxter, Richard, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, vol. 4 (London: James Duncan, 1830) 231.

⁶⁴ Mather, Cotton, *The Diary of Cotton Mather 1681-1708* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1811) 239-40. Archive.org

“obscure terms of art.” If sermons were to be delivered in “plain terms,”⁶⁵ how much more the instruction of children in the home.

According to John Bunyan, instruction was to be “in terms and Words easy to be understood.” “High expressions” were to be avoided, for “they will drown . . . children.” In addition, Bunyan warned, “Take heed of filling their heads with whimsies, and unprofitable notions,” for this would lead not to humility but to arrogance. Rather, “open . . . to them the state of man by nature; discourse with them of sin, of death, and hell; of a crucified Saviour, and the promise of life through faith.”⁶⁶

Enforcing Family Worship

In some quarters, family worship was taken with the utmost seriousness. Clergyman Oliver Heywood believed that the failure to maintain family worship in the home was a dreadful sin which should invite the discipline of the church. In his *A Family Alter*, Heywood explained,

Would you rather see the agonies of your children, and hear them crying amidst infernal torments, than speak a word to them for their instruction, hear them cry under your correction, or supplicate God for their salvation? Oh cruel tigers and barbarous monsters! You may imagine yourselves to be Christians, but I cannot judge that man worthy to be a fit communicant at the Lord’s table, that maintains not the worship of God ordinarily in his family’ and he deserves admonition and censure for this sin.⁶⁷

Heywood would have approved of the Scottish position as stated in *The Directory for Family-Worship*. The work was intended to advance “piety and uniformity” in private and family worship just as *The Directory*

⁶⁵ Westminster Assembly, *Directory*, 16.

⁶⁶ Bunyan, *Christian Behavior*, 558.

⁶⁷ Heywood, *The Whole Works*, 286.

for *Public Worship*, adopted by the Westminster Assembly two years earlier (1645), had established piety and uniformity in corporate worship. According to *The Directory for Family Worship*, “prayer and praises,” the “reading of the scriptures,” “catechizing,” “godly conferences,” “admonition and rebuke”, as well as confession, thanksgiving, and “mutual edification” were all necessary to true family piety.⁶⁸ The head of the family (i.e. the father) was responsible to ensure that these practices were carried out diligently in the home. Where a father was “unfit”, by which the Assembly meant either spiritually derelict or illiterate, “the minister and session” were to appoint another man who resided with the family.⁶⁹

None of this is extraordinary. What is remarkable, however, is the lengths to which the Scottish kirk would go to ensure that these practices were carried out in every family. Listen to the opening words of *The Directory for Family-Worship*:

To the end that these Directions may not be rendered ineffectual and unprofitable among some, through the usual neglect of the very substance of the duty of Family-worship, the Assembly doth further require and appoint ministers and ruling elders to make diligent search and enquiry, in the congregations committed to their charge respectively, whether there be among them any family or families which use to neglect this necessary duty; and if any such family be found, the head of the family is to be first admonished privately to amend his fault; and, in the case of his continuing therein, he is to be gravely and sadly reprov'd by the session; after which reproof, if he be found still to neglect Family-worship, let him be, for his obstinacy in such an offense, suspended and

⁶⁸ Westminster Assembly, *The Directory*. 56.

⁶⁹ “Let no idler who hath no particular calling, or vagrant person under a pretence of a calling, be suffered to perform worship in families, to or from the same; seeing persons tainted with errors or aiming at division, may be ready (after that manner) to creep into houses, and lead captive silly and unstable souls.” Westminster Assembly, *The Directory*, 57.

debarred from the Lord's supper, as being justly esteemed unworthy to communicate therein, till he amend.⁷⁰

Seditious Nature of Family Worship

Interestingly, family worship became, for a time, quite controversial. Because of the pressure brought by Puritans on the church of England, family worship began to be viewed by Anglican authorities as subversive. In 1583, the Anglican Church forbade "all preaching, reading, catechism and other self-like exercises in private places and families whereunto others do resort, being not of the same family." One year later, English Archbishop John Whitgift (1530-1604) established his Visitation Articles of 1584. Article 11 reads,

Item what persons you haue in your parish, [who] doo teach & instruct children, and what be the sayed scholemasters names, whether they teach publikely or priuately in any man's house, & whether . . . such as teache youth to reade English, doo bring vp their children in reading this Catechisme in English, and of other Bookes agréable to the Quéenes procéedinges. And whether they behaue themselues honestly, and both repaire to Church orderly themselues and so much as lyeth in them, procure that they schollers also frequent the same.

Again, Article 30 states, "Item, whether any doo vse any conuenticles or meetings, handling or expounding of scriptures in any priuat house or place, other then in the common Church, who they be, where and when."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Westminster, *The Directory for Public Worship*, 55.

⁷¹ Church of England, *Articles to be answered of the sworne men in the Archdeacon of London his visitation holden the yeere. 1584. the 15. and 19. of Ianuarie* (London: I, W. for Nicholas Ling, 1585; Text Creation Partnership), p. 1; (<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A00218.0001.001>)

Such suspicion was far removed from the attitude expressed by William Tyndale (1494–1536) earlier in the century when he wrote, “Every man ought to preach in word and deed unto his household, and to them that are under his governance.” In fact, “every man ought to endeavour himself to be as well learned as the preacher and every man may privately inform his neighbors.”⁷² Soon, such activity would be forbidden, not only by the Puritan hating Archbishop William Laud (1573–1645), but even by the Puritan *Directory for Family Worship*, which prohibited the admission of “persons from divers families, unless it be those who are lodged with them, or at meals, or otherwise with them upon some lawful occasion.” Such prohibitions were given to ensure that the responsibility of any individual family cannot be delegated to another family. Furthermore, there appeared to be some concern that the gathering of multiple families may tend toward the division of a family and their local congregation.⁷³

In the end, family worship was viewed as subversive because all genuine faith and practice is subversive of ungodly authority. In 1662, nearly 2000 ministers lost their livings because of their refusal to conform to the demands of the Church of England—demands, which, in many cases, were altogether unbiblical. These ministers were subverting the unbiblical misuse of authority. But just as faithful preaching and teaching continued in the face of opposition, so faithful families continued in Christ-honoring family religion.

Conclusion

This is how sixteenth and seventeenth-century Reformed and Puritan Christians understood “Christ honoring worship in the family.” Just as individual Christians were to honor God in private worship and believing communities in corporate worship, so every family bore the same

⁷² William Tyndale quoted in: Hill, *Society & Puritanism*, 401–02.

⁷³ Westminster Assembly, *The Directory*, 57–8.

obligation as a gathered household. Parents, and fathers in particular, were tasked with leading their families in prayer, Scripture reading, catechesis, conferences, and singing the praises of God. This worship was not reserved for the Lord's Day, but was to take place every day, and ideally multiple times a day.

Reformed and Puritan Christians believed that family worship was biblical. Works on the subject are brimming with Scripture. Richard Baxter cites more than fifty biblical texts in his treatment of family worship.⁷⁴ He clearly believed that family worship was a biblical mandate.

Samuel Slater had hard words for households devoid of family worship. He exclaimed,

There is so little done for God in the Houses of many who call themselves Christians, that one would take them not for Christians, but Atheists, and conclude them without God in the World . . . for there is no Praying in their Families, no Reading of the Scriptures, no Singing of Psalms, no Repeating of Sermons, no Catechizing of young ones, who would not take these for Heathens, if they did not call themselves something else?⁷⁵

Obviously, there were families in Slater's day who neglected family worship altogether. For others, it was a struggle—an ideal which they worked diligently to achieve. And, for still others, twice daily family worship was their practice.⁷⁶ Matthew Henry asked, "What shall I say then to perswade Masters of Families, who have hitherto neglected their duty . . .?" His answer? "Better late than never."⁷⁷

What is striking is the difference between Henry's day and our own. What Reformed and Puritan Christians once widely believed—

⁷⁴ Williams, Jonathan, *A Practical Theology of Family Worship: Richard Baxter's Timeless Encouragement for Today's Home* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2021) 2.

⁷⁵ Slater, *An Earnest Call*, "The Epistle Dedicatory" para. 1.

⁷⁶ cf. Cousnell, *Domestic Religion*, 93.

⁷⁷ Henry, *Family-Hymns*, para. 2.

that daily family worship was ordained and commanded by God—is almost entirely foreign to the modern Christian. One can sit in churches, attend conferences, shop Christian bookstores, and peruse Christian literature for decades without ever encountering anything which seriously acquaints them with family worship. Unlike the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when material addressing family worship was pervasive, the subject has been largely neglected in our own day. And, because the topic has received so little attention, many Christians fail to understand just how much Scripture has to say about the topic.

But Christ honoring family worship is vital. Thomas Manton, in his introductory Epistle to the Westminster Confession of Faith, wrote,

A principle cause of these mischiefs (by which Manton means mischiefs in the church) is the great and common neglect of the governors of families (i.e., fathers), in the discharge of that duty which they owe to God for the souls that are under their charge, especially in teaching them the doctrine of Christianity. Families are societies that must be sanctified to God as well as Churches; and the governors of them have as truly a charge of souls that are therein, as pastors have of the Churches.”⁷⁸

Puritan clergyman Philip Goodwin (d. 1699) wrote,

The health of the church at large relies on the ‘little churches’ of praying families for ‘the garden of god’s church is watered by the river of familie-prayer.’” Furthermore, “through the prayer of families are publike calamities kept off and publike immunities kept up.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Westminster Assembly, “Epistle.”

⁷⁹ Philip Goodwin quoted in: Counsell, *Domestic Religion*, 53.

Family worship is vital for the health, not only of the family—for it is a means by which family members are saved and sanctified—but it is also vital for the health of church and nation.

So, we might ask, “What if we have never practiced family worship in our home? What must we do?” The answer is simple. With Matthew Henry, we must say, “Better late than never!” Let us once again hold daily family worship as both biblical and necessary. No matter the particulars of our household, let us begin reading Scripture together. Let us begin praying together daily. Let us sing God’s praises when we gather, and let us intentionally speak of the Lord “when [we] sit in [our] house and when [we] walk by the way and when [we] lie down and when [we] rise up.”

If Christ-honoring family worship is new to your family, you might consider acquiring materials which will help you along the way. Joel Beeke, Donald Whitney, Joni Erikson Tada, and Terry L. Johnson have all recently published helpful books on family worship. In addition, there has been newfound interest in Puritan works on the subject. Richard Baxter’s *Christian Economics* has been edited and republished under the title *The Godly Home*. The work includes a chapter on family worship. In 2021, Jonathan Williams published *A Practical Theology of Family Worship: Richard Baxter’s Timeless Encouragement for Today’s Home*. The work distills Baxter’s teaching on family worship—teaching which radically transformed Baxter’s hometown. Puritan William Gouge’s *of Domestical Duties*, now edited and republished in three short volumes under the title *Building a Godly Home*, briefly addresses family worship. In short, the last decade has seen renewed interest in Christ honoring family worship. The result has been the publication, or republication, of materials which can be helpful to those committed to established worship in their household.

As helpful as such manuals may be (and they can be remarkably helpful), reading about family worship will not, in itself, result in the practice of family worship. Benjamin Franklin once wrote, “Old habits

die hard.”⁸⁰ Neglecting family worship, or omitting it altogether, has become a particularly bad habit for many. Yet, immediately implementing daily or twice daily family worship consisting in praying, Bible reading, catechizing, conferences, and singing can be both difficult and daunting. For those new to family worship, it is important to begin simply. First, commitment is essential. Families should gather for worship daily, preferably when the family is ordinarily together (e.g. after rising, at mealtime, before bed). Yet, if daily worship is challenging, commit to two or three days a week. But commit. Second, keep it brief, at least initially. Family worship, to be genuine, does not require a significant time commitment. Third, start with the essentials—prayer, Bible reading, and song. Prayer can be extemporaneous or written. If set forms of prayer would be helpful, there are a number of wonderful collections available including *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975) and *Piercing Heaven: Prayers of the Puritans* (Lexham, 2019). Of course, the Psalms and the prayers of Jesus and His Apostles are even better. Bible reading should be orderly. Read through a book of the Bible, chapter by chapter. Discuss the reading if time permits. Finally, singing theologically rich songs as a family is easier than ever with audio and video on most electronic devices. Families should sing one or two songs together as an element of worship. As families develop this “new habit,” it will become easier to incorporate additional time and elements into worship in the home. Furthermore, it can serve as a catalyst to godly discussion and instruction outside of regularly scheduled family worship.

In the end, Christ honoring family worship was unspeakably important to sixteenth and seventeenth-century Reformed and Puritan Christians. They believed the practice to be biblical and well established in the history of the church. May we once again establish this practice in our homes for the good of our families, the church, the nation, and, ultimately, for God’s glory.

⁸⁰ Titelman, Gregory, *Random House Dictionary of America’s Popular Proverbs & Sayings*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 2000) 253.

Suffering and Hope in Wartime Eschatology

Joshua P. Howard¹

We may begin by admitting that eschatology is an oft-malnourished doctrine within many Christian circles. For some Christians, eschatology represents the uncomfortable specter of church squabbles regarding things such as the identity of the antichrist or the mark of the beast. Visions of walls cluttered with charts and yarn assail our thoughts, and we immediately feel disoriented and uneasy at the prospect of delving much further. For others, eschatology seems to be entirely concerned with the correct interpretation of the millennial period in the Revelation to John, the millennial “kingdom” or “reign.” In any case, Christian conversations concerning eschatology frequently seem to generate far more heat than light, and relationships between involved parties often suffer in the aftermath. For all of these reasons, eschatology has become a doctrine which brings fear rather than hope for many Christians, and it accordingly holds very little impact on their lives and undertakings in this world.

One cause for this cognitive disconnect is a narrow hermeneutic concerning the category of eschatology. That is to say, for many Christians the study of eschatology is synonymous with the study of the book of the Revelation, and quite little else.² Eschatology is the Revelation, and the Revelation is eschatology—the one being simply referenced as a sort of shorthand for the other (or so the unstated belief

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² I am using the language “the Revelation” to refer specifically to the final book of the Protestant Christian canon, the Revelation of Jesus Christ (to John): Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (“the Revelation of Jesus Christ;” Rev 1:1). See Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th Edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

often goes). Even pressing in a bit further, *eschatology* typically progresses past the primary substantive sections of the Revelation and devotes the entirety of its attention to the Revelation's twentieth chapter (and often only that chapter's opening verses, at that). A Christian's eschatological beliefs are regularly expressed as their views about the millennial period (*chiliasm*), as if this is the singular issue at stake in eschatology.³ In this case, eschatology is frequently reduced to the question of whether one is pre-, mid-, or post-tribulational, with the unstated assumption that these options somehow encapsulate one's convictions regarding eschatology. Suffice it to say, this anemic perspective on eschatology is quite unfortunate.

On the contrary to the above, I would argue that the church is in desperate need of a recovery of sound biblical eschatology. Simply put, eschatology is the biblical language of hope, and it provides Christians with an indispensable sense of bearing and comfort in this life. The church desperately needs a return to a biblical eschatology that provides Christians with both courage for today and hope for tomorrow. Additionally, if we may borrow a bit from Paul's terminology, Christians need a *wartime eschatology* that is fit for the conflict at hand (cf. 2 Cor 10:3–6). To borrow from Geerhardus Vos, we will operate under the presupposition that “the Christian life is semi-eschatological,” in that “it partakes in principle of the powers and privileges of the world to come.”⁴ Christians are eschatological creatures in need of

³ Taken from the Greek word *χίλιοι*, chiliasm referring to a specific interpretation of the thousand-year reign of Revelation 20 that includes an earthly thousand year of Christ following the Second Coming. See F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd Revised edition. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 332; Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Greenville: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 85. Foundationally, chiliasm recognizes two eschatological resurrections and two kingdoms (one Messianic and one divine); see Geerhardus Vos, “The Pauline Eschatology and Chiliasm,” *The Princeton Theological Review* IX, no. 1 (1911): 33.

⁴ Vos, “The Pauline Eschatology and Chiliasm,” 34. Vos continues: “The most fundamental way of affirming this is by ascribing to the Christian a ‘spiritual’ state of existence, for the πνεῦμα is the characteristic element of the heavenly life of the αἰὼν μέλλων.”

eschatological formation. Again, a healthy eschatology is a whole-Bible eschatology that provides Christians with faith and hope in the face of trials and tribulations, precisely because Christ is victorious (see John 16:33). What the Christian church needs is not escapism or storm-shelter eschatology, but a wartime eschatology for the battles of this age.

Yet a sufficiently robust eschatology will be precisely that—one that is broadly comprehensive and richly biblical, as opposed to an outlook that is stilted or malnourished. Eschatology is a message of resounding hope, and there is much to lament concerning the trends of pessimistic and hopeless eschatology that have often plagued Christian circles, often notably so at the popular level of discourse. Counter to that trend of pessimism, there has been a noticeable (and welcome) rise in a professedly “hopeful” eschatology in recent years, quite notably so within American Christian circles. This hopeful eschatology has sometimes found its expression in scholarly and academic writings, but far more often it has been expressed via the popular-level discourse of social media, blog posts, podcasts, and video. Though this eschatology may take different forms, I am referring in general to that swath of eschatology that promotes a hopeful, victorious, triumphant theme of Christ’s victory in this world.

Yet since many (or most) eschatological perspectives may initially claim to hold such an optimistic outlook, we may define this a bit further. When we speak of a hopeful eschatology, we mean that Christ’s eschatological victory is actually being realized *now* through the church, and it is not solely relegated to a yet-future event(s). This may be expressed in recognizing that the cross brought victory as well as redemption, and that the call to disciple the nations will be successfully accomplished in this world. Further still, this hopeful eschatological victory is markedly concerned with the manifestation of Christ’s reign in this world (both in heaven and on earth), and it is not referring to a solely spiritualized or ethereal manifestation of otherworldly eschatological victory (bifurcating the heavenly from the earthly). There are many who may count themselves as partakers in this hopeful

eschatology, but it is here that I think a word of irenic and in-house caution may be in order, a sort of intramural plea. This word of caution is quite simple: to be sufficiently biblical, a relentlessly hopeful eschatology must not neglect to incorporate a robust theology of suffering. That is, we simply cannot entertain an over-realized or enthusiastic eschatology which has no room for sin, suffering, and tribulation in this life, elements which await the consummation of Christ's return for their final rectification. What follows in this article is a call for balance, a call that is both congenial and seemingly necessary: to be both biblically faithful and sufficiently encouraging, our eschatology must account for ongoing suffering in the life of the church.

Though the appeal to account for suffering will surely sound quite disagreeable to many ears, there is a substantive need for an accounting for suffering in our eschatology. The church stands in a time of victory already achieved, while such victory is not-yet consummated. Hence, suffering (to varying extents) is fundamentally endemic to the Christian experience in this world. This is an outworking of the *inaugurated eschatology* that has fortunately become quite widely accepted in eschatological circles, recognizing that there is an *already* victory (and an *already* conquering of sin/evil) that is awaiting a *not-yet* consummation (and a *not-yet* cessation of suffering). A common illustration of this is the V-Day/D-Day illustration popularized by Oscar Cullman (and later Greg Beale, among others), which describes a wartime victory that has presently been achieved while recognizing fierce battlefield fighting that still lies ahead.⁵ This inaugurated understanding

⁵ For example, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 21. Also *Ibid.*, 14, 18, 20–22, 39, 298ff.; G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *The Story Retold: A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 466; C. Samuel Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Scotland: Mentor, 2013), 429n7, 439, 444, cf. 433ff; R. Fowler White, "Agony, Irony and Victory in Inaugurated Eschatology: Reflections on the Current Amillennial-Postmillennial Debate," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 62, no. Issue 2 (2000): 162; Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 111–112; Scott A. Swanson, "How Does 'Thy Kingdom Come' before the End? Theology of the Present and Future Kingdom in

of suffering recognizes that Christians are victorious in this world *amidst* suffering and persecution, even as there is a divine use of suffering for the very purpose of achieving Christian victory in this world. Suffering does not signify defeat, and victory does not prohibit suffering.

The dynamic of an inaugurated wartime victory is a biblically faithful and reasonably helpful way to understand the manifestation of eschatological victory. That is, an inaugurated wartime victory that accounts for an ongoing dynamic of suffering helps clarify both biblical truth and the lived experience of the church. In one sense, this means that eschatology is a story of what has already been accomplished. This observation should ring true, as Christ has declared with finality that “It is finished” (Τετέλεσται, John 19:30).⁶ Yet just as in an ongoing war whose outcome has been conclusively decided, and there are still fierce battles ahead to be fought, the enemy is still present; the threat is extant and palpable; and there are undeniable struggles ahead that appear just as intense as those that have come before.⁷ Yet in another sense—one which we cannot overlook—the war has been decided in the fullest measure. There may be real fighting and grave threats which persist in this world, but the war has truly been won. Christ has “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open

the Book of Revelation,” in Ryan C. McIlhenny, ed., *Kingdoms Apart: Engaging the Two Kingdoms Perspective* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2012), 206.

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this work are to the English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016). Greek references reflect Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*; also Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, Fifth Revised Edition (with Morphology). (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014).

⁷ The common comparison regarding this dynamic in eschatology is often represented with the analogy of D-Day and V-Day (or perhaps V-E Day and V-J Day) in World War II; see the use of this analogy in Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 87; Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 21; G. K. Beale, “The Millennium in Revelation 20:1-10: An Amillennial Perspective,” *Criswell Theological Review* 11, no. 1 (2013): 62; George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1974), 120; William F. Cook and Charles E Lawless, *Spiritual Warfare in the Storyline of Scripture: A Biblical, Theological, and Practical Approach*, 2019, 96.

shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Col 2:15).⁸ It is on this theme of suffering amidst ongoing triumph that the following discussion will focus, though a few words of definition are first in order.

The Need for Robust Eschatology

If this is an appeal for a retrieval of a theology of suffering within a hopeful eschatology, we must certainly be precise in what we mean by the term *eschatology*. The precise definition of *eschatology* has been fraught with no small amount of disagreement over its meaning, though in general terms we may recognize *eschatology* to refer to the *last things*, or perhaps to the *final* or *ultimate things*.⁹ The word *eschatology* is a blend of the Greek words ἔσχατος (“last”) and λόγος (“word”), carrying the sense that it is generally a study of the consummating, ultimate, and conclusive events that are to take place in redemptive history.¹⁰ As such, eschatology generally occupies the closing chapters of various theological textbooks. However, isolating eschatology to a theological bookend is certainly a detrimentally truncated view of this expansive doctrine. As the reader of Scripture considers the Great Story that is progressively unfolding, one may recognize that this story extends far deeper and ranges far wider than a description of a

⁸ Both terms of military triumph, while θριαμβεύω occurs only here and in the “triumphal procession” of 2 Cor 2:14; see Walter Bauer and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BDAG)*, 3rd Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 100, 459.

⁹ I. Howard Marshall, “Slippery Words 1: Eschatology,” *Expository Times* 89 (1978): 264–269. Cf. G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 129.

¹⁰ See Bauer and Danker, *BDAG*, 313; Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 1091; David F. Wright, Sinclair B. Ferguson, and J. I. Packer, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology*, First Ed. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 1988), 228–231.

few concluding events.¹¹ For example, Greg Beale addresses the prescient concern with such a truncated view of eschatology:

However, such an understanding of the latter days that views them as arriving only at the very end of history needs rethinking. The phrase “latter days” (and similar phrases) occurs numerous times in the NT and often does not refer exclusively to the very end of history, as we typically think of it. This wording is used frequently to describe the end times as beginning already in the first century. Consequently, a survey of these phrases in the NT as well as a brief overview of the language in the OT, Judaism, and the Apostolic Fathers demand that the popular and even often-held scholarly view be reassessed.¹²

Beale’s appeal for a reassessment amounts to viewing eschatology in light of the whole of the biblical canon, and not simply relegating such a doctrine to the final chapters of the story. The *things of the end* reach quite far and range quite wide. Yet in order to speak about these *things of the end*, the biblical reader must first get a bit of perspective on the whole of the story in order to fully appreciate its conclusion.

Instead of a truncated view, we may instead pursue a more robust eschatology, one that takes into account the eschatological flow of the whole of Scripture. Keith Mathison encapsulates this impetus quite well when he observes:

Eschatology in a broader sense, however, concerns what Scripture teaches about God’s purposes in Christ for history. As such, eschatology does include a study of the consummation of God’s purposes at the end of history, but it also includes a study of the stages in the unfolding of those purposes. . . . If, for example, the first coming of

¹¹ I will borrow from the parlance of C.S. Lewis by using the phrase “Great Story” to refer to the whole of the biblical meta-narrative. On reading the Bible as an eschatological storyline, see Beale, *NTBT*, 163.

¹² Beale, *NTBT*, 130.

Christ inaugurated the last days, then a study of biblical eschatology must include a study of Christ's first advent as well as his second. It must also include a study of God's preparation in history for the eschatological first advent of Christ. In other words, eschatology must involve a redemptive-historical study of the entire Bible.¹³

A robust understanding of eschatology gives the Christian definite theological bearings regarding their place in the flow of the redemptive saga, containing elements that are both personal and global, both present and future. The *telos* of a robust eschatology will produce a reading of Scripture which places great emphasis on the new-creational paradigm of the consummated order of the coming eschaton.¹⁴ The things of this age are moving in a direction, and that movement must be kept in sharp focus. God has redemptive plans for the created order, and those redemptive plans involve an eschatological escalation toward a *new* created order in which all the promises of God find their ultimate consummation. The *telos* of eschatology accordingly recognizes the reclamation and restoration that are found in the redemptive flow accomplished in the work of Christ, concluding with Christ's reclamation and restoration of His people amidst the fiery judgment that accompanies His return (see 1 John 4:17; 2 Pet 3:7).

Eschatology is fundamentally the account of how God is restoring all things to Himself through the victorious work of Jesus Christ: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor 1:20). Therefore, eschatology proper concerns the *things of the end* (Christ's return, the final judgment, the glorification of the saints, the New Heavens and Earth, etc.), but it also involves the totality of events that propel the

¹³ Keith A. Mathison, *From Age to Age* (P & R Publishing Co, 2014), 2. See also Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1999).

¹⁴ See Charles R. Kennedy, "Telos," in William Smith, ed., *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865), 1103; Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 280–281; Bauer and Danker, *BDAG*, 998.

story along toward its final conclusion.¹⁵ This is quite important to note, because eschatology is not only found in one chapter of Scripture, nor even within one book of Scripture. Instead, eschatology stretches across the whole breadth and depth of Scripture. The message of the Bible is an inherently eschatological message—it is a redemption narrative that is insuppressibly moving toward a glorious, definitive consummation. There is a quite widely-circulated illustration about a group of blind men who are attempting to describe an elephant based on their sense of touch, while each man is limited by what his hands can feel (whether its leg, or ear, etc.). None of the men provides an accurate description of the entire elephant, because examining only a portion of the elephant (to the detriment of the other parts) does not give an accurate representation of the whole. Similarly, eschatology entails *all* of Scripture, and a robust interpretation of eschatology must develop accordingly. What is being advocated here is a sort of “whole-canon biblical eschatology,” in which all of Scripture is considered by observing the constituent themes and topics that progressively weave together to form the whole.¹⁶

Accordingly, if our eschatological reading does not provide a clear and compelling picture of the victorious Christ, we have most certainly made grievous mistakes in our study. Christ is the prophesied

¹⁵ See also Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1995), 1; Mathison, *From Age to Age*, 2.

¹⁶ On thematic developments within Scripture and a whole-Bible reading, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard Duane Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2011), 58. On applying both a “canonical” and “theological” approach, see Jeremy M. Kimble and Ched Spellman, *Invitation to Biblical Theology: Exploring the Shape, Storyline, and Themes of Scripture*, Invitation to Theological Studies Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 42; cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2003), 81ff; William J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 9, 11; T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2013).

victor of the story (Gen 3:15), the one of whom the prophets spoke (John 1:45), the one who possesses all authority in both heaven and earth (Matt 28:18), the one whose Spirit indwells His children (Rom 8:9), and the one who will return in glory to judge the living and the dead (Rev 22:12). But this goes far beyond a simple declaration or assertion—in other words, one cannot affirm this statement yet deny it in practice. If an understanding of eschatology places the focus of the Great Story on anyone or anything other than Christ, if it markets fear and does not generate peace, or if it produces despair and not hope, we must staunchly caution that such a venture does not sound like the eschatological message of Scripture. Our appeal here is for this victorious eschatological recognition, yet accompanied by the words of the one who walked the road to Golgotha: “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’” (Matt 16:24).

Sources of Contention

What may we say about a hopeful eschatology that is both robust and biblical? More specifically, what may we say concerning the necessary element of *suffering* within a hopeful eschatology? Our goal is to provide a measured balance to the twin errors of triumphalism and defeatism, by means of defending the element of suffering as a sort of teleological corrective for eschatology. As an initial observation toward that end, we may recognize that there is a sense in which Christians are commanded to wage spiritual war through the work of eschatology. That does not mean that eschatology is inherently caustic or disparaging, but there is certainly a sense in which Christian eschatology involves an offensive approach.¹⁷ Paul’s words are instructive in this regard:

¹⁷ *Offensive* as opposed to *defensive*, though the word’s alternate meaning could well apply in certain cases.

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. (2 Cor 10:3-5)

In this passage, Paul uses terms that are quite noticeably expressions of military conquest.¹⁸ Paul exhorts the Corinthian believers to “wage war” (στρατεύω), yet not according to their “flesh.” Likewise, the Corinthian Christians have been given weapons to be used for “warfare” (στρατεία) that are not of the “flesh” but are of weapons of divine power. Consequently, they are instructed to “destroy” (καθαίρω). The objects of their destruction are those things that are raised against the knowledge of God, and they are to likewise take every thought “captive” (αἰχμαλωτίζω) in the course of their obedience. Accordingly, Christians are admonished to put on the appropriate armor for battle, described as the “whole armor of God” (Eph 6:10,13), in order that they may wage war “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers [κοσμοκράτορας]¹⁹ over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). The eschatological admonition for Christians (those on whom the end of the ages has come; see 1 Cor 10:11) is to pick up the armor of war.

Yet although many may agree on the *tenor* of eschatological conflict, questions persist on the *nature* of such conflict. Is this eschatological battle to be fought in heaven, or on earth? Is this eschatological victory achieved within the walls of the church, or does it extend into all of life? How do we weigh the qualifications of eschatological victory—

¹⁸ Roger L. Omanson and John Ellington, *A Handbook on Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 178.

¹⁹ Κοσμοκράτωρ, a *hapax legomenon* carrying the sense of supernatural “world rulers.” See Bauer and Danker, *BDAG*, 561.

that is, what does victory *look* like? It is in answering these definitional particulars that the recognizable divisions between the various millennial views tend to occur. While chiliasm is not completely absent from this discussion, this present dialogue is more aimed toward those within the postmillennial and amillennial schools of thought. It has often been observed that these monikers (*post-* and *a-*) are not always overtly helpful or adequately descriptive, as both of these eschatological positions share much in common, having only been substantively differentiated from one another in recent years. There is also an increasing consensus between these views on issues such as the length and contours of the kingdom, the progression of the epochs/ages, and the defeat and restraint of Satan,²⁰ among other foundational issues, while there remains work that is yet to be done concerning the nature and timing of the kingdom (and therefore its manifestation and application in this world).

We may also lament that these eschatological views (at least in title) are statedly concerned with the events of the millennium (χίλια ἔτη), a period that is specifically named only in Revelation 20, where it appears in each of six successive verses (20:2,3,4,5,6,7). However, we may recognize that the implications of these millennial perspectives stretch far beyond that individual chapter, impacting (or being impacted by) how one approaches the biblical narrative at large.²¹ Since we are here to address the theme of suffering and not to consider millennialism directly, we will approach the millennium herein as referring to the period that “stands for the whole time between the life of

²⁰ Though Cornelis Venema may be correct when he observes that many within postmillennialism echo those in premillennialism by defining the binding of Satan as a complete cessation of activity; see Cornelis P. Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2000), 317.

²¹ “χίλια ἔτη” is also found in a symbolic reference in 2 Pet 3:8: “But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years [χίλια ἔτη], and a thousand years [χίλια ἔτη] as one day.”

Jesus on earth and his second coming.”²² Marcellus Kik explains this conception of the millennium from a postmillennial perspective quite well:

So when we speak of the kingdom of God, the millennial kingdom, and even the kingdom (Christ’s) of glory, we refer to the kingdom that God has given exclusively to the God-man for a definite period of time. The millennium, in other words, is the period of the gospel dispensation, the Messianic kingdom, the new heavens and new earth, the regeneration, etc. The millennium commenced either with the ascension of Christ or with the day of Pentecost and will remain until the second coming of Christ. There was a period of time when Jesus received the kingdom and there will be a period of time when He will surrender it to the Father.²³

There are some articulations of the millennium which may place more or less emphasis on a golden age that is differentiated from the millennial period, though most look for that millennial period (however articulated) to progress toward a time wherein individual regenerations eventually lead to a Christianized rejuvenation in social, economic, political and cultural areas of life.²⁴ This starting point should allow us to address the intramural discussion of eschatological suffering within such a millennial context.

²² Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 20 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 222–223; G. K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 421; cf. Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 281–282.

²³ J. Marcellus Kik, *Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1974), 17. We may note that Kik includes the conception of “new heavens and new earth” in his definition, which is typically understood as inaugurated and not-yet consummated.

²⁴ Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub Co, 1958), 14.

A Few Underlying Issues

As we venture into broadly postmillennial thought, there are certain definitional categories that must impact our understanding of suffering within a presumably victorious eschatology. There has been quite substantive dialogue and growth in eschatology observable over the past century (particularly in several notable areas of agreement between amillennial and postmillennial thought), and finding universally-accepted representatives of an eschatological perspective is quite a tall order. Though it has since become a well-worn trope of sorts, Greg Bahnsen once identified postmillennial thought with a characteristic and inherent sense of *optimism*: “In short, postmillennialism is set apart from the other two schools of thought [premillennialism and amillennialism] by its essential optimism for the kingdom in the present age.”²⁵ As suggested above, this identifying feature of optimism can become a bit of a misnomer or cliché, yet there is a reason that postmillennial thought is often described with language of optimism. Whereas presently there is only a somewhat inconsistent experience of the kingdom’s benefits in this world, there is a time of realized gospel triumph which will precede Christ’s return. Yet this expectation of gospel success is not to suggest a complete absence of evil or sin, as Boettner clarifies:

This does not mean that there ever will be a time on this earth when every person will be a Christian, or that all sin will be abolished. But it does mean that evil in all its many forms eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions, that Christian principles will be the rule, not the exception, and that Christ will return to a truly Christianized world.”²⁶

²⁵ Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism,” *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, no. III (1976): 66.

²⁶ Boettner, *The Millennium*, 14.

Accordingly, postmillennial thought may be accurately (albeit generally) characterized by an expectation of gospel success in this world prior to Christ's second coming.

Here we may identify one underlying issue which impacts a theology of suffering within a hopeful eschatology. There is a frequent lament from postmillennial circles that the other eschatological views are overtly negative and pessimistic in their outlook. Again, we return to Kik:

To say that the defeat of Satan will only come through a cataclysmic act at the second coming of Christ is ridiculous in the light of these passages. To think that the church must grow weaker and weaker and the kingdom of Satan stronger and stronger is to deny that Christ came to destroy the works of the devil; it is to dishonor Christ; it is to disbelieve His Word. We do not glorify God nor His prophetic word by being pessimists and defeatists.²⁷

Kik is not alone in this critique, and it is not without substance—herein lies the challenge of suffering. For example, Kim Riddlebarger (author of one of the seminal works in amillennialism) observes that the church age is definitionally marked by conflict, suffering, and even martyrdom, ergo suffering is a persistent expectation for the Christian in this age.²⁸ This expectation of suffering has often been sharply criticized by those within traditionally postmillennial circles, as the expectation of persisting suffering is often equated with an inescapably pessimistic eschatology. Ken Gentry's critique is illustrative: "Not surprisingly, the defenders and extenders of pessimistic eschatologies often speak of suffering and sorrow as the lot of Christians *throughout* the Christian history, with no hope of a let up."²⁹

²⁷ Kik, *Eschatology of Victory*, 19.

²⁸ Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*, Expanded Edition. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 207.

²⁹ Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*, Third Edition. (Chesnee: Victorious Hope Publishing, 2021), 34. Gentry's Appendix on the

To summarize this underlying problem, certain postmillennial critiques of amillennialism often include the critique of eschatological suffering as an ongoing expectation for the church until Christ's second coming. This has been especially prevalent in some of the writings of those in the twentieth-century reconstructionist movement, as Rushdoony may serve as an example: "Let us now examine some common traits of amillennialism and premillennialism. First, both regard attempts to build a Christian society or to further Christian reconstruction as either futile or wrong. If God has decreed that the world's future is one of downward spiral, then indeed Christian reconstruction is futile."³⁰ Rushdoony's comments are clearly in reference to a specific application of his postmillennial outlook (Christian reconstructionism), yet it exemplifies the underlying critique that views the suffering taught by amillennialism to be an impediment to eschatological impact in society. In this perspective, suffering is defeatist since any such efforts at Christian society would be ineffectual and pointless. The critique does not end there, as Rushdoony continues:

In theory, the amillennial position holds that there is a parallel development of good and evil, of God's Kingdom and Satan's Kingdom. In reality, amillennialism holds that the major area of growth and power is in Satan's Kingdom, because the world is seen as progressively falling away to Satan, the church's trials and tribulations increasing, and the end of the world finding the church lonely and sorely beset. There is no such thing as a millennium or a triumph of Christ and His Kingdom in history. The role of the saints is at

postmillennial understanding of suffering does not appear in some print editions of Gentry's work (including the one used for reference herein); this current work accessed the appendix material via <https://theonomyresources.com/pdfs/he-shall-have-dominion-ken-gentry.pdf>, last accessed June 1, 2023.

³⁰ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Meaning of Postmillennialism* (Vallecito: Chalcedon Foundation, 1977), 10.

best to grin and bear it, and more likely to be victims and martyrs. The world will go from bad to worse in the pessimistic viewpoint.³¹

One familiar with amillennial scholarship may cry foul at certain points that Rushdoony here raises, yet we may recognize the powerful role that Christian suffering plays in the tone and tenor of his critique. Other postmillennial scholars have critiqued amillennial representatives such as Geerhardus Vos for effectively blurring the lines of the work of the kingdom as it is manifested in this world, particularly so in regard to the subject of suffering.³² Gentry is helpful in clarifying that the conventional postmillennial position does not reject the *presence* of suffering, but the *persistence* of suffering: “The theme of relentless suffering for the Church throughout history is pervasive in contemporary Christian literature. The point is clear: the pessimistic eschatologies interpret the suffering theme in Scripture as prophetically ordained for all times. It is not, however, predestined for all time.”³³ Further, Gentry notes that the definitional contention that sets apart the postmillennial position is the conviction that the Suffering Church will eventually and inevitably become the Victorious Church—that is, that suffering is not a persisting and static principle, but only a transitory reality while the church is yet living among an ungodly majority.”³⁴ Therefore, the difference being noted here is not the current presence of suffering *per se*, but of the eschatological persistence of suffering—which is quite a valuable (and essential) distinction.

It should, then, be quite clear that a primary postmillennial critique of other eschatologies is that they entertain a pessimism which includes a proclivity to expect suffering throughout the extent of the

³¹ Rushdoony, *Meaning of Postmillennialism.*, 8–9.

³² See, for example, Kik’s critique that Vos “does not make a clear distinction between the Messianic kingdom and the consummate kingdom in his eschatology” (in reference to the “new heavens and a new earth” passage treated in Joseph Alexander’s *Prophecies of Isaiah*, Vol I). Kik, *Eschatology of Victory*, 5–6.

³³ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 529.

³⁴ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 536, 529.

church age. Though his conception of the millennium and the golden age may differ from some modern postmillennial explanations, Boettner is again helpful in framing the expectation of hopeful progress that is inherent in postmillennialism even as his definition grapples with the extant presence of sin:

The postmillennialist looks for a golden age that will not be essentially different from our own so far as the basic facts of life are concerned. This age gradually merges into the millennial age as an increasing proportion of the world's inhabitants are converted to Christianity. Marriage and the home will continue, and new members will enter the human race through the natural process of birth, as at present. Sin will not be eliminated but will be reduced to a minimum as the moral and spiritual environment of the earth becomes predominantly Christian. Social, economic, and educational problems will remain but with their unpleasant features greatly eliminated and their desirable features heightened. Christian principles of belief and conduct will be the accepted standards. Life during the millennium will compare with life in the world today in much the same way that life in a Christian community compares with that in a pagan or irreligious community.³⁵

This is a helpful glimpse into the characteristic postmillennial hopefulness: God saves, the nations are discipled, God's blessings flow forth as His law is pursued, and the world becomes tangibly Christianized, all in the expectation of Christ's return to crush Satan's final rebellion and institute (or consummate) the new heavens and earth.³⁶ Yet what

³⁵ Loraine Boettner, "Postmillennialism," in Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 120–121.

³⁶ "What if the following scenario were the case? First, God saves men through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Second, these men respond in faith to God's dominion assignment, given to us through our fathers, Adam, Noah, and Christ in the great commission (Matthew 28:18–20). Third, these regenerate men begin to study the law of God, subduing their own hearts, lives, and areas of responsibility in terms of God's comprehensive law-order. Fourth, the blessings of God begin to flow toward

may we say of the expectation that “sin will not be eliminated” and “problems will remain?” What then of suffering in this world?

Recognition of Suffering

How may we work toward an understanding of suffering in this world? First, we may recognize that Scripture reflects a certain expectation for suffering, as indicated in Christ’s words in the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt 5:10–12)

these who are acting in His name and in terms of His law. Fifth, the stewardship principle of “service as a road to leadership” begins to be acknowledged by those who call themselves Christian, in every sphere of life: family, institutional church, schools, civil government, economy. This leads to step six, the rise to prominence of Christians in every sphere of life, as Satanists become increasingly impotent to handle the crises that their world-and-life view has created. Seventh, the law of God is imposed progressively across the face of each society which has declared commitment to Christ. Eighth, this provokes foreign nations to jealousy, and they begin to imitate the Christian social order, in order to receive the external blessings. Ninth, even the Jews are provoked to jealousy, and they convert to Christ. Tenth, the conversion of the Jews leads to an unparalleled explosion of conversions, followed by even greater external blessings. Eleventh, the kingdom of God becomes worldwide in scope, serving as a down payment by God to His people on the restoration which will come beyond the day of judgment. Twelfth, the forces of Satan have something to provoke them to rebellion, after generations of subservience outwardly to the benefits-producing law of God. Thirteenth, this rebellion by Satan is immediately smashed by Christ in His final return in glory and judgment. Fourteenth, Satan, his troops of angels, and his human followers are judged, and then condemned to the lake of fire. And finally, fifteenth, God sets up His new heaven and new earth, for regenerate men to serve in throughout all eternity...” Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God’s Program for Victory* (Tyler: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1983), 176–177.

Accordingly, it may come as little surprise that this expectation of suffering was present even within early Judaism, an expectation which was later mirrored in the New Testament writings. Beale observes: “Elements within Judaism anticipated the advent of deception in the last days occurring alongside suffering in the covenant community—deception that would be subtle, drawing those away from the Christian community, and ultimately leading to their destruction (Dan 11:30–45, cf. 2 Thess 2:3).”³⁷ This contention by Beale is in keeping with the two-age model of eschatology (that of *this age* and *the age to come*), recognizing that there is a real and substantive victory that Christ has accomplished even while suffering and persecution are extant hallmarks of *this age* that is still passing away.³⁸

We may recognize that some eschatologies have certainly tended toward pessimism, including the expectation that everything essentially will spiritually decline up to the point of Christ’s return, yet that perspective is not what is in view here. Rather, we are examining the perspective which includes an expectation of a continuing battle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), a war which was won in Christ’s earthly ministry, and a war which will be consummated upon Christ’s second coming.³⁹ Neither should this observation be relegated to an exclusively postmillennial or amillennial camp, as proponents of both views have echoed just such an expectation. Again, we may note that Bahnsen observes that sin will be reduced while not totally eliminated, and Boettner likewise observes that evil will “eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions” though not all sin will be abolished.⁴⁰ Boettner goes on to even further

³⁷Beale, *NTBT*, 156, 190, 202. See also Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 111.

³⁸ See Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 36–38; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 940–942.

³⁹ We would echo Beale’s emphasis on not only Christ’s death, but also His resurrection and ascension; see Beale, *Revelation*, 177.

⁴⁰ Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, 63; cf. Bahnsen, “The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism”; Loraine Boettner, “Postmillennialism,” in George Eldon Ladd et al., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1977), 118. Anthony Hoekema advances a

qualify that “evil, however, does not cease to exist, nor is it necessarily decreased in amount,” and further that “at the end of the millennium it [evil] breaks out in a terrible rebellion that all but overwhelms the saints and the holy city.” Boettner’s words are quite a weighty allowance for an appreciable continuation of evil (and thereby suffering) in this world, and one that could ostensibly find affirmation in postmillennial and amillennial circles alike.⁴¹ Boettner concludes that although Christ rules with a rod of iron, that “this does not mean that all sin will ever be eradicated.”⁴² Similar to Boettner’s remarks, Gary North likewise recognizes that the conquest of the gospel in this world is a process that entails ongoing sin and suffering: “The process will be one of growth or decay. The process may be an ebb and flow, heading for victory for the church or defeat for the church, in time and on earth.”⁴³ Likewise, Gentry notes that “Suffering is an important feature of God’s governance of His people,” something that is often “ethically necessary in many times” such that “the people of God can expect suffering in their temporal experience.”⁴⁴ Yet with this growing consensus on the ongoing presence of sin and suffering amidst Christ’s triumphant victory, how are we to understand the eschatological impact of such suffering?

Suffering Sanctifies

Accounting for the presence of sin and suffering in this world is the task of theodicy, though our question here is far more modest (and

compelling critique of Boettner’s presentation, including Boettner’s neglect of an exposition of Rev 20:1–10, as well as a lack of definition concerning technical progress as it relates to “goodness.” See Anthony A Hoekema, “An Amillennial Response,” in Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, 149–154.

⁴¹ Loraine Boettner, “Postmillennialism,” in Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, 121.

⁴² Loraine Boettner, “Postmillennialism,” 125.

⁴³ North, *Unconditional Surrender*, 182, 193.

⁴⁴ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 529–30.

manageable): what is the role of suffering within eschatology? That is, what should we expect a recognition of suffering to produce in a hopeful eschatology? One reason an understanding of suffering is quite indispensable in eschatology is that it is a mechanism of Christian sanctification. There is a teleological quality to suffering, in which Christians are being redeemed and remade through the very *means* of suffering. This is quite evident from John's opening in the Revelation (1:9), in which his Christological focus is immediately evident: Christ is the focal point, sustainer, and victorious conqueror upon whom the believers are to set their focus in the midst of their suffering. Yet at the same time, John describes himself as a "fellow-partaker" (συγκοινωνός) with them in this suffering—indicating they share active participation in suffering, even while the mention of "kingdom" and "endurance" reveal the victorious nature of their mutual suffering.⁴⁵ From the very outset of the Revelation, the concepts suffering and trials seem inseparably linked with the concepts of victory and kingdom triumph—Christians will experience kingdom triumph directly *through* the experience of suffering and tribulation, not *despite* them.⁴⁶

In John Calvin's reasoning, this experience of suffering is a means by which the Christian is to follow Christ. Calvin observes: "It teaches us, thus humbled, to rest upon God alone, with the result that we do not faint or yield. Hope, moreover, follows victory in so far as the Lord, by performing what he has promised, establishes his truth for the time to come. Even if these were the only reasons, it plainly appears how much we need the practice of bearing the cross."⁴⁷ For Calvin, such suffering bears an eschatological mark insofar as it moves us to persevere to the very end:

⁴⁵ Bauer and Danker, *BDAG*, 952; Beale, *Revelation*, 45.

⁴⁶ So also Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, 56; Beale, *Revelation*, 45.

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1 & 2*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 3.8.3.

And it is of no slight importance for you to be cleansed of your blind love of self that you may be made more nearly aware of your incapacity; to feel your own incapacity that you may learn to distrust yourself; to distrust yourself that you may transfer your trust to God; to rest with a trustful heart in God that, relying upon his help, you may persevere unconquered to the end; to take your stand in his grace that you may comprehend the truth of his promises; to have unquestioned certainty of his promises that your hope may thereby be strengthened.⁴⁸

Suffering may then lead the Christian not only to trust God, but further to boldly persevere until the end of things. This is surely a bold message of eschatological hope.

The eschatological corrective emerges again at this point: suffering is neither a negation of the promises and victory of Christ, nor is it necessarily a component of pessimism or defeatism. Instead, suffering is a necessary—indeed, an indispensable—component of a robust and hopeful eschatology. We may embrace the role of a suffering pilgrim as Christians (1 Pet 2:11) yet by viewing this as the *mode* of our engagement and not as an *alternative* to such eschatological action.⁴⁹ Following in Christ's footsteps is thereby a path for victory *through* suffering for the Christian church. Bahnsen notes that this understanding contains a "new exodus" motif, inasmuch as Jesus entered glory through suffering, so too the new covenant community experiences victory through suffering. This seems particularly clear in the Revelation, where John's depiction of the Christian's suffering reflects the Christological path of victory: "John mentions the suffering of believers first because tribulation marks the path that leads us to the kingdom, just

⁴⁸ Clavin, *Institutes*, 3.8.3.

⁴⁹ Nelson Kloosterman, "Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms in the Thought of Herman Bavinck," in McIlhenny, *Kingdoms Apart: Engaging the Two Kingdoms Perspective*, 77.

as for Jesus the cross preceded the crown.”⁵⁰ In Christ’s work as in the Christian life, suffering precedes glory—as Gentry likewise notes: “The Suffering Christ came forth from the grave as the Victorious Christ. As it is in the school of life, glory follows suffering.”⁵¹

Suffering Guards Against Over-Realization

There is an occasional tendency in hopeful eschatology for us to run a bit too fast. In more precise terms, there is an intrinsic danger in producing an over-realized eschatology, in which there is no budgeting for the ongoing suffering and trials in this life. An eschatological theology of suffering balances against over-realization by recognizing the *already* without neglecting the *not-yet*. By carefully opposing such views that over-realize the eschatological victory we experience in *this age*, we may instead embrace a cruciform theology that includes a sufficiently robust theology of suffering.⁵² Christians thereby experience the blessings and victory of the age to come that has dawned in Jesus Christ, even while we experience this victories alongside the lasting effects of evil at work in this age.

Accounting for eschatological suffering is also imminently practical for Christian living. Though his theological development is not without question in this regard, Martin Luther observed that Christians suffer wrongs in this life in an essentially passive manner, depending on God to act on their behalf and judge those who wrong them.⁵³ In his call for peace, Luther observed:

⁵⁰ Richard D. Phillips, *Revelation*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip G. Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2017), 59.

⁵¹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 535.

⁵² Michael Horton, “Eschatology After Nietzsche: Apollonian, Dionysian or Pauline?,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2, no. 1 (March 2000): 46–47, 49. Horton terms an intersection between the *kingdom of grace* (now) and the *kingdom of glory* (not-yet); Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 940–942.

⁵³ Ashley Null, “Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia,” in Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds.,

Christians do not fight for themselves with sword and musket, but with the cross and with suffering, just as Christ, our leader, does not bear a sword, but hangs on the cross. Your victory, therefore, does not consist in conquering and reigning, or in the use of force, but in defeat and in weakness, as St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1 [10:4], “The weapons of our warfare are not material, but are the strength which comes from God,” and, “Power is made perfect in weakness” [2 Cor. 12:9].⁵⁴

Though these comments may (and should) be weighed against the social upheavals of Luther’s own day, we may recognize that his theology certainly recognized a cruciform theology of Christian living. Suffering, for Luther, is the proper expectation of the Christian in this life.

Having mentioned Luther, we may briefly consider at this point that there is an over-application of his theology of suffering that has apparently left its mark within much modern eschatology (and theology in general). Having made an appeal for an eschatological theology of suffering, we may recognize that this in no way may minimize the power and reality of Christ’s present rule and reign. That is, avoiding an over-realized eschatology cannot give way to an under-realized eschatology. On one hand, we do well to warn against “the toxin of triumphalism arising from an over-realized eschatology that sees our efforts as establishing and ushering in the kingdom of God;” while on the other, we may simultaneously avoid the “equally dangerous toxin—namely, an ingratitude arising from an *underrealized eschatology that refuses to extend the Third Use of the Law beyond personal ethics into social-cultural relationships, an ingratitude that quarantines the active rule of King Jesus, and communal principled response to it, to the church parking*

Christian Life in the World, vol. 5, The Annotated Luther (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1525), 287. These writings of Luther are complicated by their place in his reaction to the peasant revolts of 1524–1525, during which time some of his theological responses have been widely questioned and critiqued.

⁵⁴ Ashley Null, “Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia,” in *Christians Life in the World*, 5:318–319.

lot [emphases in original].”⁵⁵ There is a ditch on both sides that must be avoided: a theology of suffering with neither over-realization nor under-realization. There is a future and final end to suffering, sin, and death, yet that final end will only come with the consummation of Christ’s consummative victory.

Victory Comes Through Suffering

Here is where a theology of suffering is often quite paradoxical for those who advance an eschatology of hope: suffering does not typically look like victory. Suffering seems to indicate defeat, pessimism, and hopelessness (as some of the above critiques reveal). Yet suffering, as we have maintained, is the very mechanism of Christ’s victory in this world. The church triumphs *through* its victorious suffering precisely because it is following Christ, its victorious head (Col 1:18) who has triumphed through the shame and suffering of the cross (Heb 12:2). Further, we may recognize that this impetus is intimately tied to Christ’s self-identification of the eschatological Son of Man—Christ achieves victory over every nation, power, and authority through the mechanism of victory *through suffering* (cf. Dan 7:13–14).⁵⁶ Just as Christ conquered through the *Via Dolorosa*, the church likewise conquers through suffering and persecution as a testimony of their faith: “And they have conquered by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their

⁵⁵ Nelson Kloosterman, “Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms in the Thought of Herman Bavinck,” in McIlhenny, *Kingdoms Apart: Engaging the Two Kingdoms Perspective*, 77.

⁵⁶G. K. Beale, *Redemptive Reversals and the Ironic Overturning of Human Wisdom: “The Ironic Patterns of Biblical Theology: How God Overturns Human Wisdom”* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 99–100. “Son of Man” is Jesus’ favorite self-designation, occurring 30x in Matt, 15x in Mark, 25x in Luke, 12x in John; James Stalker, “The Son of Man,” in James Orr et al., eds., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 2829. Cross & Livingstone observe: “In the NT, a designation applied to Jesus. With one exception (Acts 7:56), it is found only in the Gospels and here always on His own lips.” Cross and Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1529.

testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev 12:11; cf. 1 John 5:4). John Calvin accordingly observes:

And this is what Paul teaches: “Tribulations produce patience; and patience, tried character” [Rom. 5:3–4, cf. Vg.]. That God has promised to be with believers in tribulation [cf. 2 Cor. 1:4] they experience to be true, while, supported by his hand, they patiently endure—an endurance quite unattainable by their own effort. The saints, therefore, through forbearance experience the fact that God, when there is need, provides the assistance that he has promised.⁵⁷

The church’s victory in this world is realized in much the same manner as Christ’s victory was realized in His first coming. Just as Christ suffered, His church will also suffer—yet it is precisely through this cruciform-yet-victorious suffering that true victory is realized for the church in this world (John 16:33).⁵⁸

If the church paradoxically experiences victory through suffering, we may reject the notion that accounting for suffering in this world necessarily produces pessimistic or defeatist eschatology. Further, we may insist that a truly hopeful eschatology *must* account for the biblical instruction concerning suffering in the life of the church—that is, in the present pre-consummate pre-glorified state of things. In the New Testament letters that were written following Christ’s victorious resurrection and ascension, the church was warned of the satanically-inspired rulers and authorities that exist in the heavenly places who would seek to do them harm (ἐπουρανίους; Eph 6:12), even though Christ has *now* been raised above every ruler and authority in the

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1 & 2, 3.8.3.

⁵⁸ See also the development of eschatological victory-through-suffering in Andreas J. Kostenberger, Alexander Stewart, and Apollo Makara, *Jesus and the Future: Understanding What He Taught about the End Times* (Lexham Press, 2018).

heavenly places (Eph 1:20–21, 3:10).⁵⁹ Christ has achieved current epochal victory concomitant with the extant presence of suffering. This dynamic seems quite in keeping with Christ’s victory, in which His triumph was both fulfilled and established even while the Christian is called to follow in those same footsteps as a true disciple/follower (Matt 16:21; Luke 9:22; Ps 8; cf. Dan 7:21–22, 7:18, 24–27; Rev 2).⁶⁰

Yet there is an epochal finality to this theme of suffering that is *not-yet* consummated. For clarity, the experience of suffering is not a detriment to a truly hopeful eschatology. In describing the kingdom of God to the Pharisees, Christ tells us that “The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:20–21). The advance of the kingdom is often quite mysterious, and our perception of events is not always the *true truth* of things. We may remember that the disciples struggled to understand this dynamic at the cross, as even while darkness covered the land during Christ’s crucifixion (Matt 27:45 // Mark 15:33 // Luke 23:44), the truth of things was that Christ’s death brought about the defeat of the rulers and powers of darkness (Col 2:15). Perception is not always reality, and extant suffering does not negate the unstoppable triumph of the kingdom in this world.

An Eschatology of Hope

Though this conception of battlefield eschatology is a spiritual call to arms, it is likewise a call to revel in a victory that has already been achieved. That is to say, the call of a wartime eschatology is foundationally a message of hope. When John penned the opening passage of the Revelation, he described himself as his recipients’ “brother and

⁵⁹ On a biblical-theological approach to eschatological powers, see Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2019), 121–122; Scobie, *The Ways of Our God*, 265.

⁶⁰ Beale, *Redemptive Reversals and the Ironic Overturning of Human Wisdom*, 99–103.

partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus” (Rev 1:9). John’s eschatological message was one of camaraderie and brotherhood, affirming that he participated alongside the church in the tribulation (θλιψις) that is experienced in the expansion of the kingdom. These words are soon followed by the admonition of Christ (specifically in the section to the church in Thyatira) to “hold fast what you have until I come” (Rev 2:25). Tribulation is present, therefore hold fast and persevere.

Christians are in need of a proper perspective on eschatology because it is the means through which encouragement is communicated to the church in peril. When the tribulation of this world rises, Christians are commanded to hold fast until the time of ultimate victory. The vast expanse of what God is accomplishing in this age is often difficult for finite creatures to comprehend—indeed, when different prophets were given glimpses into the unfolding vision of God’s redemptive plan, the gravity and radiance of God’s work left them wholly undone (see Dan 8:27; Rev 1:17). Yet this is precisely where the encouragement of a robust eschatology brings comfort and security in the uncertain times of this life: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (1 Thess 5:11). The biblical message of eschatology gives Christians the language of that encouragement.

Finally, the message of eschatology is given for conflict, not in spite of conflict (or in its absence). Following Joshua’s death and Israel’s continuing conquest of Canaan during the time of the judges over Israel, there was a growing forgetfulness experienced among the people of God. Specifically, Israel forgot the redemptive works of God in their midst: “And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). As a resolution to this problem, God allowed Israel’s enemies to persist among them for a specific purpose: “Now these are the nations that the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan” (Judges 3:1). The pagan nations who made war with Israel were preserved precisely in order to remind

Israel of war, as the next verse clarifies: “It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before” (3:2). God’s people cannot afford to forget the sounds of battle and war, and the message of eschatology is a potent reminder of the war that rages (though its outcome is secure).

If we are studying eschatology appropriately, we should be quite steadfast and immovable in our faith as a normative result (1 Cor 15:58). Our eschatology should not be driven about by the whims and emotions of the given moment, as if our eschatological perception was molded by the momentary experiences of this present life. Instead, the Christian must allow biblical eschatology to form and mold the very way we perceive the world itself, with our eschatology functioning as a sort of corrective lens given to us that we might see rightly.⁶¹ If Christ claims to possess all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18), we dare not look around us at evil and tragedy and question whether He was correct in this assessment. Newspaper headlines and the troubles of this life do not determine the true state of this world. Instead, we take the words of Christ to be the *true truth* of things, and we rely on this truth to properly understand the world around us. A natural disaster does not disprove the words of Christ, but instead the words of Christ give us the proper vision and context through which to view the natural disaster. Vos correctly observes that this is the true context of eschatological hope when we speak of salvation and deliverance:

The idea of σωτηρία is with Paul originally an eschatological idea: it denotes salvation in the day of judgment, salvation from the wrath to come, and from this it is transferred to the present state, inasmuch as the believer receives this immunity, this deliverance in principle now. It is thus of the very essence of salvation that it correlates the Christian’s standing with the great issues of the last day and the world to come. Hence also the καινή κτίσις spoken of

⁶¹ So also Beale, *NTBT*, 23.

in 2 Cor. 5:17, undoubtedly means to the Apostle the personal beginning of that world-renewal in which all eschatology culminates: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation”.⁶²

When we try to determine eschatology by what feels right or makes sense to us in the moment, we will inevitably construct an eschatology of our own making. Likewise, when we venture beyond what is revealed, we find ourselves in perilous waters (cf. Deut 29:29). Rather, the call of the Christian is to find peace, hope, and joy in the biblical message of eschatology—that is to say, in the Person of Jesus Christ. Through this Christ-centered lens, we may begin to form a truly robust wartime eschatology for this age.

⁶² Vos, “The Pauline Eschatology and Chiliasm,” 35.

Book Review
Mere Christendom
by Douglas Wilson

Scott Aniol¹

When Stephen Wolfe’s book *The Case for Christian Nationalism* first came out, I picked up a copy, read the first third of the book, and then decided that it wasn’t really relevant to me at the time. I had written and taught about the biblical relationship between Christianity and culture for over a decade, had fairly firm convictions on the matter, and recognized quickly that I disagreed theologically with Wolfe’s proposal. It was immediately evident to me that his proposal was essentially an application of paedobaptism and postmillennialism to whole nations and, well, as a non-postmillennial Baptist, I didn’t think it was relevant.²

However, earlier this year I began to see a number of young men start praising Wolfe’s book, using phraseology like “baptize the nations,” asserting that the purpose of government is to orient individuals toward Christianity, aggressively calling for the application of Mosaic law to the nation, and loudly proclaiming that Christian Nationalism is the only way to beat back the onslaught of pagan secularism. And many of these young men were Baptist and not postmillennial.

So I read the rest of Wolfe’s book as well as Andrew Torba and Andrew Isker’s *Christian Nationalism: A Biblical Guide to Taking Dominion*

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² Stephen Wolfe is not postmillennial, but my sense when I read his book and started hearing about Christian nationalism was that it was an application of paedobaptism to nations as a natural expression of postmillennial eschatology, which Wilson’s book bears out.

and Discipling Nations, and then I began to make statements online about how what these men were proposing was inherently incompatible with Baptist theology and essentially amounted to postmillennial theonomy. I became concerned about the latent white supremacy appearing at the fringes of the movement and the growing language of agitation that accompanied much of the (quite understandable) angst regarding the quickly devolving condition of our country.

So when Canon Press sent me Doug Wilson's forthcoming book that articulates his vision for *Mere Christendom*, something he has discussed over the years on his blog, my interest was piqued. I wondered how the proposal from this elder statesman of postmillennial theonomy would compare to the recent Christian nationalist language I had read in print and was seeing online.

Wilson's book did not disappoint.

Not that I agree with his vision. As a Baptist who is not postmillennial, I do not. But that's exactly the point. Wilson's *Mere Christendom* confirms two important ideas I have been trying to make in the current debates: (1) building Christian nations is inherently a postmillennial/paedobaptist project, and (2) forming a robust Christian public theology does not require Christian Nationalism.

The book has four parts, the first two presenting the vision for Christendom and the latter two discussing the practical details. In the first section, Wilson characterizes the current mess we are in, and in the second he sets forth his proposal for what he calls "mere Christendom." In the third part, Wilson describes what such a Christendom would look like, particularly dealing with issues related to free speech, and in the fourth part he articulates what he believes would be necessary to build it. Wilson believes we *must* pursue mere Christendom since "secularism has run its course and does not have the wherewithal to resist the demands of radical Islam. Or a radical anything else, for that matter" (69).

Wilson's Vision for a Mere Christendom

Wilson defines Mere Christendom as “a network of nations bound together by a formal, public, civic acknowledgment of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the fundamental truth of the Apostles' Creed” (69). This does not mean a tax-funded established church, but an established church nonetheless, “in the sense that the magistrate has the responsibility to recognize her, to convene synods and councils to seek her counsel, and to listen to her” (70).

His vision for a mere Christendom is predicated upon three fundamental theological presuppositions, the first of which I affirm with qualification, and the latter two with which I disagree.

The Myth of Neutrality

The first foundation is the myth of neutrality. He asserts, “The public square cannot be neutral” (4). He wants to wake up Christians to the reality that “One of the central tactics of our regnant secularism is to pretend that their foundational assumptions are religiously neutral, and that we need not look at them” (35). He quotes Christian Reconstructionist R. J. Rushdoony's famous maxim, “not whether but which” (143). Wilson is convinced that accepting the myth of neutrality has led many Christians to stand idly by while Christendom crumbles in the face of secular liberalism. Instead, Christians ought to recognize that secularism is actually an alternative religion that seeks to cast off the Lordship of Christ.

On this point I agree with Wilson. There is no neutrality on any issue; every matter is either consistent with God's law or it contradicts God's law. There is only right or wrong, good or bad, light or dark. And secularism is a false religion.

Where I disagree with Wilson is in the implications he draws from this principle. Wilson argues that since there is no neutrality in politics, then the only two alternatives are anarchy (secular theocracy) or

theonomy (Christian theocracy). “The Lordship of Christ is not an option that we might select from a row of numerous options,” Wilson argues. “It is Christ or chaos. It is Christ or Antichrist” (70). He believes that the founding of this nation was possible only because it was explicitly Christian: “Republics do not exist without republican virtue. And virtue does not exist apart from the grace of God, as offered in the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (114).

The problem is that Wilson does not seem to give any space for common grace, the *imago Dei*, and the reality of “when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires ... even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Rom 2:14–15). This is what Greg Bahnsen referred to as “borrowed capital” —pagans borrowing biblical values in certain areas of their lives. Even though it is inconsistent with what they say they believe, pagans made in God’s image nevertheless sometimes take advantage of his common grace and do what the law requires.

I do believe that the only grounding for successful living that makes consistent sense is one rooted in the authoritative truth of God’s holy Word and repentant faith in Jesus Christ. When it comes to eternal salvation, it’s Christ or chaos. Yet because all men are made in the image of God (Gen 1:27), because “the heavens are telling the glory of God” (Ps 19:1) and God’s “invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:20), and because God shows common grace even to the unjust (Matt 5:45), unbelieving people often reflect a transcendent morality in their lives that in actuality is inconsistent with their belief system.

“There can be no true liberty that is not grounded in transcendentals” (147). Agreed. “Secularism has no transcendent ground for anything” (138). That’s true for secularism. But even pagans throughout history have sought to build their political systems on transcendental

realities, even though they could not fully account for those realities. I would quickly agree with Wilson that such philosophical grounding is inconsistent with pagan belief and makes most sense from within a biblical worldview, but nevertheless, what Quentin Faulkner has called pagan “world consciousness” is a far cry from Enlightenment secular nominalism. Pagan Greco/Roman thought embodied transcendental grounding for its political philosophy. Wilson believes that “Post-Christian secularists were using Christian capital” (146), and I agree, but other pagans throughout history have done similarly as they apply God’s law written on their hearts.

C. S. Lewis makes this observation in both *Mere Christianity* and *The Abolition of Man*, and in the latter he provides an appendix of many examples of civic laws from various nations around the world that are an embodiment of transcendent morality that ultimately comes from God. These are the very laws that we ought to be promoting and supporting in our own legal system. Pagans can recognize the wisdom of these laws and keep them, though in truth to do so is inconsistent with their own pagan worldview. In fact, as Lewis argues, the propensity of even pagans to recognize the wisdom of God’s moral law opens wonderful opportunities to preach the written Word to those pagans, offering them true freedom and righteousness in Christ.

Interestingly, Wilson appears to acknowledge this reality. For example, he asserts as axiomatic that “it is *self-evident* that we were endowed by the Creator with certain rights that are inalienable, and that among these rights are the right to life, liberty, and property” (34). He suggests that God has “dropped the yeast of His Word, which included that system of case law into the Greco-Roman loaf” (178), an acknowledgment that even pagan Greco-Roman political philosophy reflected something consistent with a biblical-informed political theology. He references Chesterton’s portrayal of “decent (but still lost) pagans of Rome” (209). Wilson chides those in our nation who “try to pretend that they are the only ones in the world who have had these blessings” (203). “Read the story patterns of history,” he admonishes—“the rise

and fall of empires and great nations is one of the oldest stories in the world” (203). Later in the book, Wilson affirms “informed reason, common grace, natural revelation” (223).

Throughout history, pagans have often figured out successful legal systems that reflect biblical values because, since God designed the world to work in a certain way, those kinds of systems just work, and “stupidity doesn’t work” (242). That’s the reality of common grace politics.

The truth is that in matters of the state, the only two options are not Christ or chaos. In his kind providence, God specifically designed human government to provide a third common grace option given to all humankind (not just his redeemed people) that imperfectly preserves a degree of order and peace until Christ establishes his perfect theocratic Kingdom on earth. God’s covenant with Noah in Genesis 9 reveals God’s plan to preserve humankind and creation until the Second Adam establishes his earthly rule. Because of the reality of human rebellion, God provided measures by which in his providence he would preserve the stability of a cursed world through the earthly institution of human government, with its God-given responsibility of capital punishment. Before the Flood, it was Christ or chaos, and it quickly devolved into chaos. After Genesis 9, and especially after Babel, nations formed and prevented chaos as God works his plan of redemption for his people.

I’m afraid many Christians (understandably) want utopia now and they think that can be accomplished by simply asserting Christ’s rule over the nations. But imperfect, common grace order is why God created human government, not utopia. Utopia will come when the King comes. But that leads to the next point.

Paedocommunion and Postmillennialism

The second and third presuppositions of Wilson’s vision are connected: paedocommunion and postmillennialism. He articulates, “The

thing these two doctrines share in common is that they are both, in different ways, an optimistic testimony about the course of future generations” (97). He further explains, “Paedocommunion nurtures the next generation in optimistic faith, and postmillennialism is the grounded hope that God will continue to nurture His Church across multiple generations” (97).

It is important to recognize just how critically fundamental these two presuppositions are to Wilson’s project. He does not really defend the idea of mere Christendom from a sustained biblical argument; in fact, he quotes very little Scripture at all in this section. This is not necessarily a criticism since he acknowledges his own theological presuppositions; he assumes the biblical validity of paedocommunion and postmillennialism (which he has explained and defended elsewhere), and on the basis of these theological commitments, Wilson builds his vision for mere Christendom.

Wilson’s vision is built on the bedrock of these theological presuppositions in two ways. First, Wilson expects Christian parents to baptize their infants, rearing them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, and that “as children grow up in a faithful covenant home, they will come to a genuine profession of faith as a matter of course” (*Standing on the Promises*, 85). That presupposition is essential for Wilson’s proposal since it assumes a necessary continued expansion of God’s people through their children, which will eventually reach a tipping point that results in a majority of the world’s population publicly acknowledging Christ’s Lordship.

Further, this theology is necessary for the idea of Christendom implicitly in that to achieve mere Christendom, you essentially “baptize” the nation first (public acknowledgment of Christ’s Lordship), and then you press for conversions (internal conviction of Christ’s Lordship). I am thankful that throughout the book, Wilson stresses that “formal recognition of the Lordship of Jesus is necessary but not sufficient. More is required than paper commitments” (73). He strongly insists upon “the absolute need for regeneration and the cross of Jesus

Christ. It is only a work of the Spirit that can give us new hearts. Christian civilization is absolutely necessary, but without those new hearts, Christian standards of civilization are intolerable, as can be easily verified” (226–27). Nevertheless, as with literal paedocommunion, the assumption is that public, formal acknowledgment of Christ’s Lordship by those who have not yet personally professed submission to his Lordship is one means God uses to lead individuals to personal acknowledgment.

Of course, as a Baptist, I don’t agree with this fundamental theological foundation. The purpose of Wilson’s book is not to provide a thorough defense of these presuppositions, and so I will not attempt to refute them here. However, I would like to press in a bit on why Baptist theology would necessarily preclude any adoption of the mere Christendom proposal.

A central difference between credobaptist and paedobaptist theologies is that Baptists stress that the New Covenant is “not like” (Jer 31:32) the Old Covenant. In the Old Covenant, the sign of the covenant precedes inner regeneration and personal profession of faith. Thus, the covenant people are comprised of both regenerate and unregenerate people. In the New Covenant, however, inner regeneration and personal profession of faith precede the sign of the covenant. Thus, the covenant people are comprised of only those who profess faith in Christ.

Hopefully it is apparent, then, why as a Baptist I would object to calling people “Christian” who have not personally professed faith. Baptists don’t expect people to acknowledge Christ’s lordship formally and publicly until *after* they actually believe it. In the New Testament, no one is forced to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ—in fact, quite the opposite. Yet this is exactly what would be necessary for anything like “Christian” nations or Christendom.

In terms of the eschatological basis for Wilson’s vision, I actually agree with most of what he believes will happen; our difference is a matter of timing. He argues that there are only three options when it

comes to building Christendom: “(1) Jesus doesn’t care whether or not nations are explicitly Christian. (2) Jesus is opposed to nations being explicitly Christian. (3) Jesus wants nations to be explicitly Christian” (95).

I agree—Jesus does want a theocracy. And he will get what he wants, when he comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead. And it won’t be *mere* Christendom—it will be totalitarian, rule-with-a-rod-of iron theocracy. For now, Jesus is presently redeeming his elect while preserving the world through imperfect governments, but one day he will establish Christendom.

Further, even assuming Wilson’s presuppositions, his vision for Christendom raises some critical questions that largely go unanswered. First, Wilson says he wants an established Church, but *which* Church? In Wilson’s ideal Christian republic, “the Church must be established, in the sense that the magistrate has the responsibility to recognize her, to convene synods and councils to seek her counsel, and to listen to her” (69). Notice the singular “Church.” And again I ask, which Church? Maybe in an episcopal or presbyterian form of church government all local churches would be part of a larger body, but what of the Baptists, Congregationalists, and Bible churches? How would they fit in? Again I say, Baptist theology is incompatible with the notion of Christendom.

The second problem stems from the first. In order to achieve a *mere* Christendom in which a Presbyterian Congress is not flogging Baptists, the doctrinal basis for such a “non-sectarian” Christendom (71) must be reduced to the Apostles’ Creed. Would Roman Catholics, then, be welcomed to the table of Christendom and recognized as Christians? I can appreciate the value of Presbyterians and Baptists happily affirming one another as Christian and working together on various parachurch ministries, all while maintaining their denominational distinctives at the church level; but if the Apostles’ Creed is our only measure of what constitutes Christianity, then we would have to recognize as Christian those who affirm creedal trinitarianism and

Christology but who deny justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. For that matter, Mormons could technically affirm the Apostles' Creed. I am aware that Wilson's church recognizes Roman Catholic baptisms and welcomes them to the Lord's Table, but this Baptist considers Roman Catholicism a false religion.

Third, I am thankful that Wilson's version of postmillennialism affirms that the goal of Christendom will be achieved only through "preaching, baptizing, and discipleship, and not by campaigning, legislating, punditblogging, and so on" (95). What he proposes cannot occur "apart from the widespread dissemination of the gospel among the people" (118). And he believes that it won't happen any time soon. Wilson definitely has a long view. He criticizes "Christendom 1.0" as being too immature to achieve the goal. However, he never clarifies as to when we would know we're ready for "Christendom 2.0." "The world will gradually come to recognize [Christ's Lordship]," he says, but he never tells us how many need to recognize it before we're ready to publicly and formally acknowledge it.

The biggest reason I object to Wilson's mere Christendom proposal, however, is that we simply do not find anything like it in the New Testament. I understand the broader biblical/theological argument set forth by postmillennialists, and I do believe in the importance of systematic theology. But if God wanted us to establish nations that explicitly designate themselves as "Christian," you would think we'd find even the slightest hint of it in the New Testament epistles.

But we don't. What we find is an emphasis upon the fact that Christians are citizens of a heavenly kingdom (Phil 3:20), that we are pilgrims in this present world (1 Pet 2:11), but that we should care about this world nonetheless (1 Tim 2:1-2).

Wilson's Christian Political Philosophy

The second half of Wilson's book is where things get really interesting, because I would suggest that what he offers by way of the

practical details of mere Christendom is not exclusively Christendom, but rather how NT Christians ought to think about common grace politics. He moves on from his postmillennial ideal to practically what kind of government rightly takes into account realities in a sin-cursed world. Not only does this non-postmillennial Baptist find much in this second half with which to agree about how Christians should think about government, but also Wilson's articulation of ideal government ought to restrain the more aggressive Christians who quickly call for outlawing anything they (rightly) think is immoral in culture.

Wilson argues that biblically-informed Christians will favor extremely limited government: "This means embracing the biblical doctrine of the nature of man, which means limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism, which in turn means a removal of many of the temptations to bring in the kingdom with a sword" (158). He agrees with Jefferson, who famously quipped, "government is best which governs least" (122). Though he quibbles with part of what C. S. Lewis said on the matter, Wilson quotes Lewis on this point:

The loftier the pretensions of the power, the more meddlesome, inhuman and oppressive it will be. Theocracy is the worst of all possible governments. All political power is at best a necessary evil: but it is least evil when its sanctions are most modest and commonplace, when it claims no more than to be useful or convenient and sets itself strictly limited objectives. Anything transcendental or spiritual, or even anything very strongly ethical, in its pretensions is dangerous, and encourages it to meddle with our private lives. (119)

Wilson considers himself a theonomist, but he argues that "a commitment to biblical law" does not mean "we are to bring all the requirements of the old order straight across" (153). Rather, especially because we recognize the biblical doctrine of human depravity, we insist upon limited government where we restrain authoritarian tendencies.

“The first thing that would happen in a biblical law order,” Wilson suggests, “is that the EPA, the IRS, the Department of Education, etc. would all be abolished. Legitimate functions of government (Defense, State, etc.) would be significantly downsized or redirected” (72–73). He argues, “What governmental power exists must be fixed, defined, nailed down, watched very carefully, even though it is swathed in the duct tape of multiple Bible verses about man’s depravity” (123). Thus, Wilson actually describes himself as a “theocratic libertarian” (120).

Wilson applies this specifically in two chapters to the biblical necessity of free speech and therefore avoiding the restraint of blasphemy by the power of the state. While as a theonomist Wilson believes in “the need to restore the Bible as the quarry from which to obtain the needed stone for our foundations of social order” (149), he strongly argues against state imposed punishment for blasphemy. He reminds us that “those who want the government to have the right to kill blasphemers are also asking for the government to have the right to kill those who rebuke their blasphemies” (157), and “When you give the state power to punish a blasphemer, you are giving the state the power to blaspheme with impunity” (171). Since rulers are sinners, a healthy recognition of the depravity of man ought to restrain us from giving them the kind of power that would be required to punish blasphemy. “Whenever you give the state plenipotentiary powers to crack down on x, y, and z, what you are actually doing—please remember this—is giving them plenipotentiary powers to commit x, y, and z” (173).

Therefore, “It is better to allow a troubled individual to blaspheme than to give, for the sake of preventing such things, regulatory powers over the definition of blasphemy to the very people most likely to be tempted to get into real blasphemy” (175–76). Wilson calls this “restraining the worst blasphemer first” (the title of Chapter 11).

It’s not that we Christians don’t want to eradicate blasphemy—we do. But “we are not waging war according to the flesh” (2 Cor 10:3); “the artillery of the new covenant is more powerful than what the people of

God had in their possession in the old covenant” (169). We want to eliminate blasphemy, but “not through the law” (158); rather, we do so through gospel conversion. “The central way that Christians are called to transform the world is not to be found in politics,” Wilson insists (221). “Christ gave us our mission and He gave us our methods. The world is to be brought to Christ, with all the nations submitting to Him, agreeing to obey Him. That is the mission. The method consisted of Word and water, bread and wine” (160). Amen.

Wilson argues that inherent protection of free speech by limiting the state’s power “is the theopolitical genius of Christianity” (171). He argues that “The founding of our nation really was exceptional, because the men who drafted our Constitution knew that American politicians, taking one thing with another, would be every bit as sleazy as the same class of men from any other clime” (201). I agree.

However, I would suggest that the U. S. Founders, many of whom professed Christ or at least operated from within the heritage of Christendom, penned the Constitution not with the intent to establish a Christian nation, but rather with the intent to *break* from the notion of Christendom because they recognized the inherent problems with established religion. Wilson himself quotes John Adams’s infamous assertion that the U. S. republic was founded on “reason, morality, and the Christian religion,” while very quickly admitting that Adams was himself Unitarian, “the granddaddy of all the errors of American civic religion” (71). The very founder Wilson quotes to prove that the United States was established as a Christian nation would not fit into a mere Christendom that had the Apostles’ Creed as its basis. Adams was not a Christian. Instead, he was a pagan who was articulating something more like Romans 2 common grace morality cloaked in biblical language. In other words, protection of free speech by limiting the state’s power is actually the theopolitical genius of those who recognized the abuse of power perpetrated by nations with established religion (i.e., Christendom).

Historically, Western Christendom did not favor limited government but the imposition of Christianity through the establishment of religion. The governments of historic Christendom were quite totalitarian, imprisoning, punishing, and even killing those who dared dissent. The founding of America was not an expression of Christendom, it was a repudiation of establishment religion inherent to Christendom. On the other hand, I also may acknowledge that America would likely not have been possible without Christendom. Perhaps a parallel might be that Reformation theology would not have developed with the depth that it did without the heretical teachings of Rome, but that doesn't mean that we give Rome credit for Reformation theology. Similarly, America's federal democratic republic probably would not have developed as exceptionally as it did without the blessings and abuses of Christendom, but that doesn't mean we long for Christendom once again.

So I agree with Wilson that faithful Christians who have anything to say about government should actively limit its power (159). He rightly observes, "Requiring government to remain modest and within the bounds of sanity is therefore one of the most profound ethical requirements that has ever been promulgated among men" (122). But this is not uniquely theonomic—it's simply the best way for government to operate in a sin-cursed world.

Christian Faithfulness

At the end of the day, then, though I disagree with Wilson's mere Christendom proposal, rooted as it is in paedocommunionist and post-millennial presuppositions, I believe Wilson's political philosophy accurately captures what Scripture teaches regarding a Christian's interaction with the state. I'm firmly with him that Christians need a "robust theology of resistance" when the state oversteps its jurisdiction and that "we are to be among the best citizens a magistrate ever had—

we should be diligent and hard-working, dutiful and responsible, so that we might put to silence the ignorance of foolish men” (213).

Where I may differ practically from Wilson and his followers is when they trend toward what I would characterize as political agitation. Though I believe we ought to call public leaders to repentance, we ought to resist when the state attempts to impose its will upon the church, we ought to loudly decry the immoral atrocities of our day (abortion, gay “marriage,” transgenderism, and child mutilation), and we ought to boldly proclaim the Lordship of Christ in the public square, I’m not sure what real value there is in posting billboards just to poke at pagans or intentionally disobeying the state on matters that don’t actually prohibit the church’s free worship. I’m not sure how this is “leading a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim 2:2) and obeying the command to “if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18).

One of the important things about Wilson’s articulation is that it ought to chasten many of those recently quick to jump on the Christian Nationalism bandwagon. He admonishes those “on the right who gladly welcome sobriquets like Christian nationalist, but who then receive it like it was the very latest blasphemous selection from the fruit club, with all the cherries, my only word to them is that they should repent and knock it off. Driving your pick-up around town with that huge Trump flag flapping on one side and the Let’s Go Brandon in the original Greek waving on the other . . . isn’t helping anything” (85). He chides those who think that the cultural predicament we are in is anything new: “Cultural decadence is something that has happened routinely to civilizations for millennia, and it is a sign of our cultural narcissism that we are somehow surprised by it happening to us. The surprise is not sincere; it is not honestly come by. Somebody really ought to read a book” (223). And he cautions those Christians who ultimately diagnose our problems and propose solutions primarily in political terms: “Our problem is not globalization, for pity’s sake. Our problem is unbelief, and it is a very boring and ancient form of unbelief. We are

about as unique as a pint of salt water a hundred miles off the coast of Hawaii” (235).

And most of all, I love the kind of Christian faithfulness that Wilson consistently proposes as our primary task in this age: strong Christian marriages, godly Christian parents faithfully bringing up their children in the disciple and instruction of the Lord, fervent gospel proclamation, holy living, and covenant-renewal worship that is regulated by Scripture instead of wracked by worldliness. I fully agree with him that our first task is to clean house: “Christ is the only Savior. Christ really is Lord of Heaven and earth. But our immediate task is not to get the world to confess that. Our first and most pressing task is to get over twenty percent of evangelical and Reformed leadership to confess it. Then we would really be getting somewhere” (230). I especially love this passage:

In the face of the kind of evil that is abroad in the world, evangelical Christians need to stop filling up their worship services with sentimentalist treacle and to start worshiping biblically in a very dark world. We are confronted with a great and growing evil, and we are discovering that we do not have the liturgical vocabulary to respond to it appropriately at all. When we sing or pray the psalms, all of them, there are two consequences that should be mentioned. One, we are praying in the will of God, and He hears such prayers. Second, we discover that praying and singing biblically transforms us. This really is the need of the hour. (227–28)

Amen and amen.

Yet my conviction is that all of Wilson’s emphasis on Christian Faithfulness and limited government that protects free speech can be biblically defended and cheerfully pursued without his theological presuppositions or some sort of Christian Nationalism. And that is a key point: I do not see anything in Wilson’s proposal about how we ought to build Christendom that a faithful Christian should not already be doing.

If I could be convinced from Scripture of paedocommunion and postmillennialism, I would enthusiastically pursue Mere Christendom. But, alas, convincing me of such would take a Millennium.