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*"vita vestra abscondita est cum Christo in Deo"*  
Colossians 3:3

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## Something From Nothing

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Lawrence Semel

I was born and raised in Philadelphia and attended public school in that city. These were the days when Bible reading was a regular feature of school life. As I remember, the Bible reading consisted mostly of the reading of certain passages over and over again. Passages like Psalm 23, the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5 and 1 Corinthians 13 were regular favorites.

Why is the unbelieving world so attracted to certain passages of the Bible? Why this popularity with the world, for example, with the Sermon on the Mount? Geerhardus Vos offers us an answer. He writes about what he calls the “commonly held view” of men concerning a passage like the Sermon on the Mount. “It flatters [them] by taking for granted that [they] need no more than the presentation of this high ideal, and that Jesus does [them] the honour of thinking [them] capable of realizing [this high ideal] by [their] own natural goodness . . . it is not so much what people find in the Sermon on the Mount, it is what they congratulate themselves upon not finding there, that renders them thus enamored of its excellence. It is because they dislike the story of the helplessness of sin, of man’s utter condemnation in the sight of God, and the insistence upon the necessity of the cross . . . that they . . . adopt as their exclusive creed a portion of the gospel from which in their opinion these offensive things are absent.”<sup>1</sup>

What Vos says here about the popularity of the Sermon on the Mount with unbelief is the same reason they like 1 Corinthians 13. When the world uses 1 Corinthians 13 as an example of the Bible as literature or read it at their wedding ceremonies or print it on their greeting cards, it is used in a way that rips the passage from the gospel context in which it appears in Paul’s letter and from the whole gospel story of the redemption of fallen sinners by God’s grace in Christ. And since this famous chapter makes no mention of Christ, the gospel, sin or repentance or any such things, they think they find the apostle in 1 Corinthians 13 appealing to their own innate goodness and to their own ability to love as this chapter describes. The way they read it, Paul flatters and honors them in 1 Corinthians 13 by assuming that they are able to love as this passage directs.

For the world, 1 Corinthians 13 declares that man is someone of worth before God. He is someone that God must reckon with. When God asks us to love, man is able from his own nature, from his own inherent abilities, to love as the passage describes. And when man by his own ability loves as described, God then becomes indebted to him and owes him a reward. Man in his sin and rebellion, ever since the fall, insists before God that he is “something.” My religion, my ethics and my deeds are things that I perform before you O God. I am really “something” and you must reckon with me and pay me what you owe me for the “something” that I am.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hungering and Thirsting after Righteousness,” *Grace and Glory* (1994) 27.

Is man “something” before God as described above or is he “nothing” as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13? In 1 Corinthians 13:2, Paul writes, “...if I do not have love, I am nothing.” Do our own good works merit or earn God’s favor? Are we really religiously and ethically impressive in God’s sight? Are we “something” before God? Or before God, are we “nothing”?

### **Something from Nothing**

Now you would think that after these many years since the Reformation, the Reformed branch of Protestantism at least, would have the relationship of faith and works clear. But as recent confusion of such movements as the New Perspective on Paul and Federal Vision demonstrate, confusion is still with us. For example, for some, salvation by grace alone and by faith alone properly dominates their thinking, but to the extent that good works seem hardly to be a concern. They are clear on Ephesians 2:8-9: “*For by grace you are saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast.*” But they forget the following verse, Ephesians 2:10: “*For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared before hand that we should walk in them.*”

But then on the other hand, the confusion takes this form. We correctly see that our justification is an act of God’s free grace in Christ—a gift from God. But when it comes to holiness, our sanctification is viewed as work that we do in gratitude for our salvation. Now we must not remove the aspect of gratitude from our sanctification, but when we think this way, then salvation by works that is blocked at the front door of our thinking by the doctrine of justification by faith alone, is allowed to gain entrance into our thought through the back door so that folks begin to see their good works as originating with them.

This is a great error. The fruit of good works originates from God not from men. Again, it is Vos who has reminded us of the great Reformed principle: “All of man’s work has to rest on an antecedent work of God” (“The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 242). Vos further explains: “When the Reformed takes the obtaining of salvation completely out of man’s hands, he does this so that the glory which God gets from it might be uncurtailed” (ibid., p. 247). Ultimately then, in the deepest sense, for Paul our good works are not ours but God’s. They are the result of God’s imprinting upon us his own character and virtues so that we reflect his glory back to him and reflect his glory out before others. Our works in sanctification are his work begun and continuing in us. They are his work in us, both to will and to do what pleases him. Both faith and good works are God’s gift of grace to us in Christ, received by us by faith alone. Both are aspects of the believer’s union with Christ. If we don’t see it this way, we will begin to see good works as outside of Christ and as outside of the grace of God.

The Westminster Standards are brilliant on this whole matter. The Shorter Catechism, Question 33 states that “...justification is an act of God’s free grace;” while Question 35 states that “...sanctification is the work of God’s free grace...” Therefore, our salvation in all of its aspects is all of grace. It is God’s work not ours. It is all rooted in Christ and in our union with Christ and nothing of our Christian faith is outside of him. If we forget this, then the church is in danger of adopting the same attitude that the world has about itself. That on account of our works, we are

“something” before God—that we are “really something.” No! There is nothing of our salvation by grace through faith that is outside of Christ or that is separate from our union with Christ. Calvin agrees with this speaking of the way of salvation: “First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us” (*Institutes*, 3.1.1).

The “love” that Paul speaks about in 1 Corinthians 13 is rooted in the love of God in Christ for lost sinners. Paul’s comments about love are grounded in the great gospel statement of God’s love in John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that who so ever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*” It is only after we observe God’s love for us in Christ that we know what love is. And only then does 1 Corinthians 13, or any other Biblical passage, call upon us to reflect that love of God to others. And in the call to reflect that love to others, we are at the same time assured by this same gospel of grace that this love of God for us in Christ will then also lead to God’s love in Christ at work in us—to enable us to love others as Christ loved us. In John 13, Jesus washes the disciple’s feet and he then tells them to follow his example and love one another as I have loved you. Christ is the example of love we are to follow. But also we must never forget what Jesus says in John 15:5: “*I am the vine you are the branches; he who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing.*”

This all comes before us in 1 Corinthians 13. Though this passage is often referred to as a command from the apostle for us to love, there are no imperatives in 1 Corinthians 13. The whole passage does not in the first place command us to love.

Rather the passage is in the indicative. It describes love and in so doing, it becomes clear that when Paul talks about love in this chapter, he is really talking about Christ; he is calling upon us as those united to Christ to love after the manner of Christ and to look to Christ to indwell us by his word and Spirit to love others as he loved us. Christians can only exhale love toward others after they have first have inhaled that love from God in Christ.

So, when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:2, “*Without love I am nothing,*” in fact he means, “without Christ I am nothing.” In 1 Corinthians 13, “love” stands for Christ. In some of the verses, a certain personification of love is taking place. Paul speaks of love as acting like a person. “*Love is patient, love is kind...etc.*” (vv. 4-7). Paul personifies love. And the person being referred to is Christ. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul is explaining “*the more excellent way*” and we know that Christ is “the way, the truth and the life.” In certain passages Paul will say “...*put on love...*”(Col. 3:14), while in other passages he says “...*put on Christ...*” (Rom. 13:14). Christ and love are used interchangeably. For Paul, love is a place in which we stand and Romans 8:39 assures us that “...*nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.*” Therefore, “love” is no mere human capability as the world likes to think. Rather “love” describes God’s love for sinners in Christ. It describes Christ and the new life that arises from being in Christ.

The Christian faith is all about union with Christ and Scripture is teaching us that anything outside of Christ is nothing and is worthless before God. Outside of Christ and his work, we are nothing before God. Any good deeds that I do that are outside of Christ profit me nothing. They

gain me nothing in the sight of God. Outside of Christ and union with him, I can never merit anything from God.

The religion of the world is one that trusts in man's own efforts, his own works, to save him. Worldly religion, the religion of fallen mankind, shares the common view of how religion works. Whether it is Roman Catholicism or Mormonism or Islam or modernism, the view of salvation is the same. If you do more good stuff than bad stuff then God owes you a reward. It is a religion of human achievement that leads a person to conclude "I'm something." I'm something before God and God owes me a reward for the "something" that I am.

But in 1 Corinthians 13:2 , we have Paul's confession of faith and the confession of faith of every true believer. He insists that without love, without Christ, we are nothing before God. All manner of giftedness, all manner of good deeds, apart from Christ, profit me nothing. This is the basis of a true Christian confession that as a sinner, without love, without Christ, outside of Christ and his saving work, "I am nothing." No one gains access to the kingdom of God apart from this humility. And it is only God's redeeming grace in Christ that can make something out of nothing. "Without love, I am nothing." Apart from Christ, outside of Christ, "I am nothing." It is only redemption in Christ that takes the "nothing" that I am and makes me into "something" in God's sight.

### **The Corinthian Problem – Boasting**

Paul disciplines himself to see the Corinthians as "...*those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling...*" (1:2). In Christ, they have been sanctified. They have been separated from the world and consecrated to God. Their testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in them (1:6). They are not lacking in any spiritual gift (1:7). They enjoy fellowship with God's Son (1:9). Paul believes their confessions of faith in Christ and he takes them at their word.

But the church in Corinth has all sorts of problems too. Having been separated from the world and consecrated to God, they keep bringing the world back over into the church. They are saved by grace, but the Corinthians have fallen into the trap of boasting before God. They have begun to see their religious giftedness, their religious service, their religious life, as works that they do, as things that make them "something" before other men, that make them something to be recognized in the church, and worst of all that make them something before God.

Therefore, the Corinthians are becoming rather impressed with themselves, impressed with their giftedness, with their knowledge, with their wisdom, with their Christian lives. They are impressed with what they do and with all that they have. Therefore, in this letter, Paul has to rebuke them for their pride and for their boasting. He has to remind them that their salvation is all of grace. In 1 Corinthians 4:7 he writes: "*What do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*" They have spiritual gifts and they have good works, but they have begun to view those gifts and good works as things they do, things that originate with them apart from and outside of Christ. They are pointing to themselves and they are boasting about themselves.

Worldly religion boasts of itself and its own ability to save itself by its own works. It needs no Savior, it needs no Christ and it sees man as “something” before God who can earn God’s favor. And like the world, the Corinthians are becoming boastful in themselves. They begin to look at and see their religious gifts, their religious faith, their devotion and sacrifice, as their efforts, viewed apart from Christ, viewed as outside of Christ and outside of God’s grace. They see the things they do as things that originate with them. They are boastful, proud and arrogant. They believe that they are really “something” before God. They think highly of themselves, that they are wise, mighty and noble. Again, Paul has to rebuke them. 1 Corinthians 1:26ff.: *“For consider your calling brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen...that no man should boast before God... but by his doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”* In their boasting about themselves, they are contradicting the basic Christian confession, that as fallen, wicked and undeserving sinners, we are “nothing.”

But let’s be clear. Do we, as Christians, practice good works? Yes! We must be diligent to practice good deeds, but we must never point to ourselves as the root and origin of such deeds, but always and only point to Christ. Christ in us is the producer of love. He is the producer of the good works in us, so that the glory is his. Yes indeed, we get a reward. We are crowned with the crown of life. But the church knows that the basis of her reward is Christ and his work (for us and in us). In Revelation 2:10, Christ tells the church: *“...be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* In Revelation 4:4, John sees the church in heaven with crowns of gold on their heads. But in Revelation 4:10, the twenty-four elders representing the whole church *“...fall down before him who sits on the throne and they worship him who lives forever and ever and they cast their crowns before the throne saying, worthy art thou, our Lord and our God to receive glory and honor and power.”* The church casts its crowns at the feet of Jesus because she knows that apart from Christ she is nothing and that even the good deeds she pursues are the result of Christ in them, working the will for good deeds and the power to perform them. It is only God’s grace that takes the “nothing” that we are and turns us into “something.” But even though God in his grace in Christ treats us as “something,” still, the essential mark of true believers is their confession that apart from Christ and his work for us and his work in us, we in ourselves are “nothing.”

The Corinthians thought they were “something” before God because of their spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy and faith (1 Cor. 13:1-2). In verses 1-2, Paul uses exaggeration to make his point. I could have tongues even to the point of angel speech (there is no such thing). I could know all mystery and all knowledge (only God knows all) and I could have faith to the extent of being able to move mountains (to unmake the creation, which only God can do). I could be that supernaturally gifted, but if I have not love—if I have not Christ, then “I am nothing” before God and such giftedness profits me nothing with God.

Furthermore, in verse 3, Paul asks, What about acts of charity? Surely, doing acts of charity makes us “something” in the sight of God. But, Paul writes: *“And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor,...but do not have love, it profits me nothing.”* He is still using exaggeration. Does

the Bible direct us to be charitable? Yes! But does the Bible direct us to dispossess ourselves of all possessions? No! If I give all my possessions to feed the poor, then I become one of the poor in need of charity. But here Paul says that even if he were charitable to the point of renouncing possessions altogether, even if he practiced charity to this exaggerated extent, without love, without Christ, I am nothing.

The Corinthians are concerned to do acts of charity. But they are beginning to boast in their acts of charity to others as though they originate with them. And they think that such acts of charity make them “something” before God. Paul says that even the most costly and dramatic charity towards others, if done without love, if done without Christ, apart from faith and union with Christ—these are nothing and profit me nothing before God.

### **J. Gresham Machen**

In the 1930's, J. Gresham Machen objected to the Foreign Missions publication entitled “Rethinking Missions.” In this publication, the committee was favoring a missions program for the church that moved away from preaching the gospel of salvation of lost sinners to the nations, to a program of social and economic aid. For Machen, this was nothing less than another gospel. It was mere moralism. Such efforts, Machen said, are nothing before God and they profit the doer nothing. Christianity is not moralism and moralism is no gospel. It cannot save!

By all means, we must have deeds of charity. But they must be done in love. They must be done out of our faith in Christ and seen and understood that they result from Christ at work in and through us. Indeed, genuine faith in Christ is no dead faith, but is a working faith—a faith working through love. But if they are done without love, outside Christ and the kingdom of salvation, then we are nothing before God. They profit me nothing! They do not earn or merit anything from God.

Paul adds in verse 3, what about acts of sacrifice? “...and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.” There are people, who, out of devotion to their religion or to their cause, are willing to sacrifice much. A few are even willing to sacrifice to the extent of dying for their cause (Islamic terrorists). And those willing to make such a sacrifice would certainly boast about it before God and expect that it would earn a reward from him (the seventy virgins). A person, Paul says, might even have such dedication to a cause. But such sacrifice that is outside of Christ and his redemptive kingdom is nothing before God and of no profit before him. They merit nothing from God. They earn nothing from him.

Machen served in World War I with the YMCA. After the war, he expressed his concern about the chest thumping pride and boasting of the nation. Our army had beaten the Huns. Many had sacrificed to achieve that victory. But the nation was saying of that sacrifice that everyone one of us by such sacrifice can do more than enough to secure our souls before God. Now Machen meant no disrespect to the returning troops or to their service or to their sacrifice. But he knew another gospel when he saw it. He agreed with Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13:3, when the apostle says that there is no self-sacrifice that we can perform that achieves such a thing. Even if I deliver my body to be burned, even if my sacrifice were to that extent—if it is done outside of love, outside of Christ and union with him, it profits me nothing.



## Conclusion

Here is Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Gifts, acts of charity, acts of sacrifice, done without love, done without Christ, done apart from faith in Christ, profit me nothing. They are nothing in God's sight and they gain or merit nothing from him.

You and I come into the kingdom of God when we confess that we are "nothing". In the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, new members confessing Christ are asked: "Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God..." Far from maintaining before God that we are something, instead we abhor and humble ourselves before him. O Lord, we are nothing before you and we can boast of nothing in ourselves. The new member further confesses that he does "...not trust in himself for salvation but in Jesus Christ alone." This confession that we are nothing before God and that for my salvation Christ is everything is the requirement of a true confession by which we gain entrance into the kingdom of God. It must be your confession!

You gain entrance into the kingdom by confessing that you are nothing. But then as a citizen of that kingdom by God's grace in Christ, you rejoice in the knowledge that God has taken you and me who are "nothing" and made us into "something" most wonderful and glorious in his sight. In Christ, in the kingdom, you are a child of God and you are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. But the nature and character of the kingdom that we belong to now confronts us. God has made us into "something" in Christ and now our calling as citizens of his kingdom is to make ourselves "nothing" before him and before others.

This is what God himself does. He is the greatest "something" there is. But he loves his people and makes himself nothing in the interest of helping and serving them. In the garden for instance, God says of Adam, "...it is not good that man is alone, I will make him a helper" (Gen. 2:18). Here God makes Adam's good, his mission. God, who is the greatest something, makes himself nothing—makes himself the servant to others. This is the nature of God and the character of his kingdom. This is the more excellent way! This is the new mode of existence in Christ! This is the way of love, the way of the kingdom of God! This is the way of Christ!

Jesus observes the love of the Father and the love character of the kingdom, and he emulates it. And he who is "something" makes himself nothing in service to God and in service to his people. In Philippians 2, Paul puts it this way: "...that though he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant," he emptied himself. The KJV says: "he made himself of no reputation." Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, has all the rights and prerogatives of deity. But he who is the greatest "something," makes himself to be "nothing" in the interest of serving his Father's will and serving for the redemption of his people. That is the nature and character of God and his kingdom. It is the more excellent way. It is the place called love, where those who by grace have been turned into "something." They now make themselves to be "nothing" in this service for the good and blessing of others.

What about you? You gained entrance into the kingdom by confessing you are nothing before God. Christ is everything to you. You now belong to that kingdom where God in his grace in Christ has made you to be something. But now in that kingdom, in that realm, in that place called love, what do you do with the “something” you have become in Christ? Following the pattern of the Godhead itself, you and I make ourselves to be “nothing” in the interest of the good, blessing and betterment of others. Adam was the head of his wife in the garden. He was “something.” By observing God, he learns to make himself “nothing” in the interest of her good and blessing. It is that lesson that every Christian husband must learn and emulate.

And in the church, let every church member who confesses that they are “nothing” remember that they are, by God’s grace, wonderful “somethings” in Christ. And let the church be the place where those who are “something” make themselves “nothing” in the interest of serving God in Christ and serving the good and the blessing of others. Redeemed by the grace of God in Christ, we are a kingdom of “somethings,” who make ourselves “nothings,” in the interest of serving God, serving the church, serving one another and serving even a lost and dying world. When we do that, by God’s grace in Christ, well now, that’s really something!!!

## Deadly Fires versus Living Waters

Jeremiah 2:12-13

James T. Dennison, Jr.

The prophet Jeremiah stands astride the great reversal—the great undoing, the great regression. His forty-year career bridges the last days of Judah in Jerusalem and the first days of Judah exiled in Babylon. He experiences the twilight of Judah’s national freedom and life; he is eye-witness to the dawn of Judah’s national enslavement and death. Jeremiah lives through the great reversal—the reversal of *the* mighty act of salvation in the Old Testament—the reversal of the exodus from Egypt (“I brought your forefathers out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”—Jer. 34:13). Jeremiah lives through the reverse exodus—the return to bondage (“Judah was led away into exile from its land—the people whom Nebuchadnezzar carried away into exile”—Jer. 52:27-28). The return to bondage is via destruction and death—the destruction of Jerusalem, the death of thousands upon thousands of Judeans (“Thus says the Lord . . . I will destroy the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem . . . [this] valley [shall be] called the valley of Slaughter”—Jer. 13:9 with 7:32).

The great act of judgment in the Old Testament is the destruction of Jerusalem in the days of the prophet Jeremiah. Destruction and captivity—exilic captivity. A return to a strange land—a descent into alien territory—disenfranchisement and expatriation. 586 B.C.—a confrontation with the last things: with final judgment, with the final enemy; 586 B.C.—an encounter with death—bloody, vicious, fiery, crushing, rapacious, wasting, rotting death—death’s devouring face stares out upon Judah and Jerusalem. Inexorably, irresistibly, irremediably, death scowls, death sneers, death smirks with eschatological finality (“The destroyers have come, for the sword of the Lord is devouring from one end of the land . . . to the other”—Jer. 12:12). Death’s grim stare of inevitability!—only in Jeremiah’s Jerusalem 586 B.C., this inevitability is the foolish product of sin. The wages of sin is death, but only fools bring it upon themselves.

### A Nation of Fools

Judah and Jerusalem were full of fools in Jeremiah’s day. Foolish political leaders; foolish theological pretenders; foolish social and cultural icons. All these foolish political, religious and cultural paragons thought they were safe, indestructible, insuperable under the shadow of the Temple of Solomon (“The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these”—Jer. 7:4). Never mind that we have befouled the divine temple with idols and the blood of human sacrifices. Never mind that we have killed our babies on altars in Jerusalem defying God’s declaration—thou shalt not kill thy babies (“They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons [and their daughters, 32:35] in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded [declares the Lord], nor did it ever enter my mind”—Jer. 19:5; cf. 7:31). Never mind that our infanticide has served our convenience, promoting our unhindered life-style, even purchasing our pleasure—more of our own pleasure by destroying our babies on the altars of the gods of our age—our freedom of choice! Our political and religious leaders have guided

us to embrace and endorse this villainy. They have assured us that nothing can interfere with the sacrifice of our babies because we are invulnerable—we are unstoppable—we are the wave of the future. We have the ark of the covenant; we have the seal and guarantee of our free choice; we have the temple of the Lord—and whatever we do, god will preserve us.

As the flames ascended from the Temple of Jerusalem, as Jeremiah who had prophesied it looked upon the fiery blaze engulfing Holy of Holies and city precincts, it was clear that the Lord God would judge death-sin with death-final. He would repay evil for evil; murder for murder; blood for blood. The foolish politicians of Jeremiah's day defied the Lord of life and he sentenced them to death.

The foolish religious leaders of Jeremiah's day taught the masses that freedom was the greatest blessing ("We are free to roam," they say. "We will no more come to thee, O Lord"—Jer. 2:31). Freedom to fornicate; freedom to inebriate; freedom to prevaricate. Religious values were transvalued by the priests and priestesses of Jeremiah's day. Evil was called good; good was called evil. Prostitution as religious worship was called blessed; worship of the Lord God in chaste devotion was called repressed, inhibited, illiberal. And as the seduction advanced, the wine flowed—flowed in abundance—orgiastic abundance—priests and priestesses leading worshippers in sexual devotions, sexual perversion, sexual abandon ("You are a harlot with many lovers," says the Lord. "Where have you not been violated? You have polluted the land with your harlotry and wickedness—on every high hill, under every green tree, you have lain down as a harlot. Woe to you, O Jerusalem. I have seen on the hills and in the fields the lewdness of your prostitution—you snuff the wind like a wild donkey in heat"—Jer. 3:1, 2; 2:20; 13:27; 2:24).

And as the sacred whoredom spread, fueled by alcohol-induced abandon ("all the inhabitants of Jerusalem [are filled] with drunkenness"—Jer. 13:13)—as the sacred prostitution spread, fueled by inhibition-reducing wine, the promises of the fear of the Lord became confessions, yea professions of confidence in the flesh, in the wine jug, in the pledge to the gods of the Baal shrines, the Moloch temples, the Kemosh sanctuaries, the idolatrous groves and high places of Judah. The religious and cultural leaders of Jeremiah's day were progressive folk—god could be found in sacred sex, in the dregs of the wine cup, in the shrines of the multi-cultural and pluralistic gods. They even jeered and sneered at the name of the Lord God Jehovah.

And what of . . . the judicial leaders of Jeremiah's day—who taught the theory of living law—law alive to the contemporary cultural context. No, said these judges and barristers, law is not absolute—never absolute law because never absolute truth or absolute lawgiver. So taking away the livelihood of the stranger, the widow and the orphan was legalized by contextualizing the law to oppress the helpless—to bribe the powerful so as to suborn legal possession of the possessions, the property, the patrimony of the weak (Thus says the Lord, "Practice justice between a man and his neighbor . . . do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery and swear falsely?"—Jer. 7:5-9). These judicial leaders, in cahoots with other cronies of this society, were using the law to mistreat, to rob, even to murder the powerless. The courts of Judah and Jerusalem became the haunts of tyrants dedicated to redefining the law of the land for their own benefit and the benefit of their cronies in the palace, in the temple, in the academy and in the society. Foolish judicial

activists of Jeremiah's Judah and Jerusalem turned the law—even the absolute law of the absolute God—turned the law into a license to benefit themselves and their class of friends and allies. It was all about power—not at all about liberty.

When the swords and spears and arrows and fire brands of Nebuchadnezzar's army began to cut a swath of death through Judah and Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Jeremiah wept—his eyes ran down with tears (“Night and day, my eyes weep bitterly and flow down with tears because the flock of the Lord has been taken captive”—Jer. 13:17; cf. 14:17). His proclamation of God's wrath had been ignored; his pleas for repentance had been ridiculed; his solitary stance for the Word of the Lord had brought him death threats, beatings, imprisonment, near suffocation in a muddy cistern, ostracism and ridicule. But the death of Jerusalem and Judah—the bloody devastation of the temple, the royal palace of the Davidides, the halls of justice, the shrines of the multi-cultural gods—the bloody death of the nation of Judah in the days of the prophet Jeremiah 586 B.C. was solely the result of a refusal to listen to the voice of God through his servants, the prophets (“I have sent you all my servants the prophets, sending them again and again saying, ‘Turn now every man from his evil way and amend your deeds and do not go after other gods to worship them’ . . . but you have not inclined your ear or listened to me . . . Therefore my wrath and my anger were poured out and burned in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, so that they have become a ruin and a desolation as it is this day”—Jer. 35:15 with 44:6).

Indeed, summarizing the dreadful message of the prophet Jeremiah, the great act of God's judgment in the Old Testament is the death and destruction of Jerusalem 586 B.C. A dreary litany of destruction and death both prophesied and realized over the forty-year career of this weeping prophet. The 52 chapters of the book of Jeremiah (not to mention the 5 chapters of his Lamentations) echo and re-echo with this mantra of warning (Repent! Before it is too late!), prediction (destruction is at hand), actualization (my eyes run down with tears as I behold the death of the city, the death of the nation, the death of a disobedient, idolatrous, whorish people). Virtually one entire generation of Jewish culture and society dead-ended with Babylonian swords, fire, char layers, exile, bondage. In chapter after chapter of this largest book of the Old Testament prophets, we read the depressing rehearsal of death, death and more death. Judah forsakes the Lord God—fountain of living waters—and digs out cisterns—broken cisterns—digs out for herself cisterns which hold no water at all—no water—none!!

### **Alternative Litany**

But there is an alternative litany—a litany which emerges from God's self-revelation. Note his self-designation in v. 13 of our text: “me, the fountain of living waters.” Here is a litany chanted by the Creator of the source of living waters. Streams of living water originating with God the Lord. The well-head, the fountain-head of this life-giving water is the Lord God. He is the genesis—the beginning of these streams of vivifying water; he is the beginning—the genesis of these river-streams animated with life, rushing/streaming with life from the genesis, from the beginning, from the fountain-head, from the source, from the Creator of life—this active animator of living; this begetter of being, acting, moving; this generator of life; this originator of no death; this life-giving generator of animation; this originator of living something, living being, living creature; this giver of the breath of life.

Active water, living water from the active and living source of that water. Not lifeless himself—this maker of living water flows with life, courses with life, rushes with life from his own self-animating, life-eternal self. He is the genesis of himself and thus generates life outside himself; he alone, only he—the life; *the* life-source; *the* living source, the living life-source; vital source, vivifying origin—the makes-alive source because he is ever alive; the ever alive genesis of flowing waters of life: cool, refreshing, streams of life; God the Lord, the life-eternal genesis of eternal life-giving waters: streams, rivers—rivers, streams; waters flowing, rushing in sync with his life, coursing with life-eternal concurrent with his eternal life; streaming from the genesis of birth—new birth in water and Spirit; streaming from the genesis of rebirth—rebirth from eternal living waters—from the origin of eternal life-giving waters—from the eternal God of the eternal region of eternal living waters. Streams of living waters from the fountain—from the throne of God; rivers of the waters of life from beneath the throne; rivers of the waters of life from this glassy sea—drenching, refreshing, cooling, vivifying thirsty spirits, parched souls, lifeless hearts, dead psyches—making alive from the dead with living water, flooding water—water from the living God: living, streaming, flooding, drenching, over-flowing God—God eternal, God of heaven, God of no more judgment, no more destruction, no more fire—God of no more death!

### **Protological Jeremiah → Eschatological Jeremiah**

His self-revelation in the days of Jeremiah (the protological weeping prophet) is repeated in these last days by Jesus of Nazareth (the eschatological weeping prophet). The God who discloses himself to Jeremiah claims to be the source, the fountain-head, the well-spring of living water. Jesus of Nazareth discloses to a woman at a well in Samaria, “I will give you living water” (cf. John 4:10). Jesus gives what God is. God is the fountain of living water. Jesus, in co-equal relation, reveals that he gives living water. Co-equal gift from co-equal person. Jesus gifts water welling up to eternal life. No more thirst—never again; not ever thirsty after this living water Jesus gives flows into the soul, courses through the spirit—fills up and overflows the heart. And not only does Jesus give the living water, he claims to be the source of it. At the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7, Jesus declares that if anyone believes in him, out of his inner being will flow rivers of living water (John 7:38). From faith in Jesus, from believing in the Son of God—from co-equal fountain of living waters—rivers of life.

Jesus, Son of God, as active a genesis of this living water as the Lord God of Jeremiah. Jesus, Son of God, as animating, as vivifying an origin of living waters as God the Lord of the prophet Jeremiah. Jesus’ self-revelation is identical with, co-equal to the self-revelation of God himself—God who discloses himself to the prophet Jeremiah. In these last days, the God of living waters has become incarnate in his co-equal Son. He has borne witness that what his Father revealed through Jeremiah the prophet in the days of Josiah, he now reveals through his own incarnation in these last days. Jesus, the Son of God, is the fountain of living waters; he gives what God the Father gives; he is the genesis of streams of the river of life as his Father is. He and his Father are one: one in source of life eternal; one in origin of life eternal; one in fountain of living-water streams; streams flowing from eternity to eternity—flowing from life eternal, flowing to life eternal; water of life from God the Father and God the Son by the rebirth of God the Holy Spirit.

Water of life springing up into everlasting life. No more thirst in Christ Jesus; no more parched lips in Christ Jesus; no more dry mouth in Christ Jesus; no more longing for the waters of heaven

in Christ Jesus. Streams, rivers, fountains, floods of living water from the throne of God the Son, through God the Holy Spirit, to the praise of God the Father. Streams of water—living water—water of life—water of life eternal as God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Streams of water from the Creator of water-streams; from the sustainer of well-springs; from the consummator of glory-streams. Living water from eternal fountains of your soul—of Jeremiah’s soul—of the souls of thirsty hearts who long for and possess life—eternal life—possess *the* Life who is *the* water—living water; God’s Son, the Lord Jesus, the eschatological fountain of living waters.

### **Formulaic Litany**

Here is the alternate litany—the living litany of life eternal in Christ alone.

He is *the* Life in the face of death.

He is *the* Life in the face of destruction.

He is *the* Life in the face of tyrannical, duplicitous government.

He is *the* Life in the face of political corruption, connivance, incompetence.

He is *the* Life in the face of judicial injustice and stone-walling.

He is *the* Life in the face of social, moral and cultural degeneration.

He is *the* Life in the face of death inexorable as it rots its way into the body politic—social, economic, moral, cultural, religious, political.

Jesus is *the* Life—the fountain of life; the well-spring of living waters. All else—all else is death; death and broken cisterns. All else is deadly fires, not living waters—in Jeremiah’s days and in our portion of these last days.

## John Ball on Covenant Blessings<sup>1</sup>

Under this covenant [the covenant of God with Israel], the natural seed of *Abraham* bore the face of the church and state, and God had promised abundance of temporals<sup>2</sup>, and of spiritual a scantling<sup>3</sup>; but all [persons] under the outward administration of the covenant, were not in like manner partakers of the blessings promised in covenant. For some had their part in temporal blessings only, and the outward ordinances; others were partakers of the spiritual blessings promised. But whatever good thing any of them enjoyed either temporal or spiritual, it was conferred upon them freely according to the covenant of grace, and not for the dignity of their works. It is true, the promise is conditional, if they obey, they shall reap the good things of the land: but obedience was not a causal condition, why they should inherit the land . . . So that herein there appears no intexture<sup>4</sup> of the covenant of works with the covenant of grace, nor any moderation of the law to the strength and power of nature for the obtaining of outward blessings. But rather that God out of his abundant goodness is pleased freely to confer outward blessings promised in the covenant upon some that did not cleave to him unfeignedly, that he might make good his promise unto the spiritual seed, which by word and oath he had confirmed unto the fathers.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation is from Ball's *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace: wherein the gradual breakings out of Gospel-grace from Adam to Christ are clearly discovered, the differences betwixt the Old and New Testament are laid open, divers errors of Arminians and others are confuted; the nature of Uprightness, and the way of Christ in bringing the soul into Communion with himself: together with many other points, both doctrinally and practically profitable, are solidly handled* (1645) 142. We have modernized spelling as necessary and added explanations in [ ]. Online here: [http://books.google.com/books?id=Fvk2AAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=john+ball+covenant&ei=EsLZSY\\_sJ47CIQSP94DECQ#PPA92,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=Fvk2AAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=john+ball+covenant&ei=EsLZSY_sJ47CIQSP94DECQ#PPA92,M1)

John Ball (1585-1640) was a Puritan theologian whose work on the covenant of grace was published at the time of the meeting of the Westminster Assembly (June 12, 1645) by Simeon Ash with commendation from five additional members of the Assembly—Edward Reynolds, Daniel Cawdrey, Edmond Calamy, Thomas Hill and Anthony Burgess. “Because his treatise appeared during the sitting of the Westminster Assembly, just at the time when it set itself to framing the confession, and because it moreover borrowed from Ball in the standards, one naturally supposes that his influence can be detected in its formulation of the doctrine of the covenant” (Geerhardus Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (1980) 241).

<sup>2</sup> i.e., temporal blessings.

<sup>3</sup> very small amount; cf. OED.

<sup>4</sup> intermixture; weaving in.



## **The Eschatological Sin: The Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit in Mark 3:29**

Benjamin W. Swinburnson

Few biblical passages have been the occasion for more confusion than Mark 3:29: "...but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." Saints with sensitive consciences are often tempted to think that somehow, at some time, they must have committed this very sin. They are not alone in this struggle. Even the great Christian allegorist and theologian John Bunyan (of *Pilgrim's Progress* fame) struggled long and hard on this very point. How much more do we lesser saints struggle, who feel much farther behind in our progress to the celestial city.

It is natural to understand how this statement of Jesus has such a strong effect in the personal and experiential realm of the believer. After all, there is nothing more precious to the believer than Christ's gift of the forgiveness of his sins. The thought that such a gift might be lost or irrevocably surrendered should unsettle even the most complacent saint! However, a narrow focus on the experiential realm may rob the believer of the proper understanding of the passage along with the personal comfort which flows from the assurance of Christ's irrevocable gift of forgiveness to his elect. The key to understanding both the nature of this sin and identifying those who have committed it lies in another realm. Without denying the clear experiential implications of this sin, the key to its proper interpretation lies in the redemptive-historical arena of New Testament eschatology.

Our thesis is that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an unpardonable sin specifically because it is an eschatological sin. It is committed when the reality of heaven, having miraculously and undeniably intruded upon the plane of history, is high-handedly attributed to the work of Satan. It is committed by those who have been specially prepared to identify such activity as a sign of the kingdom, but in stubborn jealousy and pride irrationally refuse to accept it. This suggests that it is redemptive-historically unique to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, and the immediate context of Mark 3:29. Before expounding and defending our thesis, we will first set Mark 3:29 in the broader context of the structure of Mark 1-6, and the narrower context of chapter 3:20-35.

### **Structure of Mark 1:16-2:15**

After the prologue of Mark 1:1-15, the first subsection of the gospel runs from 1:16-2:15. It begins with Jesus' call of the first disciples to "follow me" (1:17), and it ends with a parallel call to Levi to "follow me" (2:14). Without being able to fully outline the details, the material in between these two call-narratives is carefully arranged in a reverse parallelism that can be summarized as follows:

A - Call of the First Disciples to “follow me (1:16-20)

B - Jesus Demonstrates his “authority” in his Teaching and over Demons (1:21-28)

C- Jesus’ Healing Touch for One and for Many (1:29-34)

Declaration of Purpose for Jesus’ Public Ministry: Preaching (1:35-39)

C’ - Jesus’ Healing Touch for One and for Many (1:40-45)

B’ - Jesus Demonstrates his “authority” to Forgive Sins (2:1-12)

A’ - Call of Levi to “follow me” (2:13-15)

The focus of this section (as with the rest of the gospel) is the revelation of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, the Son of God (1:1). Although the theme of “conflict” is relatively absent from this section, we see it subtly introduced in the questions raised by the Jews: “Why does this man speak *blasphemies*, who can forgive sins but God alone? (2:7).” This anticipates the questions posed by the Jewish leaders in the next section, and also anticipates the theme of blasphemy in 4:22-23. The contrast of 3:29 could not be starker: though the Jews accuse him of blaspheming God, Jesus accuses the Jews of blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

The next section runs from 2:16-3:12. It consists of a chain-linked series of narratives that are characterized by a progressively heightened conflict between the Jews and Jesus. The conflict is dramatically heightened by a series of antagonistic questions from the lips of the Jews.

1. In 2:16, the Scribes of the Pharisees ask: “How is it that he eats with tax collectors and sinners?”
2. In 2:18, the disciples of John and of the Pharisees ask: “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”
3. In 2:24, the Pharisees ask: “Behold, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”

Interestingly, in the next pericope the Jews are silenced (3:4), and deliberate with the Herodians as to how they might kill Jesus (3:6). The conflict that gradually heightened has now reached a breaking point: the Jews are going to kill Jesus!

After this series of chain-linked conflict narratives, Mark connects us to another carefully arranged subsection. As with 1:16-2:15, this section is also delimited by a strong parallel *inclusio*. It begins and ends with the disciples of Jesus. We have the calling of the Twelve in 3:14-19, and the sending out of the same Twelve in 6:7-13. The material in between can be analyzed in terms of the following chiastic arrangement:

A - Call of the Twelve (3:14-19)

B - Questions Related to Jesus' Family and the Source of his Power (3:20-35)

C - Three Parables: the Sower, the Growing Seed, the Mustard Seed (4:1-34)

Center: Jesus' Revelation of Divine Power on the Sea (4:35-41)

C' - Three Miracles: Gerasene Demoniac, Woman with Blood, Jairus' Daughter (5:1-43)

B' - Questions Related to Jesus' Family and the Source of his Power (6:1-6)

A' - Sending out of the Twelve (6:7-13)

It is in this subsection that the narrative regarding the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is found, to which we now turn our attention.

### **Structure of Mark 3:20-35**

We have noted that Mark's gospel has thus far been tied together using two sandwiches and one chain. The sandwiches of 1:16-2:15 are 3:14-6:13 linked together by the chain of 2:16-13:13. Now in Mark 3:20-25, we have a little sandwich within this bigger sandwich. Jesus' statement regarding blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is sandwiched between two brief narratives which deal with Jesus' family relations.

Jesus and Family Relations (3:20-21)

Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit (3:22-30)

Jesus and Family Relations (3:31-34)

This arrangement is not accidental or arbitrary. In 3:21, Jesus' own family members level an accusation of insanity against him. This anticipates the accusation of being in league with Beelzebul in 3:22. Moreover, Jesus' relationship to the Jewish scribes of Jerusalem (3:22) could also be construed as one of (more distant) family relations. In other words, both his immediate family and his national family accuse him of insanity and demon possession. The gospel of John put it this way: "He came to his own, and his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). Jesus therefore redefines family relations (both immediate and national) for the Christian believer. The disciples are thus reminded of the call to leave father, mother, sister and brother to follow Christ in the Kingdom and family of God (cf. Mark 1:20; 10:29).

While the accusation of Jesus' insanity by his own family members may seem bad enough, the Scribes and Pharisees take it a step further. We note again how the "conflict" theme in the chain-linked section of 2:15-3:12 is reprised here. Previously, the Jews' conflict with Jesus developed by way of antagonistic questions: "Why does he eat with sinners?"; "Why don't you

fast?"; "Why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" Now the antagonism comes boldly in the form of a direct accusation and charge: "He is possessed by Beelzebul...by the prince of demons he casts out demons." In other words, the series of antagonistic questions come to a climax in a direct statement and charge against Jesus.

This mirrors Jesus' response to the Jews, which began with a direct statement followed by a series of counter-questions. Jesus showed the absurdity and irrationality of the Jews' questions by appealing to logic, Scripture, and even their own teachings. He first answers them with a direct statement: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." He then answers each question from the Jews with a series of questions of his own: "Shall the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?"; "Have you never read what David did...[who] ate the bread of the presence?"; "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm?" So also here in 3:23: "How can Satan cast out Satan?" Each statement and counter-question draws out the absurd irrationality of the Jewish charges against Jesus.

### **The Eschatological Sin: Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit**

This irrationality is no more pointed than in Jesus' response to the charge of possession by Beelzebul. A house divided cannot stand. If Satan is casting out Satan, then his kingdom is coming to an end. With these words, Jesus points to the element of truth in their absurd charge. The Jews are correct that Jesus' miraculous activity is a sign that the initial eschatological terminus (end-point) of Satan's kingdom has arrived. All of the previous miraculous exorcisms performed by Jesus (1:21-28, 32, 39, 3:11) are evidence of this very fact. What is true of Jesus' healing of the leper in 1:40-45 is true of all of Jesus' miraculous activity: it is a "testimony" to the Jews that the kingdom of heaven has arrived, and that Satan's rule is at an end. Jesus' prior exorcisms are thus an outworking of the narrative thread established in Jesus' victory over Satan in the wilderness temptation of 1:12. Because Jesus has issued a fatal blow to the strong man, he is now plundering his entire house (3:27).

Jesus' casting out demons is therefore a sign of the eschatological coming of the kingdom of God and the end of the kingdom of Satan. The devil has been bound such that he can deceive the nations no longer (cf. Revelation 20:3). Instead of the tyranny of the devil, there is the glorious freedom of the children of God. Instead of self-mutilation and self-destruction, there is sanity and peace (the Gerasene demoniac). Instead of the putrid filth of uncleanness, there is the cleansing purity of the Holy One of God (1:21-28). Instead of the punishment of death and hell, there is the gift of heaven and eternal life.

All of this has been squarely set before the eyes and ears of the Jewish leaders—the scribes and the Pharisees. They cannot deny that Jesus performed these miraculous exorcisms. So they do what hardened men always do in such circumstances: they demonize their opponent! If we cannot answer his plain, rational words, we will tar and feather him with lies so that the people will not leave us to follow him! Deep-seated jealousy thus motivates and controls the hearts of the Jewish leaders: we cannot lose our constituency to Jesus! For when they leave, our power, wealth, and influence will be diminished. Our students will leave our seminaries, and we rabbis will be left with diminished salaries! This revelation about the heart of the Jewish leaders is nothing new in Mark's gospel. We already know that they have determined to kill Jesus (3:6).

Jesus fulfills God's plan to bring men life, but his own Jewish brethren plot to bring him to death!

The Jewish leaders are thus in a unique state in the history of redemption. They are heirs of the revelation that was preparatory to the coming of the kingdom of God. They had been schooled in its rudimentary principles in the revelation of the old covenant. Among all men, they were the ones in the best position to recognize the signs of the times. Further, they had beheld with their own eyes the miraculous activity of Jesus in healings and exorcisms. Their contact with this revelation was not merely indirect, but direct. This miraculous activity was a sign not only that the kingdom of heaven had arrived, but was also revelatory of its very character. In the miraculous work of Jesus, they saw a preview of heaven—with no physical maladies, no demon possession, and no death. The power and character of heaven had intruded upon them in the ministry of Jesus, but they blatantly rejected it. It was manifested in what we might call a sub-eschatological form, but at its core it was a revelation of what was truly eschatological. In other words, although the form of revelation through miraculous activity would not continue after the age of the apostles, the content was nevertheless reflective of the nature of heaven.

Further, note especially what Jesus says about the specific sin committed by the Jews. It is a blasphemy not against the Messiah, but against the Holy Spirit. As the other gospels make clear, words against the Son of Man may be forgiven, but not the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31-32; Luke 12:10). In other words, the person against whom the Jews sin is not Christ, but the Holy Spirit. Here Jesus anticipates the rest of the Synoptic teaching about the eschatological aspect of the Holy Spirit, which will be developed more fully in the teaching of Paul. In the Synoptics, the agency of the Spirit in Jesus' casting out demons is a sign that the eschatological kingdom of God has intruded upon the plane of history: "If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28).

The eschatological aspect of the Holy Spirit is thus the key to interpreting the nature of this sin. To refer to it as the "eschatological sin" is not simply an occasion to use impressive theological vocabulary. It is simply the way Jesus himself refers to it in the Greek equivalent: "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit does not have forgiveness unto eternity (*eis ton aiona*), but is guilty of an eternal sin (*aioniou amartematos*)."

The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is therefore not committed when a poor, doubting believer struggles with some past sin, no matter how heinous. Such a Christian needs to be reminded of the clear demonstration of Jesus' authority to forgive sin in Mark 2:12. Jesus possesses authority as the God-man to forgive any sin committed against him. It is Jesus' authority—not the authority of our guilty conscience—that declares the final, ultimate word with respect to our sin. If we have believed in him, *all* transgressions are taken away. If we cry: "If you are willing, you can make me clean!" Jesus will assuredly answer: "I am willing. Be clean!" (Mark 1:40-42). Jesus' declaration about the unforgivable blasphemy against the Holy Spirit should not strike any fear into the heart of an elect saint sincerely sorry and remorseful for his sin. This sin is of such a character that it shows no remorse. The mere fact that one is concerned about having committed it is sufficient proof against such a claim.

If what we have argued above is correct, then it suggests that the unforgivable sin of Mark 3:22-30 is redemptive-historically unique. It is committed by the Jewish leaders who not only had special access to the preparatory revelation of the coming kingdom of heaven, but also had witnessed its special manifestation in the miraculous work of Jesus through the agency of the Holy Spirit. They saw indisputable evidence that could not be contradicted. They had seen heaven intrude upon the earth before their very eyes, but preferred to remain in the pit of hell! But they beheld the holiness of heaven, and called it unholy hell. They beheld the Spirit of God at work through the Prince of Life, and called him the Prince of Demons. In a word, they saw the undisputed work of the Holy Spirit, and attributed it to the work of Satan. This is eschatological blasphemy, indeed! Woe was pronounced upon Israel for calling “good” “evil” and “evil” “good” (Isa. 5:20). How much worse punishment is deserved by those who call “God” “Satan” and “Satan” “God”? Having rejected heaven when it intruded upon them before their eyes, they are consigned already to the irrevocable judgment of hell, where there is no forgiveness—no matter how loud the weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But the believer who has been called to follow Jesus; who has heard his wisdom come down from heaven and believed in his name; who has been touched by his saving power; who has had his uncleanness and death taken away; who has gone forth rejoicing and proclaiming the wondrous things that God has done for him—this believer has been irrevocably freed from this eternal punishment. He may often say, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). He may even be tempted to doubt, and fall into many grievous sins. But his precious Lord Jesus, who died for him when he was his enemy, will most certainly bear with him now that he has made him his friend. Though the forces of Beelzebub may muster their strength and assembly for a final battle, the shield of faith will guard him from all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

The strong man has been bound. Satan’s kingdom is coming to an eschatological end.

But the kingdom that Jesus brings will endure forever.

## Reviews

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James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. New York, NY: Free Press, 2007. 848 pp. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-7432-3587-7. \$21.00.

Kugel's book is very well written and clear. His purpose is to share with us all that he knows about the Hebrew Bible, at least in summary. Kugel goes through the Hebrew Bible from the beginning to the end. At each stage, he first provides the interpretation of the ancient interpreters. These primarily include Jewish sources, but Christians are also considered. Then he gives us the interpretation of "modern scholars". While Kugel may at first seem to some to be giving a dispassionate account of the views of different interpreters, it is clear as we progress that he accepts modern higher critical views. One is clearly left with the impression that higher criticism has gotten it right. That is, it has properly understood the various portions of the Hebrew Bible in their ancient context. This is the case, even though Kugel concludes the book telling us of the advantages for interpreting the text within the tradition of the ancient interpreters. At the same time, he claims that the ancient interpreters did not interpret the Bible the way the authors of the texts intended them to be interpreted. For the original authors wrote for their own times, not with a view to having their works canonized in the Hebrew Bible as we have it. However, when the Bible was compiled (along the lines of the documentary hypothesis), the texts took on a new meaning. And the ancient interpreters interpreted them in light of their canonical composition, with which the original authors were not familiar. Still, the interpretations of the ancient interpreters were and remain formative for Judaism (and Kugel might include Christianity here). Therefore, we should value their interpretations and allow them to inform our understanding of how we view the texts. At this point, readers may feel like they are left with a Neo-Orthodox form of Judaism. Kugel might not be directly influenced by existential philosophy. But he does suggest that in spite of the supposed cogency of higher criticism and the fact that the texts originally had a different meaning than that attributed to them by the Jewish faith, we should still value their traditional meanings. That is, we should still read the texts in the light of the ancient interpreters whose views were formative for later Judaism.

Because of its very readable style, we believe Kugel's book could have the effect of undermining the faith of many in the veracity of Scripture. It will probably lead some to embrace liberal forms of Judaism and Christianity and others to embrace different religions and atheism. The book will certainly not promote the classic Christian faith. But are we simply discounting its higher critical sympathies out of pure prejudice? We do not believe so.

Kugel presents many higher critical views as if they were universally accepted amongst all "modern scholars". However, for this to be true, he must limit his field of scholarship to modern *higher critical* biblical scholars. Outside this group, there are very meticulous historians that do not agree with the conclusions of these "modern" higher critical "scholars". Kenneth Kitchen and Edwin Yamauchi represent two examples of such historians. Space does not allow us to rehearse their criticisms of all the higher critical views dealt with in Kugel's book. After all, Kugel's book deals with the major higher critical views of most of the biblical books (though he gives the

Minor Prophets very short shrift). Still, as an example, we will summarize one of Kitchen's critiques of the higher critical consensus, namely their view of Noah's flood.

Before doing this, we should note that Kugel's book does not even reflect a knowledge of scholars like Kitchen or Yamauchi even though their painstaking historical research has seriously challenged many of the dubious historical claims of "modern scholars". It is here that the instance of the flood is representative of Kugel's approach. Without qualification, Kugel suggests that "modern scholars" believe the story of Noah and the flood in Genesis is built on the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. Since the Epic of Gilgamesh dates from around the twelfth or eleventh centuries B.C.E., we might also see another implication of this view. That is, higher critics also see this as more evidence that the Pentateuch was *not* written as early as it claims to be. However, Kitchen has shown that there is no compelling evidence that Genesis borrowed from the Gilgamesh Epic. Instead, the Epic of Gilgamesh itself borrows from a much earlier source—the Epic of Atra-khasis from around the eighteenth century B.C.E.<sup>1</sup> This and other evidence indicates that the story of the flood was a universal story throughout the Mesopotamian world of that time. Thus, there is no clear indication that Genesis borrowed from the Epic of Gilgamesh. Further, the Sumerian king lists are *interrupted* by the story of the flood, treating it as an actual historical event, not as a myth.<sup>2</sup> None of this evidence is even hinted at in Kugel's book.

Any honest inquirer should read both sides of the story. And reading a world-class Egyptologist like Kenneth Kitchen is a good place to start in evaluating the opinions of "modern scholars" about a whole host of issues presented in Kugel's book. That includes Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis (JEDP). This does not mean that Kitchen, Yamauchi or other historians of their caliber are flawless (consider Kitchen's late dating of the Exodus).<sup>3</sup> However, their excellent historical research often shines out over the poorer historical research from which many modern biblical scholars continue to support the documentary hypothesis and the evolutionary theory of Israel's religion.

This does not mean Kugel's book is without value for those who are trained to throw out its higher critical presuppositions. While I did not find as much literary critical insight into the biblical text as I had hoped, the book has other helpful content. Kugel has included a lot of material that sheds light on the ancient Jewish interpretations of various biblical texts and stories. And for this it is helpful. But that does not mean I would run out to buy the book.

Kugel, with all his erudition, has missed the heart of the Hebrew Bible which is the heart of the Scriptures as a whole—their redemptive-historical orientation. That is, they tell us the story of the good news of salvation, a salvation leading to eternal life in heaven. That life which Adam failed to attain, God now gives to his people who trust in him. The Bible unfolds this from its first presentation in Genesis 3:15, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman and

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<sup>1</sup> K. A. Kitchen, "The Old Testament in its Context: 1. From the Origins to the Eve of the Exodus." *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* 59 (Spring 1971): 3. Available at <http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of Kitchen's work, see James T. Dennison, Jr. *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (K. A. Kitchen) in *Kerux: The Journal of Northwest Theological Seminary* 20/2 (September 2005): 47-57. (Excerpt reprinted in *New Horizons* 26/10 [November 2005]: 23.)



between your seed and her seed. He shall bruise you on the head and you shall bruise him on the heel". This message unfolds throughout the pages of Scripture the way a plant grows and blossoms. The seed of the woman is seen in the seed of Seth and the seed of the serpent in the seed of Cain. This leads up to the days of the flood when Noah (the seed of the woman) triumphs over the seed of the serpent in the flood. After the scattering of Babel, God called one man, Abraham, as the seed of the woman, from whose seed the final seed of the woman shall come to bring redemption to his people. This seed is then focused in the line of Judah and then in that of David. And in spite of the fall of the house of David in exile, the Hebrew prophets look to the future, in which the final seed of David will bring salvation to the nations. He will bring the final (eschatological) day of eternal wrath and everlasting life in heaven. The only true fulfillment of this promise is found in Jesus Christ. Have the Jews ever promoted any other Messiah who has truly succeeded and fulfilled the ancient promises? No, Christ is that seed, as the gospels proclaim. And he alone fulfills all that the Hebrew Bible contained in substance and foretold in prophecy. In his death, he was bruised on the heel—a heel-wound from which he would rise. In death, he took upon himself the eternal (eschatological) wrath of God for his people. In this act, he also bruised the head of the serpent, dealing him a deadly blow, freeing his people from the powers of darkness. And having satisfied God's wrath, he was raised from the dead to give life to the world, to those who trust in his name. Even now he gives them eternal life—life from his own life—his heavenly life. In his resurrection, Christ possesses the heavenly life, that is, the life of the eschatological age to come. And that life belongs to God's people even now through faith. They have it now as a semi-realized participation in the life to come. And they look by faith to the fullness of the end, when God will glorify his name forever, crushing Satan under their feet. Christ will be glorified in them through their final triumph and redemption. Satan and his hosts will suffer eternal defeat in everlasting judgment. The instruments of death are dead. But all the seed of the women in Christ will live. They will live, resurrected before the throne of Christ forever—eternal victors in him.

—Scott F. Sanborn

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Hilary Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein (The Helen and Martin Schwartz Lectures in Jewish Studies)*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008. 136 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-2533-5133-3. \$19.95.

Gaining greater insight into modern Jewish philosophy can be helpful for Christians in several ways. It can give them a better understanding of the Jewish world and modern philosophical movements as they share their faith. And it can provide a better understanding of the Jewish perspective that lies behind some modern biblical scholarship. For instance, one might ask (following another review in this volume), "How is it that a writer like James Kugel can claim that we should value the ancient interpretation of the Hebrew Bible even though he believes that that interpretation does not accord with the original intension of the Biblical authors?" Thus, it might help us better understand the presuppositions of modern biblical scholars as we sort through their views. Perhaps the answer to the above question about Kugel will be that he is

ultimately a pragmatist like Putnam. While the precise verdict may still be out on Kugel, what about Putnam?

Hilary Putnam, a well known philosopher and practicing Jew, has given us a helpful introductory book to three prominent twentieth-century Jewish philosophers: Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. He also includes a bit of information on Ludwig Wittgenstein. The book is helpful in that it provides useful and well-informed summaries of the views of each of these philosophers. At the same time, Putnam has (in our view) downplayed the significance of the metaphysical assumptions of their philosophical training. That is, as a philosopher who is critical of traditional metaphysical investigation, Putnam thinks that the significance of each of these philosophers is simply their practical philosophy of daily life. Putnam's own view (known as direct realism) has been influenced by American pragmatism. So this is not surprising. That is, Putnam's pragmatic moralism colors what he finds significant in these thinkers. He acknowledges the philosophical differences between them, but he finds these differences insignificant for what is important in their writings. Of course, choosing twentieth-century philosophers (especially Levinas) is useful to promote moralism, since many of these philosophers have (like Putnam) abandoned traditional metaphysics. That is, they think it a slight thing to inquire into the nature of God, humans, etc. in order to know our obligations to them. They have bought into Hume's dictum that "is does not imply ought". Thus, to find what we ought to do, they find it unnecessary to inquire into the nature of things (what is). This ultimately shapes Putnam's approach to these thinkers. But again, it is also characteristic of them as modern Jewish thinkers. In this sense, Putnam, like one of them, has his finger on their essential unity in spite of the differences between them. This seems to explain Putnam's recent interest in the subject.

As a result of this focus, Putnam pays little attention to the Hegelian influences on Rosenzweig or the existential influences on Martin Buber. He says more about the phenomenological (Edmund Husserl) and Heideggerian influences on Levinas. But Levinas again is primarily considered for his moral views.

Putnam deals with Rosenzweig's books, *The Star of Redemption* and *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy*, finding much in them he considers helpful. However, once again, Putnam focuses on things in Rosenzweig that he finds useful. Admittedly, he says nothing about the influence of mathematics on Rosenzweig's approach even though as a mathematician himself Putnam might find that interesting. But he mostly focuses on elements of Rosenzweig's philosophy that resonate with his own. This seems to be the case when he deals with the event in which Rosenzweig turned down a chair of philosophy at a university. Rosenzweig stated that he was now more interested in the real questions of everyday people than those raised by philosophers. This may resonate with Putnam because of his direct realism, a view that seeks to return metaphysics to the study of the way ordinary people actually experience the world. For Putnam, unlike classical philosophy, this seems to involve the simultaneous rejection of classical metaphysical questions. In this sense, Putnam still shows the pedigree of his analytic philosophical presuppositions and the influence of his teacher, Willard van Orman Quine. But he has moved beyond them. And thus he finds sympathy with Rosenzweig's rejection of classical metaphysical questions in the name of a turn to people's everyday questions.

Putnam also praises Rosenzweig for living an exemplary life, even after contracting a debilitating disease. However, he is critical of Rosenzweig's claim that only Judaism and Christianity are religions leading to God. Rosenzweig, as a non-practicing Jew, was first impressed by the Christian religion and only later returned to Judaism. As a result, he believed that Christianity was the one religion that God used to bring the Gentiles back to himself. But Judaism was still the religion by which Jews could come to God. Putnam finds Rosenzweig's rejection of the usefulness of other religions (such as Buddhism) to be unbecoming in a thinker that he regards as otherwise having a magnanimous spirit. Obviously for Putnam, as a modern man, to the degree that one holds that one's religion is the only way to God, he or she is not magnanimous.

Putnam deals with Buber's "masterpiece" (as he sees it), *I and Thou*. Again, Putnam does not really do justice to the extent that existentialism suffuses this work. For Buber (as we see it) the I-Thou relation is an existential encounter. This is contrasted to classical metaphysics in which one tries to describe the nature of God, man, etc. For Buber, such ways of thinking are merely I-It relations. Classical metaphysics (as an I-It relation) cannot be the basis for a true relationship with God. Thus, when Buber speaks of the I-Thou this cannot be divorced from his existentialism. In rejecting Buber's form of the I-Thou relation, this does not mean that we should treat people as things. No! If we truly understand their nature, we know that they are persons and we should treat them as such. Putnam takes these observations from Buber and treats them almost as if they were divorced from Buber's existentialism. Though he acknowledges this background, he does not find it significant. At the same time, Putnam might correctly try to refine our understanding of Buber. For he points out that for Buber not all I-It relations are wrong. This may seem to question our assumption that Buber regards I-It relations as metaphysical abstractions. And since Putnam has probably read *I and Thou* more than once, he may have a better understanding of its precise relation to existentialism, and to existentialism of a certain kind. Still, he does admit the influence of existentialism on Buber's work, but he seems to underplay it for the moral interest that he shares with Buber.

Turning now to Levinas, Putnam describes Levinas as an orthodox Jew (though a rather unorthodox one). Levinas did not think that sympathy could be a basis for ethics. That is, we should not say, be kind to other people because they are in some way like us. For what happens when we begin to define other people as something very unlike ourselves as the Nazis did of the Jews during WWII? If ethics is based on the similarities between ourselves and others, we will discard ethics in such circumstances, as the Nazis did. Therefore, in his ethics, Levinas considers the otherness of the other rather than the similarity of the other.

Levinas apparently did not consider that the Nazis should have regarded the Jews as equally made in the image of God (broadly conceived). That is, though a Jew, Putnam does not explain this as Levinas's metaphysical reason for treating the other humanely. Instead, it would seem on Putnam's account that Levinas rejected all metaphysical grounds for ethics. One must simply do what is required. That is, ethics has no grounding in *being*. It just involves imperatives that hang in the air (so to speak).

Putnam does not explain how Levinas then distinguished the obligations we have to other human beings from those we have to our pets (in the kindness we show to them). One would think that

our different obligations to them are based on their differing natures. But if metaphysics is in no way the ground of nature, how does the command to love my neighbor make sense? Do I still not have to ask, “Who is my neighbor?” At least I have to distinguish the fact that this being with whom I interact is a human being and thus a fit subject for “neighbor”, while this mosquito that is on my arm does not fall under the category “neighbor”. Putnam does not explain how Levinas dealt with these questions. However, it would not be surprising to us if he dealt with them by means of his own phenomenological and Heideggerian presuppositions. In the end, based on Putnam’s account, Levinas is the extreme example of a moralist whose moralism is supported by modern philosophical presuppositions.

Putnam has one area in which he disagrees with Levinas. For Levinas, since our love is not based on sympathy, it is not related to self-love. Instead, it is the love of the other as other. So far Putnam does not seem to disagree. However, Levinas concludes from this that we should not consider ourselves as objects of our own love, only others in their alterity. Here Putnam takes issue with Levinas, citing Aristotle to the effect that we cannot love others if we do not love ourselves. However, apart from this, Putnam seems mostly to agree with Levinas. Based on Putnam’s account, they certainly seem to share the same moralistic approach to philosophy and life.

Putnam ends by telling us something of his own religious views, though he does not consider these as important as the philosophers he has described. He says he recently told someone his views were somewhere between those of John Dewey in *A Common Faith* and Martin Buber. That is, Putnam does not believe in a supernatural God who intervenes supernaturally in our lives. Nonetheless, he engages in Jewish practices and Jewish prayers. For those of us who are traditional Christians, we find this quite odd. How can Putnam pray if he does not believe that God is sovereign and transcendent? What difference can such prayers make? Are they just simply psychological therapy? If so, is this anything more than pragmatism with a vengeance—pragmatism for one’s psychological well-being? Are such prayers simply a vacuous salve with no foundation in reality except one’s personal ungrounded aspirations? Why pray on such a view? Why not just use yoga? For Putnam, the only reason he can produce for using the Jewish prayers as opposed to transcendental meditation is that the latter is not a part of his religious tradition.

When Putnam rejects a God who intervenes supernaturally in our daily lives, he does not seem to consider the classical Protestant Christian position on God’s supernatural activity. This view distinguishes between God’s *objective* supernatural work in redemptive history and his supernatural work in the *subjective* lives of individuals. On this position, God’s objective miraculous acts in the physical arena (supernaturally healing the sick, blind, and lame, and stilling storms, etc.) have climaxed with Christ’s resurrection. The miracles we do find after this in the New Testament are the trickle effect that remained for a short time afterwards. That is, God performed miracles through some of the witnesses of Christ’s resurrection, thereby testifying to the truth of what they said. But now these witnesses have died and their testimony is embodied in the New Testament. Thus, God’s *miraculous* acts in the objective historical arena have ceased until the return of Christ.

However, God still works supernaturally in the subjective lives of people to change their hearts. He unites people to Christ and his resurrection-life, conforming them to Christ's image. This takes place in the invisible spiritual arena and is thus *not miraculous*. Admittedly, God's work in the subjective lives of people unites them to the objective supernatural miraculous resurrection of Christ in history. But this subjective work of God's Spirit is not itself miraculous, i.e., it does not effect a supernatural transformation in the physical arena. We conclude from this that while God's people are called to rely on his Spirit for internal supernatural transformation, they are not called to seek little miracles in their lives. This is not to deny that God is still in charge of the physical arena. He upholds it at every moment by his infinite power, directing all things as he pleases. But he does this by secondary causes which work according to their natures as originally created by God. This is not the same as a miracle which involved a direct supernatural intrusion into the physical arena, beginning a new chain of causes and effects.

From this perspective, God's people are called to pray to him. They pray in Christ, looking for the continual supernatural work of his Spirit, leading them to walk in heavenly supernatural places in Christ. And they pray that he would guide them as pilgrims along the pathways of this world through his sovereign reign over all things. And they look ahead to the miraculous intervention of God in history with the return of Christ. This alone satisfies them, for Christ is their life. Searching for little miracles in this world is but a pittance compared to the glory they have in Christ.

Recognizing the significance of secondary causes in the world has another upside that Putnam should consider. They testify to a personal God. For unless there is a personal God who is uncaused, the universe with its series of causes and effects could not exist. The alternative, that the universe causes itself to exist, is impossible. For it is a contradiction to say that matter and/or energy both exist (to cause themselves) and do not exist (so that they may be brought into existence) at the same time and in the same relation.

It further follows from this that God must rule the world for it to continue to exist. If not, he has created something that is self-sustaining. And something that is self-sustaining is equal to God himself. However, if God created something that is equal to himself, it would not reveal to us that it required a cause beyond itself. But since it does reveal that it requires a cause beyond itself, it cannot be equal to God (who requires no cause). Therefore, the world cannot be self-sustaining (as the Deists claimed), and God must uphold it at every moment.

This leads us into the arena of history. For the collection of moments that God upholds are strung together in the tapestry of history. It follows from this that he has both the ability to intervene in history and a purpose for it. Certainly, if he upholds the universe at every point, he has the ability to introduce into it a new set of first causes, thereby producing supernatural miraculous acts. This would be akin to a new creation. And history must also have a purpose since God, as the most intelligent being, cannot fail to do things for a reason. Thus, history has a goal, an end, or even an eschatology. If that purpose should include the redemption of human beings (whose life is tied to their history), renewing them in a new creation, it is reasonable to conclude that God might act miraculously in history in order to accomplish this.

Only an almighty God (capable of such things) can account for the existence of our universe. Unfortunately, Putnam does not really recognize that the world testifies to God, for he ultimately denies the necessity of articulating God's nature in language analogous to the world. That is, Putnam refuses to use metaphysical language to describe God's nature. His "god" (insofar as he assumes one) is indescribable. Denying the importance of knowing God's *nature*, he cannot believe that we have offended a *holy* God and deserve eternal punishment. Without this knowledge, Putnam does not see the necessity of Christ, who as eternal God, could bear our eternal punishment and satisfy it in a moment of time. Thus Christ's miraculous resurrection is also missed, that having satisfied the wrath of God, death could no longer hold him. As a result, Putnam's anti-metaphysical (and thus anti-supernatural) worldview further reinforces his moralism. He does not recognize that God's justifying grace and the renewal of our nature must precede our moral transformation. But those in Christ have a far greater possession. They have Christ. He is the true God. And he is true man, the head of a new humanity. We have a new nature in union with him, a nature that is organically related to the nature we had created by God at the beginning. Who we *are* (our nature) resurrected in Christ is the ground of what we are called to do (ethics). As a result, in the New Testament the indicatives (who we are in Christ) precede the imperatives. Thus, let us be grateful for what we have. Hopefully Putnam and others will see this one day too, as they see the bankruptcy of moralistic worldviews from present-day Judaism to modern philosophy—even the rubble of conjoining the two.

—Scott F. Sanborn

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Ben Witherington, III, *The Indelible Image: The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament: Volume One. The Individual Witnesses*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009. 856 pp. Cloth. ISBN: 978-08308-3861-5. \$50. *The Indelible Image: The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament: Volume Two. The Collective Witness*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010; 838 pp. Cloth. ISBN: 978-08308-3862-2. \$50.

When Christian people hear about biblical theology, most of them understand this expression to mean theology that has the Bible as its ultimate standard and source. In this sense, all theology ought to be biblical. In theology as an academic discipline, biblical theology has a somewhat different meaning—it is part of theology that stands between exegesis and systematic theology. Exegesis is the exposition of Scripture. Its focus is a single text or a single passage. Systematic theology reflects on the Bible as a whole. Understanding and recapitulating the content of the Bible is done in community with the church of all ages. Systematic theology is always confessional in character. The doctrinal content of the Bible is underlined.

Biblical theology focuses on the content of biblical revelation from the viewpoint of its unfolding in history. The history of revelation (or history of redemption) is one of the leading viewpoints in biblical theology as an academic discipline. Biblical theology calls attention to the individual biblical witnesses and treats biblical themes in the context of the history of revelation and redemption. The emphasis falls on the diversity of the individual biblical witnesses within the greater unity of the Bible as a whole.

In biblical theology, the great distinction is between the theology of the Old and the New Testament. When we speak about the theology of the Old and New Testament, the underlying presupposition is that the writings of the Old and New Testament (although diverse in character, each having its own accents and distinctives) ultimately form a consistent and coherent unity. At the same time, I must say that a number of scholars who have written an Old or New Testament theology only accept the canon for pragmatic reasons. We are then not writing biblical theology, but the history of religion. Actually, theology, in the strict and real sense of the word, is only possible when the Bible is accepted as the infallible and inerrant Word of the living God.

I stress that we cannot draw exact distinctions between exegesis, biblical theology and systematic theology. In fact, they are part of a spectrum. Besides that, we must reckon with the so-called hermeneutical spiral. It is a great misunderstanding if we think that exegesis and biblical theology can be done in a neutral way. The exegetes and scholars who suggest that neutrality is possible in biblical theology are unaware that they are the most dogmatic scholars we have come across. Finally, I state emphatically that biblical theology can never replace systematic theology. The Bible as a whole confronts us with questions, which can never be solved solely by an appeal to biblical texts. I think about questions with regard to the relationship between time and eternity and the relationship between the Creator and his creation.

When theologians want to restrict themselves to biblical theology at the expense of systematic theology, you always see that they have an anti-metaphysical bias. They do not want to speak about God in himself, but only about God in his relationship to his creatures. However, this is a very important dogmatic decision with far reaching consequences. In that case, the narratives of the Bible are in a certain sense read as dogmatic treatises. For in the Biblical narratives, God reacts to the actions of man in many cases. Thus, the conclusion is drawn that you cannot speak about the immutability of God. Actually it is the case that the genre of narrative is not really taken seriously. I must add that when we take the Biblical narratives as a whole, their clear message is that God is completely in control of all history. History is his story. The whole reality depends on him and he himself is independent. In theology, we use the term the *aseitas Dei* (“aseity of God”) to describe this.

Having tried to indicate the limitations of biblical theology, I am convinced that it is very fruitful to study the content of the Bible focusing on the history of redemption, on the specific contribution of each book of the Bible and each writer of the Bible to the complete revelation. These introductory remarks have prepared us to evaluate a recently published Theology of the New Testament.

Ben Witherington has given his two-volume study the title *The Indelible Image*. By means of the concept of the image of God, he explains the relationship between theology and ethics in the New Testament. The first volume treats the individual witnesses of the New Testament and the second volume describes the collective witness. Witherington states that in several of the studies of New Testament theology, ethics is not given its due emphasis. He wants to remedy this fault. Witherington does not mention it, but in former days actually no separation was made between systematic theology and ethics. Gisbertus Voetius, the father of the Dutch “Further Reformation”, can serve as a good example here. Many of the disputations of Voetius centered

around questions related to the practice of piety. The fostering of piety was seen as the goal of (systematic) theology. So Witherington is not as innovative in his treatment as he suggests.

Whiterington has a high view of the authority and historical reliability of the New Testament. He stresses that theology and history must not be seen as rivals. The gospels must be seen both as theological and historical writings. In the case of the gospel of John, the word ‘theological’ must be underlined and in the case of the synoptic gospels the words ‘writing of the historical’ must be underscored. All four gospels are based on what eyewitnesses saw or heard. Witherington is convinced that also in the case of the fourth gospel, we are confronted with real history. Witherington also defends the historical reliability of Acts. In painting the portrait of early Christianity, Luke gives a selection of the facts, but not an idealized story that is highly unrealistic. It is remarkable that in the gospels Matthew and John (both written by persons who belonged to the circle of the Twelve) the frequency of the use of the name of “Father” is much higher than in the other gospels. Among the synoptic gospels, Matthew in this respect most closely resembles the gospel of John.

The unity of the New Testament writings is seen in the way they speak about the person and the work of Christ. In almost all writing of the New Testament, Jesus is called either Lord, Christ and/or Son of God. Only in 3 John do we not find any of these three expressions. But the reason is simple—it is a letter of exhortation and brevity. Jesus is everywhere portrayed as the one in whom redemption is found. He is the Savior. Jesus himself and his activity and teaching while he was on earth are the fountain of the expressions of faith with regard to his person. Witherington rightly makes this statement without denying that compared to the self-revelation of Christ when he was on earth there is in the New Testament a further development in the presentation of the person of Christ after his exaltation and after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The witness of the writers of the New Testament not only when they record the teaching of Jesus when he was on earth, but also when they are instructed by the resurrected and glorified Christ, confronts us with the real Christ. We cannot make a distinction between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history, but only between Jesus Christ when he was on earth and Jesus Christ as he is in heaven.

Wirtherington’s conviction that according to Paul the gospel does not annihilate the order of creation but intensifies it, is very important. Homosexual behavior cannot be reconciled with bearing of the image of Christ. Homosexual orientation—just as all sinful desires—must be seen as a result of the fall of man. Persons who have this orientation must be called to self-denial in the light of the order of creation and the gospel of Christ and never be given the impression that homosexuality can be allowed under certain conditions. Witherington denies that Paul or other New Testament witnesses can be seen as defenders of the view of sinless perfection. There are mature believers, but even a mature believer has reasons to confess his sins and shortcomings.

According to the New Perspective on Paul, justification has only to do with the boundaries of the community of faith. It is an ecclesiological and not a soteriological doctrine. The New Perspective denies the correctness of the view of the Reformation on justification. Witherington cannot be seen as a defender of the New Perspective on Paul, but he does not sufficiently highlight the great importance of the message of justification in Paul’s writings. Rightly, he states that Paul and James do not really contradict each other with regard to justification and faith. They each use both the word ‘justification’ and the word ‘faith’ in different ways.



Witherington cannot provide a satisfying explanation about the sayings in the New Testament regarding election and predestination. Final election depends, in his view, on man's faith. But in the New Testament, we read just the reverse.

You will note that I think the two volumes of Witherington are very valuable. They are goldmines full of useful information and insights. However, I must honestly point to what I consider a very serious defect—a defect that is seen again and again in the way Witherington presents the message of the New Testament. Witherington is a thoroughgoing Arminian. He denies the particular nature of the atonement. Yet nowhere in the New Testament is it ever said to unbelievers outside the Christian church that Christ died for them. A complete Savior is preached and must be preached to unbelievers, both Jews and Gentiles. Not just a blessing connected with the work of Christ (“Christ died for you!”) but Christ himself must be presented to unbelievers. The message that we will never be separated from the love of God in Christ because Christ died for us and prays for us is a message of consolation for all believers. It makes clear to them the depth and the total character of Christ's love for them.

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