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# Pro Rege

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# Pro Rege

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**Pro Rege** is a quarterly publication of the faculty of Dordt College. As its name indicates (a Latin phrase meaning “for the King”), the purpose of this journal is to proclaim Christ’s kingship over the sphere of education and scholarship. By exploring topics relevant to Reformed Christian education, it seeks to inform the Christian community regarding Dordt’s continuing response to its educational task.

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# Equality: A False Standard

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by Norman De Jong

On July 4, 1776, thirteen colonies in North America signed a document that has become one of the most important pieces of paper in American history. It was called then and still is known today as *The Declaration of Independence*. Most people today are familiar only with the opening paragraphs and then focus particularly on the opening line of the second paragraph: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all men are created equal*, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The 240 years since that fateful day have seen countless celebrations and fireworks displays. Most

folks blindly celebrate the occasion, but very few stop to reflect and reconsider it: Was that action justified? Would I vote for that Declaration if I had the opportunity to cast a vote on it today? Would I agree that the grounds were so sufficient as to defy the king that God had placed over me? Would I agree that the twenty-seven separate charges leveled against King George were so weighty and in such violation of international law that I should advocate a war of revolution?<sup>1</sup> Should I stand alongside these radical colonists and declare that I am “equal to the King of England”? Should I campaign for independence and gear up for war?

What Thomas Jefferson and his committee signed was a “declaration of independence” from the King of England. The key concept driving them to that point was the belief that they and all their compatriots were *equal* to the King and needed not obey his laws any longer. Equality was the key. They claimed *equality*, which supposedly gave them a right to disobey. They claimed *equality*, and they insisted that they had a right to practice it.

Recently I asked some of our house guests if they accepted that statement (*all men are created equal*) as being true. The response was a quick affirmative “Yes!” When I pressed the question a bit further, one lady asserted that this was a statement affirming the equality of whites and blacks in the colonies and a refutation of slavery. It was, in her estimation, a precursor of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. Wow! She took my rebuttal with much grace but initial disbelief. She did not know that Jefferson had hundreds of slaves and had possibly impregnated at least one of them. According to “Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: A Brief Account,” his having fathered at least four children by slave Sally Hemings still remains a “matter of discussion” and investigation.<sup>2</sup>

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Dr. Norman De Jong is a semi-retired pastor in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Since 1993 he has served a number of OP churches in both long-term and interim relations. In his prior years he served for ten years as administrator in CSI schools. He also served as Assoc. Prof. of Education at Dordt College from 1965 to 1974, and as Director of Teacher Education at Trinity Christian College from 1979 to 1992. His Ph.D. is in Educational Foundations from the University of Iowa (1972).

If we could approach Thomas Jefferson and the rest of his committee with that same question, they might also respond affirmatively. But, did they put into practice what they asserted? Were they true to their own principle? Did they grant women the same rights as men? Did they allow people of black skin equal rights with those of white skin? Did slaves have the right to pursue happiness? Did the committee give the same privilege to Roman Catholics as they did to Protestants? Did they give renters the same legal rights that they gave landowners? Did they give children the same rights and privileges that they gave adults?

The answer to all these questions was a resounding “NO, of course not!” Black people were, to them, merely chattel; they were to be treated as slaves and kept in their quarters. If they had had to count them in the next census, they would have considered them to be three-fifths of a person. Women were to do whatever their husbands expected of them. They had no right to vote or participate in politics.<sup>3</sup> Did children have the same rights as adults? Of course not! Roman Catholics may have found safe haven in Maryland, but they were not given voting privileges or property rights.<sup>4</sup> Native Americans surrounded these colonists, but for many of the colonists, these people were savages meant for destruction or confinement to reservations. (Thankfully, there were others who sought to evangelize them with the Christian gospel.)

Today, in the twenty-first century, we need to add another category. Do babies in the womb have the right to pursue life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? Sad to say, they have no rights at all if the courts and many in the Democratic Party continue to get their way. The “rights” of the unborn are eliminated by selfish or confused mothers and fathers.

The proponents of independence claimed that their decision was “unanimous” because all thirteen colonies endorsed it, but various estimates put the popular support at approximately 33 percent,<sup>5</sup> with another third claiming neutrality, and another third voicing opposition. The opponents were labeled as “Tories.” Many of them fled to Canada, where King George was still ruler. The advocates of independence claimed to be “democratic,” but they ignored the objections of all those who opposed it. In a very real sense, this was mob rule by a minority.

The concept of equality has become one of the most powerful forces in Western culture. Over time, it has become elevated to the position of being the primary factor in court decisions, in ecclesiastical polity, and in educational practice. With a little effort, we can trace its history. We see it expressed in our *Declaration of Independence*, cited above, but may not realize that it played a major role in shaping the French Revolution, which ran from 1789 to 1799. One of the key elements in that brutal war was the Declaration cited here:

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 is a fundamental document of the French Revolution and in the history of human rights.<sup>6</sup>

This Declaration was directly influenced by Thomas Jefferson, serving then as Ambassador to France. He worked with General Lafayette, who introduced it. Influenced also by the doctrine of “natural right,” the rights of man are held to be universal: valid at all times and in every place, pertaining to human nature itself. It became the basis for a nation of free individuals protected equally by law. It is included in the preamble of the constitutions of both the Fourth French Republic (1946) and Fifth Republic (1958) and is still current. Inspired in part by the American Revolution, and also by the Enlightenment philosophers, the Declaration was a core statement of the values of the French Revolution and had a major impact on the development of liberty and democracy in Europe and worldwide.

The French Revolution, unlike the American Revolution, was not a breaking away from a foreign monarch but a revolt within France itself. In many respects, it was far more brutal than was the American Revolutionary War. It involved French killing Frenchmen, not in small numbers but in tens of thousands. It involved warfare against the clergy and the Catholic Church. It also resulted in the beheading of King Louis XVI on January 21, 1793. Later that same year, there was a bloody Reign of Terror directed by the “Committee of Public Safety.” For a period of ten months, there were thousands of people beheaded by the guillotine.<sup>7</sup> For all those brutally executed, “equality before the law” was a cruel joke. Mob rule had re-

placed legal protection. This was democracy in action. It was, in many respects, more complex, more violent, and more anti-Christian than had been the case in America. It ended finally in 1799 with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who established not a democracy but a brutal dictatorship. As in ancient Athens, democracy produced chaos.

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When we fast forward to the twentieth century, we find another revolution, this time, going on in Russia. It is called the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917-22. This revolution began in February of 1917 with the toppling of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. The nobility did not like the way he was conducting Russia's role in World War I. They considered themselves equal to him and overthrew him. He was replaced with the Russian Provisional Government. However, the provisional government was weak and riven by internal dissension. It continued to wage World War I, which became increasingly unpopular. As a result of the war, a nationwide crisis developed in Russia, affecting social, economic, and political relations. Disorder in industry and transport had intensified, and difficulties in obtaining provisions had increased. Gross industrial production in 1917 had decreased by over 36 percent from what it had been in 1916. In the autumn, as much as 50 percent of all enterprises were closed down in the Urals, the Donbas, and other industrial centers, leading to mass unemployment. At the same time, the cost of living increased sharply. The real wages of the workers fell about 50 percent from what they had been in 1913. Russia's national debt in October 1917 had risen to 50 billion rubles. Of this, debts to foreign governments constituted more than 11 billion rubles. The country faced the threat of financial bankruptcy.<sup>8</sup>

In that chaotic condition, the concept of equality found a new home. Now, the peasants and working class considered themselves to be equal with the

ruling class. They revolted against their masters. In September and October 1917 alone, more than a million workers took part in mass strike actions. Workers established control over production and distribution in many factories and plants in a social revolution. By October 1917 there had been over four thousand peasant uprisings against landowners. When the Provisional Government sent out punitive detachments to quell these disturbances, it only enraged the peasants.

The country was ripe for the writings of Vladimir Lenin, who preached a radical form of equality best known as communism. Lenin was living in exile in Switzerland, but he was secretly transported back to Russia by the Germans, who wanted to de-stabilize Russia. When his writings were distributed, there were series of revolts, until, finally, communism was firmly entrenched and the USSR was formed. Democracy and equality again had produced mass chaos, which cried out for control and stability. Communism provided exactly that, complete with a tyrannical dictator and atheism. God was outlawed and evil triumphed.

When we fast-forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, we find that the concept of *equality* continues to occupy a central place in American culture. One of the most provocative and troubling decisions by the Supreme Court of these United States is that known as *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>9</sup> For more than four decades that decision has provoked a deep divide in our land, with Democrats boldly endorsing and protecting it, while Christians and Republicans militate against it, with very limited success.

In a 7-2 ruling, the Court claimed that the "right to privacy" is "broad enough to encompass a woman's decision whether to terminate her pregnancy." While Justice Blackmun, who wrote the majority opinion, wanted to restrict that right to the first and second trimester, the Court itself ruled that the decision to abort be left "completely to the woman and her physician." In effect, the court declared that any woman and her doctor would have the legal right to murder the baby growing in her uterus. There was no concern for the rights or the life of the baby. In its interpretation, the fetus was just a blob of fetal tissue! It had no rights because it was not a person. In order to be a person, it had to exist outside of the uterus.

One of the most disappointing aspects of this court decision, and that of many subsequent ones, is that there is absolutely no appeal to and no concern for the Law of God. Every doctor and every woman ought to realize that life begins at conception and not at the moment of birth, but they are blind to that reality. Medical science has demonstrated that truth in a myriad of ways; for example, already in 1975 a standard text in embryology declared, “The development of a human being begins with conception.”<sup>10</sup> Also, the Scriptures make that point abundantly clear, as in Psalm 139:13-16, where the Psalmist claims that he was “fearfully and wonderfully made.” We see another evidence in the Gospel of Luke where we are told that the baby “leaped” in Elizabeth’s womb.<sup>11</sup> But blindness seems to dominate. Every reasonable person ought to realize that there is a living, pulsating person in that uterus. To borrow a phrase from the Almighty, these “are a stiff-necked people.”<sup>12</sup> They refuse to listen!

But, there is reason for such a barbaric decision by the highest court of the land. The ground for such an evil conclusion had been plowed ever since 1947. In that year, the United States Supreme Court passed one of the most flawed decisions ever made. It was labeled *The Everson Case*.<sup>13</sup> Without any pretense of looking at historical precedent, the Court based its entire decision on a piece of correspondence between Jefferson and the Danbury Baptist Association, written in 1800. In that letter, the Baptists in Connecticut asked the newly elected President to establish a wall of separation between church and state. With the majority opinion written by Justice Hugo Black, it had all the markings of an anti-Catholic ruling, even though it allowed the busing of Catholic students at state expense. Black was a known, prominent member of the KKK, which was anti-black, anti-Jewish, and anti-Catholic.

In rapid succession, a number of other religious issues confronted the Court. One year after the *Everson* decision, the Court ruled in *McCullum v. Board of Education* that a Champaign, Illinois public school had violated the establishment clause because it had allowed a released time program.<sup>14</sup> It had allowed religious issues to invade the public sector.

In 1962 the Court rejected the New York Board

of Regents prayer in *Engel v. Vitale*. It was once again Justice Hugo Black who wrote the majority opinion. In concluding his argument, Black asserted that a “union of government and religion tends to destroy government and to degrade religion.”<sup>15</sup> The “wall of separation” that Jefferson and the Baptists so strongly desired was getting higher and higher. In 1973 it was the genesis of *Roe v. Wade*.

Evil often seems to progress and grow. In spite of challenges from numerous quarters, the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* was considered binding, and abortion on demand was the law of the land. It was, presumably, guaranteed by the Constitution! In pursuit of the rights of women, another demand was forming. Some women wanted to redefine marriage, claiming that they had the right to marry another woman, i.e., to legalize a lesbian relationship so that the two partners might have the same legal rights as married couples traditionally and Biblically defined.

One substantial roadblock was the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), passed by Congress during the administration of President Bill Clinton. Two women who had been married in Canada but who were living in New York challenged the State of New York on its stand defining marriage as being between “one man and one woman,” the same language as found in DOMA. The case worked its way to the U.S. Supreme Court and was decided on June 26, 2013. In a 5-4 decision, the Court ruled that Section 3 of DOMA was unconstitutional.<sup>16</sup> Justice Kennedy, writing the majority opinion, “cited the principles of state autonomy, equal protection and liberty” as the basis for its decision, but this muddled the waters, for this ruling only applied to those living in New York State.

Of significance, however, is the fact that the concept of “equality” was central to the Court’s decision. Marriage had always been defined as being a union between one man and one woman. The United States Congress and a Democratic President had reinforced that definition with binding legislation. A majority of States, including New York State, had stamped their approval. But, all of that had to bow before the more sacred doctrine of “equality.” These two women had rights equal to those of all other citizens and thus were entitled to the benefits of a marriage license. New York State had to grant them



legal status as a married couple.

But, again, equality raised its ugly head. In the Windsor ruling, Justice Kennedy had argued that DOMA had written inequality into the entire United States Code. The principal purpose of DOMA was to impose inequality, he argued.<sup>17</sup> If two lesbians could have equal rights in New York, should not others also enjoy those same rights in other states? Are not all the states equal, in one sense, equal to all other states? But, what about men? Do men have the same rights as women? Should not two men have the right to “marry” in other parts of the country?

By January of 2015, four separate same-sex marriage cases had worked their way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Appeals Court decisions had come to different conclusions, almost guaranteeing that the highest court would take the case. On January 16, 2015 the Court consolidated the four cases and pinned the label of *Obergefell v. Hodges*<sup>18</sup> on it. The case garnered much national attention and had 148 *amici curiae* briefs submitted, more than any other U.S. Supreme Court case on record.<sup>19</sup> On June 26, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a 5-4 decision that the Fourteenth Amendment requires all states to grant same-sex marriages and recognize same-sex marriages granted in other states. Given the fact that Justice Kennedy had written the Windsor opinion, it is not surprising that he would also write this one. The fallout is huge and growing. The probability of numerous lawsuits coming out of it is very high.

Our Lord instituted marriage already in the Garden of Eden and blessed it at Cana. Down through history, it was quietly accepted that marriage was between one man and one woman, but no longer. Now there is a majority of persons in the United States who are willing to accept the Court’s decision. Same-sex marriage, like abortion, is the law of the land. We are to accept it, stop our protests, and bow before the sacred doctrine of “EQUALITY”!!

As a nation, we have quietly embraced secularism. It has been routinely, systematically taught in our public schools for the better part of a century. Approximately 90 percent of all the school-age children attend those schools.<sup>20</sup> They have been indoctrinated with the gospel of democracy, for the public school has become our nation’s established church. That does not bode well for our future. God, in His

righteous indignation, may decide to punish us as He did to Sodom and Gomorrah. He may also be more merciful than we deserve, for He is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”<sup>21</sup>

In the meantime, we need to become more discerning. We need to gain wisdom and reassess our love for “democracy” and for “equality.” Neither one of these doctrines is embraced in Scripture. To the contrary, we are called to obedience, not only to the governments that God has placed over us<sup>22</sup> but especially to the King who created us and called us to be His children. We need to live every day “*pro rege*,” for the King. We need also to adopt the same attitude as Jesus Christ, “who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”<sup>23</sup>

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Equality is a false standard. It is a mathematical term that has crept into our social fabric and has created chaos. We need to reject it now. Instead of appealing to it, we need to emphasize the second petition of our Lord’s Prayer: “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

#### Endnotes

1. [www.USHistory.org/Declaration of Independence](http://www.USHistory.org/Declaration%20of%20Independence)
2. “Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: A Brief Account.” The Jefferson Monticello. [www.monticello.org](http://www.monticello.org).
3. Women were denied the right to vote in federal elections until passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Even then, it was strongly opposed by the Democratic Party.
4. As late as 1877, New Hampshire refused to let Catholics vote in their state.

5. Precise numbers are difficult to determine because there were so many issues at stake. Nine of the colonies had established state churches, with the mother institution still in England. Would independence require them to forfeit their church membership? For a detailed analysis of this complex situation, see De Jong & Van Der Slik, *Separation of Church and State: The Myth Revisited* (Paideia Press, 1984), 35-51.
6. Simon Schama, "Terror is the Order of the Day," *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (Vintage Books, 1990). 726-766.
7. Ibid. p.726. For a concise summary, go to Wikipedia.com/French Revolution/Reign of Terror.
8. Gregory L. Freeze, *Russia: A History* (Oxford U Press, 1997), 231-262. See also W. Bruce Lincoln, *In War's Dark Shadow* (The Dial Press, 1983), 421-444. This source gives a complex picture of events leading up to the Revolution of 1917.
9. *Roe v. Wade* 510 US 113 (1973).
10. Jan Langman, *Medical Embryology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1975), 3.
11. Luke 1:36,41,45.
12. Exodus 32:9; 33:3,5; Deuteronomy 9:6,13
13. *Everson v. Board of Education* (330 U.S. 1,67 S. Ct.504) (1947).
14. *McCullum v. Board of Education* (333 U.S. 203) (1948).
15. *Engel v. Vitale* (1962).
16. *United States v. Windsor* 570 U.S. (2013).
17. Ibid., Majority opinion.
18. *Obergefell v. Hodges* 576 U.S. (14-556) (2015).
19. Supreme Court of the United States/Blog/Proceedings and Orders. All 148 briefs are listed there.
20. National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). In 1995-6, the public schools enrolled 88% of all elementary and secondary students, while private schools enrolled 12%. In 2014-2015, those numbers changed to 90% and 10%.
21. Exodus 34:6,7 (ESV)
22. See Romans 13:1; Daniel 4:3,17, 34
23. Philippians 2: 6 (ESSV)



# Political Imagination and the Campaign Narrative

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by Zachary Jack

The first and most obvious question any non-Iowan is likely to ask about *Corn Poll* is this: why would anyone ever write a novel about the Iowa Caucuses? Or put another way, what could possibly be novel-worthy about a political primary in a so-called pork state?

Practically, my novel *Corn Poll* arose both from my credential as a seventh-generation Iowan and as a consequence of covering the Iowa Caucuses in

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Zachary Michael Jack, the seventh generation in his family to make a farm home in rural eastern Iowa, is the author of more than twenty books, including *Corn Poll: A Novel of the Iowa Caucuses* (Oct. 2015). Jack is Associate Professor of English at North Central College in north central Illinois, where he teaches in the undergraduate and graduate writing programs and leadership studies programs. His essay, commentary, and research on the retail politics and the Iowa Caucuses have been published recently in the University of Nebraska Press's *Middle West Review*, the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, and the *Iowa Source*.

2012 as a journalist and scholar, attending dozens of campaign events and meeting each of the major candidates in person on multiple occasions. Of course this is the lucky political lot of an Iowan—citizenship's Charlie Bucket and Golden Ticket rolled into one. It's true what they say: in the realm of retail politics and ground campaigns, Iowa won the lottery.

Thinking more deeply, though, I realize that my penning of an Iowa Caucus novel also has something fundamentally to do with inherited agrarianism—a brand of localism, patriotism, and sometimes loving criticism nearest to Grant Wood's own, I suppose, among the best-known Regionalists. The truth is, our "Iowa Nice" often gets in our way where the Caucuses are concerned. Citizens of a state known far and wide for its hospitality, we're so eager to make everyone feel at home that we're prone to giving away the farm, as the saying goes. Iowans have been neglecting to tell their own story, in their own way, from their own pens, for so long now no one quite remembers what it sounds like when a truly native set of voices raises their barbaric yelp of a chorus. We ourselves have been content to let writers like Jane Smiley (a Californian) and W.P. Kinsella (a Canadian) craft the definitive contemporary narratives of our home state. The same model of immaculate hosting finds the world-famous Iowa Writers' Workshop nurturing, feeding, mentoring, and sheltering an elite group of imported writers, very few of whom hail from the home state, and ditto their professors. So Iowans telling our own story, the story of our collective political desires and fates, is an idea much too long in coming.

Secondly, what novelist could resist such a gee-whiz plot? Imagine it—an underpopulated, once agrarian commonwealth of roughly 3 million people has, since 1972, been selecting the presumptive frontrunner in the contest to be the next leader of the Free World. On its face it's a premise not even the most whimsical filmmaker would dare imagine—akin to cooking up a plot whereby Lithuania would be granted the first and all-important say in selecting the next leader of the United Nations, for example. And of course it's also rife with internal conflict, as Iowa long ago ceased to be representative of an increasingly diverse, non-white, urban nation.

No wonder, then, that our very own Iowa Caucuses threaten to explode, either literally or figuratively, each and every four years now, with states threatening both to leapfrog our first-in-the-nation status, and protest groups threatening to disrupt the vote as they did in the last Caucus cycle. In many ways Caucus night has taken on the drama and suspense inherent in *Carnival*, and along with it comes the potential for mishap and misadventure; it's a drama the RNC learned to fear in 2012, when election officials wrongly declared Mitt Romney the winner. Reversals like these, while politically damning for the GOP, are ripe for the writer of political narratives.

Dramatic reversals make for a convenient segue into the third element of the campaign narrative that makes the Caucuses such fine fodder for the imaginative writer—irony—and perhaps the biggest irony of all is this: Presidential candidates that increasingly do not hail from small Middle American hamlets and villages, as they did in Herbert Hoover's day, arrive from the cities of the monied coasts, feeling the pressing need to present themselves as experts in agricultural policy, or at least pretend to. This in turn lends an aspect of grotesquerie and sometimes buffoonery to the process, as men and women who have neither reaped nor sown attempt to ingratiate themselves with what they presume to be the salt-of-the-earth yeomen and yeowomen attending their rallies. In fact, the stats say that would-be voters at any campaign meet-and-greet in our Hawkeye State are more likely to work in finance, real estate, or insurance than in agriculture, if one merely compares the

GDP of those respective industries, and are seven or eight times more likely, according to the raw employment data, to be working in government or manufacturing than they are plowing a furrow.

The fourth narrative-friendly aspect of the Caucuses is intimacy. In a state that's flipped from rural to urban in the last half century (Iowans are now nearly 65 percent urban), many of our small towns have turned into de facto bedroom communities where residents do their essential shopping in the nearest factory or university town rather than on Main Street. As a result, the surprising assemblage of Caucus-goers who ultimately gather on election night amount to an unveiling well-nigh as dramatic as an Agatha Christie mystery, wherein the suspects arrive one by one to some dusty parlor or mothballed drawing-room to reveal once-closeted identities. Every four years, we small-town Iowans, who once routinely encountered one another at our local grocery, bank, or city hall, now caucus with at least some neighbors we've never even seen before nor even realized were living in our midst. As in a Western, or more accurately a Middle Western, one never knows with 100 percent certainly who's going to walk in the swinging doors of the local community center or fire hall to cast their lot. Whoever they are, though, it's a good bet they'll be welcomed at the ballot box. During the most recent caucus in my little Iowa town of 400 souls, precinct officials popped popcorn on the old firehouse stove while we out in the hall briefly discussed and debated our intended votes.

The final element of the campaign narrative unique to our Iowa Caucuses is unpredictability. The Caucus season is sufficiently long, at six or seven months from State Fair in August to Ground Hog Day in early February, that it lends itself naturally and nicely to the rising action the novelist seeks, replete with plot twists as the fancies of a beleaguered and fickle electorate move from this candidate to that and back again in the advent to the election. Perhaps as a consequence, Iowa's role in the presidential nomination process has gone from reliable, salt-of-the-earth presidential predictor to apple-cart upsetter and advancer of underdog or insurgent candidates—from Rick Santorum's come-from-behind win in 2012 to Obama's somewhat surprising drubbing of Hillary in the Hawkeye

State in 2008 to Trump's strong polling numbers in the lead-up to the Caucuses of 2016.

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unique and strangely enduring American folkway but also a fragile and vulnerable political tradition needing saving. And because the respective national party bosses decide who stands at the front of the line, Iowa's future position as first-in the-nation is

very much in jeopardy, one suspects, especially after the vote-counting gaffs of 2012 overturned the results of our little corn poll. In a political world where digitally powered populism increasingly stands at odds with Party king-making and electoral control, Iowa's days as presidential bellwether and harbinger could well be numbered, for, bye and bye, we have begun to think more independently, and for ourselves, meaning that we have become what many Party bosses are given to fear: a highly literate, well-educated, semi-rural demos with few external barriers to participation—a citizenry with the time, inclination, ability, and mobility to hear the candidates in person and then decide for ourselves.

When—not if—the existence of our stand-alone, first-in-the nation Iowa Caucuses is threatened, redemptive acts of voter-centered imagining and re-imagining, coupled with articulate arguments for why such a cultural extinction should matter to the rest of the nation, may yet win the day.

**Editor's Note:** Dr. Cornelius Plantinga presented this paper at the First Monday Series of Dordt College, October 5, 2015. A much earlier draft of this speech was published in *Christian Courier*, February, 1997.

# Intellectual Love of God

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by Neal Plantinga, Jr.

Readings: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 22:34-40

Matthew 22:37: [Jesus] said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

In one of his speeches, Howard Lowry tells of a time he attended a rehearsal of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Princeton. He watched as the conductor tried to get the choir to sing the main chorale a certain way. (Imagine the hymn "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" and you'll have the music.) The conductor kept rehearsing the choir, and they kept trying, but they weren't giving him the sound he wanted.

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So he called a halt, and he said something like this: "Look, your singing is skilled and it's full of talent, but it's not right for this music. The really good singing of music like this is congregational singing. You've got to sing this chorale more simply and deeply." And then the conductor told of his boyhood memories of going to church in Germany and the way people sang there. Finally, he said to the choir: "Now sing this chorale as if you were back in my childhood church."

So they sang again. They sang with simple depth, with deep simplicity. Of course they didn't sound exactly like a congregation. They probably couldn't have sounded like that if they had tried. The reason, of course, is that they brought all their musical understanding to the singing of the chorale, and so sang it with an educated simplicity, with a second simplicity, with a simplicity that lay beyond complexity.

We all know this phenomenon. According to a famous story, the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth was once asked to sum up the thousands of pages of his dense theology in one sentence. He paused. Then he said, "Jesus loves me; this I know; for the Bible tells me so."

Well, it's one thing for a child to recite these words, and quite another for Barth to say them. It's one thing to fool around at a piano by plunking out the notes of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" with your index finger. It's another thing to hear that tune as a reprise, as a recap just after a fine pianist has played Mozart's variations on it. As a reprise the tune seems loaded.

Second simplicities lie beyond complexities and incorporate them.

And so it is with loving God. A child can do it. In some ways a child can become our teacher in

doing it. But there are also adult ways to love God, and these take some time to learn. Adults learn to love God considerably. Adults learn to love God with all the powers of an educated mind. Adults bring to God a love that has all the law and the prophets compacted in it.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” says our Lord. In other words, you shall love God with everything you have and everything you are. Everything. Every longing, every endowment, each of your intellectual gifts, any athletic talent or

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computer skill, all capacity for delight, every good thing that has your fingerprints on it—take all this, says Jesus, and refer it to God. Take your longing, and long for God; take your creaturely riches, and endow God; take your eye for beauty, and appreciate God. With your heart and soul and mind, with all your needs and splendors, make a full turn toward God.

That’s the great commandment, and Deuteronomy and Matthew give it to us in two versions. Have you ever noticed the difference? In Matthew’s gospel a lawyer asks Jesus what may have been a trick question: “Which is the greatest commandment?” And Jesus replies by quoting famous words from Deuteronomy 6, words that were on the lips of pious Jews morning and evening, words as familiar as “Now I lay me down to sleep.”

“Which is the greatest commandment?” And Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your MIND”—not with all your strength (that’s Deuteronomy), but with all your MIND (that’s Jesus in Matthew).

Here’s a change worth a little gasp. What if a four-year-old prayed one night, “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my brain to keep”? You would notice.

“Love God with all your mind,” says our Lord. Take it as a charter for Christian intellectual life. Take it as a charter for Christian higher education. What’s the project for Christians engaged in these pursuits? What’s the big idea within them? The simple answer is that we’re trying to become better lovers. We want to love God with all our mind. Of course we want to offer our hearts to God, and we want to do it promptly and sincerely. And the same with our souls. But we are also intellectual beings, and Jesus Christ calls us to mindful love; he calls us to intellectual love.

“Love God with all your mind.” The command sounds simple, but it requires from us a second simplicity, a simplicity that incorporates a good deal of complexity.

So what does the command mean?

To love God intellectually is to become a student of God—a student who really takes an interest in God. Have you ever noticed that a fair number of Christians are not particularly interested in God? Some of them are ministers. These are people who don’t ask about God, don’t talk about God, and maybe don’t even think about God unless they really have to. Their interest in God seems merely professional.

Isn’t this strange? Shouldn’t we be somewhat *preoccupied* with God? Isn’t that what lovers do? They get preoccupied with their beloved. They notice things about the one they love.

And isn’t there quite a lot to notice about God? Isn’t God remarkable, after all—so surprisingly fierce, so surprisingly tender? You know, the Scriptures give us a portrait of God we would never have guessed. Sometimes the portrait makes us squirm. Think of some of the Biblical images for God. In the Bible God is lion and lamb, church and home, fire and water. God is not only a leopard, eagle, and bear but also a moth; not only a parent but also a child; not only a king and a warrior but also a barber (Is. 7:20) and a whistler (Is. 7:18).

Think of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The creeds give us a symmetrical doctrine of the Trinity—one God in three coequal persons. You would never guess from this tactful portrait that in Scripture the triune God is, so to speak, a bachelor father, his single son, and their agent. That’s God.

To love God with all one’s mind means taking

an interest in God and in the peculiarities of God. It means letting God be *God*. This is mere courtesy toward God, and you can't have love without it. The idea is that God gets to write his own autobiography. The idea is that God gets to write his own drama of life with us, including his own character description. Our calling is not to rewrite the script but to find our role there and fill it.

Mindful love of God means other things too. Dietrich and Alice von Hildebrand once observed that lovers give their beloved a good-sized benefit of the doubt. Thus, if our beloved acts well, we look upon the action as typical. If our beloved acts badly, we look upon the action as an aberration. To love somebody is to give that person a big line of moral and spiritual credit.<sup>1</sup>

So with our love of God. God does not act badly, and if we really thought he did, then we ought to give up our religion. But it sometimes *looks* as if God acts badly. It looks as if God goes off-duty while millions of women and children are trafficked into slavery and while masses of Africans starve so wretchedly. It looks as if God blesses a lot of the wrong people and ignores a lot of the right ones. It looks for all the world as if God has a lot of explaining to do. That's what Job thought, and Job is in the Bible.

How do you love God when, for a while, you can't make any sense out of God? This is a question that is a lot bigger than I am, but I think we have to trust Jesus Christ. Even before his crucifixion Jesus suffered a lot more than most of us, and *he* says we ought to love God with everything we have. *He* clears the way to love God with a second simplicity. Doesn't God deserve at least the same benefit of the doubt that we give to anyone we love? It's a matter of faithfulness. It's a matter of intellectual humility. It's a matter of mere loyalty to God.

"Love the Lord your God with all your mind." It means giving God the benefit of the doubt because we know the limits of our understanding.

Further, loving God intellectually means taking an interest not only in God, and in the peculiarities of God, but also in the works of God. I'm thinking of creation in all its strength and majesty; creation in all its stupendous variety; creation in all its unguessable particularity. I'm thinking of humanity itself, in all its multicultural riches. For, of course,

God loves not only humankind but also human kinds, and it's our delight to love what God loves.

To respect creation is to show love for its creator. How do you respect creation? You give it room to be itself. You let it unfold before your watchful eye. You search it and know it with the preoccupation of a lover. Then you tell the truth about the actual state of creation, including not only its bird songs but also its terrible carnivorousness; including not only the way purple and coral impatiens thicken into great mounds of color in a cool September but also the way lions in Kenya beard themselves with the blood of fawns. You tell the truth even when you have to tell it about us—human creatures who look so much like God and act so little like God and have fallen so far from God.

To hear in the world both the song of God and the groaning of all creation, to prize what is lovely and to suffer over what is corrupt, to ponder these things and to struggle to understand them and God's redeeming ways with them—these are ways of loving God with all our minds. Becoming a real student of God and of the works of God—becoming alert, respectful, and honest in your studies—is an act of flagrant intellectual obedience because it is an act of flagrant intellectual love.

Let me add a word about where all this love must lead. Intellectual love must lead us out into the lives and habitats of other human beings in order to do them some good. Even that—doing people some good—sounds simpler than it is, of course. It's another of those second simplicities. Isaiah tells us right away in his first chapter that we have to *learn* to do good, suggesting that good in a fouled-up world is often elusive and ambiguous. The point is that we need to study lest we unwittingly do a half-cooked good, a dangerous good, a ruthless good. We need to study first and do good second.

For then, when we actually do it—when our studies actually bear good fruit in the lives of others—then once more God's kingdom comes and his will is done. Once more we become effective lovers of God. Once more we take a creature's role in the big project of building God's shalom.

So "love the Lord your God with all your mind." Let this command defeat every anti-intellectualism. What a sin this is and how much of the Christian



church happily commits it! Anti-intellectualism is anti-Christian. Never give in to it. Never concede anything to it. Never quit fighting against it. Anti-intellectualism is the sin of lazy people or of fearful people who content themselves with first simplicities and who resist the pain it takes to grow beyond them.

“Love the Lord your God with all your mind.” Let this command also defeat every selfish intellectualism, every worldly intellectualism, every idolatrous intellectualism. Let it remind us that the life of the mind has nothing to do with carving a niche for ourselves, or making a name for ourselves, or conquering some field of study as if it were an enemy. The life of the mind is an act of love, an act of reverence. It’s an act in which we get pulled out of our nervous little egoisms and combine together in a kingdom project so much bigger than any of us, so much grander than all of us, that we

cannot help getting stretched and ennobled by this move. Intellectual love of God is thus the antidote to proud scholarship and to envious scholarship and to angry scholarship—and to all the other deadly sins of scholarship. Intellectual love sets us free from anxious striving and opens the way for intellectual joy, the kind of joy that you can see in a fresh-faced nine-year-old.

“Love the Lord your God with all your mind.” Whether we are nine years old or ninety, whether students or professors or lifelong students, our job is to think more deeply, observe more alertly, research more thoroughly, and write more clearly—all in the service of love.

It’s a matter of mere obedience to Jesus.

### Endnotes

1. *The art of Living* (Sophia Institute, 1965), 75.

# Approaches to Christian Education: From Elusive Towards a Larger and Deeper Approach<sup>1</sup>

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by Derek Schuurman

“Despite thirty years of talk about integration of faith and learning, and despite a half-dozen best-selling books that call on Christians to take intellectual life more seriously, the idea of Christian scholarship remains elusive for women and men who teach at and who lead Christian colleges and

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universities.”<sup>2</sup> This was the conclusion of Michael Hamilton, a participant in a 2001 forum for Chief Academic Officers sponsored by the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU), on the state of Christian scholarship. It remains true that this is a topic of discussion in many Christian schools. The ongoing discussion is important since the very rationale for Christian education hinges on the premise that the Christian faith somehow makes a difference in education. However, it is not a trivial matter to transform education into a distinctively Christian education.

Not only has Christian education and scholarship been elusive, in many institutions it has been lost altogether. There are many examples of colleges that began with a mission to provide Christian education that have since lost their way. The book *The Dying of the Light* recounts numerous examples of institutions whose missions have drifted from their Christian roots.<sup>3</sup> George Marsden, in his book *The Soul of the Christian University*, describes how some of America’s top schools such as Harvard and Yale were founded by Protestant Christians but somehow drifted into secular institutions. I attended a public university in Ontario which began as a Baptist institution and which is now entirely secular (with the exception of a seminary which remains). The coat of arms for the university still bears the Greek words from Colossians 1, “All things cohere in Christ,” a vestigial reminder of the university’s Christian roots.

Sincere and well-meaning Christians have taken very different approaches to Christian education and scholarship. Some of these differences can be traced to variations in Christian traditions. Generally there are four distinct Christian “streams” to which most Christian schools can trace their roots: the Catholic, Evangelical, Anabaptist, and Reformed streams. Each of these streams has historically taken a unique approach to engaging culture. However, within each of these streams, one can uncover further variations in Christian education and scholar-

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ship. What follows is an exploration of six different approaches to Christian education with examples from the discipline of computer science.

The first approach to Christian education suggests that one can divide life into secular and sacred domains. This approach is a type of *dualism*, which holds that the Bible deals in matters of faith or spiritual life whereas education deals with academic skills and reason. Such an approach to Christian education may simply mean adding chapel or a Bible class while other subjects remain unchanged. The premise is that Bible classes may deal in matters of faith but that other subjects like mathematics, physics, and art are subjects for which faith has no relevance. Indeed, for many people the term “Christian university” sounds like an oxymoron.<sup>4</sup> Along these lines of thinking, a computer science class would deal in reason and logic and would not be informed by matters of faith. Christian schools built on this premise are more susceptible to various types of “mission drift” since they operate with minimal distinctions from a secular education.<sup>5</sup>

Dualistic thinking is sometimes nuanced by the notion of noetic depravity. In general, the noetic effects of sin refer to the ways in which sin distorts human thinking. The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner suggested that the noetic effects of sin vary by discipline, and he modeled his approach using a series of concentric circles. The outermost circle represented mathematics and science, whereas the innermost

circle represented the field of theology. He suggests that the “disturbance of rational knowledge by sin” will reach “its maximum in theology and its minimum in the exact sciences and zero in the sphere of formal [logic].”<sup>6</sup> As one moves outward among the spheres, the “disturbance” due to sin decreases. Consequently he concludes that “it is meaningless to speak of ‘Christian Mathematics.’”<sup>7</sup> This philosophy leads to hiring requirements that may vary by discipline. The hiring process for faculty in computer science may not include any expectations to articulate a Christian perspective, whereas the faculty in theology may be subject to different requirements. In essence, this approach is a denial of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all areas of creation.

A second approach is to equate Christian education with “Christians educating.”<sup>8</sup> In this case, Christian education is all about the Christian character of the professor, teacher, and student. To be sure, having teachers who are Christian provides opportunities for prayer, discipleship, and encouragement. Some parents may choose Christian education simply to be reassured that their child will be safely surrounded by other Christians. In this approach the relevance of faith to the actual subject matter itself is not recognized. To be sure, having Christian educators is a *necessary* condition for Christian education, but it is not a *sufficient* condition.

A third approach to Christian education is what I like to call the “discipline frosting” approach. The idea is that you teach a subject in the same way as one might in a secular environment, but you shoe-horn something in to spiritualize the lesson. This has also been referred to as the “appliqué” model of faith and learning in which “some cursory mention of faith is applied to the surface but has no transforming power within curriculum, instruction, assessment, or the classroom ethos.”<sup>9</sup> An example from computer science is to have students write a program to sort items from the smallest to the greatest and then connect this concept to the biblical notion that “the last shall be first.” Another trivial type of frosting is to simply tack prayer to the beginning of class and then carry on as if faith did not matter. An institution may require a Bible verse for each day’s lesson. A former instructor from such an institution has wryly suggested that the verse

“But my brother Esau is a hairy man while I have smooth skin” (Gen. 27:11b) might satisfy Christian education expectations “as long as it appears in the top corner of a lesson’s printed material.”<sup>10</sup>

A 1937 report on the idea of establishing a Christian college in Northwest Iowa explicitly set out to avoid this pitfall. This report included the following statement:

The aim of such a junior college is to give young people an education that is Christian, not merely in the sense that devotional exercises are appended to the ordinary work of the college, but in the larger and deeper sense that all the class work, all the students’ intellectual, emotional, and imaginative activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

Such a “larger and deeper” approach is what we need to find. When faith is tacked on artificially, students are essentially left with the message that genuine Christian education is not possible.

A fourth approach to Christian education relies on *biblicism* to connect faith and the academic disciplines. In this approach, all truth is seen to come from the Bible, and so it is used like a textbook in all subjects. For example, it is suggested the number *pi* is found in 1 Kings 7:23, the motion of the sun in Psalm 19:5-6, the continental plates in Job 9:6, wireless telegraphy in Job 38:35, and atomic theory in Hebrews 11:3. The biologist Jean S. Morton writes, “Many scientific facts, which prove the infallibility of Scripture, are tucked away in its pages.”<sup>12</sup> Richard Mouw writes about a Bible institute which uses the motto “Our only textbook, the Bible.”<sup>13</sup> If this was the purpose of Scripture, then one might expect that all the information Solomon collected about flowers, cedars, and animals (1 Kings 4:33) would have been included in Scripture as well. Instead, Paul writes that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). He says nothing about its usefulness for geography, mathematics, or science. Although this approach is based on a high regard for Scripture, biblicism makes the mistake of using the Bible as if it were an academic textbook rather than seeing it as the trustworthy book of God’s salvation story. Another related pitfall is to look at Bible only as a source of morals.<sup>14</sup> Such an approach might

highlight the fact that Daniel ate his vegetables in Babylon and so we ought to eat our vegetables too. This completely misses the point of the bigger historical-redemptive story that unfolds in the Bible. The Bible is not a collection of moral stories or a science textbook; instead, it needs to be interpreted within its own historical-cultural setting.<sup>15</sup>

A fifth approach to Christian scholarship looks for *analogical relationships* between academic subjects and God, or attributes of God. For example, one might suggest an analogy between God, whose “word sustains the universe,” and the programmer whose “words sustain his micro-universe.”<sup>16</sup> Kevin Kelly, an editor for *Wired* magazine, has explored the use of a computational metaphor to describe God.<sup>17</sup> Others have looked at the logical operations that can be performed in a computer and compared them to the attributes of God (eternal, omnipresent, and powerful).<sup>18</sup> The theologian Vern Poythress has suggested that when one is speaking of “scientific law,” one is “speaking of God himself and his revelation through his governance of the world.”<sup>19</sup> Although promoters of this approach are quick to point out the limits of analogical comparisons, it seems to blur the distinction between Creator and creation. Another concern is that it seeks to apply theological categories to all aspects of creation, areas that are diverse and distinct from the discipline of theology.

Related to analogical relationships is using a discipline as a source of practical analogies for matters of faith. This approach has been coined the *pranalogical* approach and involves “a practical application of an analogy gleaned from one’s discipline or life experience.”<sup>20</sup> An example is to connect mathematical understandings of infinity to theological notions of infinity. While carefully and appropriately chosen practical examples may be useful as sermon illustrations or in devotionals, there are certainly pitfalls. As the Christian mathematician Russell Howell observes, there is “a danger that accompanies all analogies...[.] it is easy to draw analogies that are careless and trite.”<sup>21</sup> In the end, such an approach seeks to integrate faith by transposing concepts from a discipline into theological categories, rather than uncovering the faith and worldview aspects embedded within the discipline itself. In fact, this approach is related to dualism in that things must first be expressed in theological terms before they can be connected with faith. Things that fall outside of the

theological category cannot be connected to faith on their own. Although thoughtful practical analogies can be helpful, they do not necessarily provide a distinctly Christian perspective on a particular discipline.

Finally, a sixth approach is to sift all content through a biblical worldview, one shaped by the biblical narrative.<sup>22</sup> A biblical worldview functions like a gear-box on a car. Just as a gear-box mediates between the engine and the tires, a biblical worldview “mediates between the power of the gospel and human life where that gospel must be brought to bear.”<sup>23</sup> This approach is a holistic one that provides an alternative to both dualism and biblicism and which takes the Bible’s message seriously for all of life. Neil Postman writes in *The End of Education* that educational ends need to be supplied by a grand narrative that “tells of origins and envisions a future ... and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose.”<sup>24</sup> The Bible provides us with that grand narrative and the framework of creation, fall and redemption. This approach holds in tension the goodness of creation as well as the potential idols and distortions that are embedded in the foundations of each discipline. Al Wolters writes, “It is the task of every educator to sift out the valuable insights of a tradition and make them fruitful for further progress as well as to expose and reject falsehood and illusion within that same tradition.”<sup>25</sup>

At the center of the biblical story is Jesus Christ, through whom and for whom all things were made (Col. 1:16). In other words, “There is simply nothing humanly possible to study about the created realm that, in principle, leads us away from Jesus Christ.”<sup>26</sup> Jesus Christ has established his kingdom on earth and calls us to participate as agents of shalom.<sup>27</sup> In the words of Gordon Spykman, “Nothing matters but the kingdom, but because of the kingdom everything matters.”<sup>28</sup> This last approach seeks to acknowledge Christ as king over every square inch and our responsibility as kingdom citizens. This kingdom is diverse, but it also has a coherence as “all things hold together” in Christ (Col. 1:17). The core courses found in many Christian universities can serve to reinforce the notion of coherence and diversity in various aspects of creation, starting with Biblical and philosophical foundations and stretching across the curriculum from the arts and humanities to the social sciences

and natural sciences.

This is in stark contrast to highly specialized, technical schools, which train students in very narrow ways of thinking. Even in professional programs, a Christian education should strive to address the problem of tunnel vision by sketching the breadth of creation, the extent of sin, and the ways that redemption in Christ extends “far as the curse is found.” I recall being warned of developing myopic vision in my eyesight due to prolonged periods staring at screens and circuit boards. The advice I was given was to periodically take a break by looking out the window to allow my eyes to re-focus. This may also be good advice for teaching: as we zoom in on the minutiae of our disciplines, we can prevent educational myopia by periodically zooming out and placing what we study within a Christian framework and context.

I recognized in myself that my training as an engineer had left me somewhat myopic. But even something as technical as computers can be placed within the grand biblical narrative. To use this field as an illustration of this last approach, we begin by recognizing that computer technology is part of the latent potential in creation. Furthermore, the

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development of computer technology is an exciting cultural activity in which we respond to God by faithfully unfolding this aspect of creation. This includes the plethora of possibilities in computer hardware and software designs along with myriad creative applications opened up by this technology. Tragically, the fall into sin has brought distortions in the world of computing and software. Along with creational goodness we observe numerous examples of how computers are misdirected in ways that bring harm to the self, to the environment and to others. And, like anything else in creation, the human heart can be drawn to place its trust

in technology, which has the potential of becoming an idol. We are called to participate in Christ's kingdom by seeking normative ways of developing and applying computer technology. This process begins by recognizing the social, political, environmental, ethical, aesthetic and justice aspects that accompany our technology and directing them in ways that show love and care.<sup>29</sup> We need to move beyond the false dilemma of asking whether technology is good or bad and instead discern both its creational structure and its direction.<sup>30</sup> As students and teachers of computing, we are called to wrestle with what constitutes responsible computing and how to employ it in service of all kinds of flourishing. Ultimately we look forward to the time when all things, including technology, will be made new, but in the meantime we strive to make "some imperfect models of the perfect world to come."<sup>31</sup>

In order to maintain integrity and plausibility, a school that aims to be a Christian school must also be run in a way that is Christian. The administration, marketing, and finance departments must also be shaped by Christian thinking and practices. Furthermore, not only *what* we teach but the *way* we teach must be informed by Christian thinking. In their book *Teaching and Christian Practices*, David Smith and Jamie Smith observe that "our commitment to Christian scholarship has been significantly more articulate than our commitment to Christian pedagogy."<sup>32</sup> In other words, Christian education is about more than just content: it also includes our pedagogical practices. However, one must discern which practices are appropriate in the sphere of education. The school is not a church (or a business or a family), and so one cannot necessarily import wholesale practices from other spheres into the classroom.<sup>33</sup> The same is true for technology in education; we must recognize that we shape our tools but that our tools also shape pedagogy as well as us and our students.<sup>34</sup> We need to recognize that "formation happens by means of practice"<sup>35</sup> and explore appropriate practices for the classroom. Some of these practices may be informed by general best teaching practices, such as those explored in books such as *What the Best College Teachers Do*.<sup>36</sup> However, we must always discern the worldview assumptions that inform a given pedagogy. Jamie Smith suggests the axiom that "behind ev-

ery constellation of educational practices is a set of assumptions about the nature of human persons."<sup>37</sup> Pedagogical approaches may also be informed by various philosophies such as positivism, progressivism, constructivism, or individualism.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it is an example of common grace that Christian educators can still glean nifty ideas from their secular counterparts. As Augustine suggested, we ought to take the "treasures of the Egyptians" and wisely place them in service of God.

Lastly, Christian education is not just a cognitive or pedagogical exercise; it is also about spiritual formation. Søren Kierkegaard writes about the three wise men who consulted the scribes to find out where the Messiah was to be born: "Although the scribes could say where the Messiah should be born... they did not accompany the Wise Men to seek him." Kierkegaard observes that sadly, although "they studied the Scriptures like so many scholars, it did not make them move."<sup>39</sup> We need to recognize that students are not just "brains on a stick" (to borrow a phrase from Jamie Smith). We must recognize the importance of the heart and the need for spiritual formation. Spiritual formation can be defined as "The process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others."<sup>40</sup> This is something suggested in the mission statements of many Christian schools and colleges. In a spiritual formation project led by Syd Hielema at Redeemer University College, several ideas were explored to encourage spiritual formation in the classroom. Among these were ideas such as practicing hospitality in the classroom, encouraging virtues such as respect and wonder and a longing for shalom, and cultivating a collegial ethos among the faculty. Faculty were encouraged to make connections between different classes and co-curricular activities.<sup>41</sup> Faculty and staff were encouraged to worship alongside students in chapel, to disciple them in learning communities, and to get to know them through judicious conversations outside the classroom. Faculty can also explore ways to encourage students to develop spiritual and intellectual disciplines and provide opportunities for students to experience reverence and awe.<sup>42</sup> Faculty can serve to model epistemological humility in the face of perplexing issues as well as showing care and concern. I recall a friend who taught computer science



at a Christian college who shared with me that she used to make a practice of praying for the students in her department individually. To be sure, there is much more work to be done to explore and share best practices surrounding spiritual formation and Christian education.

Indeed, some of the aspects included in each of the six approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For instance, a Christian education must presuppose that teachers themselves are Christians, and hiring practices ought to include questions that probe for evidence of a living Christian faith nourished by spiritual practices and participation in a local church. Christian education will likely include chapel and prayer, as well as striving for excellence. But, in my opinion, viewing everything through the lens of a Christian worldview nested in practices of spiritual formation is most faithful to the Scriptures. Although it is also not easy to work out in practice, it is a worthy ongoing goal to strive towards. Schools that are serious about Christian

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education need to dedicate *at least* as much time and resources to pursuing this as they do on build-ings, technology and current teaching techniques. With effort, Christian education need not be elusive. However, without an intentional approach, Christian education is likely to be just religious frosting, or simply Christians educating, or worse yet, an expensive private education that is barely distinguishable from its secular counterparts.

#### Endnotes

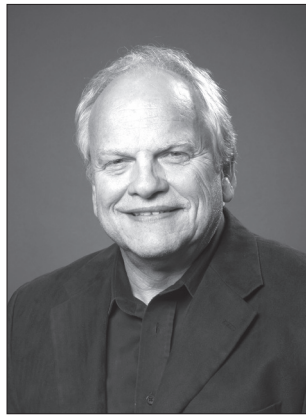
1. This paper began as a short column titled "What Makes an Education 'Christian'?", *Christian Courier*, August 10, 2015.
2. Michael S. Hamilton, "Reflection and Response: The Elusive Idea of Christian Scholarship," *Christian Scholars Review* 31.1 (Fall 2001), 13.

3. James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of the Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Eerdmans, 1998).
4. Douglas V. Henry and Michael D. Beaty, *Christianity and the Soul of the University: Faith as a Foundation for Intellectual Community* (Baker Academic, 2006), 67.
5. This approach may be susceptible to a type of elitism, as Christian schools seek to find their distinctiveness in becoming exclusive private schools.
6. Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Westminster, 1946), 383.
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# Repose in Mystery: The Limit of Sobriety According to John Calvin

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by Jan van Vliet

## Introduction

Herman Bavinck echoes Calvin when he asserts that “Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics....It is all mystery with which the science of dogmatics is concerned, for it does not deal with finite creatures, but from beginning to end looks past all creatures and focuses on the eternal and infinite One himself.”<sup>1</sup> From particularly Calvin’s commentaries and his *Institutes*, it would be accurate to say that the default position in all of Calvin’s theologizing is awe at the mystery of God. Interestingly, this mystery drove him to doxology, which has been identified as a common refrain in Calvin’s work.<sup>2</sup> This paper reviews those areas of Calvin’s thought where

recourse to mystery is most evident, examines the character of the post-conservative movement in evangelicalism, and makes suggestions as to how the Calvinian (Pauline) concept of mystery may restore biblical spirituality to evangelicals.

## I. Calvin’s Use of Mystery

It is to be expected that many of these areas are found in those categories of Christian doctrine presenting the greatest challenge to logic. We begin by examining some of Calvin’s musings on creation as found in his Genesis commentary and move, successively, through the topics of Christology, predestination, and sacraments.

Disagreement over biblical cosmogony has characterized the church since its beginning. It was probably at the turn of the twentieth century with the reaction to modernism and the advances of science that, at least in the conservative Christian church, a particular view of creation came to dominate and was considered the test of orthodoxy. Such shibboleths have no foundation in the preceding millennium and a half of church history, however, which showed varying degrees of latitude when it came to the interpretation of the days in Genesis. Yet the battle that raged through much of the twentieth century still dogs the evangelical church today.

In his Genesis commentary we find Calvin the master exegete at work. His method is first and foremost to determine authorial intent. What did Moses intend, he asks? After he systematically works through preliminary yet significant issues

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such as the identity of “*elohim*” (v1) and the “Spirit of God” (v2), he comes to v5 which closes with “And there was evening and there was morning – the first day.” Moses writes that once God created light, the first day had received its beginning.

In his comments, Calvin is controverting those who maintain that God created all things instantaneously. He is categorically stating that there was *duration* in God’s creative acts, which is signified by God’s division of his original creative power into six days. And what is meant by the phrase “the first day”?

Here the error of those is manifestly refuted, who maintain that the world was made in a moment. For it is too violent a cavil [trivial objection] to contend that Moses distributes the work which God perfected at once into six days, for the mere purpose of conveying instruction. Let us rather conclude that God took himself the space of six days, for the purpose of accommodating his works to the capacity of men. We slightly pass over the infinite glory of God, which here shines forth; whence arises this but from our excessive dulness [*sic*] in considering his greatness. In the meantime, the vanity of our minds carries us away elsewhere. For the correction of this fault, God applied the most suitable remedy when he distributed the creation of the world into successive portions, that he might fix our attention, and compel us, as if he had laid his hand upon us, to pause and reflect.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, what exactly God meant when he divided his original creative acts into six days we are not sure. We do not know more about the nature of those six days. But we do know this: God took these six days (however we might understand it) to communicate creation to humanity in terms of reference they would understand. This is as far as Calvin is willing to go. Why? Because of humanity’s incapacity to understand the greater things of God. God reached down in gracious condescension and, in a gesture of accommodation, gave us categories we could work with. Although most of the reformers held, as did Calvin, to six-day creationism, Calvin emphasizes here the reason that God chose the period of six days – accommodation.

I will come back to the concept of “accommodation” presently. Conceptually, it is of course very closely related to the topic of this paper: the mystery of God. It is because God is, ultimately, unknow-

able, that he comes to us in an act of accommodation. Elsewhere in the creation narrative, Calvin explains God’s way of communicating by appealing to humanity’s ability to exercise their rational capacities: “Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endowed with common sense, are able to understand.... Moses adapts his discourse to common usage.”<sup>4</sup>

In the case of the present example, Calvin is content to bow before the awesome mystery of God and to say no more than what he has *biblical warrant* for saying. At minimum, says Calvin, this the bible tells us for sure: that God did not create instantaneously—although he easily could have—because of our creaturely understanding. We are time bound, and God transcends time. In fact, he used a tool he created in order to display his creative activity to us, and that tool was the partition of the “space” of creation into six days.<sup>5</sup> What we do not know for sure is the nature of these days, but here Calvin, in silence, reposes in the mystery of God.

As we move to Calvin’s Christology, we find similar reasoning. The mystery of Christ is to be preserved. When addressing the hypothetical question of whether Christ would have come incarnate if there had been no adamic sin, he responds in a fashion significantly different from Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo*. Because of the distance separating the Creator and the creature, Calvin intones, the most we can say from logic is this: “[E]ven if man had remained free from all stain, his condition would have been too lowly for him to reach God without a Mediator.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this is surely God’s greatest act of condescension, by which we have access to the impenetrable mystery that is God. But, ultimately, the sending of Christ cannot be logically explained. It comes to us by “heavenly decree.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, “since we learn that Christ himself was divinely appointed to help miserable sinners, whoever leaps over these bounds too much indulges foolish curiosity.”<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, says Calvin,

Paul soars to the lofty mystery of predestination and fitly restrains all the wantonness and itching curiosity of human nature.... All who propose to inquire or seek to know more about Christ than God ordained by his secret decree are breaking out in impious boldness to fashion some new sort of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Calvin is jealous to guard the mystery which is the incarnate Christ.

Similarly does he treat the topic of predestination, election being a mark of God's gratuitous goodness.<sup>10</sup> But because of the mysteriousness and loftiness of this biblical teaching, Calvin spends 3.5 per cent of the *Institutes* on the formal discussion of this doctrine. In his commentary on the Petrine epistles, he graciously asserts that we can never know for certain, nor should we "inquire curiously"

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about the predestined status of fellow Christians. In fact, he says generously that by the judgment of charity, we "ought on the contrary to regard their calling, so that all who are admitted by faith into the church, are to be counted as the elect."<sup>11</sup>

It is, of course, in his first commentary, on Paul's letter to the Romans, that Calvin goes on at great length because here the text forces the expositor to deal with this difficult subject. He draws our attention to Paul's humility early on in Romans 3 (v. 5), where Paul talks about God's faithfulness. If God is glorified in our unrighteousness, then why are we punished? If due to our unrighteousness God's righteousness is exalted, then why are we instruments of his wrath? How is this fair and logical? Calvin, with Paul, finds no satisfactory answer. Again, this is where logic fails us. The work of human reason "is ever to bark against the wisdom of God," for all the "mysteries of God are paradoxes to the flesh." Instead of barking, however, we should labor hard to submissively seek escape from our bondage to reason.<sup>12</sup>

A clear Calvinian principle comes to the fore in his remarks on the *locus classicus* of original sin, Romans 5: the height of God's grace in Christ can be seen only against the depth of our fall in Adam.<sup>13</sup> Recall that it is in this manner that he begins his *Institutes*. We can get some sense of who

and what humanity is *only* when we view humanity in juxtaposition to who and what God is. And vice versa. So great is the mystery of God that knowledge of him can be only approached in dialectic and in reflecting on what he is not – apophatic theology. This comparison, acknowledges Calvin, is incomplete. It is not entirely satisfying. In his sketch of the likeness between Adam and Christ, he probes all the points of difference between Christ and Adam (and by extension all humanity) until an incommensurability surfaces ("there is a greater measure of grace procured by Christ, than of condemnation introduced by the first man"). While that may make for what he calls "defects in discourse," these defects are "not prejudicial" to the majesty of God.<sup>14</sup> Rather, "the highest mysteries [of God's will] have been delivered to us in the garb of an humble style, in order that our faith may not depend on the potency of human eloquence but on the efficacious working of the Spirit alone."<sup>15</sup> The inestimable mysteries of God and his ways are approached not through logic and human categories but in submissive faith. For "the wisdom of the flesh is ever clamorous against the mysteries of God,"<sup>16</sup> says Calvin, as he reminds us that Christ himself, in John 3:12, spoke of heavenly mysteries in less dignified terms with the purpose of accommodating himself to the limited capacities of "a people ignorant and simple."<sup>17</sup>

Calvin invokes mystery in full force in Romans 9. The reason is clear: Paul is debating the equity of the election of Jacob and the reprobation of Esau, particularly as found in verses 11-12, where we read (NIV), "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—[Rebekah] was told, 'the older will serve the younger.'"

One editor (Henry Beveridge) charges Calvin with going "somewhat beyond the limits of revelation" in the supralapsarian tendencies he finds in Calvin. Beveridge observes,

That it was God's eternal purpose to choose some of man's fallen race, and to leave others to perish, is clearly taught us: but this is a different question from the one touched upon here—that his purpose was irrespective of man's fall—a sentiment which, as far as I can see, is not recognized nor



taught in Scripture.... [It] is true, by a process of reasoning apparently obvious; but when we begin to reason on this high and mysterious subject, we become soon bewildered and lost in mazes of difficulties.<sup>18</sup>

Could Calvin possibly have violated his own sacred axiom: that where logic fails, mystery takes over? Could he himself be indulging the irrepressible urge to enter the recesses of God's mind and thus lose himself in the labyrinth of speculation? For "the predestination of God is indeed in reality a labyrinth from which the mind of man can by no means extricate itself." We should seek to know nothing concerning [predestination] except what Scripture teaches us: when the Lord closes his holy mouth, let us also stop the way, that we may go no further."<sup>19</sup> Could Calvin himself be coming under the intoxicating spell of the progression of logic? Is he "absurdly measure[ing] this incomparable mystery of God by [his] own judgment?"<sup>20</sup>

An editorial comment in the *Institutes* makes a similar observation but stops short of charging Calvin with unbiblical speculation. Calvin's comments here are along the same lines as his comments on Romans 9:11—that God decreed the fall of Adam before he decreed to save. "This passage," observes John T. McNeill, "briefly shows Calvin as favoring the supralapsarian as opposed to the infralapsarian view of the decrees of God."<sup>21</sup>

Calvin's observations here, however, as elsewhere, must be considered in light of his dominant hermeneutical key. And that is this: that in both election and reprobation, "no cause is adduced higher than the will of God."<sup>22</sup> In Romans 9:14–34, Paul, in wonderment, himself anticipates the questions that need asking. In this rhetorical line of interrogation, however, the final answer remains certain because far be it from the creature to consign the Creator to the dock. Paul gives no cause for why God does what he does. Calvin comments,

[A]s though the Spirit of God were silent for want of reason, and not rather, that by his silence he reminds us, that a mystery which our minds cannot comprehend ought to be reverently adored, and that he thus checks the wantonness of human curiosity. . . . regarding our weakness, he leads us to moderation and sobriety.<sup>23</sup>

In an appeal to Isaiah 45:9 and with echoes of Book 1 of *Institutes*, Calvin reminds the reader of the destiny of those who, as Isaiah put it, "speak against [their] maker."<sup>24</sup> Humans should surely not think of themselves as loftier than the earthen vessel they are, formed, as they are, by God, the divine potter. The secret counsel of God, explaining the preparation of both the elect and the reprobate for their last end, is finally an incomprehensible and "inexplicable" mystery.<sup>25</sup> Recognizing this reality, avers Calvin, should motivate us to embrace this grace of God with humility and trembling.<sup>26</sup>

The purpose of God's ways, the end of all mystery, Paul finally reveals.<sup>27</sup> In the closing verses of Romans 11, Paul launches into doxology. In a burst of song and praise, he quotes the prophet Isaiah and Job on the incomprehensibility and the incomparability of the God with whom we have to do. This is why we must set a bridle on our thoughts and tongues. Our reasoning must end, finally, in admiration. And we must recognize that God has a will that he has revealed to us in Scripture, but he also has a secret counsel. We must be aware of the distinction! It is only with the help of the Holy Spirit that we have access to God's revealed will, and we must stop where the Spirit ceases to lead us, lest the excessively curious and the impiously audacious<sup>28</sup> "be overwhelmed by the immeasurable brightness of inaccessible light."<sup>29</sup>

Finally, a few words on Calvin's concept of mystery as it relates to the sacraments.

Even if much of Calvin's reference to the sacraments as mystery is due to the language and translation issues between the Vulgate and the Greek versions of the Bible,<sup>30</sup> the sacraments underscore the mystery of God further. There is no difference between circumcision and baptism, says Calvin, when their inner mystery is considered: "Whatever belongs to circumcision pertains likewise to baptism."<sup>31</sup> It is an anagogic relationship whose mysterious meaning is given to each in proportion to his/her faith. Faith is operative here because of the lofty mystery hidden in the sacraments, mysteries moving the believer, upon seeing the sacraments, to rise up in "devout contemplation."<sup>32</sup>

In navigating through the many questions arising, primarily, from transubstantiation, one senses Calvin reaching for concepts and language to ar-



ticulate a position on the sacraments that dismisses the Roman Church's understanding of them while underscoring the sanctity with which they should be considered. As profound as the external ceremonies are, both sacraments are properly understood only when considered in light of their promise and spiritual mysteries.<sup>33</sup> The spiritual presence of Christ in communion is, in fact, a "felt mystery," a "sacred mystery" impossible to explain.<sup>34</sup> Two things are to be guarded against: first, divorcing the signs from their mysteries and second, denying or obscuring the mysteries. This feeding on Christ is to immortality, indeed, a high mystery!<sup>35</sup> "Christ's flesh itself in the mystery of the Supper is a thing no less spiritual than our eternal salvation."<sup>36</sup> It can be "no other eating than that of faith"<sup>37</sup> because this is simply impossible to comprehend with the mind.<sup>38</sup> The spiritual partaking of Christ is the actual partaking of Christ.<sup>39</sup> Appreciation of this mystery should guard against abuse.<sup>40</sup>

There remains a handful of doctrines, the understanding of which eludes natural humanity. In all these places, as expected, Calvin invokes the concept of mystery.<sup>41</sup>

## II. Calvin Defines "Mystery"—the Key "Accommodation"

But what does Calvin actually mean by "mystery"? Although by definition it defies description, Calvin gives a partial answer in his commentary on Titus 1:3. Part of understanding the mystery of God is to place bounds around our inordinate curiosity in humble acceptance that God "does everything in the proper order and at the most seasonable time."<sup>42</sup> This point echoes the hermeneutical principle he invokes in his sermon on Deuteronomy 29:29,<sup>43</sup> where Moses writes, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of the law." There is an "antithesis," says Calvin, between God's clear counsel, openly set forth in his word, and "the hidden and incomprehensible counsel of God, concerning which it is not lawful to inquire."<sup>44</sup> Some things, he says, God has reserved only to himself. Rather than coveting the disclosure of these secrets of which there is no revelation in the holy scriptures, as do some "fanatical heads," we must rather abstain with all modesty

and submission. Finally,

We must hold us still when God has not spoken of an unknown thing and which is not in holy scripture....Let us keep ourselves in sobriety and temperance....Let us seek that only, which God would have us to know, and let us be ignorant of all the rest, yea, and let us be willingly ignorant of it, knowing that our true wisdom is to be learned alone in his school.<sup>45</sup>

This position has come to be known as the dual will of God: his revealed will and his concealed will. Yet, says Calvin, "God's will is one and undivided, but because our minds cannot plumb the deep abyss of his secret election, to meet our inadequacy God's will is set before us as two-fold."<sup>46</sup> This conceptualization of God's mystery is itself an accommodative act of God.

For Calvin, this principle of accommodation is closely related to the conception of God as mystery or hidden. Accommodation is the route by which we have access to the mystery of God insofar as God himself allows that access. The much-quoted definition articulated by Edward A. Dowey, Jr., still says it the best:

The term "accommodation" refers to the process by which God reduces or adjusts to human capacities what he wills to reveal of the infinite mysteries of his being, which by their very nature are beyond the powers of the mind of man to grasp.<sup>47</sup>

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Thus, God makes himself and his will, which are eminently mysterious, accessible to us by employing concepts and categories adjusted for our capacity—one constrained by both finitude and sin. But this revelation is only partial. It hides as much as it reveals.<sup>48</sup> Calvin himself discusses his understanding of the enigmatic mystery of God, impenetrable to the human mind:<sup>49</sup>

When we hear this word, *mystery*, let us remember two things; first, that we learn to keep under our senses, and flatter not ourselves that we have sufficient knowledge and ability to comprehend so vast a matter. In the second place, let us learn to climb up beyond ourselves, and reverence that majesty which passes our understanding. We must not be sluggish nor drowsy; but think upon this doctrine, and endeavor to become instructed therein. When we have acquired some little knowledge thereof, we should strive to profit thereby, all the days of our life.<sup>50</sup>

Acknowledgement of this mystery should bring us to our knees in adoration and worship.

The ongoing relationship between the Creator and the creature, explains Dowey, “is permeated in an almost uncanny manner with the immediate presence of a mysterious will.... Man is consciously surrounded by its work.”<sup>51</sup> Calvin, says Dowey, is no “nature mystic,” in whom sub-personal metaphysical categories are determinative of theology, as is clearly demonstrated by the way in which he opens his *Institutes*.<sup>52</sup> Metaphysical speculation about the being or existence of God finds no place here. Ultimately, glorifying God is the goal of God’s self revelation – his accommodation – to humanity. This end is attained not through metaphysical speculation but through an epistemological exercise in which knowledge of God and knowledge of self lead to worship and obedience.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, the concept of accommodation is “the horizon of Calvin’s theology.”<sup>54</sup> For “[Calvin] never ventured to attach anything but the name of incomprehensible mystery to what lay beyond that horizon, yet he maintained stoutly that *it is God’s mystery, not an abyss of nothingness*. The mystery belongs to the unknowable side of the known God.”<sup>55</sup> This unknowableness is due not to the lack of clarity of the revelation but rather to the noetic effects of sin. Rather than seek to create a theological system that was rationally coherent and stripped of all mystery, Calvin opted for a theology characterized by logical inconsistencies and paradox. As Dowey notes, “clarity of individual themes, incomprehensibility of their interrelations – this is a hallmark of Calvin’s theology.”<sup>56</sup> And it is so, only because that is how God reveals himself in Scripture.

### III. Mystery and Mysticism

The (inter) relationship between mysticism and Calvin’s understanding of mystery is a complicated one. In Christian literature, the expression the “Unknown God” of Acts 17:23 came to mean the “total otherness of deity.” Philosophically, this doctrine of God’s unknowability, a key element in the conceptualization of the doctrine of God’s mysteriousness, has its roots in the thought of Philo Judaeus.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps Calvin’s invocation of mystery was to distinguish the God of the Bible from that of the mystery religions – derived from primitive tribal ceremonies – that were so popular in the first three centuries of the Christian era.<sup>58</sup> It is held by some that Dionysius was one of the few in the audience convinced by Paul’s address in the Areopagus; since then, legend has elevated him to significant stature, and his name has been attached to a body of mystical writings which have been described as “a moving tribute to the unknown God.”<sup>59</sup> It was John Scotus Erigena, who mediated the theological vocabulary of Dionysius the Areopagite, into the Western and mystical tradition, “especially in the form of the familiar ‘way of negation’”<sup>60</sup> — apophatic theology. Scholars have noticed Luther’s congeniality with the language of the mystical tradition; Calvin, however, refers to Dionysius’ claims as “mere prattle.”<sup>61</sup>

What precisely was the late medieval understanding of mystery before the time of Calvin? What was this “prattle”? Although there are certainly connections between the medieval understanding of mysticism and Calvin, there are significant differences. Perhaps that is why Calvin shows reluctance to speak of religious experience using this nomenclature: “The term ‘mystical’ has suggested confusion with the Greco-Roman mystery religions, identification with the Neo-Platonism of the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius, and the errors of Gnosticism and quietism.”<sup>62</sup> If we define mysticism as “a doctrine or discipline maintaining that one can gain knowledge of reality that is not accessible to sense perception or to rational, conceptual thought,”<sup>63</sup> then we should not be surprised to see Calvin balk at such spirituality, so-called. Experience, intuition, instinct—as valuable as these might be—are not sufficient to grant entry into the mystery of God, much less if such spiritu-

ality, has, as teleological focus, *theosis* or divination. For Calvin, as for Luther before him, Paul taught *simul justus et peccator*. This is significantly different from our “mystical union with Christ the head,” to use a phrase of common currency in classical theology. Calvin’s concept is much more epistemologically focused; spiritual experience is always guided by and guarded by Scripture. Although much of Calvin’s teaching on the mystery or hiddenness of God is noetically based, mystery for Calvin is ultimately the only answer to the knowability of God, whether epistemic or non-epistemic. This mystery is not something approached through instinct or insight or hierarchies of angels or the hierarchy of the church, as Pseudo-Dionysius taught. Perhaps it is true that as Western theology developed with

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increasingly sharp distinctions between reason and revelation, theologians became interested in what truths about God could be established by reason alone. The result was nothing more than to speak of God by way of negatives, “theology by way of negation.”<sup>64</sup>

While Calvin obviously makes use of apophatic theology (particularly in Book 1 of the *Institutes*), it would be a mistake to conclude that this is his hermeneutical key. For he also speaks of positive conceptions (cataphatic theology) and, moreover, presents the exercise of coming to the knowledge of God through a correlative encounter between the Creator and the creature in an epistemological rather than metaphysical way. That Calvin considered medieval mysticism as “mere prattle” was no doubt its highly subjective nature, a way of the Christian life without scriptural support.

At the same time, it would be disingenuous to maintain that, for Calvin, knowledge of the mystery was exclusively a rational exercise. Experience played a role as well. If we think of the Hebraic un-

derstanding of wisdom as we have it portrayed for us by the sage in the book of Proverbs, we are closer to the truth as to what Calvin meant by his concept of “knowledge.” When Calvin teaches about the knowledge of God and self through use of the principle of correlation, he does so because we see as through a glass darkly, and we can understand God (and self) only by means of such a correlative process. But he does not exclude subjective knowledge of God. Calvin’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit should guard against anyone accusing Calvin of intellectualizing the faith. Both objective rational knowledge and subjective personal experience are operative in coming into the mystery of God. This combination leads to a knowledge of God that is always true, if never exhaustive. For this reason, Calvin would distance himself from the prattle of medieval mysticism and its associated and closely related practice of contemplative prayer, in which the rational aspect of the mind is held in abeyance.<sup>65</sup> The medieval definitions of both mysticism and contemplative prayer significantly attenuate, if not outright dismiss, the crucial role the mind plays in our knowledge of the mystery.

#### **IV. Evangelicalism and Mystery: A Recommended Approach**

The Christian centuries following the Reformation have all played a part in adjusting Reformation thought and method in various directions. Although Calvin adopted the principle of *sola scriptura* as his guide in all theological endeavor and adjudication of controversy, often to consciously and explicitly critique the system of the Schoolmen, that principle did not prevent him from using the scholastic method (the use of dialectic and logic, for example). Calvin, the scriptural exegete, found value and help in the method of the scholastics: “It was impossible either to purge all scholastic methods and attitudes derived from classical authors or to avoid conflicts that required intricate theological reasoning as well as biblical interpretation.”<sup>66</sup> Similar methods can be used to accomplish dissimilar purposes; for the schoolmen, the scholastic method was used to gain insights into (sometimes extra-biblical) metaphysics (the question of existence of God, for example). For Calvin, a similar method was used to enlarge his

understanding of epistemological issues, with solid biblical presuppositions in place (Scripture assumes God exists). But it is not always easy to distinguish style from substance. And without entering the now somewhat tired debate about the continuity of Calvin's thought with that of his successors, it is surely a mistake of the highest idealism to hold that form and content do not inter-penetrates. As Marshal McLuhan has said, "The medium is the message."<sup>67</sup>

In the wake of the Reformation, evangelicalism has been understood, characterized, and defined as many things,<sup>68</sup> but one thing appears sure: there is a move to a more pietistic, subjective expression of Christianity, on the grounds that the faith has been intellectualized through the centuries that modernity reigned. In its aftermath—in this the postmodern period—a renaissance of experiential Christianity is on the rise.<sup>69</sup> This renaissance can be witnessed in a number of ways, chief of which has been a restoration of the practice of Christian mysticism. This practice is particularly true of what have been called "post-conservative evangelicals," an evangelical sub-group that continues to subscribe to generally accepted features of evangelicalism, ignores the "acids of modernity," and seeks a more experiential, subjective center.<sup>70</sup>

I want to briefly examine this post-conservative view of Christian life and spirituality because what is important to post-conservatives is to retreat from what are perceived to be the triumphal claims of the modern mind on Christian life and experience. This project of "revisioning," to use Stanley Grenz's term, centers on experience and the associated subjective spirituality to which it gives birth.<sup>71</sup> In this view, conversion is primary and is lived experience and doxology. Theology is a "second-order reflection on the faith of the converted people of God."<sup>72</sup> In their approach to theology, post-conservatives are seeking an alternative to the "evangelical Enlightenment,"<sup>73</sup> eschewing "epistemological certainty" and "theological systems"<sup>74</sup> on the grounds that all human knowing is perspectival and paradigm-dependent. In fact, Grenz "emphasizes experience over supernaturally revealed propositional truth as the heart of Christian theology."<sup>75</sup>

It should not surprise us that medieval mysticism holds such attraction to this group. If certain-

ty is found in subjective experience, if determining biblical propositional truth is not the first order task of the theologian, in concert with which a spiritual Christianity is constructed, then an experiential subjectivism rules the day.

Much has been written in the intervening decade and a half since these observations and recommendations on doing theology in a postmodern context were made. But this period has also witnessed both the truth and the results of such evangelical Christianity: The attraction of a return to the monastic lifestyle (although in 21<sup>st</sup>-century expression),<sup>76</sup> the magnetic appeal of medieval mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, and the renewed use of aids to enhance the mystical spirituality of the believers such as moving through stages of the cross. It is perhaps helpful to remember Benjamin B. Warfield's assessment of mysticism:

It is characteristic of mysticism that it makes its appeal to the feelings as the sole, or at least as the normative, source of knowledge of divine things. That is to say, it is the religious sentiment which constitutes for it the source of religious knowledge. Of course mystics differ with one another in the consistency with which they apply their principle. And of course they differ with one another in the account they give of this religious sentiment to which they make their appeal. There are, therefore, many varieties of mystics, pure and impure, consistent and inconsistent, naturalistic and supernaturalistic, pantheistic and theistic — even Christian. *What is common to them all, and what makes them all mystics, is that they all rest on the religious sentiment as the source of knowledge of divine things.*<sup>77</sup>

The postmodern mind is amenable to mystery. For that we are thankful. And it may be true that the modern emphasis on logical coherence and propositions has darkened the theological tunnel somewhat and has enervated the Christian experience. But there is a way to satisfy the deepest spiritual longings of the pious Christian other than to resort to exclusively subjective experience. Surely this approach is just as dangerous as over-intellectualizing the faith. Christianity should neither pass under the guise of arid intellectualism nor adopt a warm, fuzzy emotionalism. A wishy-washy faith is as unbiblical as

a rigid, arid one. Rather than jumping too quickly into a mysticism which, if not straight up unbiblical, is at times suspect, we should remember that all of our constitutive elements must be involved in the doxological act of worshiping and glorifying the God whom we seek to know. A healthy respect for the hiddenness of God, for the mystery, should be our limit of sobriety. We should seek to direct the postmodern Christian mind to biblical meditation. Building on the theology of John Calvin, the Puritans were masters at respecting the mystery that is God and, in true Pauline fashion, falling prostrate before this God, who is both incomprehensible and incomparable. None were better able to comprehend and articulate the mysterious paradoxes of God than the Puritans, whose tradition lasted from the late sixteenth century through the middle of the eighteenth, from William Perkins to Jonathan Edwards. If we can recapture the biblical theory and practice of meditation as understood by the Puritans, and if we can avoid the bouts of despondency and spiritual depression that sometimes plagued them, then our theological methodology would prove faithful to Scripture and to the mystery of the God who wrote it.

### Endnotes

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 29.
2. By Sinclair Ferguson in *Living to God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), 387-96.
3. John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. and ed. John King (Edinburgh/Carlisle: Banner of Truth trust, 1965, 1984), 78.
4. *Ibid.*, 86-87.
5. Recalling Augustine's dictum that God did not create *in* time, he created *with* time.
6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. MacNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. Library of Christian Classics, no. 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.12.1. My convention for citing from *Institutes* is by book, chapter and section.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Institutes*, 2.12.4.
9. *Institutes*, 2.12.5.
10. *Calvin Commentaries*, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 23, ed. and trans. Joseph Haroutunian (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958). At [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom45/vii.ii.iii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom45/vii.ii.iii). Accessed 01/16/16.
11. *Ibid.*, at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom45/iv.ii.i](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom45/iv.ii.i). Accessed 01/16/16. A Calvinian sentiment in clear contradistinction to the sad parody of Calvin's teaching of predestination promoted by many of his detractors.
12. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/vii.iii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/vii.iii). Accessed 01/16/16.
13. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/ix.vi](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/ix.vi). Accessed 01/16/16.
14. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm\\_vol38/htm/ix.vii.htm](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm_vol38/htm/ix.vii.htm). Accessed 01/16/16. Among other points of comparison, a key one centers on the "many" descendents of Adam and the "many" believers in Christ. And whether "many" means "all" as is stated in Romans 5:18 (but then a reversion back to many in the next verse).
15. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm\\_vol38/htm/ix.vii.htm](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm_vol38/htm/ix.vii.htm). Accessed 01/16/16.
16. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/x.vi](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/x.vi). Accessed 01/16/16.
17. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/x.vii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/x.vii). Accessed 01/16/16.
18. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.iii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.iii), n. 294. Accessed 01/16/16.
19. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.iv](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.iv). Accessed 01/16/16.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Institutes*, 2.12.5, n.5.
22. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.v](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.v). Accessed 01/16/16.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.vi](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xiii.vi). Accessed 01/16/16.
26. *Ibid.* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.ii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.ii). Accessed 01/16/16.
27. With a somewhat different nuancing of the word "mystery," Paul brings this significant section of Romans 9-11 to an end. He draws our attention to the mysterious fact of the restoration of the Jewish nation. This, no doubt, only matches the mystery of the call to the Gentiles that Paul taught elsewhere and the mystery of the unification of believing Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament church (Eph. 3:3-6). The fact of the restoration of the Jews, (and Gentiles,



for that matter), remains a mystery and always will because it is hidden in the inscrutable counsel of God. Ibid. at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.vi](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.vi). Accessed 01/16/16.

28. *Institutes*, 2.12.5.
29. Ibid. at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.viii](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom38/xv.viii). Accessed 01/16/16.
30. *Institutes*, 4.14.3; the Greek *mysterion* has been translated as Latin *sacramentum* in the Vulgate. Calvin sees an “identity of meaning” between the two terms (*Institutes*, 4.14.1-2). For this reason he argues that “mysterion” in Eph 5:28, in reference to marriage, has been incorrectly translated as “sacramentum” (see *Institutes*, 4.19.35-36).
31. *Institutes*, 4.16.4.
32. *Institutes*, 4.14.5.
33. *Institutes*, 4.16.2, 4.17.36.
34. *Institutes*, 4.17.5.
35. *Institutes*, 4.17.1.
36. *Institutes*, 4.17.33.
37. Ibid.
38. *Institutes*, 4.17.6.
39. *Institutes*, 4.17.33.
40. Ibid.
41. For example, the doctrines of the Trinity, the Kingdom, Romanism, and the Sabbath (*Institutes*, 1.13.17, 3.2.34, 4.10.12, and 2.8.29).
42. Ibid. at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.v.iii.i.html>. Accessed 01/16/16.
43. John Calvin, *The Sermons of M. John Calvin upon the Fifth Booke of Moses called Deuteronomie*, trans. from the French by Arthur Golding (London: John Harrison, 1583), 1039-45; reprint ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987). Brian A. Gerrish designates this as “hiddenness II” (the hiddenness of God outside his revelation), while “hiddenness I” refers to the hiddenness of God in revelation (revealed to us in “paradoxical mode”). See Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 134.
44. Calvin, *Harmony of the Law* at [www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom03/v.xxix](http://www.ccel.org/print/calvin/calcom03/v.xxix). Accessed 01/16/16.
45. Calvin, *Sermons upon Deuteronomie*, 1044-45, in modernized English.
46. Cited by David F. Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God” in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong, *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*, vol. 36 (Kirkville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publisher, 1997), 3-19; p.3.
47. Edward A. Dowey Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.
48. “Revelation is a veiling of the ‘naked majesty’ of God,” Gerrish summarizing Calvin [*Institutes*, 2.6.4] in Gerrish, 341, n. 60; see also Wright, 19.
49. Gerrish, 142.
50. John Calvin, *The Mystery of Godliness*, A sermon on 1 Tim. 3:16. At [www.the-highway.com/Mystery\\_of\\_Godliness.html](http://www.the-highway.com/Mystery_of_Godliness.html). Accessed 01/16/16.
51. Dowey, Jr., *Knowledge of God*, 7.
52. Ibid., 8.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 17.
55. Ibid., 17; my emphasis.
56. Ibid., 40.
57. See Henry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., rev., 2 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), vol. 2, chap. 11; cited in Gerrish, 335, n.4.
58. The most popular of which was the cult of Demeter. Characteristic of these mystery religions was a secret sharing of meals, dance, ceremonies, initiation rites, singing, sexual activity, and wine. See *Britannica Encyclopedia* online <http://www.britannica.com/topic/mystery-religion>. Accessed 01/16/16.
59. Gerrish, 132.
60. Ibid.
61. *Institutes*, 1.14.4. Elsewhere (commentary on Acts 17:34) Calvin seems to deny the identity of Dionysius the Areopagite with the author of the pseudo-Dionysian writings (C.O. 26:423), cited in Gerrish, 335, n6. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* says the following: “Pseudo-Dionysius, in his various works, gave a systematic treatment of Christian Mysticism, carefully distinguishing between rational and mystical knowledge. By the former, he says, we know God, not in His nature, but through the wonderful order of the universe, which is a participation of the Divine ideas (“De Divinis Nomin”, c, vii, §§ 2-3, in P.G., III, 867 sq.). There is, however, he adds, a more perfect knowledge of God possible in this life, beyond the attainments of reason even enlightened by faith, through which the soul contemplates directly the mysteries of Divine light. The contemplation in the present life is possible only to a few privileged souls, through a very special grace of God: it is the *theosis*, *mystike enosis*” (at <http://>



www.newadvent.org/cathen/10663b.htm. Accessed 01/17/2016).

62. P. N. Hillyer, "Mystical Theology" in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Packer, Ferguson, and Wright (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1988), 448-49.
63. William E. Mann, "Mysticism" in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 515-16.
64. And nature and grace, the natural and the supernatural, and reason and revelation. On apophatic theology, also in the medieval tradition, going back to Pseudo-Dionysius, God was described by denying that any of our concepts can be properly affirmed of Him. It stresses the inadequacy of human language and concepts to say anything of God. It affirms the inadequacy of human understanding in matters Divine. On the other hand and by way of contrast, affirmative and symbolic theology is described by Pseudo-Dionysius as the soul rejecting all ideas and images of God and entering the "darkness that is beyond understanding," where it is "wholly united with the Ineffable."
65. "Contemplative prayer" is defined in many ways, but at the very least it is prayer that focuses on scriptural words or phrases but is prayer without words. It is a removal of conscious thought from the mind.
66. R J Vandermolen in *Elwell Evangelical Dictionary*; cited at <http://mb-soft.com/believe/indexaz.html>. Accessed 01/17/2009. Also Charles B. Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Westminster-John Knox, 2008).
67. The form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall\\_McLuhan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_McLuhan). Accessed 01/17/2016).
68. For example, as a movement out of the Reformation, Protestantism, informed by both scholasticism and the pietist traditions, is beset by an internal tension between those who keep reason and experience separate and those who integrate the two; see Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).
69. This may represent evidence of the triumph of the pietist element in the evangelical family—the traditions of the awakenings—which holds the most promise for evangelicalism in a postmodern context. See Knight, *Future for Truth*.
70. Roger E. Olson in "Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age," *The Christian Century*, May 3, 1995, pp. 480-483. The four features are, according to Bebbington: conversionism, or an emphasis on the "new birth" as a life-changing religious experience; biblicism, a reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority; activism, a concern for sharing the faith; and crucicentrism, an emphasis on Christ's atoning work on the cross. He further describes this evangelical group as being broadly ecumenical, more at home in the Evangelical Studies Group of the American Academy of Religion than in the "older, stodgier" ETS, held captive by battles over inerrancy, higher criticism and liberal theology in general." He enumerates various interesting post-conservative adjustments to (some might call them assaults on) some fundamentals of orthodoxy, such as revelation (view of scripture), the notion of truth itself, Christology, classical theism, and more (Olson, 480f).
71. Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Downers Grove, Intervarsity, 1993).
72. Olson, *ibid.*, 481.
73. Historian Mark Noll's phrase; see Olson, *ibid.*
74. Olson, *ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*, as Grenz's subsequent work has shown.
76. Rob Moll, "The New Monasticism," *Christianity Today*, 9/02/2005.
77. Benjamin B. Warfield, "Mysticism and Christianity" in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991) vol. 9, pp. 649-66; my emphasis.

# Interweaving the Two Worlds—Jonathan Nesci's *100 Variations*: An Ode to Eliel Saarinen's First Christian Church

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by David Versluis

## **Church Architecture as Liturgy and Theology**

Church architecture can proclaim the redemptive power of God. Just as the Tabernacle was designed to remind ancient Israel of the mighty acts of God, church architecture today can signify the gift of life and remind us of God's blessing and covenantal grace. In this paper, I will detail how Eliel Saarinen used principles of modern architecture to design a church that could best serve Christian

worship. This investigation will lead to a reflection on how the contemporary artist/designer Jonathan Nesci responded perceptively to the nuances of Saarinen's work in designing an installation that metaphorically alludes to the past, present, and future.

The October 1942 issue of *Architectural Forum* published an article about the Tabernacle Church of Christ in Columbus, Indiana. This remarkable building still stands as a classic example of modern American church architecture. The principal architect was the renowned modernist architect Eliel Saarinen, who collaborated with his son Eero. This quotation from the *Forum* addresses the same issues as CIVA's 2015 conference theme, "Between Two Worlds: Contemporary Art and the Church," and may be encouraging to artists who find themselves caught between two worlds:

More than any other building type, and for reasons that require no elaboration, the church has resisted the encroachments of modern design. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that the question asked most frequently during the designing of this church was, "Why is this church so different in design from any other that I have seen?" Nor is it a particularly flattering commentary on the state of architectural appreciation at the present time that

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a straightforward solution to an honestly presented program should require involved explanations. But if it is not flattering, neither is it discouraging, for one of the most hopeful indications of contemporary approach to design is the widespread interest it invariably arouses.<sup>1</sup>

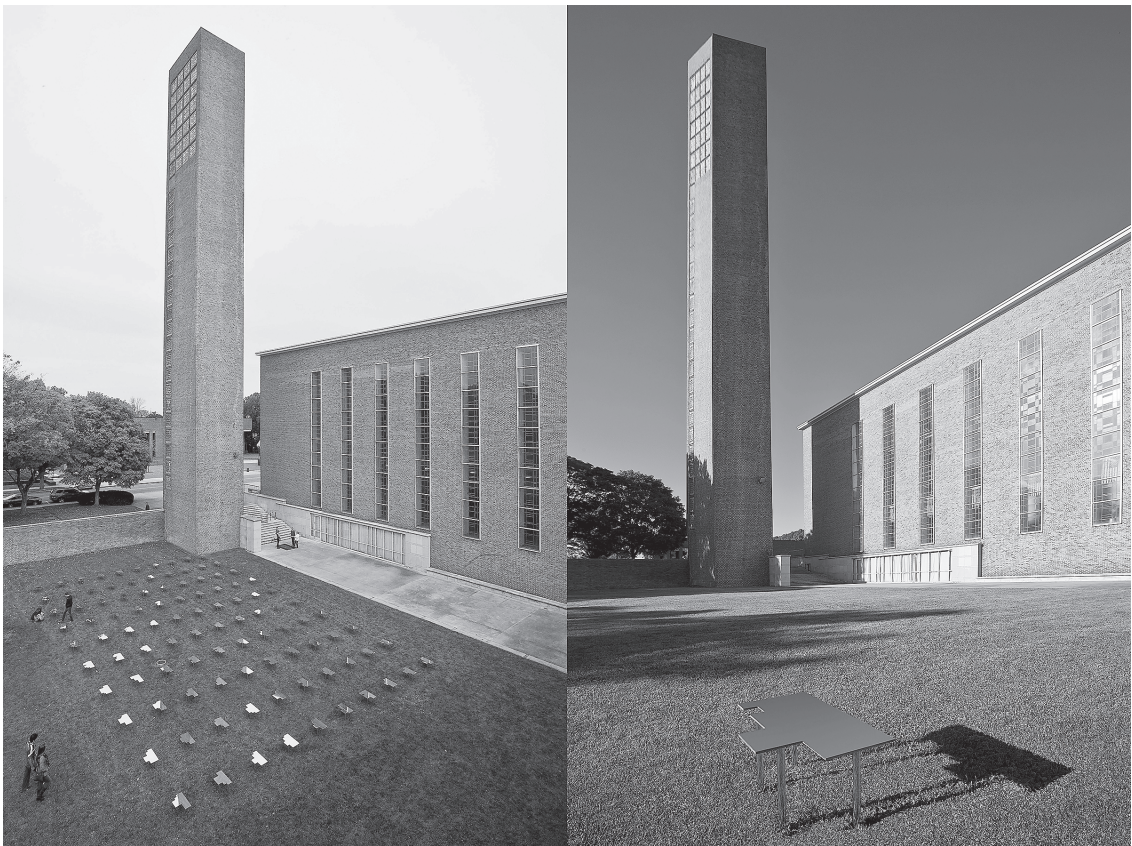
The Tabernacle Church of Christ (now called First Christian Church) was the first modern building in Columbus, Indiana, and one of the first contemporary church building designs in North America. Its geometric simplicity suggests a unity in overall form. Drawing from early Christian Italian church architecture, the rectangular box containing the sanctuary and the soaring campanile structure are characterized by incisive lines, classic proportions, minimal ornament, and harmonious rhythm and repetition. Comprising a full city block, the facility is composed of three rectangular wings surrounding a sunken garden. The layout of First Christian Church takes cues from earlier models of Saarinen's Finnish countrymen Alvar Aalto and Erik Bryggmann. The Saarinens imbued the ratio-

nal, linear form with the tactile material warmth of buff stone panels and tan brick.<sup>2</sup>

### **Glorifying God with Light, Space, and Sound**

As human beings, we can be profoundly shaped by communal spaces—particularly worship spaces—as we design spaces and furnishings to fit our current needs, capacities, and values.<sup>3</sup> Saarinen was chosen as principal architect for The Tabernacle Church of Christ because of this conviction. To answer the congregation's anticipated question "Is this design particularly appropriate to our church?" Saarinen said, "As this church has been based on the fundamentals of Christianity, so the new architectural thought is endeavoring to build upon the fundamental principles of architecture."<sup>4</sup> Saarinen's design was unusual for its time and is considered to be the first church building constructed purely on "modern" design principles.

The project began in the late 1930s. The congregation originally considered a Neo-Gothic style. J. Irwin Miller, then a recent college graduate who





had shadowed well-known architects as a student at Yale University, heard these conversations and said, “I don’t see why you talk about a Gothic Church or an Early American church—we are not Gothic or Early American.”<sup>5</sup> His comment changed the discussion and led to Saarinen’s commissioning in 1939.

Two prominent members of the congregation, Elsie Irwin Sweeney and her sister Nettie Irwin Sweeney Miller, began the process with a visit to Saarinen at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Elsie Irwin Sweeney later recalled details of the initial meeting:

Mr. Saarinen walked in. A very modest, unassuming man, rather short in stature and taciturn [sic] [taciturn]. He seemed timid and somewhat unfamiliar with our language. Since he had nothing to say, my sister opened the conversation with, “Have you ever built a church? He said ‘Yes’. — “Where?” “In Lithuania.” “Have you built any church in America?” “No. Because they are too theatrical — they are not my idea of religion.” My sister replied, “We don’t want that kind of a church.” For the first time, there was a sparkle in the eye of Mr. Saarinen and he asked her “What kind of church do you want?” As my sister had thought long on the subject, she was able to give an excellent reply. The answer was, “Our town is small and there are all sorts and conditions of men. While we should like the church to be beautiful, we do not want the first reaction to be, ‘how much did the church cost?’ We want the poorest women in town to feel at home there and able to worship her God in those surroundings.” Also she wanted the church to be so reverential that the smallest boy would know that it is the house of God and would keep still. Her third request was that it should be as timeless as the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.<sup>6</sup>

The conversation delighted Saarinen, who then agreed to design their church. Church members and the architect had several conversations centered around questions such as “What do we believe?” and “How will that be revealed in our church’s architecture?”<sup>7</sup>

Working with the building committee, the Saarinen’s proposed a set of design principles to symbolically represent and physically promote ideals such as the inter-relatedness of congregational worship, preaching, and the sacraments, as well as

the integration of church education, administrative offices, and common spaces. They believed that modern architecture would give the most straightforward and cohesive design for addressing these questions. To guide them, the building committee issued a brief articulating their vision:

We attach much importance to our effort to preach and to practice primitive Christianity and nothing else, for we believe that in it lies the hope of the world.... There are a few elements in our belief that we would like to have emphasized in the church. Because the gospel of Christ’s death, burial and Resurrection [meaning Baptism] lies at the heart of our faith, we would like it illustrated in some way in the architecture of the building.... We are asking you to build a church which will interpret the spirit of Christ and of the gospel and which will also promote these ideals and assure their perpetuation among us.... We believe that we must keep the difficult way of life that Christ preached before our eyes in the uncompromising and beautiful manner in which He presented it. We are confronted with this ideal in our communion service and in our sermons, but every other part of worship and work should be planned to remind us continually and impressively of the obligation and privilege of a Christian life in this world....

...We are all very sensitive to our surroundings, and to participate in a communion service in a place designed to interpret the meaning of that service is to help tremendously in accomplishing in individuals the purposes for which the Lord’s Supper was established. The same applies to music and to all other phases of our study, work and worship.<sup>8</sup>

### Theological Architecture

In response, Saarinen foreshadowed the import of *Christ and Architecture*, believing that a church’s architecture should reflect its theology. In their book *Christ and Architecture* (1965), authors Donald Bruggink and Carl Droppers write,

How does Christ communicate with his people? The answer of the Church of Jesus Christ reformed according to the Word of God is that Christ communicates himself to his Church through Word and Sacrament! This is the message Luther and Calvin found in God’s Word; this remains the position of those churches which are reformed ac-

cording to his Word. God communicates himself through Word and Sacrament.<sup>9</sup>

The central question, as Saarinen developed plans for First Christian Church, was, “How does Christ communicate himself to his people and how can it be expressed architecturally?” Saarinen’s design for First Christian Church acknowledges that Christ communicates himself through the Word (biblical preaching) and the Sacraments (commu-

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*The central question, as Saarinen developed plans for First Christian Church, was, “How does Christ communicate himself to his people and how can it be expressed architecturally?”*

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nion and baptism). He expressed this belief in the way the chancel with the off-centered communion table and the baptismal pool in the back (the gate of which opens when in use) combine to create a sense of balance and unity with the pulpit (the Word) on the left.

For Saarinen, “architecture becomes churchly by providing an atmosphere of meditation, and this is achieved largely through color and proportion.”<sup>10</sup> All of Saarinen’s buildings are characterized by “honest” use of materials. In the case of First Christian Church, honesty is expressed through the design of the acoustics, the use of natural light, and the masterly use of proportions. Saarinen did not try to hide the common materials he used. Wood, glass, brick, stone, and concrete all work together to form a worship space that conveys simplicity, dignity, and tranquility.

Similarly, in their book, Bruggink and Droppers suggest that the noblest examples of a church building should be viewed as “theological architecture,” architecture that accurately balances mind and substance. Theological architecture inspires through “its use of plan, shape, and materials”<sup>11</sup> producing a building that visually communicates the biblical gospel of grace and hope in Christ. Theological ar-

chitecture becomes proclamation when its physical presence projects a world that is implicitly meaningful. The best church architecture is sentient and values integrity and veracity. When love for neighbor inspires art and architectural design, it serves as a blessing to humankind. A congregation, the church building, and the furnishings can artistically work together as an act of liturgy and worship and reflect the body of Christ.

In other words, the finest (church) architecture throughout the centuries does not simply imitate the past. That’s why Saarinen proclaimed, “Any building designed . . . must be expressive of the time of its construction, and of no other time.”<sup>12</sup> He goes on to explain, “the present time must have an expressive form of its own.”<sup>13</sup> The search for architectural form that is fitting for its time and place must also be unpretentious. He states, “For honest [modest] our form ‘must’ be.”<sup>14</sup> In his 1943 book, *The City*, Saarinen studied the artistic principles of ancient Egyptian, classical Greek, and medieval architecture. He cites the 1889 book *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* (City Planning According to Artistic Principles) by Viennese architect Camillo Sitte, which criticizes pragmatic planning by noticing how old European towns (as well as the Greek Acropolis) developed “organically” over time in a more open and direct manner, based on “the law of creative expression”—they were more “social,” in other words, and not “chained by . . . [doctrinaire] sterile formality.”<sup>15</sup> Saarinen usually avoided the use of a rigid grid system, suggesting that an “informal irregularity” was more human. While he used patterns of regularity in some instances, he advocated for contemporary architecture that was a “coherent organism.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Saarinen’s Asymmetrical Grid Conception**

That “coherent organism” in an asymmetrical design is what makes First Christian Church modern, according to Columbus architect Nolan Bingham:

Saarinen used shapes in various iterations throughout the building, almost like variations on a symphonic theme. The shapes are repeated in floor tiles and wood panels in the sanctuary. The sanctuary’s tall windows on the west side resemble the tower, while small panels within the windows recall the

tower and the main building. Even the cross in the sanctuary is made of several rectangular pieces. Asymmetrical designs also stand out: the building's north side is covered with rectangular panels, but the large cross on the building's front is off-center... The front door also is off-center, more to the tower's side. The tower's clock is off-centered in the other direction, toward the church, as if the buildings were trying to move closer together.<sup>17</sup>

Saarinén considered proportion the “delightful harmony” of modern architecture and based his structures on the golden ratio. He would have affirmed the sentiment of Robert Bringham, who wrote about proportion in page layout as “an interval in music. In a given context, some are consonant, others dissonant. Some are familiar; some are also inescapable, because of their presence in the structures of the natural as well as the man-made world. Some proportions also seem particularly linked to living things.”<sup>18</sup> As we will see in my later discussion of Jonathan Nesci's work, Nesci, like Saarinen, designs his artifacts based on the golden ratio, similar to the Renaissance structure, which is “precisely measured and formed,” yet flexible, unconstrained.<sup>19</sup>

Saarinén advocated asymmetry as a method for creating active tension and coherent balance throughout the building's structure, in his design proposal to the First Christian Church's building committee and congregation:

The middle aisle of the Nave is slightly off center toward the West. We have not been concerned in a symmetrical solution, believing that forced symmetry only creates artificial and sterile conditions. Really, in the case at hand, symmetry was bound to be artificial, for the function of this church, in particular the function of the Chancel, is asymmetrical to its nature. Our endeavor, therefore, has rather been to arrive at a good balance between the various features and points of interest of the room.

According to this asymmetrical balance conception, the only symbolic feature in the Church—the plain and non-ornamental cross—is off center at the back of the Chancel. The detached communion table, on the other hand, being the central feature of the service, occupies a place of prominence in the service and is located at the central axis of the middle aisle. Here, the spirit of

symmetry is innate in the problem and, therefore, calls for a symmetrical solution.

The pulpit is off center, on the East. It has as its background the elaborately perforated organ screen. The organist's console is behind the pulpit, hidden from the congregation but easily visible from the choir at the opposite side of the Chancel, and in adequate relation to the orchestra space beneath the organ.

The organ screen is designed of wood, perforated and light, and will constitute a good contrast with the plain coolness of the background wall of the Chancel. Another contrast is introduced here with the tapestry above the choir seats. This will bring the softness of textile and enlivenment of color into the composition.

On the whole, our endeavor has been to create a serene, spatial atmosphere in this Church. Such an effect can, to a great extent, be achieved by surface and color treatment of the walls and ceiling. Another important point in this respect is the amount, direction and quality of the outside light that flows into the room. As for this outside light, we have a dual scheme: first, to lighten the Nave with the soft western light while services are held during the morning hours; second, to bring into the Chancel an abundance of the bright morning light in order to focus the eyes and minds toward this spatial flow of light. Such an arrangement, we think will add a spiritual quality to the service.

In both the Church proper and the Chapel, the same arrangement of the Baptistry has been used. It is at the rear of the Chancel, screened from the audience when not in use and opened by swinging doors when in use. Because in the Church proper, an abundance of light flows from above upon those being baptized in the depth of the baptistry, we believe that death, burial, and resurrection will be adequately symbolized with natural arrangements and effects, rather than with artificial means.<sup>20</sup>

After more than seventy years, the building is still apropos and still meets the objectives of the original building committee. In a 2012 interview, Associate Pastor Al White commented, “the building's design helps reinforce the church's purpose, to bring people closer together and closer to God, connections that are reflected in the church's many vertical and horizontal elements.”<sup>21</sup>



## Jonathan Nesci's Response to Saarinen's Architectural Theology

That design has influenced the work of furniture designer Jonathan Nesci, among others. As his work shows, Christian artists and designers can caringly engage the paradox of sin and redemption by representing a world of sorrow and joy. Humble but acute awareness of Christ's love for God's world can produce work that points to the light of hope rather than pessimistic distrust. Such artistic action becomes a service to humankind that enriches life. Theologian Cecilia González-Andrieu, quoting from Alejandro García-Rivera, writes, "Aesthetics is about hope and the 'theological dimension of art lies in that, ultimately, art interprets humanity to the human.' In this, art mirrors and makes transparent one of the ways Christ brings salvation."<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, this attitude correlates with that of several contemporary designers. Chicago graphic designer Rick Valicenti pursues "a real human presence" in the design of artifacts.<sup>23</sup> The most compelling designs are not dependent on formulaic answers that deprive it of character. Valicenti believes that as artists and designers, we go where curiosity leads us, exploring and ascertaining, while concentrating on idea, artistry, and technique. At the convergence of skill and knowledge, we craft meaningful pieces and express unique experiences. Further, art and design is integral to the human condition; at its best it is ubiquitous, nourishing, and transformative. Meaningful design allows us to connect with one another and compels us to slow down and pay attention. Valicenti's thoughts are wonderfully communicated and manifested by the work of a young designer, Jonathan Nesci of Chicago, Illinois, and Columbus, Indiana.

For several years Nesci has designed furniture based on the proportions of the golden ratio and named it the "Golden Variation." As he says, "I've been really interested in the idea of manifested order. Whether it be a building, a city plan, or a table, the idea of mathematics informing and forming our built environment interests me a great deal."<sup>24</sup>

When Nesci was offered the opportunity to design a site-specific art installation for Columbus, he chose Saarinen's First Christian Church, mainly because he intuitively sensed that the shapes and proportions of the building were similar to his own

furniture design. Nesci's curiosity in using the golden ratio as a design method led to his discovery of how Saarinen utilized it at First Christian Church.<sup>25</sup>

### 100 Variations

In 2014, Nesci's work drew the attention of independent curator Christopher West, who, with a coalition of arts advocates, initiated and organized a program that celebrated design in Columbus by pairing a contemporary artist and designer with one of Columbus' most significant buildings. Jonathan Nesci was invited to design and install a site-specific installation that ran from October 10-12, 2014 at First Christian Church. The installation was titled *100 Variations: New Reflections on Eliel Saarinen and the Golden Ratio*.

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Nesci's installation consisted of 100 unique, mirror-polished aluminum occasional tables installed on the sunken courtyard lawn of the church. The highly reflective and polished surfaces of the tabletops reference the reflecting pool that was originally a part of the church's design but was removed in 1957 due to maintenance concerns.

While developing the project, Nesci stated, "Another insight that came via research was discovering the golden ratio grid that Eliel used in planning the space, which is in the DNA of all 100 of my tables. When you walk around the church you can see these motifs that look so similar to my shapes."<sup>26</sup> Nesci superimposed the precision of computer technology and CNC machining on Saarinen's construction drawings of the church to form patterns for his polished tabletops: "Each table is also asymmetrical as that was one of the discoveries I made during the process that Eliel didn't care for symmetry."<sup>27</sup> In keeping with the spirit of theological architecture, Nesci's tables metaphorically

reflect a number of essential ideas. First, the tables in addition to being occasional tables also reference the sacraments, specifically the communion table. Second, the number 100 represents a complete, full number. Nesci was also paying homage to others in their use of 100: e.g., Donald Judd's *100 Boxes*, Marfa, Texas and Martino Gamper's *100 Chairs in 100 Days*.<sup>28</sup> Third, the installation suggests the past, present, and future. The polished surface expresses the notion that something has happened, yet it continues to happen. The shiny reflections suggest the primordial past, the material and physical object signify the elemental present, and the style is instinctively futuristic. And fourth, each table top design was asymmetrically varied with respect to the golden ratio in playful reference to Saarinen's building.

Nesci, in a lyrical way, responds theologically to the notional grid fostered by Saarinen to help viewers slow down and notice the exterior and interior design of First Christian Church. As Nesci describes it, "I've used the golden ratio to assist in developing forms for more than five years. It has given me a form that I can use over and over again to experiment with new scales, materials, and processes. It's my hope that the installation will for a moment bring the reflection back, reflecting Eliel Saarinen's work both physically and in spirit."<sup>29</sup>

Although Nesci's variations in his 100 tables are beautifully proportioned, the designs are never robotic because Nesci uses Saarinen's asymmetrical grid and golden ratio proportions. Instead, they are intuitively ordered by Nesci's use of the golden ratio as a universal and natural geometric system. As church architect, Nesci addresses a central theological question by grouping his 100 tables together to form a larger "pool" that reflects the church, as the surrounding atmospheric changes by day and night. He captures the importance of restoration and community. According to Nesci, the installation symbolizes "being integral with the church rather than at the church."<sup>30</sup> In doing so, he gets to the heart of the gospel and finds a place where the two worlds of contemporary art and the church meet.

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# BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate.* Walton, John H. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015. 256pp. ISBN: 978-0-8308-2461-8. Reviewed by Joel Duff, Professor of Biology, The University of Akron, Akron, OH.

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In the twenty-first century, after almost two millennia of interpretations, is it possible to see the Bible through new eyes? Are novel interpretations of familiar passages of Scripture possible? Is there a “lost world” of the Biblical text out there, waiting to be found? This is what we are led to believe by the title of John Walton’s newest book: *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*. To some extent, the title is simply a marketing strategy that feeds off of the popularity of his first book, *The Lost World of Genesis 1*, and a subsequent book, *The Lost World of Scripture*. For John Walton, Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, what he presents is not, in his words, a novel or new interpretation but rather a kind of resurrection of an interpretation. What has been *lost* in traditional and confessional readings of Scripture is an appreciation for the “cognitive environment” of the original Hebrew audience. Some of the insights that come from recovering this lost cultural context are indeed little discussed in today’s interpretative literature, not to mention Reformed churches; but most of Walton’s insights here will not be surprising to those familiar with his prior books.

An expert on the cultural context of the ancient Near East (ANE), Walton brings a fresh perspective to passages in Genesis that have perhaps become laden with extra-biblical interpretations and traditions. In *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, Walton asks us to step back and ask some of the most basic questions about what the text is telling us about Adam and Eve, and, maybe more importantly, what it isn’t telling us that we may believe it does. A simple example would be the traditional Western image of Eve eating an apple, which, not surprisingly, is what some people think the text says that Eve ate. Yet we don’t know what the fruit was and can only hypothesize what it may have been. Throughout this book, Walton asks fundamental questions that cause us to ask ourselves, “What do we really know about Genesis 2–3”? Did the

serpent speak to Eve from the Tree of Good and Evil? Were the serpent and Eve even in the Garden when they interacted? In most cases, what we assume about the text we really don’t know at all.

Anyone who picks up Walton’s book will surely want to know who Walton thinks Adam and Eve were. Before answering this question, though, Walton constructs an interpretative framework—based on the cultural contexts of the ANE—that he believes is faithful to the text and reflects the “cognitive environment” of the original audience. If you are not familiar with Walton’s earlier work, you should know that his central thesis is that a proper interpretation of Genesis 1 reveals that the creation story is not about material creation, but instead is about God’s assigning functions to that which He has made in the beginning. However, you need not be familiar with details of Walton’s method of coming to this conclusion before reading this book. The first five chapters, which he presents as key propositions, summarize his method of interpreting scripture and Genesis in particular.

These initial propositions are critical, for if his hermeneutical assumptions are not sound, then his proposed interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3 is going to be suspect. After defending his approach to scripture and providing a summary of the worldview that the original audience and author, Walton turns to the heated debate over human origins, ostensibly the result of a conflict between science and the traditional interpretations of Genesis 2 and 3 and the interpretation of Adam by Paul in Romans.

An important first question for Walton is this: Is Genesis 2 and 3 an expanded description of Day 6 in Genesis 1, or does it follow the events of the creation week? More importantly, what did the original writer(s) and readers think the answer to this question was? The answer is potentially critical for understanding who Adam and Eve were and when they lived. Walton favors the second

option: “When we return to the relationship between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, we find that there is therefore no precedent by which to conclude that the introductory formula in Genesis 2:4 is bringing the reader back into the middle of the previous account [in Genesis 1] to give a more detailed description of a part of the story that was previously told” (66). If Genesis 2 follows Genesis 1 chronologically, then this raises the possibility that the people created in Genesis 1 may not be the Adam and Eve of Genesis 2. Of course, that doesn’t exclude the possibility they are the same Adam and Eve. Walton concludes that “though Adam and Eve may well be included among the people created in Genesis 1, to think of them as the first couple or the only people in their time is not the only textual option.”

Walton argues for a literal Adam and Eve, not because of the need for genetic continuity with all humans but because of the Fall and its effects. Walton thinks that a proper understanding of the text, though, shows that it does not determine when exactly Adam and Eve lived and whether they themselves had physical ancestors. He finds, consistent with his interpretation of Genesis 1, that there are many “imagistic” elements in the Garden of Eden narrative (137), and that Adam and Eve are meant to be interpreted as archetypes as much as they are individuals (Walton again here refers to the ANE to support his claim). Thus, Genesis 2 and 3 is a grand metanarrative that provides context to all our lives, while at the same time, as Walton argues, it is an event rooted in time.

But if the text does not prohibit the presence of other people created before Adam and Eve, then what about the doctrine of original sin? What was the fall? How did it affect humans and the creation? What about death, pain, and suffering? How can it be said that Eve was created from the side or half, not rib, of Adam? One at a time, Walton tackles these questions in a series of propositions, which make up the bulk of the book’s chapters.

There is one theme that crosses multiple propositions that is worth exploring a bit further. Walton spends a number of pages establishing that, in the ANE environment, an important question of the original author and his audience would have been: how is order maintained in the creation? That a deity maintains and establishes order was universally accepted in the ANE, but why is there disorder

in the present if God is so powerful? Why do humans experience pain, suffering, and the devastation of natural disasters? In many ways, these questions—central to Genesis 2-3—are not so dissimilar to our own questions on origins, theodicy, and the human condition.

In the song “Wake Up Dead Man,” U2’s Bono bemoans a chaotic world lacking the order that brings justice and peace. He is impatient for Jesus to “wake up” and bring this current fallen world to an end. In the final stanza he asks: “Is there order in all of this disorder? Is it like a tape recorder? Can we rewind it just once more? Wake up, Wake up Dead Man.” Walton’s 18<sup>th</sup> proposition on Genesis 2-3 attempts to answer these questions. Yes, he says, there is order, but it is obscured by the disorder that Adam and our sin has brought into the world. As Walton says, “We currently live in an already/not yet situation in which a solution for disorder has been provided (the death of Jesus overcame sin and death), yet disorder remains. Furthermore, the continuing process brings order that can be understood through various phases that God initiated in the past as it waits for its final consummation in a new creation...[:] the cosmology of Genesis 1 was constructed around the idea of bringing order into a non-ordered situation” (161).

For Walton, however, the creation at the time of Adam and Eve’s creation is not one where there was perfection, but the “very good” state of creation meant that all the conditions were right for Adam and Eve to be formed. Animals lived and died, and if there were pre-adamites, they also lived and died.

Further, Walton sees in Genesis 1 a cosmological description of the world, one in which the original state is one of non-order into which God brings order. The Garden of Eden was a sanctuary in a semi-ordered world. There, God established a connection with his prized creation, man (“Adam”), who would bear his image on this Earth and continue the job of turning non-order into order. This central thesis of man’s role as establishing order as God’s image-bearer is presented in Walton’s Proposition 16. God in Genesis 1 established functions for much of His creation, giving them purpose and in that sense showing Adam how to order the world. Adam, placed in Eden, was a “steward of sacred space” (a concept important to the ANE), which means that by extension



he was the steward of all creation, serving the only true and all-powerful God.

Under Walton's reading of Genesis 3, we, as fallen creatures, have not only failed in our task of taking non-order and bringing it to a state of order, but we have instead allowed disorder to proliferate. We do worse than failing to fulfill our creational obligations; we have damaged the creation by bringing disorder, a disastrous problem that can only be overcome by a redeemer. For Walton, in Adam "we did not lose paradise as much as we forfeited sacred space and the relationship it offered, thereby damaging our ability to be in relationship with God and marring his creation with our own underdeveloped ability to bring order on our own in our own wisdom" (145). It is only through Christ our redeemer that paradise can be attained—not a paradise restored, then, but a paradise newly gained.

Throughout the book, Walton puts forth many apparently new interpretations of familiar, key

verses in Christian theology. Walton's propositions are effectively theological hypotheses that must be tested by theologians over the next decade. If his interpretive framework, including his description of the cultural context of the ANE, is sound, it seems likely that many of his propositions will find additional Biblical support as they are explored further. If the conclusions that he has reached do not find further exegetical support, his primary thesis will, of course, need to be reassessed. What we have been given in this book, though, is a series of thought-provoking, at times challenging, propositions that should be discussed and debated in Reformed and evangelical communities for years to come.

Where will Walton turn his attention next? I assume that he will test his interpretative framework and use his knowledge of the ANE to see what new insights it may bring to the Lost World of Noah. At least we should hope he does.

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*Justice in Love*. Wolterstorff, Nicholas. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015. (Paperback with New Preface). 306pp. ISBN: 978-0802872944. Reviewed by Ben Gibson, Candidate for Masters of Religion in Ethics, Yale Divinity School.

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Discussions about the relationship between justice and love have become a regular part of Christian philosophy and ethics over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> Is Christ's call to love in concert or conflict with liberalism's call to justice? Can Scripture's love-command serve as a consistent ethic? Nicholas Wolterstorff seeks to answer such questions and many others in his new book, *Justice in Love*. The book serves as a companion to his *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (2008), in which he sought to root contemporary discourse around rights within Judeo-Christian teaching—in Christian thinkers, the New Testament writings, and the Old Testament Scriptures. Although *Justice in Love* may be read as part of Wolterstorff's publications on justice, in this book he does a fine job of summarizing this previous work at pertinent moments, which makes *Justice in Love* accessible as a stand-alone text.

Wolterstorff begins by leveling a critique of the last century of agape ethics. He then attempts to construct an account of love's compatibility with justice, to give an extensive treatment of the literature around forgiveness and to perform a corresponding exegesis of Romans. Ambitious as this is,

how can such wildly diverse projects dwell between the two covers of one book? Wolterstorff views each of these individual sections as part and parcel of the larger project of reconciling the concepts of love and justice, two concepts that he believes have been rent asunder by scholars from various disciplines and backgrounds. In order to bring the two concepts back into harmony, Wolterstorff engages in dialogue with many disciplines: philosophy, theology, ethics, political theory, and Biblical studies, to name only a few. Thus, while the structure of *Justice in Love* may seem daunting, it is undertaken by a scholar who recognizes the complexities and far-reaching implications of speaking about love and justice.

In order to fully understand what Wolterstorff is attempting through this book, one needs a cursory understanding of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century debate about love as agapism. Among the loves named in the New Testament—*philia*, *eros*, and *agape*—agape is widely regarded as the fulfillment of Christ's love-commandment found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 22:37-39; Luke 10:25-28; Mark 12:28-31): "Love the Lord your



God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” In issuing this command, Christ proclaimed a radically different ethic that theologians, philosophers, and ethicists alike have all sought to unravel.

Wolterstorff uses the first half of his book to differentiate his understanding of agape from that of recent agapists such as Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren. In his expansive and widely contested *Agape and Eros* (1930-1936), Nygren proposed agape as a completely distinctive ethic for the Christian life. Wolterstorff refers to this agape-ethic as “classical modern day agapism,” an agape which focuses entirely on gratuitous benevolence to the exclusion of any other motivation. Agape, according to Nygren, only flows from God’s love of us to others; our own concerns with attachment (*philia*), attraction (*eros*), or justice are at best distractions and at worst corruptions of true Christ-like love. Not only does justice, for Nygren, do less than love requires, but when an individual is concerned with justice, this concern disrupts the possibility of true and self-sacrificing agape. Agape, then, may act paternalistically; I may disregard the rights of my neighbor as long as I am pursuing his or her good.

Wolterstorff levels a thoughtful critique of Nygren’s account of agape that demonstrates Nygren’s failure to take seriously the compatibility of justice and love and the position of Scripture. To note one apt critique found in the book, Wolterstorff describes how Nygren failed to recognize that the exemplar of classical modern day agape, God’s forgiveness of sins, requires a conception of justice to make it meaningful: “This is irony indeed, that the manifestation of love that the modern day agapist cites as paradigmatic of God’s love and the model for ours should undermine his claim that the love of Jesus asks of us pays no attention to justice and injustice” (53). At the very moment that Nygren claimed that God foregoes what justice requires by forgiving, Wolterstorff identifies that the very act of forgiveness requires a robust conception of justice. Forgiveness, according to Wolterstorff, is a recognition of being wronged, and a foregoing of one’s corrective rights against the perpetrator of the wrong. Forgiveness, rather than abolishing justice, requires a notion

of what is just to be meaningfully actionable: “If forgiveness is an example of the sort of love that Jesus enjoined us to have for the neighbor, such love cannot be deaf and blind to injustice; it has to be alert to justice and injustice” (55).

However, throughout his criticism of contemporary agapism, Wolterstorff paints with a broad brush stroke. Under this umbrella of classical modern day agapism, Wolterstorff tends to lump together figures as diverse as Nygren, Søren Kierkegaard, and Paul Ramsey. More than slight shades of difference appear in the thoughts of these three men, and thus we as readers are left asking, “What use is there in characterizing each of them as benevolence-agapists? Wolterstorff would seem better served by focusing his critique on Nygren, who is his paradigmatic benevolence-agapist, and using the other thinkers to help in his own constructive project.

In place of this benevolence-agapism, Wolterstorff offers a constructive account of a justice-oriented care-agapism. In this constructive section of the book, Wolterstorff’s argument is the most compelling. He insists that, opposed to Nygren’s characterization, “New Testament agape joins seeking to promote a person’s good with seeking to secure due respect for her worth; it seeks both as ends in themselves” (93). Rather than disregarding justice and *eros*, Wolterstorff sees agape as meaningfully incorporating them into a robust vision of love as care-agapism. Care, as opposed to benevolence, does not seek to simply enact love through self-sacrificial giving, but loves through acknowledging worth and investing in long-term goods. Love as care seeks justice for the other, takes seriously the need to care for oneself, and measures paternalistic actions carefully. By positioning care as the preeminent interpretation of agape, Wolterstorff attempts to dethrone Nygren’s dualistic account of agape and gives an account of love as concerned with each step of creation, fall, redemption, and reconciliation, not simply the final two.

The constructive section of the book, however, fails to identify the full scope of application for care-agapism. Wolterstorff helpfully suggests rules for applying this type of agape ethic in practice, but he fails to identify meaningful differences between individuals acting as individuals and individuals acting on behalf of an organization, such

as the state. When individuals step into the role of governance, do they attempt to maintain an ethic of agapism? Wolterstorff attempts to make some limited punishment and paternalism possible through love as care, but it is unclear whether these amendments to agape extend far enough to accommodate the agapists who are required by their role to punish a wrongdoer or to make a decision for citizens that they would be unable to make on their own.<sup>2</sup> Wolterstorff does not make clear here whether there exists or ought to exist any morally significant difference when the individual acts on behalf of the state.

In the final two sections of *Justice in Love*, Wolterstorff attempts to ground this re-characterization of agape through two other discussions: the relationship of justice, forgiveness, and punishment, and an exegetical treatment of Romans. These final sections may hold incidental value for interdisciplinary dialogue or for practitioners (such as pastors or counselors) approaching Wolterstorff's text. However, these parts of the text do not add significant contributions to the critique and construction found in the first two sections. By the end of Part Two, Wolterstorff has given an intriguing construction of justice and love's compatibility that would spark further thought and dialogue on its own. This is not to suggest that the further discussions are not worthwhile, but that this text may not have been the proper venue to attempt such expansive discussions. In particular, Wolterstorff's exegetical treatment of Romans with a renewed focus on the justice of God feels disconnected from the rest of the text. While Wolterstorff makes provocative suggestions by engaging the New Perspective on Paul, his conclusions often feel largely disconnected from his larger discussion of agape.

*Justice in Love* serves as an excellent primer for understanding the complexities of the relationship of love and justice, both philosophically and practically. His critique of Nygren's work and his constructive alternative contribute significantly to discussions about the love commandment and an agape love-ethic. This text, I believe, will prove beneficial to Christian theorists and practitioners alike in developing an ethic of justice, self-love, and world engagement. While much of the discussion surrounding agape has been undertaken by voices emphasizing its radical distinctiveness, Wolterstorff helpfully speaks from a Reformed perspective that situates agape within a broader understanding of God's sovereign plan for human life. At his best moments in the text, Wolterstorff offers a vision of Christ's call to love that takes seriously care for the self, justice for all, and a transformational agapism aimed at healing a broken world.

### Endnotes

1. Of particular note are Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Orders of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008; and Timothy Jackson, *Political Agape: Christian Love and Liberal Democracy*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015. Both of these authors dedicate more time and thought to the question of how compatible love is with variants of justice specific to Liberalism.
2. Think of the archetypal judge in Book XIX of Augustine's *City of God*, who is called to and carries out his task in this fallen world but recognizes the tension of his position.

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*I Still Believe: Leading Bible Scholars Share Their Stories of Faith and Scholarship*. John Byron and Joel Lohr, eds. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015. 249 pp. ISBN 970-0310515166. Reviewed by Jamin Hübner, Assistant Professor of Christian Studies and Director of Institutional Effectiveness, John Witherspoon College.

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One of the greatest glories of the Christian faith is its ancient and diverse tradition of changed lives. From Abraham to Augustine, Hagar to Mary, Luther to Lewis, and the millions of others throughout history, one cannot help but marvel at the power of the Christian message and God's

unrelenting pursuit of individuals. In many ways, personal and public testimony embodies the gospel; for in telling others about God's grace in our lives, we preach the good news about Christ: real, local, and meaningful (or in more trendy terms, "genuine, authentic, raw").

But this vital brew often goes untapped. The practice of story-telling is a lost art in today's "modern world," and the life-transforming power of the Christian story can become but a foggy memory of distant and irrelevant "Bible times." How fitting, then, that two Christian professors try to revive this dormant or even forgotten gospel for a new era. How? By compiling one of the most impressive autobiographical accounts of biblical scholars ever produced.

The book is titled *I (Still) Believe: Leading Bible Scholars Share Their Stories of Faith and Scholarship*, with chapters by Richard Bauckham, Walter Brueggemann, Ellen Davis, James Dunn, Gordon Fee, Beverly Roberts, John Goldingay, Donald Hagner, Morna Hooker, Edith Humphrey, Andrew Lincoln, Scot McKnight, J. Ramsey Michaels, Patrick Miller, R. L. Moberly, Katharine Sakenfeld, Phyllis Trible, and Bruce Waltke.

Those in Christian studies will immediately appreciate a book with *all* of these contributors. "We got our dream team," write the editors, "A book envisioned to contain fifteen essays ended up with eighteen as a result.... This speaks, we think, to the authors' interest... [and] speaks to its worth" (12). One can only suspect that the popularity and influence of this treasure-trove will grow as more and more Christians begin to appreciate its value and the timeless worth of "gray hair" (Prov 16:31; 20:29).

As a compilation of autobiographies, the book should not be reviewed through a summary of its chapters. So what follows is a brief commentary on its approach, a summary of its trends and impressions that surface frequently in the authors' stories, and a glance at the "encouragement" and "advice" that the book offers to those considering entering academia.

### Impressions and Trends

One of the biggest challenges that surround Christian scholars is what to do with and how to think about the Bible. For this reason, the editors specifically asked the contributors (among other questions) how they might "address the question of 'losing faith' through serious study of the Bible." I focus on this question because it seemed to be one of the most prominent of all the talking points in the essays. Other contributors spent great energy on how "life in the church affected [their]

research," how they became a biblical scholar, and how, of course, academics enriched their Christian lives (15-16). But it did seem that a personal, substantial period of "wrestling with the Bible" was present in almost every story. For some, this was a familiar experience, almost "business as usual." For others, it was a traumatic encounter that led to nothing short of a changed life. In any case, I am reminded of N. T. Wright's comments in *Scripture and the Authority of God* about Christians' dynamic relationship with the Bible throughout different phases of their lives. *I Still Believe* vindicates and embodies this idea.

Such diverse interaction with the Bible may also challenge the idea that those in "liberal" institutions have little respect or personal investment in biblical study. Virtually nothing about each contributor's story indicates that one tradition or denomination has a monopoly over biblical knowledge. The Bible is not the evangelical's book because of contemporary defenses of inspiration; not the Reformed's book because of *sola scriptura*; not the Catholic's book because of tradition or magisterial authority, etc. Rather, the Bible is for the Christian and for the church at large. All of the contributors were (and remain) Christians, and this fact seemed to them sufficient for their continued interest in both personal and academic involvement with the scriptures.

As I suggested in the introduction, the cumulative effect of these testimonies is tremendously powerful. But that is not, for example, because each person's prayers about his or her career were miraculously answered (several, like Goldingay, Davis, and Fee, had no intention of becoming biblical scholars). Rather, their awe comes from the conflicts and trials that were overcome—the dark, weighty matters that contrasted with God's continued faithfulness. Many of them tell stories of loss—loss of a spouse (to death or divorce), loss of a friend, loss of a job—and various layers of suffering naturally assert themselves into the lucid narratives of the contributors. Academia and research, while rewarding in many ways, are rarely an insulated joy-ride. "I have hit patches," writes Gaventa, "when I believed I would never write another word" (90). Gaventa openly laments a page earlier:

I grow weary of facing the same questions year  
in and out, decade in and decade out... I find it

deeply discouraging that, after nearly four decades of teaching, every year brings the same worn-out questions.... I worry about a scholarly environment that rewards certain forms of aggression that have little or nothing to do with the quality of one's research or teaching and that may well pose stumbling blocks..." (89).

As one might expect, the authors' trials and biographical dynamics vary. Hagner, for example, records a brief episode of agnosticism (106), while Michaels' story, entitled "Four Cords and an Anchor," recounts phases of his journey involving the cords of "Roman Catholicism, Fundamentalism, Anabaptism, and Calvinism" (173) and the anchor of his (now deceased) wife, Betty (185). Family and children can pose a variety of challenges—and at different seasons of life. Humphrey talks about the somewhat bizarre incident of how her childlessness made nationwide headlines (135), while Gaventa expresses perhaps a common theme of the parent-scholar: "When I was at my desk I wanted to be with my infant son, and when I was with him, I wanted to be at my desk" (88).

Doubt is certainly a common theme in these stories. For some, they doubted whether Christianity was in any sense true; others doubted the accuracy of their childhood education; still others questioned whether God, who certainly exists, is really trustworthy or knowable. Hooker speaks of Christian scholars, "like myself," who "are clinging on to faith by their eyebrows—but cling they do" (124).

After decades of self-doubt, trials of life, and external criticism, some authors conclude their time-test convictions in plain terms. Here are just three samples:

My existential struggles with illness and bereavement have undoubtedly colored my handling of Scripture. My night as wrestling Jacob finally persuaded me that most kinds of theodicy, attempts to rationalize and/or justify the ways of God, are futile; the bottom line is that either you trust, or you don't. (Moberly 205)

When I have been tempted to doubt the truth of Christianity, I have discovered that I really cannot.... I have sat myself down and turned again to the basis. What is one to make of the *story of Jesus*, his words and deeds, his self-consciousness? The

evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is incontrovertible. All attempted accounts to explain it away are totally unconvincing. *The transformation of the disciples* from weak and fearful men to strong, courageous proclaimers of the gospel, willing to face martyrdom, is explainable only from their experience of the resurrected Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit." (Hagner 115)

I remain convinced that without the Christian faith what one is left with logically is nihilism in which there is no room for the most important human aspirations and ethical values with which most people in fact live out their lives. In other words, I believe that trust in the God disclosed in Christ provides the most coherent way of seeing existence as a gift and the best hope for living and loving. (Lincoln 156)

As readers of *I Still Believe* will ultimately realize, some of the biggest reflections surface toward the end of one's life—and these are some of the greatest treasures of the book. With career games behind and more wisdom in stock, some authors *cut loose* and speak their minds. R. Ramsey Michaels' essay has this tone. And I was particularly struck by Goldingay's sober words toward the end of his essay: "I am inclined to think that nothing I do has any great value. Americans like to believe in legacies; I expect to be forgotten...[.] in general my works make no significant contribution to the life of the church or the purpose of God in the world" (103).

One challenge that I am glad that the authors did not gloss over was institutional politics and the risks involved by teaching at "conservative institutions," namely, the art of being "theologically correct." Other than the "fortress mentality" common in 20<sup>th</sup>-century evangelical fundamentalism (107), almost all of the contributors address (to use one example) the sub-topic of "biblical inerrancy," lamenting its negative effect on them and on biblical scholarship. Lincoln records his tenure deferment over the issue (154), Hagner says it "had a paralyzing effect when it came to biblical scholarship" at one point in Covenant Seminary's history (107), McKnight calls it a problematic "political term" (168), and Ramsey recounts how he "became a casualty" because of similar issues and then, ironically, landed his next (and current) job in the "Buckle of the Bible belt" of Missouri (179). I couldn't help

but think of how these testimonies vindicate some of the central, sociological claims in Carlos Bovell's *Rehabilitating Inerrancy in a Culture of Fear and Inerrancy and the Spiritual Formation of Younger Evangelicals*, Christian Smith's *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*, and, perhaps most of all, James Barr's classic book *Escape from Fundamentalism*.

Such war stories only widen as one glides through the chapters. Religious scholars in the protestant-evangelical tradition seem regularly under the gun for "not getting it right," as Fee says. For Fee, that meant being "forced to leave [Costa Mesa] because I failed to be 'right' in my handling of Revelation's eschatology" (78). In Hagner's view of the situation, "Some who lose their faith through their studies are often driven away from believing by fundamentalist contexts which allowed them no alternative between, on the one hand, a closed-minded, clench-fisted, fear-ridden mentality and, on the other, outright unbelief, whether agnostic or atheistic" (108). Whether the topic is bibliology, eschatology, or ecclesiology, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century context (e.g., the "battle for the Bible") and the influence of American fundamentalism substantially impacted the majority of contributors at some point in their career.

This point leads to a final and notable observation: the common shift towards "mere Christianity," a kind of ecumenism as the final stage in each author's theology. No contributors who were raised in a Christian home ended up embracing a more "conservative theology" than in their upbringing. Others revealed their personal disillusionment with the institutional aspects of faith and the endless strata in ecclesiology and denominations. "My relationship to the institutional church..." writes Tribble, "lost its appeal—a condition that still prevails" (229). Similar remarks are found in the essays by Dunn (60), Humphrey

(138), and others.

All of this leaves readers with a profound desire for the internal unity of the church.

## Conclusion

As a young professor of theology, I probably find the stories of *I Still Believe* more encouraging than the average, non-academic reader might. But there is undoubtedly wisdom to be shared by all. To conclude this review, I want to let a handful of the authors directly share some of this wisdom in plain terms:

When facing inevitable criticism, it is important, to resist the temptation of self-justification, but instead to work with gusto, writing and teaching what you love...maintain friendship with those who do not know [Christ], but stay closer to those who are wiser, shinier, and more transparent than you are. (Humphrey 43)

If the readers of these autobiographies plan to write, I want to encourage them to write something worthwhile (something that is true and important), not just something that makes a contribution to a debate. (Goldingay 104)

Keep asking questions about the texts and seeking truth as rigorously as you can—and don't trust other scholars' footnotes or references! Read as widely as possible in other related areas and disciplines. (Lincoln 157)

[1] Do not arrive too soon at fixed, settled positions, but remain open to new emergences that regularly lead to new territory.... [2] Read widely and deeply....[3] Alter conversation partners with some frequent regularity....[4] Remember that we are not the first ones to struggle with these issues.... (Brueggemann 41-42)





### Submissions

We invite letters to the editor and articles, of between 2,500 and 8,000 words, double-spaced, using MLA or *Chicago Style Manual* documentation. Subjects should be approached from a Reformed Christian perspective and should treat issues, related to education, in the areas of theology, history, literature, the arts, the sciences, the social sciences, technology, and media. Please include a cover letter with your e-mail address and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Send your submission to the following:

#### Pro Rege

c/o Dr. Mary Dengler, Editor  
Dordt College  
498 4th Ave. NE  
Sioux Center, Iowa 51250

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Dordt College is a Christian liberal arts college in Sioux Center, Iowa, which believes that the Bible is the infallible and inspired Word of God and which bases the education it provides upon the Bible as it is explained in the Reformed creeds. Hence, the college confesses that our world from creation to consummation belongs to God, that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, and that true comfort and reliable strength can be had only from his Holy Spirit.

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