

A vibrant red maple leaf with five distinct lobes lies on a bed of green grass and clover. The leaf's stem is visible, extending downwards. The background is a dense field of green foliage, creating a natural and serene setting.

theology  
of the cross

October  
2018

Ordained Servant

# *Ordained Servant Online*

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**CURRENT ISSUE: THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS**

**October 2018**

### *From the Editor*

This month I begin offering brief reviews of classic Christian literature, covering the large territory from Augustine to Packer, titled *ServantClassics*. Classics are those books that have endured over many decades or centuries because of outstanding quality of the thought articulated by the author; they are also relevant beyond the time in which they were written. And they are often well known but not well read. In this feature David Noe will also offer brief translations of ancient authors never before translated into English. Your ideas are always welcome.

I begin with a Puritan classic by the heavenly Doctor Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (1630). In the early days of my Christian life this Puritan classic was a major influence on my spiritual life, especially in the area of assurance of salvation.

Andy Wilson reminds us of an oft forgotten work of Luther on this five-hundredth anniversary of his Heidelberg Disputation. In it, Luther explains the essence of the gospel in a way that the Ninety-Five Theses only opened the door for by questioning practices like indulgences. Luther's distinction between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross is profound. Wilson shows how relevant Luther's work is for ecumenical discussion, the doctrine of the church, and the spirituality of the Christian.

In "Roman Catholicism, Marriage, and the Sexual Revolution," Darryl Hart reviews Ross Douthat's *To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism*, appreciating Douthat's accurate critique of the church's recent failings, while wondering why Douthat continues to tolerate the Roman Church's laxness, which is how it has remained a big tent throughout its history.

Linda Foh reviews a history of our own, *Choosing the Good Portion: Women of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, edited by Patricia E. Clawson and Diane L. Olinger. As part of that history Foh brings a firsthand appreciation, from her family's early history in the OPC, to her review of this excellent new book celebrating Christ's blessing of the church through its many faithful women.

Ryan McGraw reviews Billings's *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope*, challenging the church to a deeper appreciation and practice of the Lord's Supper.

Petrus van Mastricht's *Theoretical-Practical Theology* is a significant work of Post-Reformation theology, never before translated into English. Ryan McGraw reviews the first of seven volumes. Its value is on a par with the theology of Herman Bavinck. Noted Post-Reformation scholar Richard Muller comments on its significance:

Mastricht's work represents the full achievement of the Reformed orthodox

theological program of developing an exegetical, doctrinal, elenctic or polemical, and practical approach to Christian doctrine. Whereas other theologies of the era, like Brakel's *Christian's Reasonable Service* or Turretin's *Institutes*, embody one or two of these emphases, Mastricht provides the full spectrum of Reformed orthodox thought and does so on a highly detailed and carefully defined level. The translation is a significant achievement.

Don't miss this month's poem by Edward Taylor, a meditation on 1 John 2:1. See my introduction to the May 2018 issue for a brief comment on this significant colonial poet.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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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.

# ServantClassics

## Healing for the Bruised Reed from the Heavenly Doctor Sibbes

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by Gregory E. Reynolds

This month I offer the first of a new series of brief reviews of classic Christian literature, covering the large territory from Augustine to Packer, titled Servant Classics. Classics are those books that have endured over many decades or centuries because of outstanding quality of the thought and its articulation by the author; they are relevant beyond the time in which they were written. And they are often well known but not well read. I begin with a Puritan classic by the “heavenly doctor Sibbes,” *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax* (1630). In good Puritan fashion Sibbes expounds the twentieth verse of Jesus’s quotation of Isaiah 42:1–4 in Matthew 12:18–21: “A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory” (quoting Isaiah 42:3 where the KJV translates the last word “truth” instead of “victory”). As one who identified with the metaphors of bruised reed and smoking flax, my soul found just the right medicine in the heavenly doctor’s exposition. Reading it again this year in the Scholar Press edition rekindled the old spark.

During the summer of 1974, I was in New Hampshire doing an internship and taking a course in world history in order to insure my graduation from Covenant College in 1975. While perusing old books in the Dimond library at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, I came across a facsimile of the first edition (1630) of Sibbes’s *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax*. I had just begun collecting antiquarian religious books, so the challenge of the antique orthography and typography was pleasant. But the content was superlative. At the time I was struggling with assurance, especially under the pressure of preparing two sermons a week for most of the summer. The full title in the original is: *THE BRUISED REEDE AND SMOAKING FLAX. Some Sermons contracted out of the 12. of Matth. 20. As the desire, and for the good of weaker Christians*. In Matthew 12:20 Jesus is quoting Isaiah 42:3.

Richard Sibbes (1577–1635) was an English Puritan with a BA and MA from St. John’s College, Cambridge. In 1603 he was converted under the preaching of Paul Baynes at the Church of St. Andrews in Cambridge. He was ordained in 1608 and received the bachelor of divinity in 1610. Under his preaching at Holy Trinity Church and Gray’s Inn several eminent preachers were converted—among them was John Cotton. After receiving his doctor of divinity degree at Cambridge he became known as “the Heavenly Doctor Sibbes.”<sup>1</sup> Biographer Isaac Walton said of him, “Of this blessed man, let this just praise be given, Heaven was in him, before he was in heaven.”<sup>2</sup> In 1633 Charles I gave Sibbes the pastorate of Holy Trinity, Cambridge, where he served until his death. His gentleness caused him to avoid controversy and to influence a wide range of Christians. “Where most holiness is, there is most

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<sup>1</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2006), 535. All of my biographical information came from this book, 534–41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 535.

moderation, where it may be without prejudice of piety to God and the good of others.”<sup>3</sup> His brilliance was channeled through his piety, so that when he preached he sought to “allure [his hearers] to the entertainment of Christ’s mild, safe, wise, victorious government.”<sup>4</sup>

Here is a sample of the pastoral comfort offered by Sibbes from the 1630 facsimile followed by a modernized version :

First therefore for the great consolation of poore and weake Christians, let them know, that a spark from heaven though kindled under green wood that sobbes and smoakes, yet it will consume all at last, *Love once kindled is strong as death, much water cannot quench it*, and therefore it is called a *vehement flame*, or flame of God, kindled in the heart by the Holy Ghost.

*The first use* of this truth is for the great consolation of poor and weak Christians. Let them know that a spark from heaven, even though kindled under greenwood that pops and smokes, yet it will consume it all at last. Love once kindled is as strong as death. Many waters cannot quench it; therefore it is called a vehement flame, or the flame of God (Song of Sol. 8:6); it is kindled in the heart by the Holy Ghost.<sup>5</sup>

Sibbes was skilled in unpacking metaphors like fire and sparks.

There is a special blessing in that little spark. “As the new wine is found in the cluster, and one says, ‘do not destroy it for a blessing is in it’: so will I do for my servants’ sakes’ (Isa. 65:8). We see how our Savior Christ bore with Thomas in his doubting (John 20:27), and with the two disciples that went to Emmaus, who wavered as to whether he came to redeem Israel or not (Luke 24:21). He did not quench that little light in Peter which was smothered: Peter denied him, but he did not deny Peter (Luke 22:61). “If you will, you can,” said one poor man in the Gospel (Matt. 8:2). “If you can do anything,” said another (Mark 9:22). Both were smoking flax. Neither of them was quenched.<sup>6</sup>

Sibbes hews the fine line between antinomianism and legalism, giving the believer with a spark of grace, hope that the Lord will complete the work he has begun, while instilling a love of Jesus and holiness in the sinner’s life. Treat yourself to the remedy of assurance, and as officers in the church pass on the prescription to those in need.

### Available Editions

Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax 1630*, (Menston, Yorkshire, England: The Scolar Press, 1973).

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax*, (repr. 1630, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998).

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Bruised Reed* (1630), (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth; URL: <http://www.monergism.com/bruisedreed.html> Updated language, notes, additional verses, corrections, and formatting © William H. Gross—[www.onthewing.org](http://www.onthewing.org) 12/15/2007.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 536.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *The Bruised Reed* (1630), (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth; updated language, notes, additional verses, corrections, and formatting, <http://www.monergism.com/bruisedreed.html> © William H. Gross—[www.onthewing.org](http://www.onthewing.org) 12/15/2007, 46. Pages 257–8 in the Scolar Press edition.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 13.

# ServantReading

## Martin Luther's Heidelberg Disputation (April 1518): Remembering Another Five-Hundredth Anniversary

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by Andy Wilson

The year 2017 marked the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses on October 31, 1517, an action that is traditionally regarded as the spark that started the Protestant Reformation. While this was indeed a historic moment, it is more accurate to say that Luther was brought to a comprehension of the issues that became fundamental for historic Protestantism over a period of time. As it turns out, the year 2018 is the five-hundredth anniversary of another set of theses produced by Luther, and they are more distinctively Protestant than the Ninety-Five Theses. It is good for us to seize the opportunity for reflection provided by such anniversaries, especially when we see some Protestants downplaying the doctrinal issues that were at the heart of the Reformation. For example, one prominent Reformed seminary celebrated the five-hundredth anniversary of the Ninety-Five Theses by hosting an event in which Roman Catholic and Protestant speakers had a dialogue about how our traditions can give a more credible testimony to Christ by finding common ground and cooperating with each other instead of endlessly rehearsing the reasons why the Reformation took place.<sup>1</sup> It is troubling to see a seminary that is part of a confessionally Reformed denomination asserting that a more effective witness for Christ can be made by setting aside the issues that separate Protestants and Roman Catholics. Such instances underscore why it is so crucial for us to remember that the Reformation was a recovery of the biblical gospel. The fact that this was the case becomes patently clear when we consider the distinction that Luther expressed in the theses that were defended in April of 1518.

### The Two Kinds of Theologians

As the Ninety-Five Theses were being disseminated throughout Europe, Luther was asked by his Augustinian monastic order to prepare a set of theses that outlined his developing theology so that it could be assessed by his fellow monks at the order's regular chapter meeting in the city of Heidelberg on April 26, 1518. This set of theses is now known as the Heidelberg Disputation. Luther's main concern in these theses was to address the question of how we can attain the righteousness that we need in order to stand before God. He begins by emphasizing that while God's law is good, it is utterly incapable of

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Morgan Kelley, "Protestant-Catholic Relations on the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation," *By Faith: The Online Magazine of the PCA*, September 21, 2017, <http://byfaithonline.com/protestant-catholic-relations-on-the-500th-anniversary-of-the-reformation/>. The article describes a 2017 lecture series at Covenant Theological Seminary.

advancing us toward salvation. As the first thesis puts it, “The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.”<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that the law has no role to play in God’s saving plan. On the contrary, the law plays the vital role of exposing our sin and helplessness. As Paul says in Galatians, the law is the schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, driving us to the point of despair over the insufficiency of our works (see Gal. 3:19–26). Unless this happens, we will never cast ourselves entirely upon Christ for salvation. In Luther’s words, “It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ” (thesis 18).<sup>3</sup>

Luther follows his discussion of the law in the Heidelberg Disputation by setting a contrast between two types of theologians: the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross. It is important to understand that he is not using the term “theologian” in a professional or technical sense here. We can all be described as theologians because we all have thoughts about God and his ways. Moreover, in our fallen condition we are all by nature theologians of glory. The only way we can become theologians of the cross is by submitting to God’s revelation in the gospel. Even then, we still have to contend with the inner theologian of glory that continues to reside in our old nature.

Luther differentiates between these two kinds of theologians in this sequence of four theses:<sup>4</sup>

Thesis 19: That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened (Rom. 1:20).

Thesis 20: He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

Thesis 21: A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

Thesis 22: That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.

These statements are not easy to understand upon first reading, but they are at the heart of Luther’s protest against Rome. When we take the time to unpack these densely worded sentences, we find a wealth of theological insights.

The basic problem with the theologian of glory is that he thinks that he can figure out how God works apart from divine revelation. He thinks that he can rely on his reason to understand God. As two contemporary Lutheran theologians explain,

theologies of glory must write a new script for God on the basis of human observations about the world around them. Human reason must penetrate nature and history in order to perceive the invisible things of God. From these observations and

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Lull, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Lull, 49.



experiences, human beings can draw universal conclusions about God, thereby putting human epistemology in charge of divine revelation. But in the blindness of their minds they “exchanged the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1:26).” They rewrite God’s job description! The new job description incorporates human performance into it . . . God becomes someone we can manage.<sup>5</sup>

The theologian of glory assumes that God operates in the same manner that the world operates. He thinks that the principle of reciprocity governs our relationship with God since it governs so much of life in this world. We naturally think that those who do good will be rewarded and those who do evil will be punished, and in a theology of glory we apply this principle to the way of salvation. While the theologian of glory usually acknowledges that no one can be perfectly good, he believes that God’s grace will make up the difference for those who do the best that they can. As one writer puts it, “the hallmark of a theology of glory is that it will always consider grace as something of a supplement to whatever is left of human will and power.”<sup>6</sup> A theologian of glory suffers from a false optimism, thinking that a little boost from God’s grace, combined with our own ingenuity and efforts, will enable us to accomplish great things. He expects God’s work to be manifested in things that are powerful, successful, and attractive in the estimation of the world. This is why Luther used the term “glory” to summarize this theologian’s overall perspective.

The theologian of the cross differs from the theologian of glory in that he looks to what God has revealed in his Word about how he carries out his saving purpose in the lives of the elect. The theologian of the cross understands that in the economy of salvation, outward appearances often look contrary to the true spiritual realities. Instead of conceiving of God in ways that conform to prevailing human attitudes about what is good and powerful and wise, the theologian of the cross submits to God’s revelation and believes that the weak and foolish message of the cross is the power of God for salvation for all who believe. This mindset is encapsulated in the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18–25:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

The theologian of the cross interprets the world through what God says instead of through what man sees. This enables him to understand that God’s favor is not bestowed commensurately, or in response to our obedience. Instead, God’s favor is freely given to

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 81.

<sup>6</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 16.

everyone who places his trust in Jesus Christ as he is offered in the gospel. In short, it is not the just whom God justifies, but the unjust. The theologian of the cross understands that the only way into the kingdom of God is to be born again, which entails death and resurrection through faith in the Christ who is publicly portrayed as crucified in the proclamation of the gospel. This is why Luther used the term “cross” to summarize this theologian’s overall perspective.

Near the end of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther shows how the distinction between the two kinds of theologians stands in correlation to the distinction between human love and divine love. While human love is generated in response to things that man deems to be lovely, God’s love is entirely generated from within himself. In Luther’s words, “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it” (thesis 28).<sup>7</sup> Here is how Carl Trueman explains the meaning of Luther’s beautiful statement:

God does not find that something is lovely and then move out in love toward it; something is made lovely by the fact that God first sets his love upon it. He does not look at sinful human beings and see among the mass of people some who are intrinsically more righteous or holy than others and thus find himself attracted to them. Rather, the lesson of the cross is that God chooses that which is unlovely and repulsive, unrighteous and with no redeeming quality, and lavishes his saving love in Christ upon it.<sup>8</sup>

Another writer explains Luther’s point this way:

God’s love in Christ is a creative act that brings believers into being. When all our human possibilities have been exhausted and we have been reduced to nothing, the one who creates out of nothing does his “proper work.”<sup>9</sup>

Human love is reactive. We love certain people and certain things because we are attracted to them. There is something in those people or things that we find to be pleasing or lovely. But God does not love his elect because we are lovely. Instead, he makes us lovely by setting his love upon us. God calls those beloved who have no loveliness in themselves. He bestows his favor upon those who deserve nothing but judgment.

## **How the Theology of the Cross Permeates and Informs Protestant Doctrine**

In distinguishing the theologian of the cross from the theologian of glory, Luther formulated a biblical concept that would come to permeate many different aspects of Protestant doctrine and practice. One of the most obvious of these is the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which Protestants after Luther would describe as the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. This doctrine says that the basis of God’s acceptance of us is not any inherent righteousness that we possess in ourselves, or even any righteousness that God infuses in us. Instead, God only accepts as righteous those to whom the righteousness of Christ is imputed by faith alone. As Luther says in the Heidelberg

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<sup>7</sup> Lull, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 67.

<sup>9</sup> Forde, 22.

Disputation, “He is not righteous who works much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ” (thesis 25).<sup>10</sup> This does not make sense to the theologian of glory, because it is not consistent with what he can see about how the world works. Instead, he agrees with these words from Aristotle:

Anything that we have to do we learn by the actual doing of it: people become builders by building and instrumentalists by playing instruments. Similarly we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones.<sup>11</sup>

This observation makes sense to the mind of fallen man, but it is at odds with the Word of God when it says,

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. . . . Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. (Rom. 3:23–25; 4:4–5 ESV)

The Scriptures make it clear that if justification is based on anything that God sees in us, it cannot be described as a gift.

Another area of Protestant doctrine in which the theology of the cross is operative is sanctification, which deals with the personal righteousness that God works within those whom he redeems. While it is true that justifying faith produces the fruit of good works in a believer’s life (see Jas. 2:14–26), one of the pitfalls into which we can fall when we are thinking about sanctification is to make God’s continued or final acceptance of us contingent upon our obedience and godly living. This makes sense to the theologian of glory, because it is consistent with how things work in the world. The way to stay in a person’s favor is to keep on doing the things that please that person. But the problem with applying this principle to sanctification is that it overthrows the Word of God, making our sanctification the basis of our justification. The Scriptures declare that we can never make ourselves pleasing to God by anything that we do. As the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “by works of the law no human being will be justified in (God’s) sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). This principle is just as true after conversion as it is before conversion, as Paul made clear in the string of rhetorical questions he directed to the Galatian Christians: “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal 3:2–3). Sin contaminates everything that we do, even after conversion. This means God will only accept our good works if he has first accepted us in Christ (see WCF 16.5–6). Robert Kolb and Charles Arand offer a helpful illustration of this when they write,

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<sup>10</sup> Lull, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Forde, 104–5.

What makes a work good is not how well it is performed or the nature of the work. What makes it good in the eyes of God is that it is done because of a trust that acknowledges God as God and clings to him. When a mother declares her child's finger painting to be priceless, she does so not on the basis of its intrinsic quality or because she had it appraised by experts. She praises it because of who painted it—her child! So it is with God regarding the works of a believer.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the only people who can please God are those who are already at peace with God through Christ. Of course, it is true that the sins we commit as believers can bring us under God's fatherly displeasure and subject us to his discipline (see WCF 11.5). However, if God has accepted us for Christ's sake, then none of our failures or transgressions can cause us to lose our salvation. In the words of Edward Fisher,

for this is certain truth, that as no good either in you, or done by you, did move [God] to justify you, and give you eternal life, so no evil in you, or done by you, can move him to take it away from you, being once given.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, as Luther pointed out in his treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian*, we cannot even do good works until we are set free from trying to do them to secure or retain God's favor. Those who do good works in hopes of putting God in their debt are acting out of self-interest, not out of love.

The theology of the cross also speaks to the question of what kind of ministry paradigm the church should employ. In many churches today, the paradigm often seems more reflective of the theology of glory than the theology of the cross. While there are numerous variations of the prevailing model, they can all be subsumed under the category of "culturally-shaped ministry." In this paradigm, the church's ministry and worship are shaped by a mostly positive engagement with culture and by an emphasis on core beliefs around which a sizable Christian consensus can be formed in hopes of having a significant cultural impact. The focus in this model tends to be upon human flourishing and cultural transformation, outcomes that are impressive to the human eye. By way of contrast, the theology of the cross finds expression in what can be described as "confessionally-shaped ministry." In this paradigm, the church's ministry and worship are shaped in a manner that reflects the structural integrity of its confessional standards and heritage. The focus in this model is on making mature, heavenly-minded disciples through clear instruction in the whole counsel of God and the diligent use of the ordinary means of grace. While this approach to ministry may seem unimpressive, inefficient, and irrelevant, it reflects a willingness to trust in the Lord to accomplish his purposes through the power of his Word. As Luther once noted while reflecting on how the Reformation had taken root in Germany:

I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kolb and Arand, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2009), 237.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Trueman, 94–95.

This Word-centered way of thinking stems from a conception of the Christian religion that is fundamentally dogmatic, a perspective that stands in sharp contrast to one that sees Christianity as essentially pragmatic.<sup>15</sup> When the church's ministry is informed by the theology of the cross, the focus of ministry will remain upon "the open statement of the truth" (2 Cor. 4:2).

The theology of the cross brings a helpful perspective to many other areas of Protestant doctrine and practice. It tells us that the unity of the church is enigmatically manifested in those who profess the true religion rather than straightforwardly manifested in a purportedly infallible magisterium or in some kind of revived Christendom or in a religion that is so loosely defined that it tends towards universalism. The theology of the cross says that the Christian life is focused on faithfulness and self-denial in the ordinary aspects of life rather than on radical expressions of discipleship. The theology of the cross helps us to see that worship should be regulated by Scripture rather than by the desire to create an intense emotional, aesthetic, or culturally relevant experience. The theology of the cross teaches us to look to civil government as a preserver of order in this present evil age rather than an instrument for ushering in the age to come. And the theology of the cross calls us to persevere in humble, patient faith amid the afflictions that God ordains for us under the sun rather than expect uninterrupted material blessing in a world that has been subjected to futility.

## Conclusion

It is a constant temptation for us to downplay the message of the cross, or at least take it for granted, so that we can focus on doing things that the world values and admires. The message of the cross can seem so negative and depressing. But that, Luther would have said, is exactly the point. The message of the cross will not let us forget the ruinous consequences of sin, or our inability to do anything to escape from our dreadful plight, or the terrible price that had to be paid to secure our redemption. Luther summed it up memorably in a statement that he jotted down two days before he died: "We are beggars! That is true."<sup>16</sup> Not a glamorous or triumphant sentiment, to be sure. But it is true. And it is the perspective that we need to have if we are going to see the message of the cross as the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

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<sup>15</sup> Carl Trueman makes this helpful distinction in his article, "If Only Francis Were Luther!" the website of *First Things*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/05/if-only-francis-were-luther>.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Marty, *Martin Luther: A Life*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), 185.

# ServantReading

## Roman Catholicism, Marriage, and the Sexual Revolution

### A Review Article

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by Darryl G. Hart

*To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism* by Ross Douthat. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018, 256 pages, \$26.00.

Ross Douthat has done it again. The young, conservative, Roman Catholic op-ed writer who has the unlikely perch of writing for the *New York Times*, created a mini-controversy three years ago with one of his columns. A writer who regularly tries to explain political conservatism and Roman Catholic faith and practice—and why they matter—to the *Times*' overwhelmingly secular, liberal readers, Douthat had the chutzpah to opine in the fall of 2015, only a month after Pope Francis's positively reported visit to the United States, that the Roman pontiff had hatched a plot to “change the church.” The centerpiece of this switch in Vatican policy is a lenient path for divorced and remarried Roman Catholics to return to full communion. But the relatively simple point of either changing doctrine or reforming pastoral practice also involves, as such points always do with Roman Catholicism, papal authority. Although Francis has promoted themes of conciliarism and devolving some matters to local bishops, the pope also has the authority to make changes by papal fiat. “If Francis decided tomorrow to endorse communion for the remarried,” Douthat wrote in his column, “there is no Catholic Supreme Court that could strike his ruling down.” And yet, popes are not supposed to change doctrine. Their duty is to defend, explain, and pass it on. “Custom, modesty, fear of God, and fear of schism all restrain popes who might find a doctrinal rewrite tempting.” Those restraints explain Douthat's resort to the language of “plot.” He argued that by various means of subterfuge, Pope Francis is changing Roman Catholicism.<sup>1</sup>

Douthat may recoil at the comparison, but his criticism of Francis is reminiscent of Ignaz von Döllinger's to Pius IX during the run up to the First Vatican Council, well recounted in Thomas Albert Howard's 2017 book, *The Pope and the Professor*.<sup>2</sup> Döllinger was a German historical theologian whose scholarship made Pius's assertion of papal infallibility dubious. From the democratic revolutions of 1848 to the unification of Italy in 1871, Pius was looking for ways to shore up his authority since the liberalization of European politics was threatening the papacy's own civil authority in the Papal States.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross Douthat, “The Plot to Change Catholicism,” *New York Times*, Oct. 17, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/opinion/sunday/the-plot-to-change-catholicism.html?>

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Albert Howard, *The Pope and the Professor: Pius IX, Ignaz von Dollinger, and the Quandary of the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Döllinger's argument attracted international attention thanks in part to political liberals in Europe and North America who desired to see the papacy's feudal powers overturned. But Pius won (partly). Vatican I gave dogmatic status to papal infallibility and Döllinger eventually received the condemnation of excommunication even as the Papal States became part of the Kingdom of Italy and the pope's political power vanished. Douthat's opposition to Francis is not on the order of Döllinger's complaints about Pius. But the *Times*' columnist is raising serious questions not only about Francis's power but also his intentions. The irony is that Douthat, the layman who might naturally want more room for non-clergy in the church, is at odds with Francis's apparent scheme to liberalize Roman Catholicism through devolving papal power to regional and local settings. Douthat, in other words, would likely be more comfortable with Pius IX than Francis (though John Paul II is his model pope). Still, his open dissent and its high visibility in the *Times* invites the comparison to Döllinger.

Even more, Douthat has provoked the ire of clergy and theologians in the United States. Soon after his 2015 editorial, a group of theologians and priests took out a one-page advertisement in the *Times* to challenge Douthat. Part of their missive asserted the following:

Aside from the fact that Mr. Douthat has no professional qualifications for writing on the subject, the problem with his article and other recent statements is his view of Catholicism as unapologetically subject to a politically partisan narrative that has very little to do with what Catholicism really is.<sup>3</sup>

They also charged Douthat with "accusing other members of the Catholic church of heresy, sometimes subtly, sometimes openly," which was "serious business."<sup>4</sup> That Douthat's critics did not bring up dissent from the papacy may have revealed their own reservations about papal supremacy. Even so, those responsible for the letter had a point when they concluded that Douthat's views were "not what we expect of the *New York Times*."<sup>5</sup>

Those who wrote that letter might be tempted to buy another advertisement since Douthat's new book is an expansion of his column about Francis's methods and intentions. *To Change the Church* is narrowly about the substance of the debates over divorce and remarriage that have transpired since 2014. It is also a play-by-play account of the ecclesiastical politics that have prompted conservatives and liberals to use the mechanisms of church power to advance their views; Francis is by no means an innocent bystander but has, according to Douthat, played ecclesiastical rivals against each other while also signaling implicitly and sometimes acting directly to advance a position that amounts to liberalizing Rome's teaching on marriage. For anyone unfamiliar with recent Roman Catholicism and the ambiguity that Vatican II introduced, Douthat's is as good a place as any to get up to speed.

As much as he writes for general audiences (in ways that are actually remarkable), Douthat also intends to alert Roman Catholics who are either uninformed or complacent

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<sup>3</sup> The October 26, 2015 letter is reprinted at *Daily Theology* (blog), <https://dailytheology.org/2015/10/26/to-the-editor-of-the-new-york-times/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

about the Francis papacy. The book is especially helpful for laying out the sequence of events that began (sort of) in 2014, a year after Francis's inauguration, at a convocation when newly appointed cardinals gather to receive their red hats and discuss church life with the pope. Francis asked Walter Kasper, a cardinal from Germany, to give the keynote address. The talk wound up setting the agenda for the next two years of synods and factional maneuvering. Kasper proposed, in the name of mercy, a penitential model for remarried and divorced Roman Catholics to receive communion. He also argued in the name of Vatican II. If the church could adapt to the modern world as the 1960s council had, why not do so again on the challenges of marriage? From there ensued a series of synods on the family, with formal preparations for the gatherings of bishops, as well as behind the scenes bickering, lobbying, and papal massaging. The process revealed two wings in the church, liberals who wanted to use the deliberative process of church assemblies to make the changes look like the seamless emergence of a consensus. Conservatives, in contrast, not only had to challenge the Vatican's machinery by finding legitimate ways of dissent, such as a *dubium*,<sup>6</sup> but they also had to reaffirm and defend the church's teaching and explain, in effect, why the sin of divorce, remarriage, and adultery mattered. Meanwhile, Francis produced an apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* ("The Joy of Love"), a brief on marriage and the family, and the longest papal document in history. Although *Amoris* reaffirmed church traditions, it also provided wiggle room for bishops to pursue their own course for restoring wayward Roman Catholics to communion. The result of these two years of meetings, ecclesiastical intrigue, and papal vacillation is great uncertainty within Roman Catholicism (with some bishops in parts of the world using the proceedings as a green light to admit those in violation of church teaching to full communion). Douthat deserves credit for calling attention to this situation, if only because the world of Roman Catholic social media is filled with apologists and church regulars who barely mention the faults and flaws of their communion and bishops.

Douthat also deserves praise for explaining why divorce and adultery are sinful. His simple answer is one that sounds very Protestant: Jesus said so. The church's teaching on marriage began, he writes, with Jesus's answers to the Pharisees, recorded in the Gospel of Mark. Instead of lightening the burden of Jewish law, in the Gospels Jesus "makes the law more demanding, more radical, more transcendent" (84). This truth has informed the church throughout its history and comes with a cost. "It made missionary work more challenging in practically every cultural context" (86). It gummed up the works of ecumenism. It placed the church in conflict with European monarchs (think England's Henry VIII). Douthat's challenge to liberal Roman Catholics is particularly poignant. For all of the church's history the standard for morality was not aspirational but obligatory. But now liberals propose to tell ordinary people that Christian morality is "too hard" and the church has a duty to help folks manage the angst that results from the gap between their own lives and Christian duty. When Douthat compares changing teaching on marriage to what has occurred on usury, his argument weakens a bit. He concedes that the medieval church regarded charging interest on loans a grave sin, but the church was able to accommodate the beginning of modern finance without letting those concessions seep in to "issues more central to the faith" (163). That reassurance seems a tad glib for

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<sup>6</sup> This is a formal way to ask the pope to answer a question about church law or teaching. The *dubia* that conservatives sent to Francis, four questions, he never answered.



an institution that is supposed to know and be able to explain the nature of sin. Not only is it the apparent inconsistency of adapting on one sin but not another. It is also the problem of whether an ordinary church member can have confidence in church officials who change their minds about sin and its penalties (did those guilty of the mortal sin of usury receive less time in purgatory after the church changed its understanding?).

That somewhat easy elision of the church's teaching on usury is indicative arguably of the book's most serious flaw. As much as Douthat deserves credit for looking honestly and critically at his communion, he cannot seem to fathom Christianity apart from Rome. Despite all the evidence that Douthat gives of Roman Catholicism's errors, missteps, folly, and back room episcopal politics, from sex scandals to poor judgments in international diplomacy, he still believes, as he writes in the preface, that Roman Catholicism has

the most compelling claim to being the true church founded by Jesus of Nazareth, whose radical message and strange story offers the likeliest reason in all of recorded human history to believe that God loves us, that *He so loved the world* that our sins will be redeemed and our suffering will make sense in the end." (xvii)

The proposals for tolerance for mortal sin from liberal theologians and cardinals, with some apparent blessing by the pope, is one indication that, as was clear in the sixteenth century, the Vatican is not very reliable at preserving Christian teaching and morality. That seems all the more apparent after Vatican II, which has provoked a steady stream of bickering and maneuvering between conservatives and liberals about "real" Roman Catholicism. In fact, Douthat, someone who believed John Paul II had put up the barricades to progressive change after the experimentation of the 1970s, now thinks even popes cannot steady the ship. One consequence of Francis's tenure is for conservatives to "take a darker view of the post-Vatican II era" and to see that council as compromising the church. If Francis could be the successor to John Paul II and Benedict XVI, perhaps those conservative popes "didn't conserve enough" (198). Benedict himself may have confirmed this verdict in the eulogy he sent for the funeral of a deceased German archbishop: "he learned to let go and to live out of a deep conviction that the Lord does not abandon His Church, even if the boat has taken on so much water as to be on the verge of capsizing" (187).

At the same time, Douthat reiterates a view common among Roman Catholic apologists that this is the church Jesus founded. If you read John Henry Newman, Aquinas, Augustine, Dante, or even Evelyn Waugh, you understand, Douthat asserts, that as a Roman Catholic you belong to "the same tradition, the same story." In fact, when you step into the "worlds of Catholic past," you can "think *with* the letter writers of the New Testament and the church fathers scribbling in late antiquity" (160). Douthat writes that you cannot do this with the church's contemporary reformers like Francis and Kasper, and by implication, neither can you do that with Protestant reformers. In which case, if you enter a Protestant church you are not inhabiting the same tradition that stretches back from John Paul II to the apostle Peter. Can Douthat really imagine that the Sistine Chapel comes anywhere near the sort of space in which the apostles worshiped, or that the traditions and aura surrounding the papacy resemble in any way the standing that even the apostles enjoyed in the early church? What sixteenth-century Reformers were

trying to do (at least in part) was to restore the church to the simplicity and meaningful pastoral work of the early church. But for Roman Catholics, even those like the gimlet-eyed Douthat, imagining a Christianity that inhabits store fronts or elementary school cafeterias seems inconceivable (not to mention that he doesn't make much room for the folk piety on which Roman Catholicism thrives and in which apparitions of Mary and miraculous healings at Lourdes abound).

Why can't Douthat take the step that Luther and Calvin did when the contemporary writer has even more evidence that the bishops are prone to error and to use their offices to inflict their blameworthy judgments on church goers? The book suggests an answer in the section where Douthat compares the contemporary controversy to the seventeenth-century dispute between Jansenists and Jesuits. He quotes Leszek Kolakowski on why Jansenists could not succeed at reforming the church: "Christianity had to make itself, if not 'easy,' at least much easier, in order to survive" (168). Kolakowski adds, "One could not resurrect as a universal norm the ethos of the apostolic time when the faithful really lived in the shadow of imminent apocalypse" (168). That is what Jansenists tried to do but "to their doom" (168). Douthat seems to sense that what he is doing in this book, by criticizing proposals for making the church more lenient, is more on the side of Jansenism than the Jesuits. But he also takes comfort from his church's size. The very first line of the preface speaks of "the most important religious story of our time" because it concerns the "fate of the world's largest religious institution" (xi). In other words, Douthat seems to know that the church has always had a hard time insisting on rigor, from prohibiting indulgences in Luther's day to accommodating usury in the modern era. That is how the church has remained so large and inclusive. *To Change the Church's* major weakness, then, is wanting a big church that makes demands. Douthat's awareness of his communion's history and laxness indicates that he should know better.

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# Choosing the Good Portion, *edited by Patricia E. Clawson and Diane L. Olinger*

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by Linda Porter Foh

*Choosing the Good Portion: Women of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, edited by Patricia E. Clawson and Diane L. Olinger. Committee for the Historian, OPC, 2016. Hardback, 470 pages, \$15.00. It is available here [insert link <https://store.opc.org/ProductDetails.asp?ProductCode=choosing%2Dgood%2Dportion>].

Here are some thoughts following my third reading of *Choosing the Good Portion*.

Family history is my favorite hobby, and I could gladly devote all of my free time to this research. Finding old documents and photos helps me find out *what* happened and *when*. Not as easily answered are the questions *where* in Ireland did my ancestors come from and *why* did they all settle in Philadelphia? If they hadn't made certain choices, would I be here today?

My grandmother arrived from Ireland in 1912 and lived with her older brother and sister-in-law who worshiped at Grace Presbyterian Church in South Philadelphia. When my mother was growing up, her family sat under the preaching of David Freeman whose family were their neighbors and children her playmates. Mr. Freeman's bachelor friend John Murray was a frequent guest in his home and worshiper at Grace. Mom came to know him well and regarded both men as spiritual fathers since her own father didn't believe until his final illness under Mr. Murray's witnessing. On June 11, 1936, Mr. Freeman became a constituting member of the OPC, and the following Sunday he walked out of Grace Church with my grandmother, her children, and a majority of the congregation following him.

In *Choosing the Good Portion* I found stories of my religious heritage that rounded out the memories my parents told me of the OPC's early years. It's a fuller picture of some of the fifty women whose names were recorded as constituting members of the new denomination and those who joined them over the decades, and how they worked beside the men whose names are more familiar in our church's history. Having grown up in the OPC, I knew several of the East Coast ladies well, others from around the country were known by reputation, but most were new to me. It stirred long-forgotten memories and denominational prayer requests from years ago: Debbie Dortzbach's kidnapping after Anna Strikwerda's murder; the lawsuit against the McIlhennys and First OPC in San Francisco; the Falks imprisonment in Eritrea; as well as thanksgiving for new churches being planted around the USA and the opening and closing of foreign mission fields.

As the idea for this book took off, a request for names of women who labored for the OPC through its eighty years was emailed to all the presbyteries and shared around the denomination. At that time I was updating the 2016 edition of the OPC Ministerial Register, which includes the names of wives and daughters of most of the 1,141 OPC ministers from those first eight decades. I knew little about these women who had followed their husbands and fathers from congregation to congregation. So the proposed book seemed an interesting concept that would make a good addition to the existing OPC history library, but I wondered how many women might be suggested and then who could they persuade to do all that writing? And would they find enough background—particularly about our earlier, lesser known “foremothers”?

*Choosing the Good Portion* became a true labor of love. Ninety-three women were researched and written about by fifty-five OPC-connected authors, some who never met their

subjects, some who were friends or family members, and two who wrote their own stories. I like footnotes and sources, and this book is full of them. Recent and older interviews of the subject or her family, old letters and self-published memoirs, materials and photos from the OPC archives, and articles from *The Presbyterian Guardian* and *New Horizons*, by and about these women, provided plenty of details to fill in the memory gaps. Since the *Guardian* is available online [insert link <http://www.opc.org/guardian.html>], it is easy to look up and read the articles cited and learn even more about these women.

The book's purpose was not to extol each woman for her achievements but to recognize the struggles, sacrifices, and challenges she faced while serving her Lord and her church. How was her faith tried, and how did God sustain her in her labors? I found this aspect of the book most powerful, particularly in the lives of women who I remembered from my youth but who, unknown to me, had come through much before I met them. Such personal struggles rarely appeared as prayer requests in missionary letters which, to my young mind, made them seem like "super Christians" or plaster saints. Back then, women didn't open up as readily as today, at least not publicly. But I'm sure each would sing heartily "Father, I know that all my life is portioned out for me."<sup>1</sup>

Another theme that struck me was how God brought each woman into her place or places of service and how he prepared her for those good works she would do to his glory. Each woman's tale is different, but there are similarities. Her original, admirable plans for serving the Lord took a different turn. Or she crossed paths with an OPC pastor or member, and her thinking was changed or her appreciation of the Reformed faith was deepened. Her beliefs led her to search for a church where the whole counsel of God was faithfully preached and, if necessary, work toward the establishment of such a congregation in the town where God had placed her. She was instrumental in the nurturing of the next generation of the OPC including future officers and their wives, either her own children or her spiritual children, and so the denomination grew as she planted, others watered, and God gave the increase. Do we believe in God's sovereign purposes? Certainly, and sometimes he blesses us further by revealing how he worked and is working in the details.

My *third* reading? Oh, yes! After anticipating *Choosing's* publication for over a year, I quickly devoured my copy, reading first about the ladies I knew and then back and forth until I had read each story. Finishing the last chapter, afterword, and index, I turned back to the first page and began again, this time more slowly and thoughtfully. The history of the OPC unfolds as each of these women built her corner of the church. Then, this spring, hunting for a particular detail, I decided to read it all again.

Two suggestions as you read *Choosing the Good Portion*. Keep tissues handy. It is inspiring, convicting, and humbling—as the story of God's work always is. Don't use *Choosing* as bedtime reading. Each short story can stand by itself, but it's too tempting to read "just one more," and you'll be up all night.

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#### **For further reading about the book:**

George Marsden's review - [http://www.opc.org/review.html?review\\_id=621](http://www.opc.org/review.html?review_id=621)

Co-editors Clawson and Olinger's interview - [http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article\\_id=898](http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=898)

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<sup>1</sup> Hymn #444, original *Trinity Hymnal* (1961); #559, *Revised Trinity Hymnal* (1990); #500 *Trinity Psalter-Hymnal* (2018).

# Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table, *by J. Todd Billings*

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by Ryan M. McGraw

*Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table*, by J. Todd Billings, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018, xix + 217 pages, \$25.00, paper.

If the risen and ascended Christ is not present in our worship services, then our worship is empty. Believers look back to what Jesus did in his earthly ministry to save his people, to what he will do when he returns in glory, and to what he is doing now in the church as she looks to him in faith. Todd Billings challenges readers to renew their affections for the triune God when observing the Lord's Supper. The book is gripping and helpful, even while it raises some problematic questions. It will benefit Reformed pastors as they read it with discernment and draw from it to minister to their congregations.

This work presents a helpful re-evaluation of the Lord's Supper as affective and not merely cognitive. Billings proceeds on three premises. First, people have functional subconscious theologies of the Lord's Supper. Second, the Reformed tradition can help us re-evaluate these functional theologies by self-consciously looking to the presence and power of the triune God at work in the sacraments. Third, the Lord's Supper keeps the gospel at the center of Christian experience through the themes of remembrance, communion, and hope. These three terms are adopted from the Lord's Supper liturgy of the Reformed Church in America (110). With regard to functional theologies, Billings shows that most people come to the Lord's Supper with the assumption that the only thing necessary to profit from the sacrament is catechesis or right thinking. This unintentionally shifts our attention in the Supper from the divine act of communicating grace to believers to the human act of remembrance. While arguing that we should not jettison remembrance (113), he notes that we need present communion with the ascended Christ in the sacrament and we need future hope in the Lord's return. This means that the Lord's Supper must be affective and experiential and not merely intellectual and cognitive (18). He makes his case that the Lord's Supper is the true "icon" of Christ in which we remember him who came, we commune with him who is present (by the Spirit), and we look to him who is absent (in body) by appealing to the Reformed confessional tradition and to Scripture (186). In chapter three, he describes nine aspects of the Lord's Supper drawn from many classic Reformed confessions (though, surprisingly, he devotes little attention to the mature statements of the Westminster Standards, which make most of his points even more clearly). He draws positive examples of the affective aspects of the Lord Supper from the Scottish "holy fairs" (45–65) and he seeks to illustrate principles with positive examples from modern worship services. In the third section of the book, Billings shows that we should understand the Lord's Supper in light of the contours of Scripture as a whole as they relate to Christ rather than merely focusing on a narrow set of texts treating the sacrament (though he examines these as well). This has the advantage of making the Lord's Supper a more integral part of Reformed worship by tying it to the acts of the triune God in the gospel. In addition to these features, almost the entire book is full of striking statements and profound insights that make it gripping reading.

Though this book has few limitations overall, two of them are important to single out. First, Billings's aim is to promote catholic unity across denominational lines (63). Without

seeking to persuade Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals to adopt a Reformed position on the sacraments, he seeks to show points of convergence that “can be a way of swimming in catholic waters that leads us to the waterfall of the triune God’s love” (202–3). This is not necessarily a compromise of Reformed convictions (66), especially in light of the length to which he goes to establish them from Scripture and from Reformed confessions. The problem lies with his examples of what these convictions look like in practice. For example, he depicts a worship service in which a woman from Cameroon leads in the confession of sin (133), a boy from the youth group does the Old Testament reading, and a middle-aged woman reads the New Testament (134). Ironically, in a book that stresses the Reformed tradition, readers are left wondering whether Billings has any place for ordination and public ministry in relation to administering divine ordinances. This not only militates against the Reformed tradition, but against the ecumenical overtones of the book. While his examples leave room for modern Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, they exclude historic Reformed, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox liturgical practices and views of office in relation to public worship. This partly undercuts the value of this book, both in terms of Billings’s ecumenical aims and in terms of readers adopting his (otherwise solid) Reformed perspective on the Lord’s Supper.

The other area of concern is the author’s treatment of paedocommunion. While denying infant participation in the Lord’s Supper without conscious faith in Christ (155), he also denies that children should profess their faith before the elders of the church before participating (156). He argues that the real issue in 1 Corinthians 11 was not personal self-examination, but corporate participation. While children must have an “age-appropriate” confession of faith, this does not entail self-examination, in his view. He adds that excluding young children from the Supper represents failing to discern that the church is the body of Christ (157). While I agree that it is inappropriate to set a specific age at which covenant children should come to the Lord’s Table, Billings’s approach raises the question as to who determines whether they have “age-appropriate” confessions of faith. If ministers of the gospel dispense ordinances including the Lord’s Supper, then should they not have a part in admitting people to such ordinances as well? This reflects the same ecclesiological problem raised with regard to who leads worship above. He admits that 1 Corinthians 11 has individual and corporate ramifications (149) while he undercuts the individual ones, to a large extent, in the case of children. Communion with Christ in the Lord’s Supper is, as Billings notes repeatedly, an act of corporate worship for the whole church. However, he appears to leave little theological room for ordained officers as representing the church and ministering on Christ’s behalf.

This is a great book for those desiring to grow in their affections for the triune God through the Lord’s Supper. It drives readers to remember what Christ did even while they experience the presence of the One who is absent and coming again. While the faults noted above should not detract from these facts, they are substantial nonetheless. Recovering a robust Reformed sacramental theology cannot be divorced from Reformed ecclesiology. Like many good books, this one offers pure gold mixed with some dross. Nevertheless, the author issues a timely call to the church today in relation to the value of the Lord’s Supper.

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# Theoretical-Practical Theology, by *Petrus van Mastricht*

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by Ryan M. McGraw

*Theoretical-Practical Theology*, by Petrus van Mastricht. Edited by Joel R. Beeke, translated by Todd M. Rester, vol. 1 of 7 vols. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2018, xci + 238 pages, \$50.00.

Theology has changed and persisted over the centuries. While the creedal and doctrinal core of Christianity remains stable, other things shift and adapt to contemporary problems. Theological developments occur in response to the challenges of the times as well. However, while contemporary theological models often contribute much to our understanding of exegesis, they are sometimes less precise and frequently less devotional than their Reformed scholastic predecessors. Modern readers do not likely associate the words “scholastic” and “devotional,” and “precision” often takes on a pejorative meaning. The first translated volume of Petrus van Mastricht’s *Theoretico-Practica Theologia* challenges all of these assumptions.

Contemporary readers will find much in his work that has familiar Reformed content, but his combination of scholastic precision and fervent devotion in an academic system of theology is so different from most current theological models that it will seem novel to many. This first volume directs readers to rethink their approach to theology in light of the definitions and character of theology. This material will not only leave readers longing for the rest of the planned set to appear, but it will also add a needed voice to contemporary approaches to the nature and study of theology. This review focuses on Mastricht’s definition of theology, his doctrine of Scripture, and his distribution of theology, which correspond to the three chapters comprising this volume.

Mastricht defined theology as “the doctrine of living for God through Christ” (64, 98–104). This highlights his place in the historical development of Reformed theology, reflecting a decidedly pre-Enlightenment bent. The historical introduction by Adriaan Neele shows excellently how and why this is the case. The funeral oration, on the other hand, while a relevant piece of history, is tedious and less helpful because the speaker spent most of his time digressing about the worthiness of other authors and his assessment of Dutch education and politics. Mastricht, like Jonathan Edwards who commended his work heartily, lived on the cusp of Enlightenment thought. He was famed in his day as one of the primary opponents of René Descartes. While most post-Enlightenment authors classified theology as a science and defined theology as a discourse concerning God, Mastricht perpetuated the earlier Reformed tradition by treating theology as encompassing all theological habits (especially wisdom; p. 100) and defining it as “the doctrine of living for God through Christ.” In his view, “doctrine” envelopes all philosophical habits and it stresses the objective, or theoretical, nature of theology. However, “living for God,” stresses the idea that the Bible is concerned primarily with the experimental rather than merely the intellectual knowledge of God. “Through Christ” reflects the fact that there is no saving knowledge of God apart from faith in Christ. The value of this definition of theology is that, even though it is partly couched in philosophical categories, it provides readers with a definition of theology that reflects the goals of Scripture. The Bible directs us to knowing God and obtaining true spiritual wisdom rather than merely teaching us a scientific system of doctrines. This is something that has resonated with believers in every generation.

Mastricht directs us in a right path in this regard without sacrificing theological precision in favor of experimental piety.

If faith in Christ is necessary for the true knowledge of God, then, as Mastricht's second chapter stresses, we cannot know Christ apart from divine revelation (84). Mastricht gives five reasons why the finalized canon of Scripture is superior to other forms of revelation and why it is necessary to know God by his Word and Spirit only (119). His treatment of the eight properties of Scripture is full and satisfying (126–31). While he upholds what we now call the full divine inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of the original autographs of Scripture, his treatment is deeper and broader than these issues. This is important in our day when there is a tendency to highlight controverted attributes of Scripture to the neglect of a full doctrine of Scripture. Mastricht also includes useful pastoral points, such as the idea that those who do not know the original languages of Scripture may not have a grammatical certainty or certitude of knowledge, but they may have a spiritual certitude or certitude of faith (184–85). This illustrates Mastricht's use of scholastic distinctions by maintaining the priority of the original text of Scripture without denying the sufficiency of translations to produce saving faith in the non-specialist.

Mastricht's final chapter in this volume introduces briefly the distribution of the system of theology. Without rejecting organizing principles used by others, he argues that the simplest division of theology is into faith and love, or what one should believe and what one should do (205–6). This corresponds roughly to the earlier division of the system, used by the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, into what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man. This reflects Ramist-oriented theologians, such as Amandus Polanus and Johannes Wollebius, as well. In addition to this broad distribution, Mastricht stands out for dividing each chapter of his theology into exegetical, dogmatic, elenctic, and practical sections. This makes his treatment well organized, easy to follow, and particularly full. His method has the advantage of being well rounded theologically and pastorally, making his work particularly suited to helping pastors.

In many disciplines, experts either become obsessed with definitions and method, or they ignore them entirely and simply do the work. In theology, we should land somewhere in the middle. How we define theology and how we understand its purposes will affect our goals in teaching and studying it, as well as what we hope to do with what we learn. This first volume of seven of the *Theoretico-Practica Theologia* defines theology in a way that weds doctrine and experience, knowledge and wisdom, content and faith, and principles and holiness. It is a holistic approach to theology for whole people who are being wholly redeemed by Christ. Modern readers may prefer the exegetical depth of newer authors. No author can be everything to everyone. Yet Mastricht contributes something indispensable, and often forgotten, in contemporary theology. Theology is about knowing the right God, in the right way, for the right reasons. This neither negates the need for objective academic theology nor converts it into popular or practical theology. Instead, it creates an organic union between things that are often separated, but should not be. Reading Mastricht is important, both due to his content and because he gives us a different perspective from a different context. This is a perspective that we need to learn from, adopt, and adapt, until we speak its language fluently with our own accent.

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# ServantPoetry

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## An Advocate with the Father: Meditation 38: 1 John 2:1

by Edward Taylor (c. 1642–1729)

Oh! What a thing is man? Lord, who am I?  
That Thou shouldest give him law (Oh! golden line)  
To regulate his thoughts, words, life thereby;  
And judge him wilt thereby too in Thy time.  
A court of justice Thou in heaven holdst  
To try his case while he's here housed on mold.

How do Thy angels lay before Thine eye  
My deeds both white and black I daily do?  
How doth Thy court Thou pannel'st there them try?  
But flesh complains: 'What right for this? Let's know.  
For, right or wrong, I can't appear unto't.  
And shall a sentence pass on such a suit?'

Soft; blemish not this golden bench, or place.  
Here is no bribe, nor colorings to hide,  
Nor pettifogger to befog the case,  
But justice hath her glory here well tried.  
Her spotless law all spotted cases tends;  
Without respect or disrespect them ends.

God's judge himself; and Christ attorney is;  
The Holy Ghost registerer is found.  
Angels the serjeants are; all creatures kiss  
The book, and do as evidences abound.  
All cases pass according to pure law,  
And in the sentence is no fret nor flaw.

What say'st, my soul? Here all thy deeds are tried.  
Is Christ thy advocate to plead thy cause?  
Art thou His client? Such shall never slide.  
He never lost His case: He pleads such laws  
As carry do the same, nor doth refuse  
The vilest sinner's case that doth Him choose.

This is His honor, not dishonor: nay,  
No habeas corpus gainst His clients came;  
For all their fines His purse doth make down pay.  
He non-suits Satan's suit or casts the same.  
He'll plead thy case, and not accept a fee.  
He'll plead sub forma pauperis for thee.

My case is bad. Lord, be my advocate.  
My sin is red: I'm under God's arrest.  
Thou hast the hint of pleading; plead my state.  
Although it's bad, Thy plea will make it best.  
If Thou wilt plead my case before the king,  
I'll wagon-loads of love and glory bring.