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Description

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articles

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From Rutherford Hall
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As this Spring issue of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal (RPTJ) is made available, one look around Rutherford Hall, home of RPTS, is all that it takes to show that we are in a time of transition!

Youth from a local Christian school came over one day and mulched our flower gardens, themselves a sign of the changes the spring weather has brought. Beautiful, newly crafted gables are being installed above the windows on the exterior, seemingly bringing our historic building to life. Plans are underway for this summer to begin renovations in our dining hall in the basement, restore some rooms on our main floor to their period décor, and develop a new office for our librarians.

Even more significantly, our new Church History Professor, David Whitla, newly granted his doctorate by Queens University, will move into his new office soon. New, talented staff are coming on board even as those who have served us wonderfully in the past are moving on to other assignments or into retirement.

As all these changes take place, they are not only a reminder to pray for RPTS in the midst of them. They also remind us that, like the articles in this issue of RPTJ, the kingdom of God we serve is always called upon to meet the challenges of this changing world in which we live. You can see that in each of the varied topics covered in this issue: how the universality of human languages can only be resolved theologically; the opposition to the doctrine of God’s simplicity found in the modern church that is reminiscent of the struggles of old; the modern need for discipleship that Biblical counseling can bring; the tectonic shift occurring in this generation brought by the transgender movement; and our Covenanter forefather’s vision for America as they immigrated here. You will see in these pages of our journal how God’s people are called upon to rise up by faith and bring the Scripture’s transformative truth in every age and to each situation.

So as you read these articles, may the Lord equip you further to do likewise!
Gregory of Nazianzus on the Nature of Human Language

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Introduction

The subject of universals with reference to natural human language involves a bundle of three interwoven strands running through the tapestry of linguistics. One of these strands, and certainly the oldest as a developed academic discipline, pertains to elements of language at the phonetic/phonemic and morpho-syntactic levels that are present in all, or common to and colocalational in many, of the world’s languages. The next and most recent, relatively speaking, strand relates to semantics and perception, inferring the operations and structures of human cognition particularly from the lexical aspect of language. The third and least-frequently discussed strand, often assumed as a foundation for cross-linguistic or diachronic studies, is variously labeled the “universality” or “uniformitarian” principle, and has as its foundational position the assumption that certain dynamics of language remain diachronically and cross-linguistically similar, if not constant. Together, these strands run through an impressive body of literature pertaining to “universals” that has vastly expanded the frontiers of language philosophy and methodology in recent years, and yet they include some frontiers which, interestingly enough, were explored in the past by classical Christian writers, often with delicate nuance.

This paper explores select conceptions of language articulated by certain patristic Christian writers, particularly those of the Cappadocian father Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390), with a view to an implicit assumption of universalism. As a linguist with sociological and educational interests, I enjoy seeing “modern” concepts of the field adumbrated in ancient writings. It is certainly intriguing, for example, that the second century Letter to Diognetus is quoted in one modern theology on work with the note that “Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they

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do not use a peculiar form of speech ...” Language is eminently human, and human societies, unlike much that inhabits the field of linguistics today, are unflinchingly religious.

Consequently, this paper first reviews some ground-level issues involved in the language-universal strands of the past half century, and then acknowledges some Eastern patristic theologians, particularly Gregory of Nazianzus, with a view to locating their shared perception of language as a gift from God in the context of cataphatic (positive) and apophatic (negative) approaches to theology. These approaches facilitated the patristics' appreciation for a language phenomenon that expresses the particulars of divine revelation in profound detail, even as the writers could see the limitations of a human facility bound up with fractured perception, imprecise expression, and obfuscation caused by the shifting sands of diachronic semantic change and cross-linguistic differences of all sorts. Finally, we will show how the topic of linguogenesis necessarily fit into the patristic discussions of language universals, specifically because the classical writers being consulted connected the phenomenon of human language to the Divine Trinity even as they resisted “the trashy myths of old” which grossly literalized metaphors or ascribed features of morphology, such as grammatical gender, to the Creator's attributes. Patristic writers were constructing a “theological anthropology of language” which contrasted in content with pagan perceptions of the world and offered as a starting point something very different from the empirically-based, theoretically value-neutral approaches typical of the often religion-avoidant field of general linguistics.

A Half Century of Language Universals

A language universal represents an attempt to capture and categorize patterns in phenomena that transcend particular languages, communities, and speakers. However, these attempts at generalization fall along three lines. Often the discussion relates to the first strand, addressing the phonetic, lexical, and morpho-syntactic aspects of language, reaching to identify the transcendent features that are “capable of generating the very different syntaxes of all human languages” and constitute “one of our basic endowments, rather than something we learn.” Curiously, one universal of language is really a universal about language, namely, that natural languages tend to be redundant:

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3 This paper draws in part from Gregory of Nazianzus' On God and Christ: Five Theological Orations. See also the discussion in Vladimir Lossky, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church (Cambridge: James Clark, 1973). Augustine’s philosophy of language is not engaged here because he tends to address other topics such as language acquisition, and the relationship between signs (verba) and referents (res), and also because the literature on Augustine is extensive. However, this paper will acknowledge how Augustine conceived of the purposes of language in Confessions and De Magistro and briefly references the relationship Augustine saw between cognition and lexicon, given their universal relevance. I wish to thank colleagues Byron Curtis and Robert Frazier for invaluable assistance at various points, although the shortcomings of this paper are solely the responsibility of its author.

4 Lossky, Mystical Theology, 23-43.

5 Gregory, Oration 31.

6 The objects of Gregory’s incisive discussion are early examples of tendencies present in some modern exegesis and preaching, as critiqued by D. A. Carson in Exegetical Fallacies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984).

7 Arseniy Chernikin, Philosophy of Language in Greek Patristics (Curator Ignotus, 2014), 5.

“Languages are not wholly consistent. They are not perfectly logical. In fact, they are loaded with redundant information. Typically, this performs a social function; it may make meaning easier to decode, or it may support the connection between people who might struggle otherwise to communicate ... To expect a natural language to behave like mathematics is akin to expecting a child to behave like an iPod.”

Consequently, discussions of universals sometimes acquire a distinctly sociological flavor, given the human and relational baggage that necessarily comes with language.

This first strand of universals developed empirically, at ground level, in contrast with the quite different deductive approach of the patristics. A convenient—and oft-cited—departure point for it was a Conference on Language Universals held at Dobbs Ferry, NY, in 1961, sponsored by the Linguistics and Psychology Committee of the Social Science Research Council and composed of anthropologists, psychologists, and linguists. Its proceedings, edited and published by Joseph H. Greenberg, noted that “Underlying the endless and fascinating idiosyncrasies of the world’s languages there are uniformities of universal scope. Amid infinite diversity, all languages are, as it were, cut from the same pattern.” With this involvement, Greenberg was on his way to becoming the reputed “father of language universals,” and Universals of Language was released in 1963; a second edition was to follow just three years later. A similar symposium met in 1967 at the University of Texas in Austin, and many more have since been convened at academic institutions across North America and Europe.

The then-Stanford professor Charles Ferguson put the matter this way: “As soon as human beings began to make systematic observations about one another’s languages, they were probably impressed by the paradox that all languages are in some fundamental sense one and the same, and yet they are also strikingly different from one another.” He mused further that the “search for oneness may be as old as the study of language, [although] the expression ‘universal grammar’ dates from the beginning of the seventeenth century ... and the expressions ‘language universals’ and ‘linguistic universals’ came into linguistic terminology in the 1940’s and 1960’s, respectively ...”

The groundswell of interest in this strand of universals would continue to surge, being fed by the above-quoted volume which was itself the fruit of the “Project on Language Universals” that ran from 1967 to 1976. Led by Greenberg and Ferguson, its extensive yet preliminary findings were packed into a monumental four-volume basket known as the Universals of Human Language series (Vol. 1 – Method and Theory; Vol. 2 – Phonology; Vol. 3 – Word Structure; Vol. 4 - Syntax), edited by Greenberg, Ferguson, and Edith Moravcsik. A major idea of its voluminous cross-linguistic survey, where Greenberg himself was working with some thirty languages – listed in Greenberg, was that even as some 45 language universals were being identified, “cross-linguistic variation is to some extent limited by the fact that certain items and structures in language systems are dependent on one another.” Yet despite the explosion of knowledge and theoretical advances evidenced through conferences and publications, so much remains tentative, for with more than seven thousand living languages today, there will continue to be additional languages subjected to scrutiny with the potential for challenging the present state of

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12 Ibid., 73-74.
thinking. Early on, Greenberg sagely observed that, “The tentative nature of the conclusions set forth here should be evident to the reader.” Nevertheless, the grasp for universals remains important because they imply some standard reference set of something common to human beings despite the plethora of obvious differences existing between genetically-divergent speech codes. This tantalizing commonness haunts many corners of the fields embraced under the label “universals,” though perhaps it was not so for those who were accustomed to talking the “language” of a transcendent God whose creatures bear His image.

Some alleviation of the tension between the fundamental commonality and differences of human languages would come in the form of the second strand of the discussion of universals, which attends particularly to the lexical level of language and provides frameworks for understanding human cognition. This strand delves into the relationship between meaning and language; Wierzbicka notes that “language does not represent objects, but rather the concepts which, in the process of speech, have been formed by the mind independent of those objects.” To the degree this observation is correct, inter-language translation is a complex venture at best, as Italians say traduttore traditore – i.e. ‘translation is a traitor.’ Cognitive linguists search for universals of the human mind that are grammaticalized by, but not simply to be equated with, natural human language.

The third strand in the universals discussion relates to cross-linguistic and diachronic assumptions of universality, as recently discussed in Bergs. Labeled either the Uniformitarian Principle or the Principle of Uniformity, it “claims that the processes which we observe in the present can help us gain knowledge about processes in the past.” The roots of this rather necessary assumption are planted amongst the natural sciences, and it has often taken shape in matters of historical sociolinguistics though, as Bergs documents, the principle must be handled carefully, since the “risk of anachronisms” in the form of what can be termed conceptual and cognitive category differences could belie certain presumptions of consistency. Bergs draws on examples of social class, gender, and relational networking. As Bergs sees it, “the principle is indeed helpful when studying language structures in isolation, but that its applicability in historical sociolinguistics must be viewed with much caution.”

This brief overview of “universals” will have to suffice as preparation for the subsequent discussion of selected patristic conceptions of language. Regardless of where in the three zones of the universals discussion they fall, as considered above—structural features, semantics and cognition, or diachronic cross-linguistics—something unflinchingly human keeps arising, and in the estimation of the earliest i.e. 1960s vintage protagonists, the door is wide open to consideration of universals in other fields too, including biology, sociology, and music. In this present discussion, however, the tables have been turned, for it is not so much that universals

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13 Ethnologue.com, consulted by this writer for the original paper prepared during summer 2015, listed 7102 languages of the world today, classifying 578 of them as “institutional,” 1598 as “developing,” and 2479 as “vigorous,” while 1531 were “in trouble” and another 916 “dying.”

14 Greenberg, Universals, 73.

15 Wierzbicka, Semantics, 5, and quoting Humboldt with approval.


17 Ibid., 80.

18 Ibid., 96.
are being applied to the field of theology, rather, theology has become the watershed for one’s conceptions regarding language.

**Augustine and Other Patristic Writers on Language**

Language philosophy, for the patristic writers, was tied to human anthropology, *Biblically* framed. Whereas ancient pagan writers often perceived of language as a gift from the gods, some Christian writers specifically saw language as essential to relations within the Trinity. Patristic writers were influenced by the classical education they had received, directed as it was to grammatical, logical, and rhetorical themes. But their approaches typically involved a “theological anthropology of language.” As Chernikin elaborates:

“First, it is a very old idea that language is of divine origin ... Second, it is an old belief that the gods have a language of their own, which is as different from the human language as Greek is different from the barbarian languages. The very notion that human language is the gift of the gods exists in almost all world mythological systems, and can by no means be regarded as exclusively Greek.”

At least, such was the background for the patristic writers, even as the picture of their language philosophy was painted with more colors.

The complexity is visible from much that has been discussed: the lion’s share of studies at this intersection of patristics and linguistics has gone to Augustine, who referred to aspects of human language in various contexts, articulating a connection between cognition and lexicon. For example, he lamented the divisive effects of multilingualism, noting that “all the similarity of their common human nature is of no avail to unite them in fellowship. So true is this that a man would be more cheerful with his dog for company than a foreigner.” In an early statement on imperial pragmatism and language ideology, he noted that Rome “has been at pains to impose on conquered peoples not only her yoke but her language also, as a bond of peace and fellowship ... ” In *Confessions*, Augustine famously commented on childhood language acquisition and how his seniors did not formally teach him how to speak, but, “When they named anything, and as they spoke turned toward it, I saw and remembered that they called what they would point out by the name they uttered,” continuing that, “The natural language ... of all nations, expressed by the countenance, glances of the eye, gestures of the limbs, and tones of the voice, indicating the affections of the mind ... And thus by constantly hearing words, as they occurred in various sentences, I collected gradually for what they stood ... ” It is not that Augustine was ignoring the “data,” but that he was in fact deeply influenced in his perception of the data by his theology. He has more to say about this subject in *De Magistro*, and also in *De Doctrina Christiana*, as also discussed in Jackson, there offering his theory on signs related to the things they point to,

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19 Chernikin, *Philosophy of Language*, 180; he shows Clement’s dependence upon Plato for some conceptions.

20 Ibid., 41.


22 Augustine, *Confessions* 1.8.

in what would become standard terminology in modern semantics and semiotics in signs (signa) vs. the present realia.\textsuperscript{24}

Yet despite the fact that so much that has been written along these lines,\textsuperscript{25} Chernikin claims that, aside from work on Augustine and language, there still has been “remarkably little research on the massive corpus of Patristic writings on language.”\textsuperscript{26} So, it is appropriate next to turn to the Cappadocian, Gregory of Nazianzus (c.330-c.390), who also commented on natural human language, specifically with reference to what today falls under some portion of the universals umbrella.

\textbf{Gregory of Nazianzus on Language}

Gregory of Nazianzus, “The Theologian,” made a number of language-related observations in connection with the doctrine of God, the theme that runs through what would come to be known as his “Five Theological Orations” (Orations 27-31). For example, he commented on the miracle of tongues at Pentecost (Acts 2),\textsuperscript{27} questioning whether the miracle occurred via the mouth of the speakers or in the minds of the hearers. Most importantly, he fastened not only his pastoral theology\textsuperscript{28} but also his perception of the nature of language upon a firm bedrock of Trinitarian theology. Gregory repeatedly raises speech and language issues in these Orations, as follows in their order of appearance:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Every speech has two parts to it. One part aims at establishing one's own position; the other refutes the opposing case. This is the method we shall try, expounding our own, before refuting our opponents’ arguments (29.1).
  \item We, after all, understand and preach the Son’s Godhead on the basis of their grand and sublime language. What do we mean here: expressions like “God,” “Word,” “he who is in the beginning,” who was “with the beginning,” who was “the beginning,” “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” and “with you is the beginning,” and “who calls it the beginning from the generations of old”? ... Plainly these, and all the expressions synonymous with these, refer to the Son. None of them is a later acquisition, not became attached at a later stage to the Son or to the Spirit any more than to the Father, for perfection does not result from additions. It was never the case that he was without his Word ... (29.17).
  \item Count up the phrases that in your ignorance you set over against these – “My God and your God” ... Put in, if you like all the even lowlier expressions used about him – the fact that he “slept,” “was hungry,” “got tired,” “wept,” “was in agony,” “was subjected” ... It is not hard to clear away the stumbling block that the literal text of Scripture contains – that is, if your stumbling is real and not just willful malice. In sum, you must predicate the more sublime
\end{itemize}


\textsuperscript{26} Chernikin, \textit{Philosophy of Language}, 8.

\textsuperscript{27} Oration 41:15-16.

expressions of the Godhead, of the nature which transcends bodily experiences, and the lowlier ones of the compound, of him who because of you was emptied, became incarnate and (to use equally valid language) was “made man” (29.18).

- The ancient Hebrews used special symbols to venerate the divine and did not allow anything inferior to God to be written with the same letters as the word “God,” on the ground that the divine should not be put on even this much of a level with things human. Would they ever have accepted the ideas that the uniquely indissoluble nature could be expressed by evanescent speech? No man has yet breathed all the air; no mind has yet contained or language embraced God’s substance in its fullness. No, we use facts connected with him to outline qualities that correspond with him, collecting a faint and feeble mental image from various quarters. Our noblest theologian is not one who has discovered the whole ... (30.17).

- So stands the doctrine of the Son. It has passed through the midst of its adversaries unscathed by their stones. The Word cannot be stoned. The Word, if you like, flings tones, striking the wild beasts, the arguments, which mischievously approach the mount (31.1).

- [B]ecause the Son is “Son” in a more elevated sense of the word, and since we have no other term to express his consubstantial derivation from God, it does not follow that we ought to think it essential to transfer wholesale to the divine sphere the earthly names of human families. Do you take it, by the same token, that our God is a male, because of the masculine nouns “God” and “Father”? Is the Godhead a female, because in Greek the word is feminine? Is the word “Spirit” neuter in Greek, because the Spirit is sterile? If you want to take the joke further you could say, as the trashy myths of old did, that God coupled with his own will and fathered the Son. We should then be faced with the bisexual God of Marcion, who pictured those outlandish aeons (31:7)

- The Son does not fall short in some particular of being Father. Sonship is no defect, yet that does not mean he is Father. By the same token, the Father would fall short of being Son – the Father is not Son. No, the language here gives no grounds for any deficiency, for any subordination in being (31:9).

- Some things mentioned in the Bible are not factual; some factual things are not mentioned; some nonfactual things receive no mention there; some things are both factual and mentioned. Do you ask for my proofs here? I am ready to offer them. In the Bible, God “sleeps,” “wakes up,” “is angered,” “walks,” and has a “throne of cherubim.” Yet when has God ever been subject to emotion? When do you ever hear that God is a bodily being? This is a nonfactual, mental picture. We have used names derived from human experience and applied them, so far as we could, to aspects of God ... [With regard to other metaphors, e.g., “sitting” and “being enthroned”] this too is human language: the divine abides in none as it abides in the saints ... Indeed every faculty or activity of God has given us a corresponding picture in terms of something bodily (31.22).

- There really is a great deal of diversity inherent in names and things, so why are you so dreadfully servile to the letter, so much the partisan of Jewish lore, following the syllables while you let the realities go? (31.24).

- So, in the end, I resolved that it was best to say “goodbye” to images and shadows, deceptive and utterly inadequate as they are to express the reality. I resolved to keep close to the more truly religious view and rest content with some few words, taking the Spirit as my guide ... (31.33).

Some observations regarding context and substance are in order. The fourth century constituted a critical period in which the Church needed to formulate essential agreement on the content of
orthodox truth, and that would necessitate agreement on formulation or wording. The challenges to catholic Christianity came from what were then called Anomeans or Eunomians—the first label pointed to dissimilarity, i.e., of substance; the second arose from the name of an early proponent—defenders of what came to be known more widely as Arianism. There has been ample discussion, with stridently divergent opinions, concerning which classical Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle, were behind the different players on both sides of the heresy battle. What is clear is the animosity: Gregory characterized them as people who “delight in the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of the Knowledge falsely so-called’, and in ‘strife of words’ which leaders to all elaborate verbiage by Paul ... These people I speak of have versatile tongues, and are resourceful in attacking doctrines nobler and worthier than their own.”

Arguments about words may entail conflicting views of epistemology and of language, and that is not, surprisingly, what arises in Gregory’s Theological Orations. It seems only fitting that in the debate over the essence of the Trinity, the matter of language necessarily finds its place, as it had done in much detail within the writings of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. After all, the Bible introduces God the Creator as repeatedly speaking the world into existence (Gen. 1), the Son as “the Word ... in the beginning with God [and] all things made through him” (Jn. 1:1-3), along with the Spirit who “will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you” (Jn. 16:13). Human language announces the God who speaks. In that spirit, then, some observations on Gregory’s Orations are appropriate.

First, Gregory’s references to language and speech were implicitly universal because of their theological basis. Of course, this would hold true widely across patristic writers, and certainly for the Cappadocians. Any announcement of truth is “on the basis of their [i.e., God’s] grand and sublime language,” and observing of its words that, “None of them is a later acquisition,” because the Father was never “without his Word.” Though Gregory refrains here from speculating on the type of language spoken in heaven, he does anchor the essence of language in the Creator Himself and implicitly shows the indebtedness of human codes to some sort of heavenly counterpart.

Second, it follows from this theocentric approach to language that Gregory appreciated its power to influence people and to shape their conception of reality. When delineating differences between Father and Son without implications of economic inferiority, he insisted tersely: “No, the language here gives no grounds for any deficiency, for any subordination in being.” Human language is capable of precision, he indicates, but there is some complexity to be considered here. Gregory of Nyssa conceived of human speech, in any language, as a strictly human phenomenon rather than something being bestowed directly from God. For Gregory of Nyssa, language evidences complex human nature, but that includes man’s limitations as well; language is imperfect because men are limited. For Gregory of Nazianzus, on the other hand, God always had with him “the Word,” and we use something that echoes God’s sublime

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29 See Chernikin, Philosophy of Language, 214-342, for summary discussion of the controversy and Cappadocian views on language, specifically those of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa.

30 Gregory, Orations 27.1, and citing I Tim.6:20.

31 Oration 29:17.

32 By way of contrast, Origen believed the primordial language, like that of heaven, was Hebrew (Contra Celsus 5.30-31). See the related discussion in Chernikin, Philosophy of Language, 199-200; Clement was similarly inclined; Gregory of Nyssa argued it could not have been Hebrew (CE ii 256; 7ff, as quoted in Chernikin, Philosophy of Language, 335).

33 Oration 31:9.
communication and not some later addition. In contrast to Gregory of Nyssa’s line of
demarcation between heavenly thought and earthly speech,34 Gregory of Nazianzus seems to
identify some common thread running between the two.

Third, Gregory of Nazianzus makes much of the highly metaphoric nature of human
communication. He explains the inevitable use of anthropomorphisms, such as God sleeping or
walking, in these words: “We have used names derived from human experience and applied
them, so far as we could, to aspects of God ... [and] this too is human language: the divine abides
in none as it abides in the saints ... Indeed every faculty or activity of God has given us a
corresponding picture in terms of something bodily.”35 However, Gregory offsets the usefulness
of metaphor in this way: “[B]ecause the Son is ‘Son’ in a more elevated sense of the word, and
since we have no other term to express his consubstantial derivation from God, it does not
follow that we ought to think it essential to transfer wholesale to the divine sphere the earthly
names of human family ties.”36 Gregory properly objects to any use of metaphor which forces
itself upon the interpretation rather than deriving from the metaphor some insightful quality to
be seen in common between the items. In his thinking, metaphor held potential, but “in the end,
I resolved that it was best to say ‘goodbye’ to images and shadows, deceptive and utterly
inadequate as they are to express the reality. I resolved to keep close to the more truly religious
view and rest content with some few words, taking the Spirit as my guide ... ”37

Fourth, Gregory’s immense appreciation for the power of words in articulation and illustration
is balanced in other ways too. He railed against those who equated grammatical form with the
essence of reality, specifically illustrating this point with the confusion of grammatical for
biological gender: “Do you take it, by the same token, that our God is a male, because of the
masculine nouns ‘God’ and ‘Father’? Is the Godhead a female, because in Greek the word is
feminine? Is the word ‘Spirit’ neuter in Greek, because the Spirit is sterile?”38 Strung somewhere
between points three and four above, it appears that Gregory balances the blessings of specificity
with the dangers of human finitude. Whereas Saussure is credited with delineating between
denotational sign and material world, i.e., the thing toward which the sign points,39 Gregory was
wrestling with this centuries earlier and doing so not merely because Greek philosophers had
delineated body from soul. Supposedly-modern linguistics concepts may find their origins in the
minds of ancient proponents.

Fifth, a further nuance of that balance arises in connection with Gregory’s sense of labels for
things. It appears he has synonymy in mind, though he may also be reflecting on multiplicity of
languages, when he says: “There really is a great deal of diversity inherent in names and things,
so why are you so dreadfully servile to the letter, so much the partisan of Jewish lore, following
the syllables while you let the realities go?”40 Here again, he juxtaposes the specificity of
language next to the vicissitudes of natural human language, noting there are many ways to
express a single idea.

34 See related comments in Chernikin, Philosophy of Language, 308-310.

35 Oration 31:22.

36 Oration 31:7.

37 Oration 31:33.

38 Oration 31:7.

39 On this see Judith Irvine. “When Talk Isn’t Cheap: Language and Political Economy.” American

40 Oration 31:24.
Sixth, it may be cautiously suggested that Gregory’s distinction between the words that point to things and a person’s conception of those things constitutes a precursor to a defining mark of cognitive linguistics. Words or phrases (“names”) help people understand their world, as do metaphors, but they do so quite imperfectly: “When do you ever hear that God is a bodily being? This is a nonfactual, mental picture. We have used names derived from human experience and applied them, so far as we could, to aspects of God ... [T]his too is human language: the divine abides in none as it abides in the saints ... Indeed every faculty or activity of God has given us a corresponding picture in terms of something bodily.” Gregory seems to go beyond Saussure’s distinction between signifier and signified, taking steps toward distinguishing words from cognition. Metaphors aid conception and words grammaticalize conception, but neither equates with cognition nor the ‘real world.’

Throughout these six points, one may observe the rhetorical and theological method Gregory embraced in operation. He had said that the two basic parts of every speech involved establishing one’s own position while also refuting the opponents’, i.e., his orations involved cataphatic (positive) and apophatic (negative) approaches to theology. Human speech may be distinct from its heavenly counterpart, whatever it ought to be called, but the Cappadocians conceived of mankind as endowed with a “majestic dignity” that enabled one’s acoustic organs to produce meaningful speech. Rightly used or misused, the capacity, if not the language system, or speech systems, themselves, is a divine gift, for, as Gregory of Nyssa argued: “[N]o one would deny that he who has learned to practice an art for right purposes can also abuse it for wrong ones, so we say that the faculty of thought and conception was implanted by God in human nature for good, but, with those who abuse it as an instrument of discovery, it frequently becomes the handmaid of pernicious inventions.”

Particular and explicit in its capacities, natural human language may effectively relate what is factual and discard the pernicious. Words, like metaphors, are nevertheless approximations of reality, with limits tied to human finitude and sinfulness, so they must not be construed in a dogmatic exercise of rank literalism. Words, like God, are knowable even though the total reality remains inscrutable. Whatever thrives within the insightful and lively nature of language does so because God is its Author and he has always had “the Word” present right beside him.

41 Oration 31:22.

42 On which subject, see Wierzbicka, Semantics, 5; Irvine, “When Talk Isn’t Cheap”; also Carson, Exegetical Fallacies (Baker, 1984), particularly Chapter 2 on “Grammatical Fallacies,” 62-90.

43 Oration 29:1.

44 As also did Chernikin, Philosophy of Language, 314.

45 CE ii, 189; 15ff, and quoted in Ibid., 327.
Reflections on Theological Method
and the Doctrine of God:
A Review of James Dolezal’s All that is in God

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Dr. James Dolezal’s book All that is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Christian Theism makes some strong claims. His opponents throughout the text are theologians he dubs “theistic mutualists” who reject what he terms classical Christian theism. For Dolezal, “no less than true religion is at stake in the contest between theistic mutualism and classical Christian theism.”

If Professor Dolezal’s claim is accurate, then every believing theologian should purchase his book and prepare for battle! To substantiate the charge, Dolezal himself comes armed with a Ph. D. from Westminster Seminary as well as a first book on the doctrine of God which appeared in 2011. The present volume was published by Reformation Heritage Books, part of a well-known and highly honored ministry in Grand Rapids, and carries endorsements from Dr. Paul Helm as well as a professor from Westminster Seminary California and the President of RTS Orlando. Also, TableTalk magazine has endorsed Dolezal’s findings. With these soldiers lined up behind him, Dr. Dolezal has caught every readers’ attention.

Thanks to Dr. James Dolezal who kindly read an earlier draft of this review.

1 James E. Dolezal, All that is in God (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2017), 104. He opened the book, Ibid., 1, with: “Two distinctly different models of Christian theism are presently vying for the heart and mind of evangelical Christianity.”


3 Keith A. Matheson, “Unlatched Theism, an examination of John Frame’s response to All that is in God,” Tabletalk, November 30, 2017.

4 Richard Muller, the most prominent church historian of our day, claims in his foreword that Dolezal’s opponents have replaced traditional understandings of God with notions of a changing, temporal deity whose oneness is merely social (ix). These theistic mutualists, with their “aberrant argumentation,” argue that God “takes new attributes to his nature,” or “a series of new ‘properties’” (x). Their theistic mutualism leads to the conclusion “that God is passible, composed of parts, and temporally bound.” Furthermore, theistic mutualists argue that the three Persons of the Trinity are “three discrete beings” (xi). His scathing conclusion is that, “The modern aberration of theistic mutualism invents new divine attributes and has a somewhat mutable deity altered by relationality. It is a “confused mess of misleading theologians put forth today under the guise of new and relevant reconstructions of the evangelical and Reformed faith.” (xii)
Who exactly are the enemy “theistic mutualists”? A partial list includes Covenant and Knox Seminary’s Robert Reymond, Regent Seminary’s J. I. Packer, Westminster/RTS’s John Frame, Westminster’s K. Scott Oliphint, Trinity Seminary’s D. A. Carson, and Southern Seminary’s Bruce A. Ware.

Understanding Theistic Mutualism According to Dolezal

Before we can determine the victors in this great field of battle, we need to define terms and view the terrain of the combat zone. The first question is: What is theistic mutualism and why is the position so detrimental to Christ’s church?

A theistic mutualist insists that God is involved in a genuine give-and-take relationship with his creatures. A theistic mutualist is committed to a way of thinking about God and his relationship to the world whereby he “conceives God as interacting with the world in some way like humans do, even if on a much grander scale.” Theistic mutualists believe that God’s being can be moved by his creatures. They “allow for a measure of ontological becoming and process in God.” They apparently hold that to a certain extent God derives some part of his being from relationship to the creation. They have “embraced a rudimentary form of process theism to the extent that they allow some measure of ontological becoming and dependency in God.”

This theistic mutualism is detrimental to Christ’s church because the teaching undermines God’s perfection and fullness of being. They advance “an idolatrous form of theism” because they supposedly locate God’s being within the order of finite beings. Dolezal reasons that “Such a God is inevitably mutable and finite and as such is unworthy of worship.”

Theistic mutualists have failed to grasp a proper view of God’s self-sufficiency and immutability, or impassibility. God’s self-sufficiency is also called his aseity. This divine self-sufficiency entails, according to Dolezal, that God is purely actual in his being. God cannot become more than he is or other than he is. As pure being, God cannot undergo any change. Dolezal says that God cannot voluntarily subject himself to being moved by creatures. There cannot be the smallest change in God because it would signify an alteration in his being.

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6 Dolezal, All that is in God, 2.
7 Ibid., 3. Theistic mutualism is “the belief that any meaningful relationship between God and man must involve God in a transaction wherein he receives some determination of being from his creatures.”
8 Ibid., 4.
9 Ibid., 6: “God has been reconceived as deriving some aspects of his being in correlation with the world.”
10 Ibid., 7.
11 Ibid., 8.
12 Ibid., 6.
13 Ibid., 7.
14 Ibid., 4; 15: “One of the better known arguments for God’s pure actuality appears in Thomas Aquinas’s...”; 16: “Pure actuality is understood by Thomists...”; 31n.49: “God...is pure act.”; 33n.52: “As purely actual...God...”; 56: “He must be purely actual in all that he is...”; 58: “...divine pure actuality-constitutes a baseline, a controlling grammar for all of our thoughts and beliefs about God.”
15 Ibid., 17-19.
Thus, when the Bible says that God experiences some change in relation, affection, or agency, these are only anthropomorphic or accommodated expressions. God does not alter himself ontologically when he alters his revelation of himself. God being personal in his loving interaction with the world does not mean that he is acted upon or moved by his creatures.

Calvinist theistic mutualists make a theological error, says Dolezal, when they claim that there are different types of divine immutability. What is termed ontological immutability is supposedly God’s unchangeable nature itself, sometimes called his essential nature. This essential nature does not change. God has what some term relational mutability, they assert, in his interaction with angels and people.

However, argues Dolezal, God in his relationships with others is a state of being and thus, by definition, ontological. To say that God changes while in relationships with his creatures, so-called relational mutability, is actually affirming ontological mutability. In Dolezal’s understanding, any theologian who proposes that something real in God actually changes while in a relationship with creation, no matter his claim that God does not change in his essential nature, is guilty of asserting God’s ontological mutability.

Dolezal writes that the heart of theistic mutualism is a correlative relationality between God and his people. Such a position affirms that God is subject to alteration in his being, and thus in at least some respect, is in becoming. Dolezal laments that this thinking is the prevailing position among many evangelical and Reformed theologians. Some Reformed theistic mutualists grant that God undergoes change but that he goes through changes because he wills to change. In other words, God is in control of those changes, and that is acceptable, a position which can be summarized as a self-controlled mutability. Theistic mutualism includes the view that a righteous man can produce divine pleasure that God would otherwise lack, and that God has chosen to do this for himself. Nonetheless, contends Dolezal, if God freely chooses to be mutable for himself, might he then not be free to augment or negate his omniscience or his omnipresence or some other attribute?

**Divine Simplicity in Theology Proper**

Dolezal then presents the classic notion of divine simplicity, which means that God is not composed of parts. A part of something is less than the whole of something, and without that part, the whole would be different than it is. If God were composed of parts then he would be dependent upon the parts and the composer of those parts.

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16 Ibid., 20-21.
17 Ibid., 22-24.
18 Ibid., 24-26.
19 Ibid., 27-28.
20 Ibid., 31-35.
21 Ibid., 39: “Yet divine simplicity is either entirely missing or severely underappreciated in the writings of evangelical theistic mutualism... Many... disparage it as a ‘philosophical relic’ that the church is wise to disregard.”
22 Ibid., 37-40.
Thus, God’s essence and existence must be identical. God’s existence is his act of being, and his essence is also to be. Each of God’s attributes must then be identical with his essence. Furthermore, God’s attributes, because he is simple in his being, must be identical with each other. That is, God’s essence is not a number of divine attributes that exist together as an integrated whole.

But such a God is difficult to comprehend! Dolezal admits that human experience does not provide an ontological model for understanding it. For every creature, essence and existence are distinct principles of being. A person exists, but his essence is what makes that person a specific person. A person’s attributes, his wisdom or goodness, for example, are in addition to his essence. All people have the same human essence, but not all people have the same wisdom or goodness.

But how then is the Christian to understand Scripture’s language which makes God sound like he is a man? While the Bible speaks as if God were a man who repents, he is not a man — but God! Likewise, divine attributes like wisdom and goodness sound human but are not. While they are separate and distinct in humans, they are not separate and distinct in God.

Dolezal asserts that there are three basic approaches used to solve problems with divine simplicity, but that each one relativizes God to make language about him more intelligible. The first approach simply disregards or dismisses divine simplicity. These theologians assume that there are some attributes which belong to the divine essence while other attributes are acquired via relationships with creatures. Such a view violates simplicity’s insistence that God cannot be composed of substance i.e., attributes connected to his essence, and accidents i.e., sources of being distinct from his essence. Dolezal asserts that perhaps a majority of contemporary evangelical theologians operate under those assumptions.

The second approach is to oppose or deny divine simplicity. There are a number of reasons why divine simplicity is denied. Some say that it is nonsensical to argue, as does simplicity, that all of God’s properties are identical with all of the others. It seems self-evident that God’s power, love, and knowledge are clearly not identical properties. Others have said that divine simplicity is not warranted by Scripture. They argue that the Bible presents God as in some sense composite. Yet, Dolezal posits that divine simplicity does not render God an abstract property; what may be

23 A theologian cannot claim that there is no essential change in God while there is nonessential change. Nothing is distinct from or falls outside of his essence. Cf. Ibid., 97.

24 Ibid., 41-42.

25 Ibid., 60: “Divine simplicity accordingly insists on an inescapable incapacity and inadequacy of all our God-talk.”

26 Ibid., 65.

27 Theologians who come under scrutiny here are Bruce A. Ware in God’s Lesser Glory (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000) and God’s Greater Glory (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004) and Rob Lister in God is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), Ibid., 65-67.

28 Theologians who come under scrutiny here are Ronald Nash, The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983); Alvin Plantinga, Does God Have a Nature? (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, 1980); and John S. Findberg, No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), Ibid., 67-69.
termed properties are nothing but the concrete, personal God himself. The distinctions of attributes are a divine accommodation to reveal something of the fullness of his being.²⁹

The third approach is to reconceive simplicity in a way that distorts its teaching. Some revisionists do not believe that the divine essence itself is simple but has genuine complexities. They argue that there is univocal language about God which makes God’s attributes real and distinguishable characteristics of his divine being.³⁰

In response, Dolezal says this third position comprehends the unity of the divine essence as a corporate unity embracing units of actuality and intelligibility. Such a view precludes any attributes as ontologically identical to the divine essence. Rather, since God’s essence is simple, it cannot be composed of an aggregation of his attributes.³¹

In addition, he contends that human language still speaks truthfully about God even though we draw all that we may say about God from vestiges of him in creation. What is a unity in God is presented in Scripture in the form of creaturely multiplicity. The diversity of attributes flows from how he has revealed himself and not from God’s own being. Human language and thought does not parallel the very form of God’s being.³²

**Divine Eternity and Creation**

Dolezal then addresses the topic of God’s eternity. He argues that God has no future or past since he does not experience successive states of being.³³ In contrast, some Reformed theistic mutualists insist that God’s eternity is, in fact, an endless succession of moments. For them, God is “everlasting” rather than eternal.³⁴ Other theistic mutualists hold that God existed before time and creation, but that when he created the world, he entered into time. So God is timeless without the universe but temporal within the universe.³⁵ Yet others underline that God takes on new attributes to his essence to relate to his creatures, in time, after creation.³⁶

A prominent Reformed theologian contends that since time and history change, then God, who exists in time, changes. Nevertheless, God is unchangeable in his supra-temporal existence. Still, his changing existence in time is no less real than his atemporal existence. God assumed this new manner of being at the creation.³⁷

²⁹ Ibid., 69-71.

³⁰ Theologians who fall into this category include Charles Hodge, R. L. Dabney, Robert Reymond, John Frame, and Kevin Vanhoozer. Ibid., 71-73

³¹ Ibid., 73-75.

³² Ibid., 75-78.

³³ Ibid., 79-82.


³⁶ This reference is to Lister, *God is Impassible*. See Ibid., 92.

In a similar fashion, another Reformed theologian also tries to convince readers that God at creation took on new attributes, properties, and characteristics that he did not previously have, that are neither of his essence nor are necessary to his essential identity as God. The key for this assertion is the incarnation itself which reveals God as eternal in his essential character but temporal in his covenantal character.\textsuperscript{38}

Drawing his analysis together, Dolezal asserts that the theologians mentioned above wrongly agree that “God cannot act in the temporal realm without somehow existing on the same ontological continuum with His creatures.”\textsuperscript{39} God acts in time to create, thus moving from a state of inactivity, not creating, to one of activity. God is moved or changed in this process, they think. They assume that God cannot act in or relate to the world if he is timeless.

The only legitimate option, says Dolezal, is for theologians to assent to the intellectually incomprehensible notion that God is eternally Creator. Foundational is that God must be able to do all things, such as create, from his own being. He doesn’t need new properties of being to create because creator-hood belongs to God in his eternal essence.\textsuperscript{40} In this regard it is appropriate for theologians to speak of God’s absolute attributes, those which belong to him from eternity without a relationship to creatures, and his relative attributes, which have a relationship toward creatures. Relative names or attributes still denote something which exists absolutely in God and are not something which has happened to him (accident). In other words, “‘Creator’ is a relative name and denotes absolute reality.”\textsuperscript{41}

When God wills something it is produced. Unlike creatures, this eternal act of will to create does not need a subsequent act of creation. In this way creation appears not in time but with time. It is not as if God moved his power from bare potential to actuality by his willing to create.\textsuperscript{42} Creation brings about no change in God because he did not become Creator. He is the eternal Creator, says Dolezal.

**Divine Simplicity and the Trinity**

Dolezal’s final topic is the Trinity. Since evangelical theistic mutualists disregard divine simplicity, they are faced with the three Persons of the Godhead as either three parts of God or three discreet beings who compose the social unit called God.\textsuperscript{43} Often, theistic mutualists explain Trinitarian unity using the notion of perichoresis (mutual indwelling) to account for God’s unity. However, Dolezal disputes that only the simple unity of identical substance can ensure that the fullness of the Godhead is in each person of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{44}

He explains the unity of the divine being, or God’s unity of singularity, by elaborating the Biblical witness to God’s singularity and exclusivity, and concludes that the Father, Son, and

\textsuperscript{38} The referent (Ibid., 94-95) is K. Scott Oliphint in *God With Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 96.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 97-98.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 99.

\textsuperscript{42} The opponent here is T. F. Torrance in *Christian Doctrine of God, One Being in Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

\textsuperscript{43} Dolezal, *All that is in God*, 105-06.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 106-07.
Holy Spirit have the exact same nature. Furthermore, the consequences of divine simplicity also keep believers from contemplating three gods.\textsuperscript{45} What that means is that unlike men, in God there is no determination of his being in addition to his essence. There are no particularizing features that are over his divine nature. This view of divine simplicity is essential to monotheism and demonstrates that God must be one being because that is what it means to be God.\textsuperscript{46} In other words, God’s essence, or whatever is in God, is ontologically identical to his divine nature—his substance and nature are equivalent.\textsuperscript{47}

Despite this unity, the three persons are truly distinct. The distinctions are in personal relations. The Father begets or has the real distinction of paternity, the Son is begotten or has the distinction of begottenness, and the Holy Spirit is breathed or sent forth with the relative property or distinction of spirated procession.\textsuperscript{48}

Dolezal uses negative expressions to explain the three persons. The distinctions are not between the persons and the divine essence but only among the persons themselves. The distinctions are also not the same as creaturely persons where a person is a complete substance distinct from all other persons. Likewise, in creatures, relations inhere as accidents but not so in God. The three persons are not complete individual substances. Divine relations are not features of his being which exist over and above his substance. Unlike men, he is not composed of substance and relations.\textsuperscript{49}

In contrast to Dolezal’s presentation of classical Trinitarian unity are composition models of Trinitarianism favored by theistic mutualists. Social Trinitarianism is the favorite flavor for them, and Jürgen Moltmann is the most influential advocate. For Moltmann, perichoresis is the glue that holds the Trinity together. Evangelical theologians J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig are also social Trinitarians who maintain the one divine nature to be an aggregate of the three persons each with distinct centers of consciousness. For them, it is the Trinity as a whole that is properly God. The three persons are parts of the one God. Also, Calvin Seminary’s Cornelius Plantinga is in favor of a social Trinitarianism and rejects the Augustinian tradition’s notion that God has a singular mind and will. He asserts that the three persons have distinct centers of consciousness with a harmony of knowledge, rather than an identity of knowledge. For Plantinga, the Trinity is a complex thing of persons, essences, and relations.\textsuperscript{50} Dolezal rightly refutes these erroneous views of social Trinitarianism.

However, there are some evangelicals who also hold to modified forms of social Trinitarianism. John Feinberg apparently supports that for the Trinity to have true fellowship, they cannot always be thinking of everything they know. However, if Feinberg is correct, then the three persons have discrete acts of will, divine knowing and willing are distinguished from the divine essence, and to say that God knows something is the result of different acts of knowing which

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 111-15.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 115-16.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 117.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 119.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 118-23.

Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem apparently contend for a functional subordination within the Godhead. For them, the Father exercises authority over the Son not just as incarnate but from eternity. Each person exercises a power of will which is distinct. Such a view means that God’s will and power are a collective aggregation of acts.  

**Appraisal and Conclusion**  

The topics addressed in All that is in God are of high importance and the author does a great job presenting his position. The issues under debate touch just the tip of the theological iceberg of how believing theologians are to interpret the scriptures relative to the doctrine of God and ultimately to all of the other theological topics.

To make progress analyzing the problem, it would be helpful to turn back through the pages of church history beginning with medieval thinking, moving to the Reformation and then into modernity. However, both to avoid contemporary debate and to restrict the size of this study, the concluding investigation will focus on the 19th century theologian Charles Hodge’s review of the issues. Dolezal rightly points out that Hodge rejected Thomas Aquinas’ theological method relative to interpreting God’s attributes. Let us more closely examine Hodge’s analysis of the divine attributes, which receives a footnote in Dolezal’s text.

Hodge began by asserting that the divine essence is unchangeable and that it has certain perfections. Those perfections are revealed both in the constitution of human nature as well as in scripture. The perfections are called attributes, which are essential to God’s being and are necessarily involved in the believer’s idea of God. God’s attributes are distinguished from predicates which refer to him, from the properties or distinguishing characteristics of the three Persons of the Trinity, and from accidents or qualities which may or may not belong to a substance.

Hodge’s analysis of the historical development of the attributes indicated that there were paths which he thought that believing theologians should not follow—those of nominalism and realism. The medieval realist notion viewed God as a composite being, composed of different elements. Those realists believed that general terms did not express mere thought or conceptions in our

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51 John Feinberg, No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2001), See Dolezal, All that is in God, 130-32.

52 Bruce A. Ware, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2005); Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1994). See Dolezal, All that is in God, 132-34.

53 Dolezal, All that is in God, 73. In an earlier interpretation of A. A. Hodge’s thinking, he laments, 64: “just how much the mechanistic Enlightenment thinking has impacted Christian theology.”

54 Hodge made strong univocist claims (using Dolezal’s term) when he asserted, Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, (London: Clarke, 1960), 1:396: “The Scriptural view of this subject, which distinguishes the attributes in God as distinct, and assumes that knowledge in Him, in its essential nature, is what knowledge is in us, does not conflict with the unity and simplicity of God as a spiritual being.” He continued: “...that knowledge in God is knowledge, and not power or eternity; that it is what knowledge is in us, not indeed in its modes and objects, but in its essential nature. We must remove from our conceptions of the divine attributes all the limitations and imperfections which belong to the corresponding attributes in us; but we are not to destroy their nature.” “God, therefore, does and can know in the ordinary and proper sense of that word.”

55 Hodge, Ibid., 1:368.
minds, but substantive existence.\(^{56}\) While Hodge advised against walking down that path, the route looks familiar because it at least has similarities to the road advocated by Dolezal’s antagonists, the univocists. If this is the case, then it could perhaps be suggested that the univocist’s position is not solely the ugly child of enlightenment thinking but has a much longer theological pedigree.\(^{57}\)

Another objectionable way to describe the relationship between God’s attributes and essence, according to Hodge, could be to follow Aquinas and some Lutherans who argue that God is pure act (actus purus)- a theme well known to readers of Dolezal’s book. This is a false representation, Hodge asserts, and should be corrected. To say that the divine attributes only differ in name, or are simply a divine accommodation, is “to destroy all true knowledge of God.”\(^{58}\) Aquinas’ view makes God simply a force that can be known only by its effects. Theologians are left with either abandoning attempts to determine the divine attributes or to renounce knowledge of God as well as faith in the revelation that he has graciously given of himself. This means that God, as such a force, is not a person and has no will; such a view “is essentially pantheistic.” Hodge cited with approval an author who said that this teaching is “the denial of God as He is revealed in the Scriptures.”\(^{59}\) Furthermore, if God is actus purus, then God cannot have knowledge. “If omniscience is only a different name for omnipotence, it ceases to be a distinct attribute of God.” Hodge was strongly against confounding knowledge and power in God. To say that they are identical in the divine being is to affirm “that as God knows from eternity He creates from eternity…” “We are thus led, by these speculations, into pantheistical views of the nature of God and of his relation to the world.”\(^{60}\) To be crystal clear on his strong rejection of this medieval notion, Hodge lamented: “It is deeply to be regretted that...the Lutheran and Reformed theologians, after renouncing the authority of the schoolmen, almost immediately yielded themselves to their speculations.”\(^{61}\)

The best way to represent attributes and essence, from a historical perspective, would be to follow Francis Turretin and others, posited Hodge. Turretin taught that the attributes had a real foundation in the divine nature, and Hodge believed that there should be an actual distinction between the divine attributes. God’s attributes, as revealed in scripture, are objectively true and are grounded in the divine essence. Theologians should reject the “...extreme view of the simplicity of his essence,” said Hodge, “which requires us to assume that the divine attributes

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\(^{56}\) Hodge, Ibid., 1:369: They comprehended “the divine attributes as differing from each other realiter, as one res or thing differs from another.”

\(^{57}\) The other dead end street for Hodge was the way of nominalism. Nominalists argue that general terms are words which answer to mental abstractions. Nominalists “confound the attributes, making them all mean the same thing, which is equivalent to denying them all together”; in referring to the different attributes, they “only use different words for one and the same thing.” Ibid.

\(^{58}\) Hodge, Ibid., 1:371.

\(^{59}\) Hodge says “...there can be no difference between the actual and the possible, for the one as well as the other is always present to the divine mind. It would also follow that the creation must be infinite, or God finite.” Aquinas’ teaching “is derogatory to God.” Positively citing Martensen, *Dogmatik*, 113, Hodge asserts: “It is the denial of the very essence of faith, if it is only in our thoughts that God is holy and righteous, and not in his own nature; if it is we who so address Him, and not He who so reveals Himself.” Hodge, Ibid., 1:372.

\(^{60}\) Hodge, Ibid., 1:395.

\(^{61}\) Hodge, Ibid., 1:394.
difference only in our conceptions.” The ground for that rejection is that the divine attributes differ not only in human thinking; there is a reason in God why theologians think of him as possessing these diverse perfections. In other words, “...the divine perfections are really what the Bible declares them to be.” He summarized the problem when he bemoaned, “Instead of determining the nature of the divine attributes from the representations of Scripture and from the constitution of man as the image of God, and from the necessities of our moral and religious nature, they allowed themselves to be controlled by a priori speculations as to the nature of the infinite and absolute.” In terms of method, thought Hodge, theologians must be controlled by scripture and the laws of humanity’s nature and not by speculative medieval thinking.

Charles Hodge’s teaching clearly disagrees with Dolezal’s presentation, and Dolezal rightly admits that the great northern Presbyterian theologian held to a notion of a complex divine essence. Yet, Charles Hodge has been judged by scholars and ministers alike to be a champion of orthodox theology for nearly two hundred years. Contemporary American reformed theologians who come under Dolezal’s sharp critique can certainly claim an honored American pedigree.

Moving beyond a critique based upon Hodge’s systematics, Dolezal’s book presents a number of unanswered questions. The first two questions flow from John Frame’s response to Dolezal’s book. The first question concerns the nature of God’s attributes and the creation. Bavinck, according to Frame, taught that God had attributes that are apart from creation, that he termed “necessary” attributes. God has “free” attributes that he has by virtue of his relationships to creatures. Dolezal seems to charge that Bavinck’s “free” attributes are what he terms “new” attributes that in fact don’t exist. If God’s free attributes don’t exist, then does God have no relationship to his creatures? God having no relationship to creatures is a form of deism. On the other hand, if a theologian holds that God’s relationship to his creatures are his own eternal being, then is that not a form of pantheism?

The second question concerns the notion of God as eternally creator. Dolezal argues that it is foundational that God must be able to do all things, such as create, from his own being. But what does it mean to say that God creates from his own being? Couldn’t that mean that the creation is in some sense or way “part” of God in some pantheistic fashion? Dolezal argues that God doesn’t need new properties of being to create because creator- hood belongs to God in his eternal essence. Granted, God has an eternal attribute to create a world different from himself. But

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62 Theologians then distinguish between the reason as determining and the reason as determined (ratio rationantis/ ratio rationatae) relative to the attributes. Hodge expressed himself precisely, “...the divine attributes differ neither realiter, nor nominaliter but virtualiter.” Ibid., 1:373.

63 Ibid.

64 Hodge, Ibid., 1:394.

65 Hodge, Ibid., 1:396: “And in determining what is, and what is not, consistent with the nature of God as an infinitely perfect being, we are to be controlled by the teaching of the Scriptures, and by the necessities (or laws) of our moral and religious nature, and not by our speculative notions of the Infinite and Absolute.” For more information on Hodge’s theological method, see Richard C. Gamble, The Whole Counsel of God (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 1:73-75.

66 Dolezal notes that the prominent southern Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney was also a univocist who asserted that if someone claims that the divine attributes differ only in name, then “...they are unmeaning”. Ibid., 73.

67 John Frame, “Scholasticism for Evangelicals: Thoughts on All that is in God by James Dolezal” Nov. 25, 2017 in Frame-Poythress.org.
unanswered for me was when Dolezal thought God acted to actualize this world. Is not creation from “the beginning” - when he spoke something into existence that is not of his own existence? Also, I don't think that he would want to say that actualizing the created world is part of God's essence - because that would be pantheism. Dolezal would not want to affirm any type of pantheism - but his teaching should probably be more clear on this important point.  

Dolezal also speaks of “absolute” and “relative” divine attributes. The “relative” attribute was not clear to me at least. For Dolezal, is a “relative” attribute of God’s essence and therefore not truly relative - or are they truly relative and therefore non-divine? The author needed to make this section more clear.  

While being able to claim a relatively long American theological heritage, some of Dolezal's warnings against certain contemporary evangelical theological expressions are still correct. His book is in some ways helpful. Dolezal does his best to demonstrate the bankruptcy of the old Princetonian and southern Presbyterian, as well as more contemporary formulations of equivocist thinking. It is at this point that Dolezal's book raises another important question. The question concerns the relationship between the doctrine of God proper, and thus all other doctrines, and theological method. To choose a theological method is also to select a way of looking at and thinking about the world from within a specific culture. Dolezal seems to charge that some evangelical theologians are intellectually trapped within a post-Kantian world and formulate their doctrine of God, specifically their equivocist thinking, according to that worldview. But what does Dolezal offer as an antidote? He argues that a better substitute is a

68 While Dolezal analyzed how both Augustine and Bavinck dealt with this problem, and rightly insisted that theologians must distinguish between the way humans predicate about God which is different from how God actually exists, nevertheless he provided no answer to this question as best as I can observe. See All that is in God, 98-100.

69 For example, in All that is in God, 100n56 Dolezal said that a relative attribute is not ontologically relative but is different from “absolute” attributes because they are articulated from the standpoint of our relation to God as creatures in time. If that is the case, are the “absolute” attributes knowable in any sense by creatures who live in time?

70 Believing theologians must combat any denial of fundamental biblical teaching regarding God’s attributes and Dolezal has brought this important teaching to his reader’s attention.

71 For more information on how humans are to speak and know about God, see Gamble, The Whole Counsel of God, 1:85-90.

72 For information on culture and the philosophy of Aristotle in theological method, see Gamble, The Whole Counsel of God, 1:46-47; for cultural influences, see Ibid., 1:79-80; for epistemological foundations, see Ibid., 1:82-84.
rejuvenated scholastic tradition. In other words, it appears that he wants contemporary theology proper to be confined to pre-enlightenment neo-Thomist thought patterns.

Theological method relative to the doctrine of God involves advanced hermeneutics and complex concepts. The words that we use to describe God necessarily flow out of a given worldview or metaphysic that speaks the truth about reality. The question for me is whether Thomas Aquinas’ metaphysic, which reached back in time to the pagan thinker Aristotle, was the most biblically faithful worldview that can be constructed and used in crafting a doctrine of God that is as close as possible to God’s own self-revelation. There is no question that by God’s common grace a pagan based metaphysic can synapse with that given by God through special revelation. Yet, the question remains whether systematic theologians today can conform their thinking more closely to the worldview directly given by God in scripture than did Aristotle. In other words, it would seem that a superior alternative would be for the faithful systematic theologian, as far as possible, to theologize with a biblical metaphysic rather than self-consciously utilizing either past or contemporary cultural or philosophical grids. However, such a theology is not easy to construct!

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73 Dolezal believes the doctrine of divine simplicity reached its summit in Aquinas. 55: “Several factors enabled Thomas...perhaps most important of which was the recovery of Aristotle’s metaphysical framework...” “The conceptual framework did not alter the essential claims of the doctrine, though it did enable Thomas to explicate it in more precisely existential terms.”; 61: For more information on “how each modern mechanism displaced the older, predominantly Aristotelian, natural philosophy, see...”; 61-62: “...mechanism took over the field of natural philosophy...”; 62: The philosophical change brought “a restricted understanding of the meaning and significance of divine simplicity...”; 63: For those elaborate [medieval and Protestant scholastic] denials to make sense, “one would need to presuppose the basic accuracy of Aristotelian metaphysics...”. Dolezal also argues in 63 that after Hume and Kant, Christian theologians abandoned the metaphysical structure of Aristotelian philosophy as they went simply to the Bible assuming that they didn’t have to commit to a particular understanding of being.

74 For information on John Owen’s rejection of Aristotle’s method in theology, see Gamble, The Whole Counsel of God, 1:92; for a note comparing Aquinas, Calvin, and Turretin, see Ibid., 1:53n107.

75 Aquinas was too great a thinker for me to assert that his metaphysics was simply Aristotelian. There were aspects (like his doctrine of esse or the transcendentials of being) that were clearly not Aristotelian.


77 We certainly want to avoid the type of problems that swept through the Netherlands from the middle of the 17th century until the end of the 18th between Voetius and his followers, and Cocceius and his. While Cocceius rejected Voetius’ scholastic method, in some ways those debates were really between those who followed Aristotle’s philosophical tradition and opponents who followed Descartes. See Bavinck’s analysis in Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:180-81, 183-86 and John Bolt’s editorial note 1:186n21. For some past attempts to create such a theology and the inherent difficulties in its accomplishment, see Gary T. Meadors, ed., Four Views on Moving beyond the Bible to Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).
Biblical Counseling: A Discipline

Prof. Keith A. Evans

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The training of a generation of future pastors, missionaries, and laborers in Christ’s Church, to counsel the flock of God, that they might disciple the nations, is an overwhelmingly awesome calling!

The primary affection that I am experiencing upon receiving this holy calling is: thankfulness. I am so thoroughly thankful that Christ, by his Church, has deemed it fitting and acceptable to entrust to me this sacred study. I am simply so very thankful to receive the position of Biblical Counseling Professor from Christ, and it is my sincere hope and prayer that I may faithfully honor Him and be a loyal servant to His dear sheep. Thus, to those of you who have supported me, prayed for me, encouraged me, counseled me, endured with me, and sacrificed so much, that we might be having this conversation tonight, namely, my wife, Melissa, and my children, as well as my parents: thank you.

Biblical Theology and Biblical Counseling

As we consider “Biblical Counseling: A Discipline,” our minds should go back to the memorable year of 1894, when the Reverend Geerhardus Vos, of Princeton Theological Seminary, was inaugurated as its Professor of Biblical Theology. At this point, you may be wondering: what do Biblical Theology, and Biblical Counseling have to do with one another. Apart from the fact that they, of course, are both “Biblical,” we can at the very least, assume that they both aim to be Biblical.

The title of this inaugural address, “Biblical Counseling: A Discipline”, is actually an homage to Dr. Vos’ Inaugural Address, where he spoke on the then new, theological discipline of Biblical Theology. Of course, Biblical Theology was not new then, in the same way that Biblical Counseling is not new now as a theological discipline — and yet there was and is an element of “newness” to each of them, respectively. At this juncture, if we are not careful, we will begin sounding like the Apostle John, who speaks of an old commandment, which is also a new commandment — but I digress.

Biblical Counseling, like Biblical Theology in 1894, is relatively new, in the history of Christendom. After all, Biblical Counseling is only about fifty years old as a discipline. She is but now coming into her third generation of practitioners and professors. And here at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the one taking up the discipline is quite a young professor —

1 The following is an edited text of the inaugural address delivered by Rev. Keith A. Evans, on November 2, 2018, as the first Professor of Biblical Counseling at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

some may even say “boyish.” Thus, we have a younger professor taking up the instruction of a rather recent arrival, in the scope of church history, to seminary curricula.

And yet, Biblical Counseling, like Biblical Theology before her, is almost as old as time itself. She is, after all, the discipline of rightly understanding the Biblical text and rightly applying it to the circumstances of life. Perhaps we are beginning to see the line between Biblical Theology and Biblical Counseling is straighter than initially considered. The application of the text is the logical conclusion of rightly dividing the word of truth.

However, let us return to 1894 for one moment.

Quoting from Dr. Vos’s inaugural address, adapting his thoughts for our immediate purpose in this paper:

Biblical [Counseling] being a recent arrival in seminary curriculum and having been entrusted to my special care and keeping, I consider it my duty to introduce to you this theological science ... This is all the more necessary because of the wide divergence of opinion in various quarters concerning the standing of this newest accession to the circle of sacred studies. Some have lauded [Biblical Counseling] to the skies as the ideal of [practical] theology, [holding discipleship to an idealism she cannot possibly bear] and in such extravagant terms as to reflect seriously upon the character of her sisters of greater age and longer standing [namely Preaching]. Others look upon the new-comer with suspicion, or even openly dispute her right to a place in the theological family, [desiring that she be outsourced right out of the church, out of the seminaries, and into the medical fields, where the care of souls allegedly belongs].

Therefore, it is in the spirit of Dr. Vos that we must ensure that the Theology of Counseling be Biblical — not only in content, but also in methodology.

One final point as we consider the venerable Geerhardus Vos. The afternoon of his inauguration, he spoke against his discipline, stating that Exegetical Theology was primary, and additionally, that Biblical Theology was a handmaiden to Systematic Theology. In like manner, I hope you will hear me tonight speak against my discipline. That Biblical Counseling, as Practical Theology, is secondary to the importance and primacy of preaching. And yet, might I further suggest that Systematic Theology is the handmaiden to Practical Theology, of which Biblical Counseling is a part?

After all, theological claims are fundamentally practical, and if our theology is not applied and does not reach the average churchgoer, what ultimate good is it? Application of the word of God to the experience of life is the heart of the theological task. The Scriptures come to us in the form of application. They are truth applied. Surely the Scriptures speak about substitutionary atonement, about adoption, about justification, about election, and about the incarnation, and so forth. But Scripture does so in a way that is applied to life, so that the atonement is brought to bear on your marriage in Ephesians; adoption is brought to bear on your prayer life in the midst of enduring affliction in the Book of Romans; justification is brought to bear on your forgiveness of others in Matthew; election is brought to bear on your patience with your fellow believer in Colossians; the incarnation is applied to the lowliness with which we ought to view ourselves in relation to others in Philippians, and so on. Scripture thus comes to us in the form of application. It comes as counsel itself, so that we are admonished, rebuked, corrected, encouraged, supported, sustained, and conformed by it into the image of God in Christ.

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3 Ibid. The brackets are mine.
At the same time, the application must not be divorced from the source. Why, ultimately, would we desire the formation of character, apart from the character of God? Why would we teach people to be truthful, apart from the One who is Truth? Why instruct people to be loving, separated from the One who is the embodiment of Love? Why counsel people spiritually, devoid of the Spirit? Why seek Christ-likeness in individuals, absent of Christ? Or in other words, how can we possibly commend holiness without the Holy One? Or most foundational yet: how can we promote godliness, apart from God himself?

Cautions For the Discipline of Biblical Counseling

Having glimpsed the importance of this theological discipline, let us turn our attention to the cautions which we must employ when engaged in the work of Biblical Counseling while instructing in the Seminary and engaging in it in pastoral ministry:

The first caution under consideration flows from Judges 17:1-13, where we find an Ephriamite, named Micah, an Israelite named in accord with the true and living God, who worships at a household shrine, instead of going to the place of public worship in Ephraim. Public worship at that time occurred in the Tabernacle in Shiloh, in the very region where Micah lived. Thus, we find the man in the text without excuse, with no appeal to significant difficulty in seeking God as God had prescribed. Instead, Micah comes across a Levite, from the Tribe of Judah no less, from the city of origin of Christ Himself.

Now, instead of looking to the true priest, the One from Judah, the One to be born in Bethlehem, Micah looks to a meager approximation of him. Therefore, Micah makes a priest out of one who should be a servant of the True Priest, the True Priest who would point Micah to reliance upon the Living God, a God who is neither fashioned out of silver or represented by images and who does not dwell in houses made by hands.

If, at this point, we are tempted to conclude our passage as a rather obscure and impenetrable Old Testament passage, we find a New Testament parallel in the Book of Acts Chapter 14, where Paul and Barnabas, messengers of Christ, are worshiped instead of Christ Himself.

The universal point to both of these texts for our purpose in this paper is that discipleship, the one-on-one ministry of the word to individuals, could result in people relying upon the servant rather than the Master. In pointing people to the Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God, counselees could come to depend upon the counselor or the counseling in an unhealthy and Biblically-imbalanced way.

If Biblical counseling is ever known as individual therapy, though I recoil at the phrase, then let us never lose sight of the much more important and required Group Therapy, of going to the house of God in public worship. And may our ministry to the sheep never produce dependence upon anyone other than the True Priest of Bethlehem in Judah, that Great High Priest, not of the Levitical order, but in the order of Melchizedek, Jesus Christ himself.

The second caution for consideration is the all-too-common notion that providing wise and formal counsel to people is reserved for the specialist. Such a distortion of Biblically-based counsel is addressed by Acts 20:17-38. Here, Paul, the consummate specialist in communicating and applying the Word of God, is entrusting the very same ministry to the elders of the Ephesian church.

Paul is commending intimate and earnest care for the church of God which Christ obtained with His own blood. Paul places this care upon the elders of the church, this tearful, personal, house-to-house counseling of the flock in which he himself engaged. Notice how Paul puts it, when he says: “remember that for three years I did not cease to nouthetically confront everyone with
tears” (Acts 20:31), and Paul is commending the same to the elders (Acts 20:32). He specifically entrusts the word of God as the means to build up and sanctify the people of God. Then, to bring it all to bear with full weight and responsibility, Paul says: “In everything, I have shown you that by laboring in this way, we must support the weak” (Acts 20:35).

Paul, the specialist of the word of God, sees with tears this responsibility of counseling the word of God personally and from house to house, as being given to more than just the specialist. Biblical Counseling is not just conferred upon the counseling specialist alone. Neither is counseling with the Bible given just to the pastor, but it is a ministry bestowed on the Church of Jesus Christ as a whole. Perhaps this point is merely a Biblical advertisement that we all need training at RPTS in applying the word to the people of God.

The third and final caution for consideration flows from the previous point Paul was making: it is the Word of God he commends to us, as the means in the counseling dynamic of building up, strengthening the weak, and sanctifying the Church. The caution before us, however, is the reverse of the above. Do we want the counseling department at RPTS, the discipleship and counseling in your churches, and the soul-care of Christ’s people, to be based off of the insights and experience of men? Do we believe the mere observations of science and the meager attempts of secular humanism are enough to try and meet the deepest needs of the soul? Or might there be more adequate help available to us?

Paul had great confidence in the Word of God, what it was given for, and how it was to be used in the lives of people. Likewise, the Apostle Peter states:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses to his majesty ... knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:16-21 ESV).

If there is any concern whatsoever about lack of experience and under-qualification of a Biblical Counseling professor, praise the Lord that, “we do not follow cleverly designed” human solutions, nor a man’s personal interpretation of the questions of life like, “who is man, what is his problem, and how do you fix him?” Are we not “eyewitnesses to his majesty” and to the power of Jesus to change lives? Or do we think his hand is slack?

Do we want to counsel in confidence? And upon true authority? On the claim, “Thus saith the Lord?” Or on the ever-changing, shifting opinions of man? Do we want our offer of hope and help, our discipleship and counseling, to be open to everyone’s personal interpretation? Or do we desire the curriculum at RPTS to be based upon the counseling professor’s meager experience, compared to the infinite wisdom of the Most High God? Do we want our promise of holiness and process of growing in greater faithfulness in all circumstances to be based upon the unchanging truth of God?

All of our concerns and reservations aside, I will age; I will finish my doctoral work eventually; I will labor in this field, all by God’s grace. But all of the above is immaterial compared to this one truth. We all have been entrusted with God’s perfect, inspired, inerrant, infallible, unchangeable, authoritative, perspicuous, sufficient, reliable, eternal Word — which grants everything necessary that the man of God may be complete, lacking nothing.

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4 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own; emphasis added.

5 Emphasis added.
"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" — in the public ministry, or in private counseling and discipleship ministry. That Word never returns to God void, but accomplishes its purposes, forever useful in transforming people’s lives.

May the Lord bless the application of His Word, in the discipline of Biblical Counseling, and specifically at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, for decades upon decades to come.

To God only be the glory.
Gender Blending and Confusion

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There are two stories that I think would help us to put a mental framework around this topic of gender blending and confusion. The first one is *Alice in Wonderland*. If you haven't read it, certainly you have seen the movie. Why is it helpful? Because in Wonderland, nothing is what it seems to be. It is an overarching theme in *Alice in Wonderland*. Everything that seems normal is NOT normal. Things are exactly the opposite of what they seem to be in Wonderland. And so more and more, it is Wonderland for your young people today. I'm so old, I'm 70 now. I remember the sixties. The sixties literally were Alice in Wonderland. Everything gets changed. Actually, you can think through that idea now. The sixties and “Alice’s Restaurant” was a theme song. You can be anything you want at Alice’s Restaurant. Really the whole world has become Alice’s Restaurant in that things really are illusory and do not seem to be what they really are. We are all chasing the Mad Hatter! Or worse yet, we have become the Mad Hatter!!

The second story that really helps, most of us know at least generally is The Emperor’s New Clothes. You should remember it. A scam artist comes along and convinces the emperor saying, “Hey, I’m going to make you a new set of clothes. You can you take off your old ones”. But the emperor is really naked, and nobody really wants to burst his bubble. The artist, however, said, “Oh, yeah, emperor, these are really great clothes. You really look great.” Nobody wants to be the one who goes, “You know, you're naked, and you do not really have anything on, and this is really ridiculous.” So you remember, he’s in a parade, and of course, the little boy is the one who says, “Hey, the emperor has no clothes.” And that’s where the trouble begins. Today our culture really has no moral clothes, and Christians are the ones who are standing, pointing, and saying, “Hey you are naked in more ways than one. You're naked physically, but you are also naked because you have no defense before the living God.”

Today in Western culture, everyone is responding strangely to this whole issue of gender and sexuality. Today a federal judge would say to a man who claims to be a woman born in a man’s body that he can change his birth certificate and claim his identity as non-binary. In fact, it’s not just male or female – those are not the only choices, you can be whatever you want. The reality is that western culture is on a bad acid trip. We have taken cultural LSD, and we are hallucinating all over the place. As Christians, we have to understand it. We are living in perilous times, and it’s not just that Christians are being killed by ISIS or that house church pastors in China are being busted by the federal government for being in a non-registered church, but even you here in America are in for attacks. I keep telling our seminarians: “Some of you are probably going to end up in jail for a hate crime just for preaching through Romans.” So we are more and more going to be like the early Christians, who were outsiders to the world and its approval and tolerance. In our country and western culture, the federal government, state governments, and

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1 The substance of this paper was given at the Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship 2016 Summer Institute entitled “Disordered Desires: Bringing Grace to Modern Sexuality.”
local governments say, “You must swear allegiance to what we say.” This means the LGBTQ agenda for dominance has won the culture war. The moral communists have won.

Friends, this issue is not about political correctness; it is really religious correctness. They would not call it so, but it is a religious issue. Which God are we going to serve? Will it be the triune living God who made men and women in His image, or is it going to be God howsoever the government decides? We are told, we can be Christians, but keep it in the closet. So, gays, lesbians, and others talk about, “We’ve come out of the closet.” Well, guess what? They are out of the closet. The closet is empty, and they want to put us in the closet; This is the reality.

Several years ago, we were going to a gay rights parade in San Diego to offer gospel hope. I will not forget what the San Diego detective told us: “Remember you used to be the majority but are now the minority.” We also had another experience when my wife ran a pro-life pregnancy center in San Diego County: CUP, the Center for Unplanned Pregnancy. We were up front with our positions and had a confidentiality statement crafted by a pro-life lawyer. The advertisement in the phonebook stated clearly we were not a medical clinic. We thought for sure there was no way that we could be shut down. Planned Parenthood, however, shut us down, because they sued all the pro-life pregnancy centers in the county. In spite of having the most conservative judge who professed to be a believer, we lost the case! So this is the whole cultural milieu we are in today. It is an antagonistic culture, which is not sufficiently satisfied to say, “Keep quiet,” but if we say the emperor has no clothes, they will try to shut us down.

So where do we start in trying to understand this general shift in the culture and particularly the issue of gender confusion and gender blending? Jesus, of course, points us in the right direction. He always goes back to the beginning, to creation before the Fall. Let us turn our attention to Matthew 19. Now, it’s not about gay and lesbian; it’s not about gender confusion per se, but it is in the context of marriage and family, which after all are the biblical paradigms for this issue of gender. What this paper aims to do is not only to explain the confusion, but particularly how we should counsel someone who comes in and is confused and says, “I’m a man in a woman’s body” or “a woman in a man’s body” or “I’m transgendered” or the next identity du jour. The next term we might hear in this culture could be omnigendered – someone claims they are a little bit of everything. So, how do we deal with this confusion?

Interestingly, in Matthew 19, we have Jesus being tested by religious leaders. He is teaching about divorce, and in verse three we read this: “And the Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause.’” There was a controversy. Some rabbis were saying that the reason for divorce could be any cause (Deuteronomy 24); while other rabbis were saying it has to be a serious thing. So which is it? Jesus, however, answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female.” He didn’t offer them three different options. It’s male and female. This historical paradigm is not just a myth. It’s time and space history, and that's God's way of working. “Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother, hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let not man separate.” They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?’” Notice how they frame their opposition as Moses commanded to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away. It is not what Deuteronomy 24 says if you read it carefully. “But Jesus said, ‘It was because of your hardness of heart that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning, it was not so. And I say to you whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery.’”

The disciples said to him, ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it’s better not to marry.’” They are saying, in effect, “You’ve got to be kidding me. If you’re talking about being that strict, who can meet that standard? So it’s better not to get married.” Jesus said that “not everyone can receive this thing but only those to whom it was given. For there are eunuchs who have been so
from birth.” In other words, Jesus is speaking here of those incapable of sexual relations. “There are eunuchs who have been made so by men,” as Origen and others in church history. “And there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, but let the one was able to receive this, receive it.” In light of this historic paradigm of male and female genders which Jesus uses to explain the basis of the issue, we need to consider the following perspectives in our approach to counsel those who are struggling with gender blending and confusion.

**Gender issues are a subset of a larger issue of identity in general.**

Modern people in America do not understand who they are. *It is the bigger issue.* Actually, gender and sexuality are only a subset of this larger issue. The issue is, “Who am I?” Every counseling psychology, whether Christian or non-Christian, secular or not, has a paradigm that answers fundamental questions like Who is man? What's wrong with him? How do you fix it?

I got saved in seminary and then went to Temple University, where I got my undergraduate degree in history, to get a Master’s in psychology. I have never forgotten a counseling course that I had. This course was run by a woman, who was not a Christian, but her mother was a Christian. She walked into the class on the first day of the semester and said, “You have a ten-page paper for next week. Who is man? What's wrong? How do you fix him?” The design of the course was rather brilliant. You read the books, saw the films, you studied them, and then you wrote the same paper at the end of the semester. Everybody in the class was a Master’s or a Ph.D. student. Panic reigned! “Oh, my word! This is so hard! What do I do? How does this work? Who is man?” And I’m thinking, “Wow, this is a piece of cake. That's not hard — Romans 1, 2, and 3. What's hard about this? Who’s man? The image of God. What's wrong? Sin. How do you fix it? Jesus. This is easy.” So, I write my paper, and by the Lord’s providence, I got a good grade. We went through the whole course and then I had to write the paper again. So, I go up at the end, and she says, “Let me guess. I'm going to get Romans 1, 2, and 3 again.” Of course, she was right! So I asked if I could write a critique of these different people from a Christian perspective. She allowed me to do so. I’ve never forgotten that course because even as a non-Christian, she saw that anthropology was the core issue in counseling.

Hence for everybody, whether it is any letter in LGBTQ, or whether it is people who now think that they're animals, identity becomes the issue. The fundamental question of identity is: Am I whom I was born to be? or am I who I demand that I want to be or imagine myself to be? While I was in Brazil, I learned that there is a woman in Brazil who thinks that she is a lion. She is getting plastic surgery to make her look like a lion. When I came back to the United States from Brazil, I heard there is a guy in Arizona who thinks he is a dragon. So what's he doing? He's getting surgery to make him look dragon-like, with horns and stuff. There is a whole subculture of “Furries”, youth who take on an animal persona. They have clubs, networks, and conventions. There are things to note: one, not all are the same except there is the common theme of personified animals. This is species confusion! The lines are blurred between humans and animals. Two, there is a higher incidence of gay, bi-sexual and transgendered among them than in the non-Furries. If you want to study or understand this phenomenon you can easily research it online.

We need to weep over people like this for they are confused, very confused. Now, think about this question. Where do I go in the Bible to get a handle on this issue, because it doesn’t seem like there is anything in the Bible that talks about people who think they are dragons or lions. But the point is identity. Am I a lion, a dragon, or am I a person made in the image of God who's in rebellion against God? So for us as believers, this is really straightforward; it is Romans 1, 2, and 3. Romans 1 makes clear what happens when you do not agree with God. You profess
yourself to become wise, but in fact, you make yourself to be a fool. So in a sense, this confusion should not throw us off, even though it is complicated. If the question Who are you? is answered as I think I’m a dragon, then the Bible clearly informs us, No, I am not a dragon. Dragons do not exist. Even if they did they will not be judged by God on that great and fearful, final Day. This argument goes across the board. People used to come in for counseling and say they were several different people because of Multiple Personality Disorder. But the answer is, No, you are not. You are whomever you are as you were born and developed, and there is only one of you. You are either in the first Adam or the second Adam.

I think we all struggle with identity. There are some things that we all do not like about us. But, no matter what we think, desire or do, it is not going to change who we are. The sooner a person realizes this truth the better that, “This is who I am and my only hope of change is to become like Jesus instead of who I am, male or female. I have to become like Jesus.” It is God’s goal for you and me. Because, who is man? What does it mean to be an image bearer of God? Can you un-package that a bit for a counselee? This is important for a counselor to be able to do. If you say to someone that he is an image bearer of God, that should mean a couple of things. Your job is to reflect his character. You all woke up this morning and looked in the mirror. What did you see? Was it you? Yes and no! If your spouse came into the bathroom and went up and started kissing the picture of you in the mirror what would you say? You would say that the image is not you. It really is a reflection of who you are, but it’s not you.

Think about this in concrete terms. In the Old Testament, and particularly in the New, what are the three offices of Jesus Christ? Prophet, priest, and king. I would submit to you that this is a good summary of what it means that you are an image of God. You are a worshipper, as a priest. You are to be a worker, as a king. You are a witness to preach or teach and reflect what God has taught you as a prophet. Not everybody is ordained to an office but we function in these three functions or capacities. Are you a good worshiper? This has implications for counseling. Are you teaching people to be a good worshiper? Are you teaching people to be a good servant of God?

Life must also be understood as two basic realities, not this amorphous “We’re all god.” There is God and then everything else is creation. There is male and female. There are the children of Satan and the children of God, going all the way back to the Garden: the seed of the woman, Jesus, and the seed of the evil one. Life is binary, like it or not! So if a federal judge says it’s not binary, it does not change the fact that the world really is; there are two separate realities, divisions, and it goes right through from the seeds in the garden. Remember, God created and explains the world, not human judges! Judges need to remember Psalm 82. Remember, the seed of the woman is going to come and crush the seed of the serpent. Or as Paul picks up in Romans, God will soon crush Satan under your heel, Romans 15:20. So Paul is picking up the theme and in effect saying, “Look, Christ is risen from the dead. You’ve got His victory, and he’s going to defeat the evil one through you, not because you are the savior, but because you belong to the Savior”.

We need to begin to think through all of these truths. Jesus says to the Jews, “You are of your father the devil because you want to kill me.” Satan’s children want to eliminate the children of the Light. Therefore we must see the gender issue as a subset of the larger overall identity issue. Yes, the gender issue is really just a subset of a larger issue that goes back to the Garden. It is Satan’s seed playing out. “I’m not going to be whom you declare me to be. I will not accept my body as you have given it to me.” Or applied to the other area of identity in the culture: “I do not like being human; I’d like to be a dog. I refuse to accept God’s definition of who I am.” This is a demonic way of expressing, “did God really say there are only two complementary sexes?”; “did God really say I’m human, can’t I become an animal?” Soon we might have people insisting they are aliens from other planets.
All counseling as involving the issue of the image of God.

Identity is an extension of this perspective. There used to be a phrase out there: “you are what you eat”. Do you know what the Bible’s answer to that is? **You are whom you worship.** Look at Psalm 115 and Matthew 6. These are very important passages because they are a key to counseling in general and particularly in these gender issues. What does Psalm 115 say? It contrasts idolatry and true worship.

“Not unto us, Lord, not unto us. But to your name be the glory. For the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness. Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God? Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”

So there is God - Jehovah God; we know now from the New Testament He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He’s contrasted in verse 4 to silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but can’t speak, eyes but do not see; ears can’t hear; noses do not smell; hands but do not feel; feet but do not walk. They do not make a sound in their throat. Pretty understandable; pretty graphic description of an idol. But here’s a very pivotal line. Look at what it says in verse 8. They that make them **become** like them; the idol maker them becomes like them, so do all who trust in them. Where does an idol come from? Our mind sees something in creation, we put it together, and we design this idol, make it and then what happens? The ironic thing is that we become stupid and dumb like the idol – an ironic reversal or an idolatrous reversal. The dead idol controls the living creator and becomes his master. It’s really a creaturely thing that comes out of our imagination, pieced together from our experiences and imagination. But those who make them become like them, so do all trust in them. Do you want to be dumb? Make and serve an idol, mental and or physical.

In verse 9, the Psalmist says, “O Israel, trust in the Lord; he’s their help and shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord; he’s their help and shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord; he’s their help and shield. The Lord has remembered us. He will bless us. He will bless the house of Israel. He will bless the house of Aaron. He will bless those who fear the Lord, both small and great. May the Lord give you increase, you and your children. May you be blessed of the Lord who made Heaven and Earth. The heavens are the Lord’s heavens for the Earth is given to the children of man. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into the silence, but we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord.”

Do you see the relationship? You are what you worship. Trace it out. Why do communists kill so many people? They are basically materialists. They do not believe there is a personal God, a moral God. So people are fodder for the State’s grist mill, merely raw material for the idolatrous State. Why is there so much sexual immorality in the Hindu religion historically? Look at the Hindu gods. They are a bunch of perverted gods, a bunch of dirty old gods. The god that you worship dictates who you become because you are made in the image of God and you will reflect Him or the god you serve.

In the New Testament, I think Jesus nails this truth down and makes it even clearer in New Testament terms. In Matthew 6, Jesus speaks about worrying:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on Earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where are your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body, so if your eye is healthy your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness? You can’t serve two masters; you either hate the one and love the other, or will be devoted to the one despise the other. You can’t serve God and money.”
What does Jesus say in passages elsewhere? Where do adultery, fornication, murder come from? Out of the heart. Man is heart-driven, and what drives the heart? The Treasure of that heart. Jesus is saying we are what we worship. Our treasure dictates our self-concept and our character. It is the result when the fool has said in his heart there is no God. Therefore, in the area of gender, you become like the god that you serve. It is true for anybody. A person may not be gender-confused, he may not be species confused – or any of these other extreme things – but it comes down to this: you will become like the god that you serve. Psalm 115 shows this truth and Matthew 6 makes it even clearer.

In Ephesians 2, we are told we were dead in our trespasses and sins, but God made us alive in Christ. When you were dead in your trespasses and sins, you were like your father the devil who is a liar and a murderer. The big weapon that Satan uses is lies. Hence, if I think I’m a dragon with all of this power, I do not have to answer a living God. But even if you were a dragon, you would still have to answer to God! This issue is not as complicated as people make it out to be. It involves complicated issues, but it’s not as confusing as it might at first seem to be. You need to know that you are an image bearer of God and that God is leading you. In a sense, you can take that clarity and gently shine it on this person who is confused about gender, species, or whatever. It’s true even for people who really are not gender confused or species confused or someone who thinks he is an alien or something weird like “I was captured by an alien ship.” Our response is always: “No, you’re an image bearer of God.” We need to help them pray as Moses prayed in Psalm 90 to teach them to number their days that they might have a heart of wisdom. We all are going to die and have to answer to the living God, and we need to realize it. You need to realize it now and so does your gender or species confused friend.

In chapter two of Ephesians, you were dead in your trespasses and your sins; you were made alive together with Christ, united with him. Chapter four then goes onto explain what true holiness is. Paul exhorts us to make sure that we keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Now you are part of the body of Christ. You have to find your identity in terms of where you are in the body. To our question, “What am I supposed to be accomplishing?” Ephesians answers it in chapter 4, verses 17-24:

“Now this I say, and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as Gentiles do in the futility of their minds. They’re darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”

Does not this passage offer us a functional definition of the unregenerate or those who are dead in their sins? What is callousness? It’s a heavy layer of skin that keeps you from rubbing yourself the wrong way. So when you get a callus, you become insensitive to the irritation. In the same manner, when you are dead in your sin, your heart becomes callous to the reality of God. How do you then live? If you do not know the reality of God, you give yourself up to sensuality. One could say it this way, faith is supra-sensual. Can you see God? You can’t see God. Can you hear him, smell him, or taste him? No. Can you feel him in your body? No! So, I tell people, positive or negative, your feelings are not the Holy Spirit. The bottom line is that sensuality is living by your five senses. What I see, and touch, and feel. So if I think I’m a rabbit, or whatever I am living by my senses, and not living by faith in what the Word of God says. As Paul says about the unregenerate in verse 24: “They give themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” The more you give yourself to sensuality, the more you take on that identity, and the more you would think thoughts like “I’m an animal, transgendered, or whatever,” and it becomes a deeper form of sin that we all experience.

We can think we are wonderful people, but that is still sin manifesting in pride. The Bible is clear that apart from Christ we are all sinners. The bottom line is, am I like Jesus? Normally not, but
that is where he is changing me. As I become more like Jesus, I am becoming like I am supposed to be. This my identity – love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, meekness, and self-control. It's my true identity in Christ, and it's where I have got to go and grow. To be honest, every one of us needs a reality check to see whether we are living by faith in the Son of God who is making us conformed to his image or living in a fantasy world.

**Gender is but a subset of the image of God.**

In Genesis 1, God made man in the image of God. In Genesis 5:3, Adam had a son in his image and likeness. Moses, by the Holy Spirit, deliberately picks up that theme and phrase. Remember when you go to Luke, the genealogy of Jesus goes all the way back to Adam who was the son of God. There is the image bearing all the way back to the beginning. In Romans 5, or 1 Corinthians 15, Paul tells us that there are really only two images: the first Adam and the second Adam. So everyone who is in the first Adam is confused and cursed as to identity. They do not understand being an image bearer of God. If I am in Christ, then I am now part of the man from Heaven, the second Adam, who has laid down his life. *It also follows from this paradigm that Adam and Eve are the norms.* Anything else is a sinful degeneration from that created norm. Gender and sexuality are part of the image of God and are impacted by sin. But the insanity of thinking I am some other gender than what I am is really just a subset of the insanity of thinking I am something other than an image bearer of God who has to answer to God. This type of moral, spiritual insanity has been around since the Fall.

**Do not be deceived by the pagan worldview around us.**

Underneath all the heat surrounding gender issues, whether it is the male/female identity or whether it’s the binary nature of gender or species issues these all are a subset of this whole concept of identity. Who am I living in a covenental relationship with and whom am I reflecting? Doesn’t that seem a lot simpler? It’s not easy, and you and I cannot convert people; we cannot even get them to see this as the core issue. But, it is the reality. So, when we step back, whatever the person’s sin is, whether it’s a gender issue or something else, at the root or at heart it’s the same identity issue. Am I going to live in reality, or am I going to live in a dream world? Hold up my head high and whistle a happy tune? Therefore, I’m not afraid to imagine I am whomever I think myself to be. All of this is Eastern thought. All this is going back to the garden: “You'll be like God. Do not worship the real God. You can set your own agenda and do your own thing.”

Peter Jones’ work is very helpful in this regard. He shows how homosexuality functions as the sexual sacrament of the New Age movement. It is really what we see with the gay and lesbian movements. The movement thinks, “We gays are going to lead the world into the Age of Aquarius; we’re going to lead them into the new world where there are no distinctions. And all these old distinctions that actually create war and issues - they’re all going to be obliterated as we are absorbed into the godhead and we express our essential deity.” This a lie that leads straight to the pit of hell. How do I go about counseling this issue? It’s difficult, but it’s not all that esoteric. We have faced it, and yet we think it’s different. For me, it’s all about going back to the Introduction to Biblical Counseling, the Marriage and Family course, and the Advanced courses which I teach at Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh and have taught elsewhere for decades. In all of it, I have tried to be biblical. The Advanced course interestingly, utilizes the Ten Commandments and the Westminster Larger Catechism as

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opposed to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), saying that God gave us ten words – that’s sufficient to organize life. And Jesus says it boils down to two commandments. The first four and the second six. All the law and the prophets hang on these two – loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves. So, however you want to organize and approach it – low to high or high to low, it all comes down to love God with everything you have, love your neighbor as yourself, and you’ll be fine by the grace of God.³ This gender issue is just an extreme version of trying to avoid who we really are.

Exhortations for Life

You need to live and counsel out of these realities.

You need to live as an image bearer of God being recreated by the work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. You need that for your own identity, so when somebody comes in, and he thinks he is a furry or an animal, you need to relate to him as God’s image bearer who can be redeemed through Christ.

Obviously, you need to teach your children.

Your children are growing up in a culture that tells them they can be anything they want to be. And they have friends who are kind of weirding out. We need to teach them that while Jimmy may be very nice, Jimmy is confused. Jimmy thinks he’s a fox, but he’s really not a fox. We have to have compassion for him, and we have to love him, but we cannot treat him like a fox. He cannot come to our house and eat our chickens. We need to treat Jimmy as Jimmy. You need to teach your children, and you need to teach your churches the truth of how God views these issues.

You’re probably facing this issue already with people in your youth group. We had a father-son retreat that I spoke at recently, and there was a furry there. The kid was wearing a fox tail and a hat. How do you relate to him? You talk to him and ask about his parents. What’s your name? Where do you come from? Why did you pick a fox as opposed to a cat? You can ask good questions and probe and say, “What’s in it for you?” It’s not all that different unless you’re at the University of California, Irvine; you’re the anteaters. Or if you’re UC Santa Cruz, you’re the banana slugs. My guess is that they picked these mascots because they wanted to be weird or kinky. Nobody is terrorized by a banana slug! We laugh, but most of our sports teams take on mascots. Why? They want the spirit of the animal. Nobody wants to be an aardvark, because who’s afraid of the aardvark, or the armadillo? Pitt Panthers, Penn State Nittany Lions, sure! We have this tendency as humans that we want some of these other qualities to make up for us where we think we lack. So when you think of these issues, it’s not all that confusing. And so we need to speak this truth into the culture and say, “You’re much more special than a fox.”

I experienced some of it at an abortion clinic in Chula Vista. A young guy was really mad at me. He asked why I was there. I said, “Because you are made in the image of God, and you're important. The same is true for your baby; that's a human being. Anyways I believe that you're important. If you abort the baby, that's a human being made in the image of God. To do that is

to incur guilt.” He retorted, “I do not believe that.” My response: “Well, whether you believe that
or not, that’s the reality; and you are more important than you think you are. You’re not an
animal. If someone was going to kill you, it would be my job to defend you. The same thing for
this or any other unborn baby. You are more significant than you possibly could imagine. When
you think about it, you're cool, aren’t you? You’re not even an angel.” He calmed down but
walked away.

As an aside, some people say angels are better and stronger than us. True, but so are elephants!
Angels are not the image bearers of God, and Jesus didn’t die for angels! Years ago, I was in
Uganda and a Pentecostal pastor asked me why can’t Satan be saved. I was surprised by the
question! I responded it is because He didn't die for Angels. Hebrews 2:16 says he died for the
seed of Abraham. To the pastor or the young father who is dealing with children struggling with
this issue, tell your young people: “You're way more important than an angel, and you’re way
more important than a fox or anything. You have more dignity than you possibly could possibly
imagine. So why do you want to be an aardvark or a fox when you can be an image bearer of the
God who created the whole universe and sent Jesus to die for such sinners as you so you can
become an adopted son?”

Conclusion

So these are the kinds of themes we can work with people and challenge them in their confusion.
The gospel works here. Repentance and faith are the doors into the person and work of Jesus
through which the transsexual or the transgender or the trans-species person needs to enter the
kingdom. So in a real sense, the transgender and the trans-species person is no different from
you or me or any “regular” sinner. You have to give up your old identity, bound as it is to the first
Adam, and gain a new identity in Jesus Christ, the second and final Adam.

Obviously, you need real wisdom to apply this to real people in counseling and evangelism. And
of course remember to fulfill 2 Timothy 2:25, “the man of God must be gentle, able to exhort
those who contradict, so perhaps God may give the gift of repentance unto life.” Remember, you
too were dead in your sins and confused. But God had mercy on you in Christ our Lord. I do not
know who you thought you were, but now you are in your right mind and you are an adopted
child of God. This good news is what you needed. This same gospel is what every gender
confused person also needs. Amen!
The window seemed to change in an instant. One moment the night had extinguished every gleam of light except for passing headlights, which careened down a slender highway and eventually faded from memory; the next, and without warning, a world ablaze with the hues of a brilliant autumn morning filled the room where I lay following the accident. Washed in these colors, the gothic spire of La Roche College rose above the landscape like some celestial fixture, alone in magnitude and glory. Across the road, and catching whatever rays it was allowed by the spire, was the bronze dome of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church. I was in Passavant Hospital, named after its founder, Rev. William A. Passavant—a Lutheran. At first, these sights were a welcome respite from the cold fluorescent world of the hospital, but as the scene was reenacted morning after morning, a thought continued to dog and alter my perspective.

From a single window, I could see the supposed glory of the “American experiment.” In these peaceful mornings, I saw that a college which disseminated Roman heresy could continue beside a bastion of Eastern sacrilege—across the road from a Lutheran institution—and all with the protection of the civil magistrate. It struck me that I was living in the triumph of revolutionary ideals that were secured in the early American Republic, but more powerful was the thought that this victory was secured against the hopes of my forebears in the faith. This was not the America which Covenanters had preached, prayed, and fought to secure. But as I reclined in my bed, (with La Roche’s cross in my periphery), I realized that however much I knew of their argument, I knew very little of the context of early American Covenanters. I knew this kind of life — one where religious toleration and ecclesiastical disestablishmentarianism are first principles — and could hardly imagine a world wherein the Covenanter project for America was even tenable, let alone acceptable to many.

Samuel Brown Wylie knew a different world. In 1802, the “first principles” of today were still the abstract dreams of radical republicans, and the uncertainties of their ideal society were felt in every congressional meeting. His was a new world, but how “new” it was had yet to be defined. In this nebulous context, Wylie’s *Two Sons of Oil* offered a clear position — a way forward (or backward) — which, if heeded, promised to turn the infantile United States into a Reformed Republic. However, Wylie’s sermon was not without precedent. The biography of the preacher tells a story, in which a transatlantic journey could not separate him from the context of Covenanter persecution, national rebellion, and fledgling Reformed presbyteries. His was a life in which the *Two Sons of Oil* could easily find a place of influence.

“This is the best presentation of the position of the Covenanter Church that has been written, from which the author departed in 1833,” Glasgow averred — over eighty years after its initial
publication. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the content of the *Two Sons*, a question of context is asked. Was Wylie’s sermon unprecedented? This paper argues that the Irish and American contexts in 1802 were very much the same, politically, philosophically, and ecclesiastically; naturally giving rise to a sermon such as Wylie’s. An examination of Wylie’s Ireland, the America of his exile, and the location in which this sermon was preached are conducted below, in order to demonstrate strong continuities on both sides of the Atlantic.

I. Ireland, 1797

The homecoming of Samuel Brown Wylie (1773-1852) was imbued with excitement, such that Irish tremors were registered in London. However, neither the excitement nor the trembling were on account of his return. These were the tense harbingers of conflict, fast approaching. Wylie crossed the Irish Sea in 1797, just in time to watch his fellow Irishmen sprint the warpath. Sprinting they were, and Wylie required six months to close the distance between himself and revolution. Until now, he had been detained in Glasgow, with seven other sons of Ulster, to complete his undergraduate course; he was returning to see his homeland “in a state of real, though smothered, rebellion.” With his new credentials, Wylie returned to Antrim on the eve of insurrection—in time to exchange books for bullets.

Though the Glasgow years were docile for Wylie, his homeland endured upheaval at every turn; and in large part, the issue could be expressed through tutelage. Wylie had matriculated under Archibald Arthur, the immediate successor to Thomas Reid, while Ireland was being trained by Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-1798), the United Irishman. These tutors (*i.e.* Arthur and Tone) were not identical, but neither were they without parallels. Reid had started his own revolution by championing the Scottish Enlightenment; Wolfe Tone instigated one by espousing the Enlightenment theories of the revolutions, American and French. When Wylie returned home, one major difference existed between their courses: martial law. Wolfe Tone had coaxed Ulster into a frenzy, and by 1796, Britain responded in kind with martial occupation. Britain too had undergone tutelage. The American Revolution taught Cornwallis and George III that insurrection was a serious threat — and that Britain could lose. Britain could not lose Ireland, however. The island must be subdued and, if need be, at the end of a bayonet. Thus, when Wylie crossed the Irish Sea, with his Glasgow diploma in hand, he encountered forces which had also undergone matriculation, and all three were eager and prepared to employ their newly-acquired skills.

When he left the gangplank, Wylie came ashore an island poised for war, but the pestiferous airs of insurrection were not uniquely Irish. In one sense, the decade lent itself to such exigencies. Beneath the substrate of absolute monarchies and martial law was avid and resilient angst, spanning oceans and continents. In 1797, the most notable by-products of this general unrest found expression in the American and French Revolutions. Riots in London, like the American and Parisian demonstrations of the previous decades, were inextricably and ideologically linked to the fervor Wylie encountered in his homeland. In all of these cases, a matured, “narrow

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 59.

5 “Insurrection Act.” n.p. [cited 1 October 2018]. Online: http://www.qub.ac.uk/ild/?func=display_bill&kid=2515
republicanism” had been imbibed and costly embargos on this strong spirit failed to suppress its spread. America, England, France, and now Ireland had strong anti-monarchical, anti-aristocratic republicans who quoted Paine and Rousseau while wearing French blues. Such were signs of the times. Wylie’s republican contemporaries were thoroughly anti-Hobbesian, as they grounded their dream for an autonomous Irish republic upon the quest for civil liberty. Their utopian state would be classical in its foundation (after Machiavellian readings), but with important footnotes to Thomas Jefferson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Paine, and Samuel Pufendorf. Thus, a single dream threaded the Sons of Liberty, the French Jacobins, and the United Irishmen. Not only were their ideals linked, but a reciprocal enthusiasm ensured growing momentum. The success of his revolutionary peers overjoyed Tone; the golden age of republicanism was dawning. “This present great era of reform, when unjust governments are falling in every quarter of Europe,” promised an incoming of the Irish Republic and the demise of English repression. Thus, the United Irish dream was born and matured by an international force which promised civil liberty to men and regarded the king as a dangerous relic of primitive despotism. Even Antrim, Wylie’s hometown, found this intercontinental dream in the breasts of her sons, and so ensured that Wylie would meet this spirit of the revolutionary decade.

The dream of the United Irishmen permeated every sphere of life: political, economic, and ecclesiastical. By the time of Wylie’s return, their dream for this latter sphere had become a rallying cry. Tone fought “to unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishmen in place of the denominations of Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter.” Tone’s Society was intentionally ambiguous in its religious subscription, and this paid dividends to the cause; Papists and Protestants filled his ranks to excess. This ecclesiastical platform separated the movement from its predecessors, which flew either Catholic or Protestant banners, and so promised more participants and a surer victory. Secularism, however, had very little to do with this “forward thinking” on Tone’s part. The movement had been characteristically Protestant until Presbyterians espoused the cause of “Catholic emancipation.” The change was narrated by Tone himself: the “Catholic Question” was raised in a secret committee in which Catholic leaders presented their political agendas.

6 The terminology is debated, though Alan Ryan succinctly generalizes in a noncontroversial way when he writes: “narrow republican theories—theories that repudiate monarchy because civic liberty is incompatible with monarchy—[stands distinct from] broadly republican theories that accept monarchy as a constitutional possibility.” Alan Ryan, On Politics: A History of Political Thought from Herodotus to the Present (New York: Liveright, 2012) 2:498.


9 Stewart, Deeper Silence, 98, 143.

10 Tone, quoted in S. J. Connolly, Divided Kingdom: Ireland 1630—1800 (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 439.

11 Tone, quoted in Ibid., 494.

12 Stewart, Deeper Silence, 154. “Catholic Emancipation I conceive to be, a dispensation of those who profess the Roman Catholic Religion, from the necessity of taking the oaths of Supremacy and Abjuration, and making and subscribing the declaration annexed to them; and an exclusive privilege to men of that communion to sit and vote in the two houses of Parliament, and to fill the highest offices in the empire, without taking those test oaths of their allegiance to the constitution in church and state, which our ancestors thought necessary for the security of both; which test oaths every Protestant in England and Ireland, is now obliged to swear before he can become a senator, or fill any of the higher employments under the government.” Anonymous, Catholic Emancipation (London: John Stockdale, 1805), 7.
After deliberation, the United Irishmen unanimously adopted the cause of full religious toleration—all voting members were Ulster Presbyterians. For the main body of northern Presbyterians, this ecumenism was an addendum to the “New Light” controversies earlier in the century. In the ‘10s and early ‘20s, the confessional wars raged until the victory of the liberal ministers was determined by the vote of Synod. This mêlée was a debate over the then-required full subscription to the Westminster formularies, and in 1720, the “New Lights” (a number of them suspected Arians) took the field. Heresy and political insurrection were not entirely heterogeneous, and the Presbyterian support for Tone’s “bridge” over denominational fissures is a case in point. The republicanism then-in-vogue held that aristocracy and the church’s civil charter (regardless of its denomination) were creatures of monarchy, and thus, principally opposite to civic liberty. The Westminster standards represented the theology of a church under the tyranny of a non-republican parliament, and its binding force testified to a primitive infraction on the rights of individual conscience. In this context, it seemed that “Presbyterians” were free to choose between dusty Trinitarian orthodoxy and the Arian revival of late. If Presbyterians could choose such articles of faith, who were they to demand that an Irishman be either Protestant or Catholic?

When Wylie ventured north and returned to his native Antrim, the Presbyterian involvement in the United Irishmen was reaching a climax. The “New Lights” had been early supporters of the cause, and their politico-ecclesiastical leftism demanded as much; however, in ‘97 they were joined by a host of other more conservative Presbyterian bodies. Tone was now drawing upon members from the “dissenting” Presbyterians — Seceders (Burgher and Anti-Burgher), and Reformed Presbyterians. Despite the avowed ecumenism of the movement and its opposition to the attainments of the Covenanted Reformation, these bodies yielded droves of participants to the insurrection. Joining the secret society, Seceders and Covenanters incorporated themselves into an effort which their shepherds repudiated. Seceder ministers had, by this time, resolved that the Confession of Faith bound the churches to broad religious toleration and also resolved that all insurrectionary acts were antithetical to Christianity. Their parishioners were keen on the first conclusion but choked vociferously on the latter. In one sense, the first conviction prepared Seceder laity to embrace Tone’s ecumenism, despite the forceful cries of their ministers; and the “narrow republicanism” which was so popular, to fully identify as United

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13 Stewart, *Deeper Silence*, 154. To the exclusion of Tone, who was raised an Irish Episcopal. See Ibid., 150.

14 Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 44; Stewart, *Deeper Silence*, 77. “There are many sects—Old Light, New Light, Seceders, etc. The former are the old Scotch Presbyterians, who agree with the Church of England in articles of faith, but oppose [i.e. English] church discipline. The second deny the divinity of Christ, and the last I know nothing about.” Duke of Rutland, quoted in Ibid., 130.

15 McBride, *Scripture Politics*, 49. For a case study in this rabid a-confessionalism, the Belfast Presbyterians are illustrative. “When a voluntary declaration concerning the eternal deity of the Son of God was proposed, the Belfast Society refused; although they did not contest the doctrine, they objected to the circumstances [i.e. man-made creed], which they fancifully compared with the Spanish Inquisition.” Ibid., 45.

16 In 1796 the General Associate Synod (of Burgher Seceders) gave “permission to all their members to make exception to every thing [sic] in the Confession, which, taken by itself, seemed to allow the punishment of good and peaceable subjects on account of their religious opinions and observances.” John M’Kerrow, *History of the Secession Church* (Glasgow: A Fullarton & Co., 1841), 474. By 1804 the Burgher Synod maintained that “a liberty of worshipping God in the way which they judge agreeable to his will, is a right common to all men. They may and often do err, and offend the most High God, by substituting a false worship in the place of that which he requires: but no power on earth may take their right from them.” General Associate Synod, *Narrative & Testimony, Agreed Upon by the General Associate Synod* (Edinburgh: A. Neill & Co., 1804), 195. The magistrate’s dereliction “can never warrant a minority to refuse subjection to any whom the general body set up, in all their lawful commands.” Ibid., 197.
Irishmen. Reformed Presbyterians were more unified — pastors and flock — in support of the cause. Showing themselves averse to the practice of Seceder ministers, Rev. William Gibson (1753-1838) preached at United Irish rallies, as did Rev. James McKinney (1759-1802). More than both, however, was the support of Rev. William Stavely (1743-1825)—Ireland’s “Cameronian Apostle” and leading United Irishman. In 1801, Stavely confessed,

That after various solicitations, he had been prevailed upon to take a solemn declaration to co-operate with virtuous Irishmen of every description [i.e. denomination] to obtain a redress of grievances; that he had administered said declaration to several persons; that he had sat in a private meeting with said persons, and had along with them contributed a little money, but for what purpose applied he knew not; that he also sat in a Baronial Committee in virtue of having taken foresaid declaration; and that he had in an unthinking manner spoken something of lifting up arms from Loyalists.

Across the Irish Sea, and suspicious that their brethren were inclined to Tone’s secret society, the Reformed Presbytery of Scotland published their *Seasonable & Necessary Information*. It was sent to Belfast’s *Northern Star* — a bi-weekly publication, established by Presbyterian United Irishmen — and in it, the Scottish Covenanters summoned Irish Reformed Presbyterians to remain aloof from the society, for all of the obvious reasons. This less-than-subtle warning to those Reformed Presbyterians already subscribed to Tone’s northern journal went largely ignored. The Reformed Presbytery of Ireland had committed to the United Irish cause, for better or worse.

Though he was only home for six months, Wylie’s taste of martial law’s cruelty would leave an indelible impression upon his memory. The United Irish cause, and even the involvement of Reformed Presbyterians in the insurrection, would allude his pen when the atrocities of marital occupation could not. The spring of 1796 introduced Ulster to English tactics in mass suppression, and when Wylie returned the following year, those methods had evolved into frenzied chaos. The ascendancy of the United Irishmen goaded British officers into desperation, which was expressed through new and harsher legislation. In 1796 it was a capital crime to administer any oath, without government sanction. Months later, an act of indemnity granted legal immunity to all extra-court proceedings (including executions) against suspected rebels. And finally, immediately prior to Wylie’s return, *habeas corpus* was suspended, which allowed

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17 Durey, Michael. *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 1997), 143

18 Ibid., 142.

19 “Towards the end of the year 1792, the first Reformed Presbytery was constituted in Ireland. Of this denomination the Rev. William Stavely was the great Irish apostle.” James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (London: Whittaker & Co., 1853), 3:405.

20 Matthew Hutchison, *The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland: Its Origin and History, 1680—1876* (Paisley: J. and R. Parlane, 1893), 236. Hutchison adds, “The meaning of this is not hard to understand. Mr. Staveley and others of his brethren, with many of their office-bearers and people, had associated themselves with secret societies, with the object of resisting the measures of the Government, even to the extent of taking up arms.” Ibid.

for the soldiery to indefinitely detain rebels, based exclusively upon suspicion.\textsuperscript{22} After his homecoming, these tactics only grew more intolerable. The military occupation became a “licentious” reign of terror, even according to their commanders.\textsuperscript{23} Particularly painful for Wylie was the fact that the British strong-arm was especially devastating to Reformed Presbyterians. Rev. James McKinney fled to America when he was warranted for seditious preaching, and by February 1798, half of the presbytery’s ministers would be exiled or imprisoned, with at least one lay-member publicly executed for treason.\textsuperscript{24} In old age, Wylie himself would describe the condition of his brethren.

Reformed Presbyterians were under the necessity of selecting one of these three consequences, some one of which must unavoidably result from their existing position. First, sin, by polluting their consciences in swearing an immoral oath of allegiance to a tyrannical government. Second, suffer, by being perhaps shot—on the instant—on the spot—or hanged without trial, at the discretion of a ruffian soldiery; or if trial was allowed, it was a mere mockery, under martial law, and in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, resulted in condemnation. Third, to flee and exile themselves from the sepulchers of their fathers.\textsuperscript{25}

This was the excitement, and these were the tremors which welcomed Wylie home. With other Reformed Presbyterians, these exigencies would incite him to choose the third option — voluntary exile. Like thousands of Irishmen, Rev. William Gibson and his family, with John Black (1768-1849), Thomas McAdam, John Reilly (1780-1820), and Samuel B. Wylie, left their homeland instead of facing arrest for supposed involvement with the United Irish cause.\textsuperscript{26} That October 1797, Wylie left his pupils in Antrim which, in six months’ time, would become a battlefield.\textsuperscript{27} On battlefields and streets, the uprising of 1798 would claim the lives of many, but before and after the conflict, it continued to alter even more. This reality can be observed in the fact that Wylie and his fellow exiles would never return to live in their homeland, and that each man would become notable in the place of their exile, and because of it. These men would gain notoriety as founding members of a new Reformed Presbytery in the place of their banishment. Thus, as one historian observed, “Among the more unusual by-products of the revolutionary crisis in Ireland we must, therefore, include the Reformed Presbyterian Church of the United States.”\textsuperscript{28}

II. Reformed Presbytery, 1798

On October 18, 1797, Wylie and his émigré cohorts arrived in Delaware, barely escaping Ireland before the rebellion, and arriving in the United States in time to weather a smallpox epidemic. Fleeing the pestilence in Delaware, Black and Wylie secured livings as tutors in Philadelphia, but this failed to disguise their alien status. They were in a new Republic and its topography — geographical, social, and religious — offered confusion at every turn. “They enquired for the city

\textsuperscript{22} Connolly, Divided Kingdom, 472.

\textsuperscript{23} See Ibid., 476.

\textsuperscript{24} Samuel Ferguson, Brief Biographical Sketches of Some Irish Covenanting Ministers (Londonderry: James Montgomery, 1897), 55-56.


\textsuperscript{26} Durey, Transplanted, 144. cf. Wm. Melanchthon Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America (Baltimore: Hill & Harvey, 1888), 440; 522; 653; 741.

\textsuperscript{27} W. H. Maxwell, History of the Irish Rebellion in 1798 (London: Baily Brothers, 1845), 204-219.

\textsuperscript{28} McBride, Scripture Politics, 78.
of Philadelphia, which was not yet in view, and were told that it lay half a mile distant toward the Delaware River. This incident was a practical reminder of their foreignness in a strange land. Their obscurity afforded them little peace, however. Though the carnage of the 1798 insurrection was an ocean away, these refugees could not escape public association with the rebels. Philadelphia’s Gazette of the United States received a list of purported members of the “American Society of United Irishmen,” and among those published December 18, 1798, Black and Wylie were listed. The following week Wylie’s repudiation was published by the Gazette. It seems that whatever comforts they left behind were not restored by the Republic, while those troubles which they fled were able to span the Atlantic.

The humble arrival of these refugees would give rise to a seminal moment in Reformed Presbyterian history. With the arrival of his brother-in-law, Gibson, Rev. James McKinney saw the opportunity to ameliorate the “inadequate” condition of the American Covenanters. Those Reformed Presbyterians who stood aloof from the Associate Reformed Synod sacrificed the presbyterian structure they once enjoyed and reverted to a society-based subsistence. In this state of confusion, McKinney’s arrival in 1793 was a welcome relief to Rev. William King (1747-1798) who was, at that time, the only RP minister in America—forming a commission of the Scottish Reformed Presbytery. However, McKinney saw the limitations inherent in this arrangement, and the arrival of Gibson afforded the opportunity to change. The two men, with ruling elders from the now-defunct Reformed Presbytery of 1774, constituted themselves the Reformed Presbytery of America, May 1798 — an independent judicatory. Among the first actions taken by this fledgling body was the approval of Alexander McLeod (1774-1833), Thomas Donnelly (1772-1847), Black, and Wylie as students of theology. In two years’ time, all four of these men would be ordained as Gospel ministers — with Wylie being the first RP minister ordained on American soil, June 25, 1800.

By 1800, Ireland’s Presbyterian multiverse had been largely recapitulated in the Republic, and the new Reformed Presbytery ensured an accurate duplication. From 1782 Irish Covenanters were the only immigrants who were unable to transfer membership from the Old World into a

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30 Durey, Transatlantic, 250.
31 Ibid.
32 Wylie, Memoir of McLeod, 31.
33 This revolutionary Synod formed a confederation of “dissenting” Presbyterians (Covenanters and Burgher Seceders), and all of the Covenanter ministers in good standing joined the Associate Reformed Synod (AR), November 1, 1782. RPs in the South, and several northern societies refused the union, and were without a regular presbytery, and enjoyed only a scattered ministry until the reconstitution of the Reformed Presbytery in 1798. The narrative is given in Glasgow, History, 73-77.
34 Ibid., 76.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 77. Carson asserts that the deed of constitution was ratified February 21, 1798, (cf. Carson, Transplanted, 19) however Wylie (Memoir of McLeod, 31) and the Minutes of Presbytery concur with Glasgow’s date.
38 Ibid., 3.
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presbytery in the New. Seceders (Antiburgher) had established an independent court in response to the Associate Reformed Synod and welcomed their Irish brethren with a seamless theological transition. Other Seceders (Burgher) found the Associate Reformed Church comfortable enough, and “mainline” Irish Presbyterians were contented with the General Assembly.39 Thus, until 1798, Reformed Presbyterians were without official representation in the Republic. Outside of Reformed Presbyterian circles, few mourned this fact. When the Reformed Presbytery was resurrected from its long slumber, it challenged the status quo of “dissenters” in America and offered an unbending conservatism to beleaguered émigré Presbyterians. This new addition only proved that with the recapitulation of ecclesiastical bodies came the continuation of old disputes. The Associate Reformed Synod had been formed in an attempt to keep Old World debates on the other side of the Atlantic,40 and the mainline Presbyterians ignored those fissures for the same reasons, but emigration continued to remind Americans that theological principles transcended oceanic barriers. Consistently, newer “dissenting” immigrants demurred the mainline Presbyterians and preferred either the Associate Reformed, Seceders or the new Reformed Presbytery.41 Because of this trend, America witnessed polemical firestorms akin to those in Ireland and Scotland — completing the replication of Old World Presbyterianism.

Regardless of the apparent similarities in the Presbyterian tapestry, emigrants did not always enjoy the smoothest of transfers. Thomas Ledlie Birch (†1808), for example, was a prestigious Presbyterian minister in Ireland but was exiled for his involvement in the 1798 uprising.42 His fame, however, left him at the docks. When Birch applied for admission to the (mainline) Ohio Presbytery, they refused him entry — though he possessed a letter of transfer from his home presbytery.43 When he appealed his case to General Assembly, the highest court reaffirmed Presbytery’s ruling.44 Personal dimensions were unquestionably at play, but subterranean fissures were also disturbing the situation. Birch himself saw this ill-treatment as the bitter fruit of a “new light” (i.e. American) pietism, which placed experiential piety over theological precision. The title of his opening salvo — Seemingly Experimental Religion — summarized his reflections. Almost in confirmation of Birch’s charge, the General Assembly officially severed all fraternal relations with their British brethren; in 1801, the Ohio Presbytery declared that a minister who hoped to transfer from those churches “could expect no more recognition ‘than if he had come from the Church of Rome.’”45 To his exasperation, Birch discovered that his problems were not confined to the mainline Presbyterians. American Seceders (Antiburgher)

42 Peter Gilmore, Exiles of ’98: Ulster Presbyterians and the United States (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2018),_.
43 Thomas Ledlie Birch, Seemingly Experimental Religion, Instructors Unexperienced—Converters Unconverted—Revivals Killing Religion—Missionaries in Need of Teaching; Or, War Against the Gospel by its Friends (Washington, PA: Published for the Author, 1806), 31.
44 Presbyterian Church in the United States, Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, from its Organisation A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1847), 218.
45 Minutes of the Ohio Presbytery, quoted in Gilmore, Irish Presbyterians, 82.
also refused Birch his desired transfer.\textsuperscript{46} The American market for one of Ireland’s popular ministers was poor, no matter which variant of Presbyterianism he chose. This causes of this phenomena appear to be legion, but the most palpable was the ascendancy of nascent progressivism. By 1801, the mainline Presbyterians abandoned the thornier statements in the Westminster Confession, as they related to the civil magistrate,\textsuperscript{47} had sanctioned Isaac Watts’ \textit{Paraphrases} and other uninspired compositions for worship,\textsuperscript{48} and her ministers were publically permitting all manner of irregularities (i.e. women preaching, occasional hearing, open communion, etc.) in the flurry of the “Second Great Awakening.”\textsuperscript{49} The Associate Synod (AR) had also amended the Confession’s statements on civil magistracy by 1799,\textsuperscript{50} and offered offense to conservative Seceders and Covenanters for capitulations in favor of, and against the stated principles of both traditions. To sensitive consciences, the \textit{tertium quid} which the Associate Reformed offered smacked of latitudinarianism.\textsuperscript{51} If he was unwilling to settle in a small presbytery, the refugee Covenanter or Seceder was forced to choose which convictions he cherished most, and which he could dispense with, and that determined the communion to which he attached himself. Such a man learned that Irish norms, and the comfort afforded thereby, were not to be found even amongst the majority of “Presbyterians.”

The spectrum of Presbyterians which Covenanters faced in the Republic was not monolithic, even if there was a general trajectory away from Old World convictions. And though divisions between them were often theological, they were not exclusively so. American politics divided Presbyterians, just as British policy had incited debates between them in Ireland and Scotland. Mainline Presbyterians were largely Federalists and supported the party through voting, preaching, and fundraising.\textsuperscript{52} However, “dissenting” Presbyterians tended to be “Jeffersonians.”\textsuperscript{53} The entailment of such a division was not always abstract, and disagreements could come to blows. Pittsburgh, of all places, would become the battlefield between politically-divided American Presbyterians in its famous, but ill-named tumult: the “Whiskey Rebellion.”

Despite the name it acquired in later years, this angst had not been generated by disgruntled and bawdy alcoholics, who became miffed at an increase in their liquor prices. Historians have compellingly argued that this conflict was the distillation of a contradiction between republican theories: Federalist and Anti-Federalist.\textsuperscript{54} Prior to the events of 1794, these warring American

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 85.
\item \textsuperscript{48} May 28, 1802. Minutes, 249.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Gilmore, \textit{Irish Presbyterians}, 86.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Associate Reformed Church in America, \textit{The Constitution and Standards of the Associate-Reformed Church in America} (Salem, NY: T. & J. Swords, 1799), 8.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Glasgow, \textit{History}, 74.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Gilmore, \textit{Irish Presbyterians}, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
parties competed through elections, papers, journals, and even brawls on the floor of Congress.\textsuperscript{55} The Federalist platform demanded that a strong central government was required if the United States was to survive and compete with the robust monarchies of Europe. As a result, Federalists flirted with an “elective monarchy” and anticipated the evolution of a class system in America, akin to Britain’s.\textsuperscript{56} Their penchant for monarchical and aristocratic forms led them to see Washington’s inauguration as a “coronation” and gave rise to the regal ceremonies for the first “President,” eerily similar to those of George III. Meanwhile, Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and many others demurred the need for a standing Congress, and more so, the kingly and aristocratic accoutrements which characterized Washington’s administration.\textsuperscript{57} These Anti-Federalists saw the federal government as an exigency of foreign policy, not of internal administration. With sympathies to the new Constitution, these still voiced preference to the Article of Confederation and desired to see the United States modeled after the Swiss cantons, and not Poland’s elective monarchy.\textsuperscript{58} The subject of national debt forced the issue, and also measured the radical chasm which divided American republicans. Alexander Hamilton—a leading Federalist—had been tasked to oversee the repayment of debts, which had been the “price of liberty.”\textsuperscript{59} These Revolutionary War claims, and their need to be settled, required the kind of centralized government which the Federalists envisioned; how could a confederation of independent states pay off a shared debt? Hamilton’s plan would, in kind, reflect the blessings and strength of the federal system. Taxation was the key to reducing domestic deficits, and liquor was Hamilton’s subject of choice. Imported beverages were taxed up to 35 cents on the gallon, but the new legislation was also concerned with homebrew.\textsuperscript{60} Hamilton proposed, and Congress passed, a tax on all whiskey, manufactured for private or commercial use. Practically, however, the tax lent itself to a violation, as it was impossible to measure the private consumption of homemade spirits. Hamilton resolved this impracticality with a simple addition: he levied a further tax on anyone who possessed a still.\textsuperscript{61} Demanding and collecting this excise would serve economic and political ends: the United States would relieve her floundering economy and demonstrate the resolve and muscle of the new government to her citizens. In short, its success would be a decisive score against republicans, in favor of the Federalist administration—and these stakes generally appreciated. “The fate of the excise law will determine whether the powers of the government of the United States are held by an aristocratic junto or by the body of the people,” wrote one contemporary journalist.\textsuperscript{62}

The tax was more than a proto-temperance law, however. By 1791, whiskey had evolved into a versatile commodity on the frontier. “It was used to celebrate weddings, and bring solace to mourners, but it was also used to pay off debts, the minister’s salary, and the farmer’s rent.”\textsuperscript{63} Two factors had turned whiskey into backwoods currency: the farmer’s grain could not be


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 34.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 74.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{62} 26 September, 1792 \textit{National Gazette in Slaughter, Whiskey Rebellion}, 130.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 21.
transported for city commerce and, in remote places, cash money was held by the elites. This tax was an attempt by the new government to radically change the economic norms of the frontier community, and also invited tax collectors into homes and barns as federal spies, to extract dues or levy fines. Thus, for the pioneering farmer, Hamilton’s invasive legislation smacked of the tyranny they overthrew in the previous decade. Unsurprisingly, few frontier magistrates heeded the new legislation — to the exclusion of General John Neville, who made sure that Pittsburgh would pay up. When collectors demanded the excise, Western Pennsylvania replied with talks of secession and a progression of violence proved their seriousness. In September, a tax collector had been tarred and feathered, followed by at least two other similar instances in 1792; by 1793, farmers who paid the excise became targets for violence. The insurrection evolved from barn burnings to skirmishes in 1794. After an exchange of fire, Neville had his house burned and his federal bodyguard captured. The insolence had reached its zenith, and Washington was no longer willing to negotiate without military support. These tensions were reported to the governor of Pennsylvania: “I am sorry to inform your Excellency that a civil war has taken place in this country.”

Famously, when Washington dispatched General Henry Lee and his 13,000 troops into western Pennsylvania, the rebellion disintegrated. Peace negotiations were a bygone nicety. The western counties now watched as “dragoons galloped across the countryside” in search of rebels, and this sight drained support for the cause. Forced into subjection, the rebels now faced the bitter consequences of their failed insurrection. Arrests were commonplace, loyalty oaths were imposed, the hated excise was enforced, and new legislation prohibited unsanctioned “democratic societies.” Federalists did not emerge unscathed, however. Jefferson publically feigned disbelief at Washington’s hubris: “It is wonderful that the President should have permitted himself to be the organ of such an attack on the freedom of discussion, the freedom of writing, printing, and publishing.” The “Jeffersonian Revolution” of 1800 would occur, in part, because of the fear generated by Washington’s response: should the Federal government be able to send dragoons against its citizens? During Jefferson’s first term, “the whiskey excise and all other internal taxes” were repealed.

Politically charged as it was, the rebellion carried an ethnic dimension as well. Pittsburgh was on its way to becoming the “Belfast of America” by 1794, with over one-third of its population freshly drawn from Ireland. An Irish accent threaded the war meetings of the insurrection, and


67 Ibid., 60.

68 Ibid.


70 Major General John Gibson, as quoted in Berkin, *A Sovereign People*, 47.


72 Berkin, *A Sovereign People*, 77.


its first-hand historian was notorious for his homely expressions — reminiscent of the old country.\(^{75}\) Irish rebels tended to settle in the remotest parts of the Republic, and Pittsburgh offered a kind of political independence “that seemed impossible in landlord-dominated Ireland.”\(^{76}\) Thus, not only were there a great many Irishmen in the area, but a cohort of expatriated rebels made the Allegheny frontier their hoped-for bastion of republican liberty. As a result, like elsewhere in the Republic, Pittsburgh recapitulated the political and “ethno-religious culture” of Ireland.\(^{77}\) At the time of the insurrection, Irish Republicanism and Presbyterianism were exports which found free commerce in the Pittsburgh region, and when the rebellion was underway, these politico-theological ties were inseparable. Even a decade prior to the insurrection, one Pittsburgh Seceder called his band of squatters the “Covenanters,” as they stood in opposition to Washington’s claim to land rights.\(^{78}\) When their republicanism was challenged in ‘94, these “Covenanters” were on the frontlines. While mainline Presbyterians (mostly American-born Federalists) urged pacific measures, these Irish Associate Reformed and Seceders became leading figures in the struggle.\(^{79}\)

When McKinney visited the region in 1795, it would have been a cultural doppelgänger to the home he had left two years before.\(^{80}\) The Associate Reformed and Seceders were still flying republican standards, still rehearsing old debates, and continued a lower-class kind of existence.\(^{81}\) Instead of fearing the British hangman, these feared an American court as their fellow Presbyterians faced charges of treason.\(^{82}\) These experiences characterized the region. When McKinney arrived, “Associate [i.e. Seceder] and Associate Reformed congregations at times outnumbered mainstream Presbyterian congregations.”\(^{83}\) Together with the imposition of loyalty oaths, threats of recrimination, theological debates, psalm-singing, and an Irish accent, this painted an accurate portrait of Ireland in the American frontier — with one major exception. There was no Reformed Presbytery in 1795. Pittsburgh Covenanters had lost their ministers to the Associate Reformed union and were without preaching, baptism, and communion seasons. Thus, these folks faced insurrection and its bitter consequences without a shepherd, and instead of defecting to a more comfortable situation with the Associate Reformed or Seceders, they adhered to principles. Their plight was like so many others, and McKinney’s peripatetic ministry could only temporarily ameliorate their condition. When he returned from the frontier, he and King emitted an Act of the Reformed Presbytery in North America for a Public Fast with the Causes thereof, as a committee of the Scottish Reformed Presbytery. In this fast, they besought the Lord, “that he would pity us in our low estate, think upon us, and assist us while we attempt

\(^{75}\) William Findley was often in attendance at these meetings. His accent was a talking-point among fellow congressman, see Ibid., 16.

\(^{76}\) Gilmore, Irish Presbyterians, 7.

\(^{77}\) Gilmore’s study provides a thorough and unprecedented account of this fact. See Gilmore, Irish Presbyterians.

\(^{78}\) Moore, Founding Sins, 54.

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{80}\) Glasgow, History, 308.

\(^{81}\) Gilmore, Irish Presbyterians, 30.

\(^{82}\) Moore, Founding Sins, 54.

\(^{83}\) Gilmore, Irish Presbyterians, 26.
to set up his fallen Tabernacle in this western world.”

As we saw before, the reestablishment of the Reformed Presbytery was necessary for McKinney, and the condition of post-insurrection Pittsburgh must have argued as much for him. Thus, once it was constituted, the Presbytery would be required to travel the backwoods in order to minister to her Covenanter societies—and those in the western Alleghenies, not least of all.

III. Pittsburgh, 1802

One Thursday evening in Butler County, a farmer cut another furrow into the soil. He was behind his plow, as he had been the previous day, month, and year. The peaks of the Alleghenies were darkening, and the shadows in the field were long. These events and the purple hues of dusk promised dinner and much-needed rest. The farmer turned the plow once more, probably counting down to his final pass. However, a male voice stopped his work. In the western counties, travelers were seldom seen in the evening, unless they intended harm of some kind. The voice called again, and the farmer approached the road. Through the evening shadows, he could discern a friendly face; fears could be dismissed. The traveler repeated his question: “Ain’t you going to the sacrament?” An odd question for sure. There had never been a Covenanter communion season in these parts, and it was unlikely for one to be this evening. But the friend’s face argued sincerity. Incredulous, the farmer asked, “Where is it?” To this was replied, ‘in the Forks of the Yough.’

The plow was left standing in the furrow, the horses unhitched, and the two friends were soon on their way together.

After the communion at the Forks, another was held at a farm eight miles south. Though invitations to the first had been disseminated as far as Butler, a second communion season seemed appropriate; after all, these Covenanters had never received the sacrament in these parts. Samuel Scott’s farm was offered for the occasion, with appealing upgrades. At the Forks, they had communed under the canopy of a tree, whereas Scott offered his barn as lodging for communicants. His generosity was not without precedent, however. He was himself a Covenanter — by conviction and marriage; he was brother-in-law to James Renwick Willson. Moreover, his experience in Pittsburgh was also typical of Covenanters in the Alleghenies. He refused the Associate Reformed union, weathered the insurrection, and was surviving the post-rebellion years; he knew intimately the dismal condition of Reformed Presbyterians in these parts.

The aftermath of the “excise insurrection” (as Willson called it) inaugurated a host of difficulties for Scott and others. In the immediate wake of the rebellion, the threat of recrimination was real, and measures taken by the Federal government did not ameliorate fears. During the rebellion, a “test” had been drawn up which was to be signed by all residing in the

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86 Ibid.


The final form of this oath was comprehensive in its claims to allegiance.

“I do solemnly promise henceforth to submit to the laws of the United States; and that I will not directly or indirectly oppose the execution of the act for raising a revenue on distilled spirits and stills, and that I will supports as far as the law requires the civil authority in affording the protection due to all officers and other citizens.”

The solemnization of this test and its unequivocal expressions of fidelity to the government of the United States was unpalatable for Covenanters and others. Despite several adjustments, a great majority refused to subscribe it. After the rebellion, General Henry Lee imposed a similar oath, which was to be given to whomever the local magistrates suspected of insurrectionist tendencies. In this final test, failure to sign the oath of loyalty promised to come at great personal cost, especially as it was well known that Seceders (i.e. James and Samuel McBride) and the Associate Reformed were among the thirty “impenitent rebels” who were to stand trial for high treason. Scott and other Covenanters faced these tests knowing that they would either have to cross conscience or risk being numbered among those to be hanged as rebels.

Ecclesiastically, Covenanters were further ostracized as other communions took up the cause of the United States and preached against any who would declaim the Constitution. In the heat of the rebellion, local Associate Reformed ministers emitted a decree demanding that her members subscribe to the oaths. The mainline Presbyterians—largely Federalists—were brooding over these treasonous days, even eight years after the fact. Rev. Elisha Macurdy preached his famous “War Sermon” which called hundreds of former rebels to repentance, and with some success. The political position of Scott and other Reformed Presbyterians was clearly out of step with the consensus of Christians, and their lack of ministers could only remind them of this fact.

Thus, when Samuel Wylie and John Black arrived on the Scott farm in 1802, the three men could reminisce over very similar experiences; albeit, experiences which occurred on opposite sides of the Atlantic. The men from Ireland knew the perils of test oaths, recrimination, and insurrection as did Scott. Moreover, all three knew how their peculiar political theology separated them and made them liable to devastating abuse. Indeed, from Scott, the two ministers could have learned much about the condition of Covenanters in the rebellion, but most likely those stories would come from their mutual father-in-law, Andrew Watson. Their

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89 Findley, History, 129.
90 Ibid., 130.
91 Ibid., 132.
92 “Before the army left the country, the commander in chief [i.e. General Henry Lee] prescribed the form of an oath which he required the justices of the peace to administer to citizens, whom he commanded to appear indiscriminately before the magistrates for that purpose.” Ibid., 322.
93 Moore, Founding Sins, 59.
94 Ibid.
95 Gilmore, Irish Presbyterians, 75.
96 September 1801, John Black married Elizabeth Watson, and Samuel Wylie officiated; the following April, Wylie married Margaret Watson (sister to Elizabeth), and in turn, Black officiated. Gilmore, Exiles of ’98, 140.
wives’ father was a business partner to Hugh Henry Brackenridge during the insurrection, and due to Brackenridge’s prominent role in 1794, Black and Wylie would likely know more than most about the actions that were taken by either side. Whatever unique vistas Watson could provide his sons-in-law, at least one conclusion could be distilled: whether in Pittsburgh in 1794 or Ireland in 1797, Covenanters endured pain and difficulties under rebellions which they did not incite, by governments which they could not own, and among Christians with whom they could not join in communion. Unsurprisingly, Black and Wylie deemed a second communion season appropriate, as they too knew the needs of such a haggard and harried people.

Hundreds of Covenanters gathered on the Scott farm as Black preached. Black “was rather below the middle stature: but his intellectual head, his penetrating and lively eye, and his rapid and even restless movement ... marked him out at once as a superior man.”98 “He was a distinct, plain, fluent speaker, always interesting and often eloquent and powerful.”99 His complexion was dark, aged, and riven with deep and reflective solemnity. When Black concluded his sermon and quit the pulpit, Wylie would have been a drastic change. His countenance was boyish, rounded; and his manner, unpolished. “Wylie was not an eloquent preacher in the sense in which that phrase is commonly understood. His voice, though strong, was wanting in flexibility, and his manner was perhaps somewhat modified by the necessity he was under of preaching extempore.”100 “He was a person of large frame, well-built, and stately — a man of presence, who could scarcely fail to arrest the eye of a stranger, in the street or elsewhere.”101 Thus, the two young preachers were visibly opposites, but in any account of their preaching, their Irish brogue and piercing intellects made them alike. Notwithstanding these differences, and regardless of their shared accent, everyone on the farm would depart knowing that both men were true preachers and true Covenanter preachers at that.

With a sprawling congregation before him, filling Scott’s barn and grounds to excess, Wylie announced his text; the sermon was to be taken from Zechariah 4:14. As the young preacher warmed to his subject, the suitability of his text and doctrine must have been palpable. “This chapter is replete with abundant comfort to the returning captives,” Wylie said; “in their embarrassing circumstances, they stood in great need of consolation.”102 The condition of Reformed Presbyterians in this part of the Republic certainly argued that they too needed some degree of consolation. “[They] doubted much, whether the temple they were about to erect would ever acquire the respectability of the former one.”103 Who knew if the new Reformed Presbytery would be lasting and faithful, as those they left in the old world? Wylie had an answer, both for Zechariah’s returning exiles and the Covenanter exiles in the Alleghenies: “God would, by his own omnipotent arm, consummate the work, notwithstanding the imbecility of its friends, and the malignant opposition of its enemies.”104


98 Sprague, Annals, 29.

99 Ibid., 30.

100 Ibid., 39.

101 Ibid.

102 Wylie, Two Sons, 2.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.
Leaving their context, Wylie moves to an exposition of the words and informs us that “Anointed ones,” (יָֽנותֶרֶת) may be read as “Sons of Oil”—making some account for the sermon’s enigmatic title. But who are these sons? If the golden candlestick (in 4:2-3, 12) indicates the church invisible, then Wylie says that the two sons may be Christ and the Spirit of God — Anointed Ones who pour grace like oil upon God’s elect. However, Wylie decides that the visible church is intended, and with good reason. In their immediate context, these words indubitably refer to Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest; “the former in the state and the latter in the church.”\textsuperscript{105} Thus, Wylie concludes the two sons are “the two great ordinances of Magistracy and Ministry” as both are “contributing their respective influences to the advancement of civil and religious reformation.”\textsuperscript{106} What follows is the young preacher’s theological appraisal of both institutions; how they differ, agree, are concerned in religious matters, are characterized and constituted. In print, the whole sermon is of modest size; nearly one hundred octavo pages in all. However, the substance was not sacrificed on the altar of brevity. In these leaves, one finds a thorough political theology which is distilled from first principles; rebuffed by, and proved after fifteen serious objections; applied to the current circumstances with seven directives; and five entailments are drawn for the individual Christian—for his information, examination, consolation, rebuke, and exhortation.

**IV. The Preacher and History**

While the foregoing has sought to prove that Wylie’s electric sermon was not unprecedented — as his contexts in Ireland and America were palpably similar — the history is not without application. Wylie’s biography evinces God’s providential rule over the lives of his preachers, and in this governance, the Lord calls each preacher to his sermon. The external circumstances and events which influenced Wylie’s life prepared him to make the “best statement of the position of the Covenanter Church.” For instance, when Wylie fled Ireland, the question of civil magistracy had gained a life-and-death component, and the perils of conscience which one might undergo as a result were articulated above by Wylie. For Covenanters in the Alleghenies, the conscience-ensnaring oaths imposed in the wake of the Whiskey Rebellion also turned the political question into a high-stakes controversy. What should the Covenanter do? Wylie’s answer was the *Two Sons*, and by his life he demonstrated its doctrine. He was an exiled preacher because of the principles espoused in this sermon, and thus, suffered for the cause which he maintained. Providence had made his life a testimony to the doctrine which he preached and had linked him to his congregation through these similar experiences — albeit, across oceans, under different governments, and through unique means.

In part, because of these shared experiences, Wylie was also able to be a spiritual diagnostician. While a politico-theological sermon might seem less than warm, its use in the Alleghenies could yield myriad applications — spiritual and otherwise. Wylie’s sermon could inform consciences regarding what was, or was not, in accord with the Word of God in relation to the United States, and so could pacify the unduly wounded, or awaken the severely hardened, conscience. Fidelity to the cause of Christ in this land would be defined, and thus, Wylie could call men to renewed obedience with direct application to their context in western Pennsylvania. However, these applications are not only pertinent to the pulpit — they reach hospital rooms as well.

From Passavant’s balcony, the valley looked like a postcard. Tufts of fog filled groves and the fall foliage jutted bright oranges and reds. And from my periphery, on my right and left, those two symbols of heresy and sacrilege — LaRoche and Trinity Orthodox — stood undisturbed. On the bench beside me was a reprint of Wylie’s famous sermon—which, for me, had gained some profundity because of these buildings — and as I mindlessly turned those pages for the

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 5.
thousandth time, a thought began to consume me. What is the cause of Christ, as it uniquely concerned the United States? Answering this question was the great errand of the *Two Sons*, and the entirety of Wylie’s life seemed to be a footnote to his answer.

Covenanter martyr Donald Cargil wrote something that came to mind that autumn day: “let never one think that he is in the right exercise of true religion, that has not a zeal to God’s public glory.” The context was regarding civil government, and shortly after writing those words, Cargil sealed them with his death. In one sense, Wylie’s sermon and life are something of a comment on Cargil’s conviction. Every sphere — even the civil sphere — must redound to God’s glory, and thus, the pulpit must have freedom and occasion to apply God’s Word to the government. Further, Wylie’s struggles in Ireland, the plight of Covenanters in Pittsburgh, and the similarities in their experiences demonstrate that this concern must not be, and is not, restricted to preachers. The Christian, in whatever station, must be concerned about Christ’s cause in the public or civil realm — even if at great cost to himself. While such a conclusion may seem lackluster, the current temperature in evangelicalism regarding civil magistracy seems to demand its place. The preacher must be free to apply the Word of God to kings, and Christians must be willing to suffer rather than sin should the civil powers rebel against Christ, and demand their subjects to do the same. Cargil suffered martyrdom, Wylie went into exile, and the *Two Sons* maintained an old doctrine despite certain criticism—all out of a zeal for God’s public glory. No matter what one may think about the doctrine of the Two Sons, each reader is confronted with the question: what is the cause of Christ in my nation, in my day? Wylie gave an answer, and so must the present generation.

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