



# Ecumenicity Revisited

# *Ordained Servant Online*

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### **CURRENT ISSUE: ECUMENICITY REVISITED**

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### *From the Editor*

As John Bouwers, in his article, “The Biblical Case for Ecumenicity,” observes, ecumenicity was a commitment central to John Calvin’s ministry. The June-July 2015 issue of *Ordained Servant* addressed this theme with several articles based on lectures given at the “Semper Reformanda Conference,” held at the United Reformed Churches in North America Classis Eastern US on October 14, 2014. Bouwers’s article was also given at that conference.

From its inception in 1936, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has been deeply interested and involved in ecumenicity. One decades-old example is our joint venture in Great Commission Publications with the Presbyterian Church in America. A more recent example is our Psalter-hymnal project with the United Reformed Church.

Danny E. Olinger’s “Geerhardus Vos: Life in the Old Country, 1862–1881” is the first in a series of articles that will become the chapters of a full biography of Vos. This is a first for *Ordained Servant*. A biography of Vos is long overdue. We shall read it with great interest.

T. David Gordon’s review article assessing Mari K. Swingle’s *i-Minds: How Cell Phones, Computers, Gaming, and Social Media Are Changing Our Brains, Our Behavior, and the Evolution of Our Species* is important because Swingle does not come from the Media Ecology circle. She is a “Canadian neurotherapist, whose research and clinical specialty is in the neurology of brain waves, and how such neurology affects human behavior.” As Gordon points out, this is a healthy corrective for those who think any critical thinking about the electronic environment is curmudgeonly.

Our next review article this month is my review of Katie Roiphe’s *The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End*. This is a secular treatment of the topic of death, offering a fascinating conjunction of the topics of literary biography and death. If all of life ought to be, as the Puritans insisted, a preparation for death then this cautionary tale will be of interest to every pastor.

John Fesko reviews *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, edited by Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain. This is a very fine example of contemporary systematic theological scholarship covering the main rubrics and making the coverage accessible for the busy pastor.

Allen Tomlinson reviews Ken Golden’s *Presbytopia: What It Means to Be Presbyterian*. This useful little book is meant to prepare visitors for church membership in a Reformed church.

Don’t miss the poem by G. K. Chesterton, “A Hymn for the Church Militant.” He gives a surprising twist on the theme which is commensurate with the topic of ecumenism.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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- “Practical Ecumenicity.” (G. I. Williamson) 5:1 (Jan. 1996): 24.
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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

# ServantReading

## The Biblical Case for Ecumenicity

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by John A. Bouwers

I crossed a national border and a couple of state lines to get here.<sup>1</sup> That's nothing when you consider that John Calvin said he would cross ten seas for the sake of unity. He wrote Archbishop Cranmer in April 1552 with a particular concern for the Church of England. He was discouraged by the devastation the church experienced in its disunity. Calvin was known as the apostle of ecumenicity.

My assignment is to speak on the biblical mandate for ecumenicity.

We start with the conviction that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is one.

My presentation is based largely on John 17. I will also reference Article 27 of the Belgic Confession and what our fathers have taught with regard to the "one holy catholic church." I refer you also to a very helpful document on the Orthodox Presbyterian Church website, "Biblical Principles for the Unity of the Church."<sup>2</sup>

We come from a context of churches that relate to each other in the bonds of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), where together we express a commitment to the pursuit of organic unity among likeminded churches.

In the United Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA), we conduct our ecumenical efforts *with a view to complete church unity*. Admittedly, this is not something that is easily attained, but it is the goal. My challenge is to encourage you from the Scriptures as to why that should be the case. We can become cynical, but we should not be. We ought to live by faith: "I *believe* one holy catholic ... church ..." This confession needs to be brought to expression.

Jesus Christ makes plain in John 17 that this is his heart's desire. Ephesians 4:3 states that we are "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." It's a unity we are to keep; to manifest; to work out; to bring to expression.

Some suggest we should be content with unity as a spiritual *essence* and not be so concerned about the *expression* of unity. That is a false dilemma. Yes, ultimately we must be rooted in what is given to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, by the work of the Spirit. But out of that reality we are to be busy.

In our own broken experience we know it is relatively easy to break unity. Sometimes it is necessary, when truth is at stake. It's a more difficult challenge to bring unity about. We are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation to the world. We need to show that reconciliation to the world.

The church is one.

### 1. The Declaration of Unity as Reality

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a lecture given at the United Reformed Churches in North America Classis Eastern US, Semper Reformanda Conference on October 14, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Accessed September 21, 2016, <http://www.opc.org/relations/unity.html>.

Belgic Confession, Article 27 says:

We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Over against the accusations that they had destroyed the unity of the church, the Reformers declared, “We believe ... one holy catholic and apostolic church.” They believed, based on the Scriptures, that God has one work in the earth.

The Lord has a covenant, and the language of Leviticus 26:12 is repeated throughout Scripture: “I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” He binds himself to one people and dwells with them. In the New Testament, Ephesians 2:14 explains, the walls of partition have come down. God has one people. If the wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles can come down, certainly the wall of partition between Reformed and Presbyterian is not insurmountable.

There is one body. Ephesians 4:3 states, “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Ephesians 4:1–16 is a call to manifest that unity and bring it to expression.

The consummation is seen in Revelation 21:3 where the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God as a bride prepared for her husband, and again the Lord says, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

The church is one. It is a declaration of faith.

The Reformers understood that Reformation was required because of the deformation of the church. There had been a sham kind of organizational unity in the place of a commitment to the truth and to the gospel. In the face of this the Belgic Confession describes the one holy catholic church as “a holy congregation of true believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Article 27). Unity is found in Christ. The Reformers were accused of rending church unity: “Where the Pope is, there is the church,” their accusers said. But the Reformers responded, “Where Christ is, there is the church.”

Perhaps you’re in a foreign place, and you run into other believers. They are also “expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.” There is a unity you enjoy together. The church is one.

Jesus says in John 17, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. . . . I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours” (vv. 1, 2, 9).

The blessed reality of unity roots in what God has *given* from all eternity. It roots in election; in God’s sovereign grace; it is fundamentally a gift of God. Unity is not, first and foremost, organizational. That was the Roman Catholic error. We need to stand on the right foundation. It needs to be unity in Christ, a work of God’s Spirit. That’s the unity for which Christ prayed, a gift of God, and a reality.

At the very least we understand that it is an eschatological reality. Jesus prayed, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to

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<sup>3</sup> *Psalter Hymnal: doctrinal standards and liturgy of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1976), 82.

see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). Unity is a reality. And as we look forward to that unity, we need to work it out today. But, in doing so, we must beware the danger of unity as idolatry.

## **2. The Danger of Unity as Idolatry**

The Heidelberg Catechism says idolatry is having or inventing anything that one places trust in apart from or alongside of the one true God (Q.#95). Unity is an idol if it becomes more important than God; if, for the sake of unity, we deny parts of our confession.

When unity becomes an idol, as it did in the days leading to the Reformation, it becomes a weapon with which to pummel those who seek to call the church to faithfulness. “The church is one; you can’t rend the fabric of the church.” Yet the Bible was not opened, and the Lord Jesus Christ was scarcely preached. Hope was not found in the gospel of God’s sovereign grace, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Those who proclaimed these truths were viewed as troublemakers in Israel. When unity becomes idolatry, it takes on a role more significant than the truth of the Word of God.

A careful look at John 17 reveals what Jesus is praying for:

I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.... For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.... Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (vv. 6, 8, 17)

Any desire for unity that would make the Word secondary is a sham. That is the liberal ecumenical movement.

Another form of unity as idolatry demands “everything gets done the way I do it.” But unity is not uniformity, and it is important to understand the difference.

In Colossians 3:11 we read: “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” There is diversity, but it is not a threat to unity. Diversity contributes to the blessing of unity. An overemphasis on uniformity can hinder true unity. Diversity ought to contribute to our sense of privilege and blessing. We have things to learn from each other.

Uniformity hinders unity when we emphasize our distinctive, defining moments as churches, a moment in history, an emphasis, a way of preaching. Distinctives are elevated to the point of confessional status: “We might have the same Confession, we might agree in everything we confess from the Word of God. But we preach differently, so we’ll never be united.” This form of idolatry hinders unity.

## **3. The Demand for Unity as Responsibility**

Finally, if we declare unity as reality, the implication is that we need to engage the demand for unity as responsibility. Jesus prayed for it.

Some suggest that Jesus wasn’t praying in John 17 for the organizational unity of the church; that, instead, Jesus prayed for his return to the glory of the Father and that his people would experience that reality with him. That’s true enough in the ultimate sense. But we can’t deny that what Jesus prays for has implications for practical unity today.

In Scripture there is an expectation that the church be governed in a certain way. “Appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). We see that in Acts 14, as well as in the pastoral Epistles. Acts 15 suggests a connectionalism in the life of the church—the need to consult with one another. Having consulted with one another at the Jerusalem Council, what was decided there was communicated to the churches as, “They delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem” (Acts 16:4). The expectation is that churches hold one another accountable, live according to this standard, and continue to interact with each other. Therefore, when Jesus prays for unity to come to visible expression, this kind of connectionalism is an *application* of what Jesus prays for.

We are taught to work for what we pray for. *Ora et labora*. Jesus prays and works, says John 17:21, “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Jesus works for what he prays for. Shouldn’t we do the same?

People say, “Time spent on ecumenicity takes time away from the work of evangelism.” According to Jesus, that’s a false dilemma. For the sake of our witness to the world, we need to strive for oneness. We are ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:20), yet we can’t get along with each other? We need to examine ourselves, and give better expression to what we have in Christ.

In Ephesians 4:32, Paul says to forgive one another as you have been forgiven in Christ. “Ah, but we’re spiritually one,” we say piously. Yet our actions say something different. “I’m not talking to those people. We haven’t talked to them since the 1930s or the 1940s.”

Jesus says, “that they may all be one ... *that the world may believe*” (John 17:21, emphasis added). It is not either/or: the mission of the church and our call to ecumenicity work together. The world must see that we are serious about the gospel of reconciliation.

R.B. Kuiper wrote:

There are Christian denominations which are so similar in their interpretation of the Word of God [and I would interject that they hold faithfully to the same confessions, historical differences and emphases aside] that they can without compromising their convictions merge with one another. It may be said that organizational unification is their solemn duty.<sup>4</sup>

Not to do so, to be complacent or unconcerned, would be sin. It’s our solemn duty.

Since our inception as United Reformed Churches, we have engaged extensively in the work of ecumenicity. It is reflected in our name. We were born of secession, but want to say to the world, we’re not about being by ourselves. We want to seek in whatever ways we can to bring true unity to expression.

I can speak personally of the blessing of witnessing walls and barriers coming down. We thank God for this, his work.

At the same time we need to strive for more. In relation to John 17 there are those, Martyn Lloyd-Jones being one, who emphasize the *essentialness* of spiritual unity over against the *expression* of unity. We should not take that approach.

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<sup>4</sup> R.B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 54.

If unity is a spiritual reality (and it is), why does Jesus continually pray for it? Because he wants to see more of it. He wants it manifested that the world may know. Now, we can sit back complacently and say, “Ultimately in eternity, eschatologically, all will be well.” Or we can become disillusioned and say, “It’s hard work. We’ll never attain perfect unity until the eschaton anyway, so why bother?” But that would be like saying with regard to our own personal sanctification, “I’m not going to be perfect this side of eternity anyway, so what’s the use?”

We are not antinomians; we never stop striving in terms of our desire to be renewed after the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. Likewise with our ecumenical calling, we strive for more.

John Murray wrote:

It is to be admitted that the fragmentation and lack of coordination and solidarity which we find within strictly Evangelical and Reformed churches creates a difficult situation. And how this disunity is to be remedied in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is a task not easily accomplished. But what needs to be indicted and indicted with vehemence is the complacency so widespread, and the failure to be aware that this is an evil, dishonoring to Christ, destructive to the edification defined by the Apostle as the increase of the body into the building up of itself in love (Ephesians 4:16) and prejudicial to the evangelistic outreach to the world. If we are once convinced of this evil, the evil of schism in the body of Christ, the evil of disruption in the communion of saints, then we have made great progress. We shall then be constrained to preach the evil, to bring conviction to the hearts of others also to implore God’s grace and wisdom in remedying the evil, and to devise ways and means of healing these ruptures to the promotion of the united witness to the faith of Jesus and the whole counsel of God.<sup>5</sup>

What is to be indicted, as Murray says, is complacency.

The challenge for us is, are we willing to work, to strive sacrificially? Are we willing, as Calvin was, to cross ten seas for the unity of the church?

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<sup>5</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 335.



# ServantHistory

## Geerhardus Vos: Life in the Old Country, 1862–1881

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by Danny E. Olinger

In the early 1800s, Geerhardus Vos's parents, the Reverend Jan Hindrik and Aaltje Beuker Vos,<sup>6</sup> were born three years apart and raised in farming families in Grafschaft Bentheim, Germany. Unlike the Voses who worked on a rented farm, the Beukers were landowners, Aaltje's mother descending from Bentheim nobility, the von Heest family of Laarwald.<sup>7</sup>

The difference in social status was also reflected in the difference in the church affiliation of the respective families when Jan and Aaltje were children. The Beukers were members of the established German Reformed Church. The Voses were members of the Old Reformed Church (*Altreformierte Kirche*), which was formed in 1838 in succession from the German Reformed Church. The Old Reformed Church believed that the German Reformed Church had abandoned Presbyterian polity, sound doctrine, and ecclesiastical independence in order to preserve its favored status and economic support in the Kingdom of Hanover.<sup>8</sup> The opinion that the state church was compromised in polity and doctrine was not uncommon, but the law of Hanover prohibited citizens from leaving the state church for a non-sanctioned church. Old Reformed members risked imprisonment in seceding to form a new church, but they were convinced that fidelity to the Word of God demanded such a stand. Nearly every Old Reformed preacher was imprisoned at one time or another. Jan Berend Sundag was imprisoned twenty-eight times for preaching the gospel between 1838 and 1845. Police would search out and break up illegal church services. Monetary fines were also handed out for those caught attending the services, the penalty doubling with each additional arrest.<sup>9</sup>

One of the challenges for the Old Reformed was the ordaining of its officers. Seeking orthodox Reformed ministers, the Old Reformed looked to the Christian Reformed

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<sup>6</sup> Jan was born in 1826 to Gerd and Anna Clement Vos, in Osterwald, Grafschaft Bentheim. In 1829, Aaltje was born to Berend Jan and Fennigjen Stokman Beuker, in Vozel, Grafschaft Bentheim.

<sup>7</sup> See, "Hendricus Beuker," German-immigrants.com, accessed September 24, 2016, <http://www.german-immigrants.com/tng/getperson.php?personID=1222&tree=Bentheimers-I>.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert J. Brinks, "Ostfrisians in Two Worlds," in *Perspectives of the Christian Reformed Church*, ed. Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ritter (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983): 24.

<sup>9</sup> Even after the Kingdom of Hanover reforms of 1848 that permitted membership in other churches, the Old Reformed faced severe restrictions. When seeking to get married, Old Reformed members would have to engage the local German Reformed minister in their municipality to get an official marriage certificate. Before issuing the certificate, the German Reformed minister could demand a public confession of faith from the Old Reformed couple that they never meant to leave the German Reformed Church. See, Gerrit Jan Beuker, "German Oldreformed Emigration: Catastrophe or Blessing?" in *Beaches and Bridges: Reformed Subcultures in the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States*, ed. George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2001): 102–3.

Church (*Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk*) in the Netherlands for help. Christian Reformed minister Albertus Van Raalte installed the elders and deacons of the Old Reformed Church in Uelsen in January 1838. Hendrik De Cock did the same for the Old Reformed congregation in Bentheim in 1840.

Six years earlier De Cock, then pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church in Ulrum in the province of Groningen, had been at the center of the events that led to the creation of the Christian Reformed Church. De Cock had been suspended from the gospel ministry for baptizing children of parents who had objected to the liberalism of their local churches. De Cock refused to recant for his actions, and on October 13, 1834, he and the congregation in Ulrum seceded from the Dutch Reformed Church. Others joined with them the next day in signing the Act of Secession of 1834.<sup>10</sup>

Reflecting upon his parents' upbringing in the Old Reformed Church and their love for the Christian Reformed Church, Geerhardus Vos commented:

Both my parents came from Graafschap Bentheim, where there was great empathy with the religious movement involved with the "Secession" (*Afscheiding*). They remembered that a prohibition (based on the Napoleonic Code) against secret political gathering was used to have the dragoons scatter the religious gatherings of small groups who stood in protest against the 'Big Church' (*Groote Kerk*) in Bentheim.<sup>11</sup>

But, the identification of the Old Reformed Church with the Christian Reformed Church did not stop with a devotion to Reformed orthodoxy and a willingness to stand for the truth. Both churches used the Three Forms of Unity—the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort—as their confessional standards. Old Reformed ministers preferred preaching in the Dutch language, the German language being identified with the Lutheran Church and theological liberalism.<sup>12</sup> Both Christian Reformed and Old Reformed members were seen as culturally backward, but, in their opinion, the cultural emphasis of the German Reformed Church and the Dutch Reformed Church led to the spiritual decline of both. Joining both the Christian Reformed Church and the Old Reformed Church was a matter of personal conviction and not a matter of convenience or societal aspiration. It was no surprise then that Christian Reformed ministers helped form eight Old Reformed congregations in the territory of Bentheim and five congregations in Eastfriesland (*Ostfriesland*).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Liturgically, these believers—known as "Seceders"—objected to the departure from exclusive Psalm singing to that of Psalms and hymns in worship. Doctrinally, they lamented the church reorganization of 1816, which they believed weakened the confessional status and teaching authority of the Belgic Confession (1561), Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1618), the so-called Three Forms of Unity. Regarding the polity of the church, they favored the practice of the Dutch Reformed Church prior to the 1816 reforms. See, *Reformation of 1834: Essays in Commemoration of the Act of Session and Return*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong and Nelson Kloosterman (Orange City, Iowa: Pluim Publishing, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Geerhardus Vos, "Autobiographical Notes," trans. Ed M. van der Maas, *Kerux: The Journal of Northwest Theological Seminary* 19, no. 2 (September 2004): 6. The article was first published in the Dutch language in *Neerlandia*, January 1933, 9–10.

<sup>12</sup> Brinks, "Ostfrisians in Two Worlds," 27–28.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

The Beuker family's departure from the German Reformed Church came about in the mid-1840s through the gospel witness of a hired servant, Gerrit Bouws, a deacon in the Old Reformed Church in Emlichheim. Although the Beukers came later than the Voses to the Old Reformed Church, once they were members they were totally committed to the cause. This was seen particularly with Aaltje's brother Hendricus's pursuit of the gospel ministry in the Old Reformed Church. He studied with local Old Reformed pastors in Uelsen before leaving Germany for the Netherlands and entering the Seceder Theological School in Kampen in 1858.

Established in 1854 as an orthodox option for those pursuing the gospel ministry, Kampen quickly became the place for the cross-fertilization of Christian Reformed and Old Reformed members. This was true for the Vos and Beuker families. After studying under the personal tutelage of W. A. Kok and Jan Bavinck at Hoogeveen, Netherlands, Jan Vos enrolled at Kampen in 1856 and was a member of the inaugural graduating class in 1858. Hendricus Beuker graduated in 1862.

Following Jan Vos's graduation, he married Aaltje Beuker. On September 19, 1858, he was ordained and installed as minister of the Old Reformed congregation in Uelzen, Bentheim.<sup>14</sup>

That Jan Vos could serve as pastor of the Uelzen congregation was due to the reversal of one law and the establishment of another. Previously, the Old Reformed had suffered from the prohibition on German ministers laboring outside the bounds of the state-recognized church, but that prohibition was lifted by 1858. At the same time, however, another law came into effect. Ministers born in the Netherlands could not be called to German pulpits, state church or not. Jan Vos, a German native, was eligible to accept the call to a congregation in Bentheim.

Although Jan Vos received his ministerial start in the church of his youth, he was more at home theologically in the Christian Reformed Church. In 1860 he accepted a call to pastor the Christian Reformed congregation in the rural Dutch town of Heerenveen in the province of Friesland, right across the German border.<sup>15</sup> It was during the second year of their stay in Heerenveen on March 14, 1862, that Jan and Aaltje celebrated the birth of their first child, Geerhardus. Three more children were born into the family, Anna in 1864, Bert in 1867, and Gertrude in 1870.

Never staying with a particular congregation for a long period of time, Jan Vos held pastorates in the rural Christian Reformed congregations in Katwyk an Zee (1865–70), Lutten (1870–74), Pernis (1874–78), and Ommen (1878–81). A strict and devout piety

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<sup>14</sup> On January 9, 1941, Geerhardus Vos wrote Henry Beets about a correction to his dad's pastoral record in the 1940 Christian Reformed Church yearbook. The necrology listed J.H. Vos's first pastorate as Velzen and listed it with his other pastorates in the Netherlands. Vos said, "The name of the place is Ulzen (sic), and it is a town in Graafschap, Bentheim, not in the Netherlands. Since there is a town in Holland, it creates the impression that my father once was pastor there." A month later on February 12, 1941, Vos wrote Beets again thanking him for "the exchange of Uelzen for Velzen in the recent edition of the yearbook." Vos then added, "I feel somehow that the substitution of the real name of his first charge in the necrological report is a last act of 'piety' (in the Latin sense of the word) performed in his memory." *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005): 244–45.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Dennison believed that the political situation in Germany, particularly the rise of the military, contributed to Jan Vos's acceptance of the call to Heerenveen. See, Charles G. Dennison, "Geerhardus Vos and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church," in *History for a Pilgrim People*, ed. Danny E. Olinger and David K. Thompson (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian, 2002): 77.

pervaded the Vos home. The children were taught the Bible and the Three Forms of Unity. Scripture and the Heidelberg Catechism were memorized. Scripture was read and prayer would be offered both prior to meals and after meals. No foolishness was permitted when attending a public worship service. The Vos children were taught that when the people of God were gathered to worship on the Lord's Day, they were appearing before the great King in the beauty of holiness.

Until around the age of thirteen, Geerhardus attended public schools in the villages where his father ministered. He then attended the Tuinlann Christian School in Schiedam near Pernis. Although his course of study at Tuinlann included Latin and Greek, logic, literature, history, and geography, the school was unable to provide the quality of education necessary for entrance into the Dutch university system. Consequently, when Geerhardus reached the age of fifteen, his parents enrolled him in the "French School" at Schiedam, arranging for him to stay with the family of the Reverend C.J.I. Engelbrecht, pastor of the Christian Reformed congregation in Spijkenisse. Engelbrecht, who was fluent in English and French, also served as Geerhardus's personal tutor.<sup>16</sup>

Geerhardus then moved in 1878 to the *gymnasium* in Amsterdam,<sup>17</sup> living in the home of his uncle and pastor of the Christian Reformed congregation in Amsterdam, Hendricus Beuker. After graduating from the Theological School in Kampen in 1862, Beuker pastored Christian Reformed congregations in Zwolle (1862–1864), Rotterdam (1864–1867), Giesendam (1867–1869), and Harlingen (1869–1873) before accepting the call to Amsterdam (1873–1881). During this time, Beuker gained notoriety in Seceder circles through his founding and editing of a theological journal, *The Free Church*. Some saw Beuker's journal as a deliberate foil to the political initiatives put forth in *The Standard*, the theological journal of another young Dutch Calvinist, Abraham Kuyper.

Life in Amsterdam was a cultural awakening for Geerhardus who had only experienced life in the small rural areas of his father's pastorates. First, there was the sheer size of the population, over 250,000 people. Next, there was the size of the Christian Reformed community in Amsterdam, some four thousand in number spread over three congregations. But, there was also the exposure to the arts and literature. At the gymnasium, Vos studied under Willem Jacobsz Hofdijk, a renowned Dutch poet and instructor in language and literature. Late in his life, Vos was loaned a collection of

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<sup>16</sup> For a summary of Vos's early education, see George Harinck, "The Poetry of Theologian Geerhardus Vos," in *Dutch-American Arts and Letters in Historical Perspective*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga, Jacob E. Nyenhuis, and Nella Kennedy (Holland, MI: Van Raalte, 2008): 71.

<sup>17</sup> In his "Autobiographical Notes," Vos wrote that "the rector was Kappayne van de Coppello (the brother of the 'minister' of that name)." Translator Ed M. van der Mass provided the following footnote on why Vos put the word "minister" in quotation marks. He wrote, "This may be simply a pointer to the fact that he is using *minister* in a political rather than religious sense. An interesting speculation is that the quotation marks reflect Vos's negative opinion of Johannes Kappayne van de Coppello, who was in Vos's view not a true minister (one who serves) in any sense. He was the liberal formateur of the coalition cabinet that served from 1877 until 1879. In this cabinet Kappayne van de Coppello was Minister of the Interior. In that role he managed to get a new law on primary education passed, in spite of fierce opposition from confessional constituencies, which made the standards and requirements for the schools more stringent, but without any government support for the non-public schools. Petitions were signed by 305,000 Protestants (members of the Antirevolutionary party) and 164,000 Catholics, but to no avail. The coalition crumbled in 1879, when Vos was 17." See, Geerhardus Vos, "Autobiographical Notes," trans. Ed M. van der Mass, *Kerux* 19, no. 3 (Dec. 2004): 10.

Hofdijk's poems (*Kennemer Balladen*) from the Reformed historian Henry Beets. Thanking Beets for sending the poems to him, Vos reflected on studying under Hofdijk and others at the gymnasium:

The perusal of them brought most kindly to mind the old days in Amsterdam when Hofdijk stood before the class reciting some of his own compositions, or left us to our work of drudgery, whilst he himself sat aloof wrapped up in reading delicious things, forgetful of his duties as a teacher. There was a great deal of that method in the old "gym"; I can remember some other professors indulging in the same habit. If home-study had been discountenanced, as it sometimes is in our days, there might have been justification derived from the fact that the students after all had to be given time for writing out their themes, etc. But we had plenty of homework given to us.<sup>18</sup>

In another remembrance of Hofdijk and his romantic poetry, Vos wrote: I greatly admired his "Kennemer Ballads," especially his reverence (which at times bordered on the religious) for the world of the trees of North Holland north of the IJ River. I still remember one expression he used in a description of that landscape: "Trees, you'd almost kneel before them."<sup>19</sup>

The exposure to Hofdijk ignited a passion that Geerhardus exhibited from his teenage years until his death, the writing of poetry. The Dutch poets J.J.L. Ten Kate and Jan Luijken, and writers Joost van den Vondel and Willem Bilderdijk had a great influence upon his poetical style. He also enjoyed the Swiss poets Gottfried Keller and Conrad Ferdinand Meier and the Austrian poet Rupert Hammerling. Once in America, he expressed great appreciation for Ralph Waldo Emerson and the British poets Alfred Lord Tennyson and Algernon Swinburne.<sup>20</sup>

As a student, Geerhardus combined a quick intellect with discipline and energy. Among his classmates were the famed Dutch poet Herman Gorter and composer Alphons Diepenbrock.<sup>21</sup> Gorter and Diepenbrock would become leaders of the "Eighties Movement" (*Tachtigers*) that impacted Dutch arts and letters. Another classmate was Herman Kuyper, the oldest son of Abraham Kuyper. Herman Kuyper would serve as church historian at the Free University of Amsterdam.

Vos graduated with honors from the Amsterdam gymnasium in the summer of 1881. His father accepted a call at the same time to serve as pastor of the Spring Street Christian Reformed congregation in Holland, Michigan. The exact reasons why Jan Vos accepted the call, having rejected a similar call four years earlier, are not known. Most likely a combination of forces were in play. Political struggles between the kingdoms of Hanover and Prussia in the 1860s had led to Prussian military conscription. A famine in 1880 forced others to relocate. And, positively, it is highly probable that the opportunity to minister to the 1,700-member Spring Street congregation had some appeal for Jan Vos.

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<sup>18</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Henry Beets, January 1941, in Dennison, *Letters*, 242.

<sup>19</sup> Vos, "Autobiographical Notes," 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Harinck, "Poetry," 71.

By the 1880s nearly 10 percent of Seceder membership had departed for America.<sup>22</sup> Part of the reason for the heavy emigration of Seceders was the societal make-up of the Christian Reformed congregations. They were primarily farmers and hired hands, not the Dutch aristocracy. When Seceders individually and collectively made the move to America, they found Christian Reformed congregations to be similar to what they had left behind both theologically and culturally. In fact, some thought that the move to America allowed them to remain “more Dutch than the Dutch” with the ability to preserve the old values and practices.<sup>23</sup>

For Geerhardus, his father’s acceptance of the call and his family’s relocation to America meant that he had a decision to make. Stay behind his family to attend school in the Netherlands or go with his family and attend school in the United States.

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<sup>22</sup> G.E. Boer, teacher at the Theological School at Grand Rapids, wrote to a pastor living in the Netherlands in June 1881, “Every week big crowds of people from the Netherlands arrive and for weeks at a row we announce their attestations in the Sunday services.” See, George Harinck, “Geerhardus Vos as Introducer of Kuyper in America,” in *The Dutch-American Experience: Essays in Honor of Robert P. Swierenga*, ed. Hans Krabbendam and Larry J. Wagenaar (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2000): 245.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert J. Brinks, ed., *Dutch-American Voices: Letters from the United States, 1850–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995): 15.

# ServantReading

## i-Minds

### A Review Article

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by T. David Gordon

*i-Minds: How Cell Phones, Computers, Gaming, and Social Media Are Changing Our Brains, Our Behavior, and the Evolution of Our Species*, by Mari K. Swingle. Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada: New Society, 2016, xix + 242 pages, \$19.95, paper.

For a decade or two, the digital technologies largely received a “free pass.” Commercial forces routinely advocated their purchase on the ostensible ground that these technologies would radically alter human experience for the better. And, until there was enough experience with these technologies to assess their influence, those of us who were more cautionary were ordinarily dismissed as curmudgeons, cranks, or both. Our reservations were ordinarily more modest than our detractors thought; we merely observed that all benefits have costs, and/or that we already have a Messiah, to whom we look for the true re-creating of the present mortal and sinful order, and therefore do not need to open the field to ostensible competition. The “free pass” phase of digital technology is now well behind us; the jury is in, and author after author presents evidence that the cost for these benefits is a good deal higher than we had supposed.<sup>24</sup>

Enter Dr. Mari K. Swingle, a Canadian Neurotherapist, whose research and clinical specialty is in the neurology of brain waves, and how such neurology affects human behavior. On the Swingle Clinic website, they describe their discipline as follows: “Clinical psychoneurophysiology is a biological approach to healing and wellness ... Neurophysiological treatment does not involve pharmaceuticals or other potentially dangerous or ineffective drugs.” Dr. Swingle’s father, Dr. Paul G. Swingle, is considered one of the founders of neurophysiology. Note that neurophysiology is a “biological approach,” an approach grounded in the use of EEG (“electroencephalography”) technology to measure brainwaves. Dr. Swingle is not, therefore, a mere essayist; she is a behavioral scientist, whose own practice and research have persuaded her that for many individuals, the digital world is having significant negative impact on behavior:

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone under Thirty)* (New York: Tarcher, 2008); Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010); Winifred Gallagher, *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (New York: Prometheus, 2008); Jaron Lanier *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Knopf, 2010); Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015); Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: Harper, 2007).

For children, adolescents, and youth, excessive usage of digital media is now highly associated with learning disabilities, emotional dysregulation, as well as conduct or behavioral disorders. For adults, it is highly correlated with anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction and sexual deviation, insomnia, social isolation, disaffected pair bonding, marital conflict, and compromised work performance. In clinical practice, I am also starting to note some rather frightening connections with thwarted emotional and cognitive development in the very young. (xii)

The fifteen chapters that constitute the book (including the fifteenth itself, on iAddiction) contain what Dr. Swingle (and other neurologists) have learned from their research and clinical practice. Those interested in the science will appreciate the rich bibliography supplied in the 234 endnotes.

Two principles recur in the book as the criteria by which Dr. Swingle assesses i-tech (the concept not the company). First, she constantly raises the question about the extent to which we are “immersed” in digital technologies (and why). Second, she repeatedly distinguishes integration from interference: when and how digital technology becomes *integrated* into a healthy and productive life, and/or when and how it *interferes* with a healthy and productive life. She likens digital dis-integration (problematic digital experience) to food disorders. People with food disorders cannot simply go “cold turkey” as other addicts can, because we have a biological need for sustenance. Likewise, Dr. Swingle argues that the digital world is such a large aspect of most professional life that people simply cannot choose to opt out entirely; they must, rather, learn how to integrate digital tech into their lives without permitting digital tech to interfere with their lives.

Dr. Swingle intends for the work to be accessible to non-scientists, to which end she has a number of places in the book set aside by different type, and entitled “Scientific Corner.” For those less interested, these portions can be skipped. Early in the book, however, she does have a section entitled “Electroencephalography 101,” which is in the text itself, because this brief introduction is necessary to understanding so much of the other material in the book. Even this section is as non-technical as possible.

Because Dr. Swingle is a clinician, her research (and her book) are not merely technical; she is very much concerned about human behavior, to which end she (refreshingly) permits herself to express the occasional value judgment, and she always does so self-consciously, so that the reader can distinguish those comments that have been substantiated empirically from those that have not. This reviewer considers this candor to be an asset, not a liability. She candidly acknowledges, for example, that most clinicians believe that there should be no use of digital technologies before the age of four, whereas she believes that the age should extend to six.

The chapter on addiction is one of the more fascinating ones, because many of us have observed (in ourselves or others) digital behaviors that appear to be analogous to addictive behaviors. Dr. Swingle has observed that many studies examined the more obviously dangerous or damaging uses of digital technology: “second life” websites that become, for many, their first life; pornography; digital bullying, etc. But she has discovered that one of the most addictive behaviors surrounds the more-neutral-appearing process of digital searching: “One hundred percent of my participants reported using the Internet compulsively for searching” (199). She likens such searching to gambling, where part of the attraction is to the unknown, the unpredictable. That is, she distinguishes



digital *content* from digital *process*, arguing that the process itself is (or should be) the primary concern:

Gaming, gambling, stock watching and trading, e-mailing and texting, auction shopping, as well as pornography are all addictions that can be driven by both content and process as supplied by the medium, the Internet. This last classification appears to be the classification of most threat. Technological addiction is *all about process*, and more and more of us are succumbing to it. (198, emphasis mine)

If Dr. Swingle is even partly right, much of our approach to the digital world has been extremely inadequate: educators, parents, clergy, mental health officials, et al., have primarily addressed the *content* of digital technologies (gambling, pornography, violence, bullying); we have been much less likely to discuss the *process* of surfing the web itself, and how such searching alters our brainwaves:

What is evident is there is just something bewitching about the buzz, the ring, and now the endless possibility for more: instant accessibility both in content and material, attainable. Like Pavlov's dog, we have conditioned ourselves to salivate to the bell; like lab rats, we push and push on the lever for the food pellet of pleasure, of intrigue, of more. What we have forgotten to ask is what is happening to our brains in this great experiment of life on i-tech. (208)

Dr. Swingle is not a theist, or, apparently, a religious person: "Although I am not crazy about the religious framing of his work, one author, Struthers, has some very powerful points in his book *Wired for Intimacy*" (171). Swingle therefore does not address or answer every question that religious people would address; however, in her epilogue, where she provides some succinct advice, much of it is remarkably common-sensical, and therefore consistent with what we would ordinarily call natural theology. Consider some of her advice (and try to ignore some of her non-Sunday-school nomenclature):

- I do not reply to work emails past a specific hour or on week-ends.
- Take back play and don't get caught in the organization and the capitalism of it all.
- Fight like hell to have sport, music, and art reintroduced in schools during the curriculum.
- Bring back hobbies where, by definition, being good or bad at them is irrelevant!
- In formal education ensure that the integration of technologies serves a true educational purpose, and is not merely introduced because of novelty, convenience, or vested external interests.
- Get back to your beds as opposed to your computers together. Snuggle, touch, and be touched by people, by each other.
- Play! Play with your children, your partners, your friends, your pets and any and all non-tech objects around you. (211–13)

Perhaps the group who would most benefit (and be most disturbed) from reading *i-Minds* is parents. The book concentrates substantially on how digital technologies (unless used in extreme moderation) retard emotional, intellectual, moral, and creative

development in the years most critical to developing a healthy neurology (e.g., who would have thought that eight-to-sixteen-month-old infants who watched “educational” videos to develop vocabulary actually learned eight words per hour *less* than infants who were *not* exposed to such videos?). Several times in the book, she repeats the counsel she gives to her clients: “No more than one hour of screen time a day for older children, absolutely none until the age of four; and waiting until six is notably healthier” (145). Also repeated is this maxim: “Nothing wrong with a little, a lot wrong with a lot” (144).

Twenty years ago, those of us who issued cautions about digital technology were largely dismissed as cranks. After all, we had no scientific “proof” for our claims, and indeed, there can be no scientific proof of things that will happen in the future. While we did not understand the biology, we did (or so we thought) know something about human nature, and we made our predictions and warnings on that basis. The jury is now in; the digital world can no longer resist scrutiny by dwelling in the future; it is now part of our present and part of our recent past, and its affects on human behavior and experience have now been subjected to rigorous scientific scrutiny (and will continue to be so). A consensus is emerging: the digital technologies enable us to perform some tasks more rapidly or economically; but they do not tend to make us fuller or richer humans. The sheer weight of empirical study that Dr. Swingle has read and/or conducted is now staggering, and the commercial forces can no longer foist their digital wares on an unknowing or unsuspecting public.

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# ServantReading

## The Violet Hour by *Katie Roiphe*

### A Review Article

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by Gregory E. Reynolds

*The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End*, by Katie Roiphe. New York: Dial, 2016, 308 pages, \$28.00.

When requesting a review copy of this book from the publisher, I noticed that I had mistakenly titled the book *The Violent Hour*. I responded: “Sorry for botching the title. When I think of death, I think more of violence than violets as in Dylan Thomas’s, ‘Do not go gentle into that good night.’ ” Indeed, Dylan Thomas is one of the six great writers whose final days are examined by Katie Roiphe in this book. Though she writes from a secular perspective, Roiphe’s account of death is poignant and reflects her own profound encounter with her own potential death at age twelve.

The Puritan imperative, based on an accurate interpretation of Scripture, was that the Christian life should be lived in preparation for death. What we discover in this book is that, Christian or non-Christian, death is always in view; it hovers over human consciousness like black flies in New England May.

In reviewing *The Violet Hour*, I will follow Roiphe’s order in discussing each of the six writers, but with an emphasis on John Updike and Dylan Thomas, the two with whom I am most familiar.

Roiphe is a master of identifying the Achilles heel of each dying writer. She reports their talents, hopes and fears, virtues, vices, and foibles accurately. For example, Susan Sontag, filmmaker, teacher, political activist, and author of *On Photography* (1977) and *Against Interpretation* (1966) among many others, “was a person who took creative liberties with truth” (50).

Many years before she was diagnosed with breast cancer, Sontag wrote in the notebooks: “Thinking about my own death the other day, as I often do, I made a discovery. I realized that my way of thinking has up to now been both too abstract and too concrete. Too abstract: death. Too concrete: me.” (67)

A very talented but self-centered woman, Sontag always asserted her presence (68), and had no time for religion. But she was interested in viewing religion as a tourist at a distance. After visiting a Tibetan prayer meeting, she remarked, “He was very charming, but, my God, what nonsense!” (73). As she was dying in the hospital, her last words to a friend as she grasped her sleeve were, “Get me out of here” (75). She could never accept her death, but death accepted her. She died at age seventy-one, three days after Christmas in 2004.

Sigmund Freud, the creator of psychoanalysis, whose work and writings have had a major influence on Western thought and popular culture, was an advocate of a stoic

approach to death, facing “the hard facts of mortality” (83). “After all, we know that death belongs to life, that it is unavoidable and comes when it wants.” It is something to be mastered by reason (84). Here Roiphe mocks this attitude, “As if one is supposed to be only *a little bit* attached to life” (85). For Freud control was everything. Even in the face of being obsessed with the idea that he was dying, he refused to give up smoking twenty cigars a day, against his doctor’s advice (92). He was diagnosed with mouth cancer in 1923 at age sixty-seven. Here is the irony of irrationality of the supreme rationalist. Roiphe notes that he even called his smoking his sin, “an interesting word choice for a man of science” (95).

Freud’s focus on rational assessment and complete control was so all-consuming that it encompassed his mode of dying (101). He refused painkillers. His neurotic fear of death succumbed to resignation in the face of his “inescapable anger” over his own demise (105). His youngest child, Anna, who was present at his death, poignantly observed, “I believe there is nothing worse than to see the people nearest to one lose the very qualities for which one loves them, I was spared that with my father, who was himself to the last minute” (110). My mother was also herself right to the end, but that would have been small consolation had she not trusted her crucified and resurrected Lord.

Another person who was cogent to the end and even wrote poems about that end was the important writer John Updike.

On his deathbed at Massachusetts General Hospital, Updike felt compelled by custom to be a “good host,” but resented it, as he reflected in this poem.

Must I do this, uphold the social lie  
that binds us all together in blind faith  
that nothing ends, not youth nor age nor strength,  
as in a motion picture, once seen,  
can be rebought on DVD? My tongue  
says yes; within, I lamely drown. (116)<sup>25</sup>

Sex was a kind of redemptive activity for Updike; and while we may understand the impulse, we cannot embrace the conclusion since we know both impulse and conclusion to be sin. Roiphe sympathizes with Updike’s linkage of adultery with immortality: “I have a soft spot for those who try to defeat death with sex” (297). Malcolm Muggeridge observed, “Sex is the ersatz or substitute religion of the twentieth century.... Sex is the mysticism of materialism and the only possible religion in a materialistic society.”<sup>26</sup>

Ordinarily the best poems are not the last written by a poet. But Updike is an exception, as Roiphe accurately reports:

[Y]et in his new poems, the wily inventiveness, the powers of observation, the sheer gift with words that both his warmest admirers and sharpest critics found astonishing, are all on display. He had been writing about death since he was young, but now he had a fresh subject: his dying. (119)

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<sup>25</sup> John Updike, from “Hospital 11/23–27/08,” in *Endpoint and Other Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 23. I have added the two lines, underlined, that Roiphe edited out with an ellipsis.

<sup>26</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, quoted in Dover Beach blog, accessed July 9, 2016, <https://lifeondoverbeach.wordpress.com/2012/04/14/malcolm-muggeridge-on-sex-and-materialism>.

On his death bed, however, morbid apprehensions, or what he called “gray sensation” (121) could not be overcome with sex. Unlike life’s negatives of loss, fear, and guilt, which Updike had turned into “the honey of words, ... the approach of death, and the dwindling of self, involved a whole other, physically and emotionally trickier level of pain” (124). Thus his deathbed reading included *The Book of Common Prayer*. Roiphe observes, “There was also a book he was not reading, Barack Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope*, which Martha [Updike’s second wife] had given him for Christmas” (126).

During the months before he died, Updike asked Martha to drive him to Smith’s Point to see Emmanuel Church, where Martha attended on her own in the summer (131). His son Michael couldn’t “understand how anyone so intelligent could believe in God” (138). Updike actually “plotted *Couples* almost entirely in a church” from jottings on the program (138). Roiphe opines that his faith coexisted with

a very American search for self-fulfillment, a kind of rapturous merging of the two. His affairs are tinged with guilt, his sex scenes with heaven, his love with rapture; it’s all jumbled together. (138)

Updike loved “the concrete stuff” of the church, the rituals, the Sunday mornings, the church pews. He said the Lord’s Prayer with the children in their rooms before they fell asleep. In later years he and Martha attended services regularly at an Episcopal church, St. John’s, minutes away from their home in Beverly Farms.... When he was too sick to go to church, the Episcopal priest came to his house two or three times a week to talk to him and give him communion. (139)

After Updike married Martha, he shifted from “the flashy distractions of adultery to mortality” (141). His writing continued “not submitting gratefully to that eternal sleep” (148). So his last poetry was a way of “writing his way out of death.”

End point, I thought, would end a chapter in  
a book beyond imaging, that got reset  
in crisp exotic type a future I  
—a miracle!—could read. (149)

and reflecting with a kind of desperate resignation  
God save us from ever ending, though billions have.  
The world is blanketed by foregone deaths,  
small beads of ego, bright with appetite. (150)

I partly disagree with Roiphe’s assessment that “the late poems breathe calm,” as this poem, while more resigned, still hates letting go.

With what stoic delicacy does  
Virginia creeper let go:  
the feeblest tug brings down  
a sheaf of leaves kite-high,  
as if to say, *To live is good*  
*but not to live—to be pulled down*  
*with scarce a ripping sound,*  
*still flourishing, still*

*stretching toward the sun—  
is good also, all photosynthesis  
abandoned, quite quits. (151)*

But on the night before he died, Updike asked Martha if she was ready for the leap. Instead, she countered with her own question, “Are you?” “Yes!” he responded with a loudness that surprised her. “I am too,” she said. “And so is God.”

When Updike’s Episcopal minister arrived at the hospice, Updike’s children “recited the Lord’s Prayer with him, as they had in their rooms as children” (156). The following day, just before Updike breathed his last, Martha read from *The Book of Common Prayer*. “[A]n ending so completely in the penumbra of his oeuvre that one can only think: How would Updike write it?” (158). He had requested that a passage from “Pigeon Feathers” be read at his funeral. While the boy in the story gazed at the dead pigeons’ feathers, he was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever. (158)

Of the six writers’ deaths reported and reflected upon by Roiphe, Updike’s is the only one with a ray of light. While finally Updike seemed to have breathed his last breath in gospel hope, the remaining three writers seemed to have plunged into everlasting darkness.

The initial fame of the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas revealed an early focus on death. Roiphe reports, “Dylan Thomas had burst into public at nineteen with his first lush poems, many of which, like ‘And Death Shall Have No Dominion,’ were preoccupied with death” (162). Robert Lowell noted the looming disaster in Thomas’s life. Besides his enormous talent

He was also, and perhaps this was more important to some of his admirers, doomed, damned, whatever you will, undeniably suffering and living in the extremest reached of experience.... Here, at last, was a poet in the grand, romantic style, a wild inspired spirit not built for comfortable ways. (163)

As was the case for Updike, sex played a central role in Thomas’s life. Unlike Updike there was no obvious redemptive thread running through his life and work.

Women adored him. As the gimlet-eyed Hardwick observed, “So powerful and beguiling was his image—the image of the self-destroying, dying young poet of genius—that he aroused the most sacrificial longings in women.” (170)

Also, unlike Updike, Thomas thought about his own death constantly. He described the poem he had written on his birthday, “Poem on His Birthday,” “Why should he praise God and the beauty of the world, as he moves to horrible death?” (172). His morbid obsession with death also exhibited a curious enjoyment of illness. “He certainly liked the theater of sickness, the staginess, the attention it brought him, and later the excuses it provided” (176).

Thomas’s drunkenness was a way of escaping his manic creativity, which left the rest of his life in chaos. He preferred reading other poets aloud in performance because reading his own amplified the pressure to create new poems.

But in spite of hours wiled away in the pub, in spite of his nearly insatiable need for company, when Thomas was writing, he was fanatical. He wrote draft after draft; when one looks at the scrawlings and scratchings of those drafts, the sheer labor involved in his poems, the huge amount of time and effort on a single word, a phrase, is undeniable. He also felt peace and purpose when he was writing. Those rare moments of concentration in his shed at Laugharne were a great salve to him. (181)

This is the necessary discipline of all great poets, as I have learned from poets like Donald Hall. The tragedy is that Thomas was never able to embed his discipline in an otherwise disciplined life. The idea that creative genius must be cultivated in the soil of dissolute life is a dangerous myth initiated in the Romantic era.

Late in his life Thomas felt that his poetic muse was departing. “One can chart his self-loathing through his last years” (181). It was during his last trip to New York in 1953 that a poem that had been published a year earlier, “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” became a prophecy fulfilled. The alternating refrain in the six stanza poem, “Rage, rage against the dying of the light,” was a lament over his father’s death, but really a presage of his own demise. Roiphe’s interpretation that it is “a poem about acceptance ... a love song to death” (182–83) is considerably off the mark. It probably reflects the way that she wishes to deal with death.

Just prior to going into a coma, which would result in his death a few days later on November 9, he lamented over his youngest son, Colm, “Poor little bugger, he doesn’t deserve this. Doesn’t deserve my wanting to die” (184).

Nearly a decade earlier his gorgeous poem “Fern Hill” expressed the sentiment a drinking buddy recalled hearing from Thomas, “I’ve got death in me” (191). Far more than a recognition of his mortality, this was the hopeless theme of his life. The final lines of “Fern Hill” demonstrate the alluring beauty of his morbid musings.

Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
Time held me green and dying  
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

Roiphe sums up her assessment of Thomas, “Is this what Thomas was? A self-destroyed escapist?” (193).

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower  
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees  
Is my destroyer.

Roiphe concludes, “It is this paradox, this morbidity mingled with celebration, the great seductive virile power of nature, combined with a constant awareness of its killing that is the essence of Thomas” (194).

Maurice Sendak is famous for his children’s book *Where the Wild Things Are*, winner of the 1964 Caldecott Medal for the Most Distinguished Picture Book of the Year. Sendak was both author and illustrator. “Maurice had always been obsessed with death. He drew through his obsession and used it” (203). His fame—more than is usual for a children’s book author—never relieved him of his obsession. When asked how it felt to be famous, he responded, “I still have to die” (217). So his obsession with work staved off death. He admitted to being crazy because “that’s the very essence of what makes my

work good” (219). Sendak was always feeling surrounded by a hostile world. The death of his dog Jennie suffuses *Higglety Pigglety Pop! Or, There Must Be More to Life* (1967).

The darkness threatened to engulf him, and he tried to draw his way through it .... Along the way, the odd, whimsical story gives voice to a very high level of bleakness, of nearly giving up.... Tony Kushner writes of the book’s ending: “ ‘Pop! Stop! Clap! Chop! The End.’ Samuel Beckett couldn’t have put it more succinctly.” (221, 222, 224)

Sendak found Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* books reassuring (227). But what he found most reassuring of all was knowing that “people love him best of all” (234). But he hated many things: adults, hospitals, Christmas, and snow—it showed in his books, as one little girl complained about *Outside Over There*, “Why did you write this book? This is the first book I hate.” (255).

Sendak’s cynicism was tempered by his childlike imagination and the sentimental hope the invisible realm of angels stimulated. Faith for him was a purely psychological reality.

Maurice [Sendak] liked the idea of believing, even though he didn’t believe. He didn’t believe in an afterlife. He didn’t believe in God. When an interviewer asked him, at eighty-three, what came next, he said, “Blank. Blank. Blank.” (259)

Such a sad tale brings new poignancy to Paul’s declaration of the state of the Ephesian Christians before they believed: “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

James Salter is the only subject of the book of whom I had never heard. He is an American novelist and short story writer. Roiphe is surprised at Salter’s claim that at eighty-nine he does not think about death, despite the fact that his fiction is obsessed with transience. “Everything he writes is elegy, a paean to a moment as it is in the process of being lost. Dusk is his language” (263–64). A West Point graduate and World War II veteran, “he took a masculine, romantic view of death” (265). Salter followed Updike’s example of writing until he died, “He wrote through anything” (269).

But Roiphe discovers chinks in the armor. He admitted that once when on a flying exercise as a cadet he was low on fuel and lost. “He tried reciting *Invictus*: ‘I am the master of my fate ...’ He didn’t want to pray, but finally said a few prayers” (273). Out of control, his plane crashed. He ended up unharmed, but full of nightmares.

Black and white photographs of the writing desk—or in Sendak’s case drawing board—of each writer add considerable interest to the text. A Dominique Nabokov photo of each writer would have been a nice addition. On the last page Roiphe shows us her writing environment as well. It made me wonder how she will face her own end. She tells us.

The reason she calls the last chapter on Salter an epilogue is because it contains her own reflections on how she faces death. Remember, she faced death at age twelve.

When the terror of death blows through you, what do you do? ... When Salter’s daughter died, he recited the only psalm he could mostly remember.... Updike kept *The Book of Common Prayer* next to his bed and prayed with Martha and the reverend who visited him. Even Sontag, a passionate atheist, called Peter Perone to pray with her one morning. (274)



It turns out that literature is Roiphe's comfort.

To me, religion has never been consoling. I can't get anything out of even the cadences of it. It feels like a foreign language. I sometimes find the reassurance I imagine other people getting from religion in passages of novels, in poems (274)

Roiphe latches onto Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," which promises "an eternal world of art" (275–76). She tries to tell herself that these death stories are okay.

They are not really okay, because in each case someone dies, and there may, in fact, be no less-okay thing than that. But it's okay for this reason: If you have to let go, you can. You can find or manufacture a way to.... The fear returns, or it never goes away. (277–78)

Her tragic conclusion:

Here's what I learned from the deaths in this book: You work. You don't work. You resist. You don't resist. You exert the consummate control. You surrender. You deny. You accept. You pray. You don't pray. You read. You work. You take as many painkillers as you can. You refuse painkillers. You rage against death. You run headlong toward it. (283)

In the end Roiphe agrees with Salter's proverb, "We make our own comfort" (285, 287). Cold comfort, indeed. This book is valuable to church officers as it brings us face to face with the reality of the world's tragic emptiness and desperation. It reminds me of Blaise Pascal's sage aphorism, "Men despise religion: they hate it, and fear it is true." We must seek opportunities to tell them that if they believe Christianity is true and trust it, their fears will be quenched and their hope well founded. Let us hope they will ask.

But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Pet. 3:15–16)

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# ServantReading

## Christian Dogmatics *edited by Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain*

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by John V. Fesko

*Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, edited by Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016, 408 pages, \$36.99, paper.

Michael Allen and Scott Swain, professors at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, have assembled an interesting book that reflects upon the key subjects of systematic theology with a view to renewal and retrieval. The editors highlight the fact that theology is ultimately a task that must derive its motivation and energy from the grace of God (3). They also argue that renewal must come through retrieval, that is, a theological engagement with our catholic heritage. In other words, as we study the Scriptures we do so in the classroom of the communion of the saints, where we learn from theologians throughout church history. The editors and authors press renewal and retrieval towards the goal of dogmatics, “the disciplined effort to have our eyes and mouths retrained by the gospel” (4). But they do this training with a healthy engagement of church tradition, which must “be shaped by the truth, goodness, and beauty of our heritage and not be drawn into a pathology of untruth, evil, and ugliness by our native resources” (5).

The editors have assembled a team of accomplished theologians who write sixteen chapters to cover key loci in systematic theology, including prolegomena (Allen), Scripture (Kevin Vanhoozer), the divine attributes (Allen), the trinity (Swain), covenant of redemption (Swain), creation *ex nihilo* (John Webster), providence (John Webster), anthropology (Kelly Kopic), sin (Oliver Crisp), incarnation (Daniel Treier), the work of Christ (Donald Macleod), redemption applied (Richard Gaffin), the law of God (Paul Nimmo), church (Michael Horton), sacraments (Todd Billings), and eschatology (Michael Horton). Most of the contributions share a number of positive common factors. The essays interact with key historic Reformed documents, which helps readers better understand the Reformed tradition. The essays engage a wide array of sources, patristic, medieval, Reformation, post-Reformation, and contemporary. The breadth of learning and knowledge in some of the contributions is impressive. The authors, however, do not merely flex their intellectual brawn but ultimately carry out the overall purpose of the book, which is to promote a Reformed catholicity. Third, the essays engage their subject in a thoughtful and learned manner. I personally benefited from many of the chapters and identified a number of sources for further reading.

More specifically, there are two noteworthy features that commend this book. Most of the essays offer a thoughtful engagement of patristic and medieval theology. Augustine, Boethius, John of Damascus, and Thomas Aquinas are a few of the names that appear

throughout this book. For some, mention of the patristics is unproblematic, but the same might not be true of Aquinas. Many in Reformed churches assume that the Reformation was a clean break from all that went before and thus look upon medieval theologians with a degree of suspicion. Yet, open the pages of Calvin's *Institutes* and one finds multiple positive references to medieval theologians such as Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>27</sup> Or open the works of John Owen and explore the Thomistic elements of his theology.<sup>28</sup> This pattern was not lost on Reformed theologians like Herman Bavinck, who argued that the patristics, like Augustine, and medievals, like Aquinas, were a treasury of knowledge for Reformed Christians—they were not the exclusive property of Rome.<sup>29</sup> While many believe there is a unique Reformed take on all theological matters, the truth is that the Reformation touched upon key issues and left others unaltered. It may be a slight over-generalization, but in his famous letter to Cardinal Sadoletto, Calvin characterized the Reformed dispute with Rome as a conflict over justification and worship (ecclesiology, sacraments, and polity), not as a wholesale rejection of everything Rome had to say.<sup>30</sup> Strictly speaking, there is no unique Reformed doctrine of God, trinity, the person of Christ, or creation, for example. These catholic doctrines are common to Protestants and Roman Catholics alike. Hence, this book is an excellent entry-point to key medieval sources and doctrines that are a part of our biblical and catholic heritage.

Another benefit of this book is its engagement with contemporary theology. Readers will note the names of Barth, Bonhoeffer, Jenson, Torrance, and Rahner, among many others. Some readers might find this off-putting, as these names are often associated with something less than pristine orthodoxy. But the virtue of this book is that the authors mine these sources for insights and, when necessary, offer careful critique. Some theologians might be more practical or useful for the pastor or ruling elder—I can more easily and quickly benefit from Calvin's *Institutes* than I can Barth's *Church Dogmatics* just given the massive difference in the size of the two works—two volumes vs. thirteen! Nevertheless, this book culls some of the best insights from contemporary sources, which makes it a valuable resource for the busy pastor. He can benefit from the spadework that these authors have performed.

There are a few weaknesses to this book. As to be expected, with a collection of essays there are some essays that are weaker than the others. Another shortcoming is that in one or two places the exegesis is either non-existent or very thin. Oliver Crisp's essay on sin, for example, has much to commend it. He thoughtfully engages the subject and challenges the common Reformed doctrine of immediate imputation for original sin. He promotes a Zwinglian realist view. At one level, this is fine. But when he rejects immediate imputation, he does so apart from any exegesis. To claim that immediate imputation promotes an arbitrary view of God or that no one ever authorized Adam to represent humanity are expected common objections, but to fail to provide substantive

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<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., A. N. S. Lane, *Calvin and Bernard of Clairvaux*, Studies in Reformed Theology and History, New Series (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Christopher Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Herman Bavinck, "Foreword to the First Edition (Volume 1) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 9–10.

<sup>30</sup> John Calvin, "Reply by John Calvin to Letter by Cardinal Sadoletto to the Senate and People of Geneva," in *Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge, 7 vols. (1844; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 1:23–68.

counter-exegesis to the exegetical support for immediate imputation renders the objections unconvincing. Another limitation of the book is that, given that each chapter covers an entire locus of theology, sometimes the essays feel a bit rushed.

These drawbacks aside, I encourage elders and pastors to buy a copy of this book, read, and study its contents. There is a wealth of information here that can enrich one's understanding of the key subjects of systematic theology. Allen and Swain continue to produce excellent resources for learning more about biblical doctrine, and this book certainly is a wonderful contribution to this end.

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# ServantReading

## Presbytopia: What It Means to Be Presbyterian *by Ken Golden*

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by Allen C. Tomlinson

*Presbytopia: What It Means to Be Presbyterian*, by Ken Golden. Fearn, Ross-shire, United Kingdom: Christian Focus, 2016, viii + 135 pages, \$12.99, paper.

“Presbytopia” is an invented word by the author—who is the pastor at Sovereign Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Davenport, Iowa—a derivative of “utopia” (“no place”). Literally the word would mean “old place,” and the author suggests that we need to remember in these times in which “old things have fallen on hard times” that “old places have value” (2). Of course, since he is writing for Presbyterian Churches in particular, the particular “old place” is that kind of church, i.e., a classic Presbyterian church.

This short and well-written book is intended to introduce the faith and practice of a conservative Presbyterian Church to outsiders, and especially to those desiring to unite with a Presbyterian Church who are coming from another (or with no) ecclesiastical tradition. Golden has done a good job as far as his stated purpose goes. As one who came to the Reformed faith and into Presbyterianism from a Baptist tradition, this book would have been very handy for me when I switched traditions over thirty-five years ago.

Part One is entitled “Christian Essentials.” Here basic biblical doctrine is reviewed as the author examines briefly the Bible, God, man, sin, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. He divides up what the Holy Spirit does, as far as the application of Christ’s redemptive work, into one chapter on the Spirit as the agent bringing us to gospel faith (resulting in justification) and the next chapter on the Spirit enabling our Christian life (resulting in progressive sanctification).

Part Two is called “Reformed Distinctives.” He distinguishes “Christian Essentials” as describing “the being of the church” from “Reformed Distinctives” as describing “the well-being of the church.” Here is a chapter on the TULIP, followed by a chapter on polity (“Biblically Balanced”), and then a chapter on worship (“According to Scripture”). It probably would have been helpful to have added a chapter distinguishing covenant theology (in a very summary form) from dispensational theology, as part of “Reformed Distinctives.”

Part Three is “Means of Grace.” Chapters include “Preaching and Sacraments (The Primary Means),” “Baptism (The Gracious Entrance),” “Lord’s Supper (Solemn Nurturing),” and “Prayer (Daily Conversation).” These chapters could prove very helpful to new believers especially, though even the most experienced Christians need to be reminded of the importance of these means periodically.

There is a very useful glossary defining terms and a sample liturgy, both of which could prove very helpful for those unfamiliar with this Presbyterian ground.

What are my criticisms of the book? The descriptions of the Bible books (pages 9–10) are too condensed in my opinion, leading to a misstatement on page 10 in which all the Epistles are described as “letters to churches.” At least a few of the New Testament Epistles are addressed to individuals, though they are of value for all the churches. On page 55 Golden’s explanation of the Sabbath is too brief and does not address the most often quoted text by broad evangelicalism in its dismissal of the Fourth Commandment for Christians, Colossians 3:16–17. While one can appreciate the intention of the book to be brief, still many coming from outside of a Reformed or Presbyterian background may need a little more explanation regarding some of these matters, if they are to get started in “Presbytopia.”

Chapters 11–12 also could use more elaboration as far as our distinct approach to baptism as Reformed churches. The last paragraph on page 97 could be read (and probably would be read by our Baptist friends) as affirming “believers only baptism,” which is not what the chapter is teaching as a whole. I would suggest that another sentence or two to summarize our understanding of the relationship of personal faith to covenant baptism would prove helpful.

On page 86, as the author discusses the regulative principle of worship, he adds “forms” to “elements” and “circumstances.” I am not convinced that this has been a separate category throughout Reformed and Presbyterian history, and I know that opinion concerning this is divided among my Reformed friends as to whether this should be seen as a separate category or not. Since the author evidently holds to this as a third term to be used to describe “Reformed Distinctives,” I understand his use of the word for his own setting, but it might make the book a (very) little less useful for our churches at large, in light of disagreement.

I believe two words could be improved upon in the glossary of terms. First, “Incomprehensibility” is defined as God’s “inability to be known apart from revelation.” Much of my formal training took place in non-Reformed institutions, so perhaps I am the one out of sync here with the rest of the OPC, but my understanding of the “incomprehensibility of God” is that we can never know God exhaustively. Of course, all true knowledge we have of him must come about as a direct result of his making himself known both in general and (especially) special revelation. However, even then, his infinite being and infinite attributes can only be comprehended by finite creatures to a very limited degree. Also, under “Law” it would be helpful to use the Westminster Confession of Faith’s threefold “moral,” “ceremonial,” and “judicial” (WCF 19) as a very useful tool for those coming out of broad evangelicalism, with its dispensational influence. Many have been taught that Old Testament saints were saved by Law-keeping, and New Testament saints are saved by grace. A more nuanced explanation of the relationship between the Gospel and Law can be very helpful for aiding the inductee into Reformed circles in understanding better how the Old Testament relates to the New Testament. The threefold breakdown of the Law of Moses can prove very helpful for such a purpose.

In spite of these criticisms, I found that the book accomplished its stated purpose sufficiently. I am thinking about making use of it in the future for introducing new members or prospective members to our faith. Where the explanations have been a little too brief for my personal liking, any deficiency can be made up while teaching through the book in a new member class. Recommended.

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# ServantPoetry

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G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936)

## **A Hymn for the Church Militant**

Great God, that bowest sky and star,  
Bow down our towering thoughts to thee,  
And grant us in a faltering war  
The firm feet of humility.

Lord, we that snatch the swords of flame,  
Lord, we that cry about Thy car,  
We too are weak with pride and shame,  
We too are as our foemen are.

Yea, we are mad as they are mad,  
Yea, we are blind as they are blind,  
Yea, we are very sick and sad  
Who bring good news to all mankind.

The dreadful joy Thy Son has sent  
Is heavier than any care.  
We find, as Cain his punishment,  
Our pardon more than we can bear.

Lord, when we cry Thee far and near  
And thunder through all lands unknown  
The gospel into every ear,  
Lord, let us not forget our own.

Cleanse us from ire of creed or class,  
The anger of the idle kinds;  
Sow in our souls, like living grass,  
The laughter of all lowly things.