

# REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL



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THE ONLINE THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL OF THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

# REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL



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## From Rutherford Hall

The man sitting across from me had been involved in politics for thirty years. A good politician, he was well aware of politics' severe limitations. He understood the God-ordained place of the political system, but he also firmly believed that the ultimate need of this world is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For, without the transforming work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, societal sin will continue to abound, regardless of public policy.

At the same time, this man held a jaded view of the church. His experience was that rather than the church being used by God to see culture transformed, the church itself had been substantially compromised by the world. He had seen church leaders who seemed to share in common too much of the corrupt qualities of politicians: interested in power and possessions more than the souls of men. In fact, my new friend expressed so strong a concern that church leaders do not influence the souls of their congregants for good that he did not want to be a pastor. I assured him that there is a different kind of church leader that he may not yet have seen, and he was interested in meeting such people.

It was said of the church in the New Testament that they were turning the world upside down, when, as a matter of fact, it was turning the world right side up. They were being used by their Savior to make a radical difference in the world in which they lived. And that is what the Lord has called us to do as well.

As you read this journal, please know that our aim in this not merely giving you more things to think about. Our goal is that the message of the Kingdom transform lives. It is with this in mind that our mission statement includes the following : “Our training emphasizes scholarship in Biblical studies, systematic theology, and church history; the cultivation of personal godliness and interpersonal skills; and the development of spiritual gifts - all with a vision for discipling the nations of the world.”

Today, the word “missional” often carries bad connotations.. Many associate it with a zeal for evangelism or social justice at the expense of Biblical truth, but in the best sense of the word, in the sense of responding faithfully to the Great Commission, we must be missional. We must have as our goal the discipling of the nations. May God use this journal to this end!

**For Christ and His Kingdom,**

**Dr. Jerry O'Neill, President**

# Critical Realism and the New Perspective

Dr. Richard C. Gamble

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A well known British biblical scholar has described himself as a “critical realist.”<sup>1</sup> Critical realism is the philosophical foundation for this person’s view of “knowing” about Christ as well as knowing about his “resurrection”.<sup>2</sup> Since competing views are in a “state of collapse” he argues that “critical realism...is required for a coherent epistemology.”<sup>3</sup>

This short study has very limited goals: to trace some of the historical and philosophical backgrounds to the development of critical realism, to make a brief connection between critical realism and language philosophy, and to summarize how such philosophical thinking has impacted contemporary New Testament theology.<sup>4</sup>

## Polanyi: Biography

The founder of critical realism was Michael Polanyi (1891-1976). It seems that the best way to comprehend Polanyi is to think of him as a scientist who was dissatisfied with how philosophers explained his field of endeavor- and from that dissatisfaction Polanyi developed his own massive

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1 Opposing both positivist and phenomenalist, N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Fortress Press, 1992), 35, proposes: “... a form of *critical realism*. This is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’), while fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence ‘critical’).” There are personal reasons for Wright’s adoption of this philosophy. After finishing his education Wright was appointed as a research fellow at Merton College (Oxford) and overlapped with his colleague Polanyi for one year.

2 The Edinburgh theologian T. F. Torrance was also a proponent of Polanyi’s critical realism- and he in turn influenced the Oxford professor Alister McGrath. See Torrance’s “Michael Polanyi and the Christian Faith - A Personal Report,” in Polanyisociety. Ibid, *Belief in Science and in the Christian Life. The Relevance of Michael Polanyi’s Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh, 1980).

3 Wright, *NTPG*, 32. Using the analogy of a telescope, Wright acknowledges that some objects are not within its range and some are situated so that when you view one object you may be unable to see a second. When it comes to historical writings, the telescope may distort or give errors of perspective to the object (event). Additional lenses may be needed to correct the telescope’s errors. Nevertheless, the view through the telescope is of an event. Wright, *NTPG*, 90: “Critical realism, not the abandonment of knowledge of the extra-linguistic world, is required for a coherent epistemology.”

4 Critical realism in the United States has been influenced by the thinker Bernard Lonergan.

epistemological system.<sup>5</sup> He was not a “normal” scientist — or philosopher. To explain, his life story runs along these lines.

Born in the last decade of the nineteenth century to a Jewish family from Hungary, Polanyi was trained as a physician in Budapest (1914) and served as such during the First World War. While on sick-leave he attained a Ph. D. (1919). He then began research in Germany and was elected to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institut für Physicalische Chemie three years later.

A decade after that honor, Polanyi discerned the problems connected with the rise of Germany’s National Socialism and moved to England in 1933.<sup>6</sup> While living in England, Polanyi was made a fellow of the Royal Society (in 1944), and taught as Professor of physical chemistry and social studies at the University of Manchester.<sup>7</sup>

### Positivism

The Czech scientist had problems with “positivism”- the way that science was comprehended when Polanyi was a student. He felt that positivism had too great a tendency toward “reductionism”- the notion that all ideas derive from a single homogeneous type. He also believed that positivism did not square with the way in which he thought — or did his science in the laboratory. Also, positivism did not seem strong enough to bear the burden of a comprehensive philosophical system.<sup>8</sup>

Polanyi’s first major publication, *Science, Faith, and Society* (1945), was a critique of positivism.<sup>9</sup> That volume was in great part a reaction to Einstein’s theory. Polanyi was convinced that Einstein’s

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5 Eugene Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 30-31, argues that his thinking stemmed from dissatisfaction with positivism. Jerry H. Gill underlines that Polanyi wanted to counteract scientific “objectivity” by establishing a personal dimension to thinking. See his *The Tacit Mode: Michael Polanyi’s Postmodern Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY press, 2000), 53. Marjorie Grene, “Introduction” to *Knowing and Being*, xiii, argues that it was Polanyi’s dissatisfaction with how science was organized that sparked his philosophical reflection.

6 One of his brothers immigrated to Brazil; another went to Italy, and the third traveled to the United States. His fascinating older sister specialized in the study of “rural sociology”. However, the details of Polanyi’s early years are not clear (at least to me!). Drusilla Scott, *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 2, says that he was raised in Hungary and entered the University of Budapest in 1909. Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 26-27, however, hints that Polanyi’s father had already immigrated to Switzerland after the 1848 revolt, studied engineering there, and then married a Russian countess who had also fled to Switzerland because she tried to blow up the Tsar! Thus, was Polanyi born of a dispossessed Jewish family that had emigrated from Hungary, and was then raised in Switzerland? Scott has his academic training entirely in Hungary, with a move to Germany in 1920. Concerning the move to England, Polanyi must have had tremendous linguistic abilities to continue a career in yet another language (his third) at age 41!

7 Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 26-31.

8 Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 32.

9 Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith, and Society*, (Oxford, 1946; reprinted Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964). Polanyi’s opposition to a positivist account of science is that it ignores the role personal commitments play in the practice of science. The University of Manchester wisely changed his chair after its appearance — so that he no longer had to teach. See Scott, *Everyman Revived*, 3.

work, moving from absolute time and space to relativity, illustrated well the way scientific knowing actually takes place — but also undermined the philosophical rule of positivism.<sup>10</sup>

Polanyi's book demonstrated his philosophical abilities, which then led to an invitation to present the Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen University (for 1951-52).<sup>11</sup> The fruit of those lectures was his publication *Personal Knowledge*.<sup>12</sup> As Polanyi's thinking continued to develop, he produced *The Study of Man* at the end of the 1950's, which investigated what he termed "focal" and "subsidiary" awareness.<sup>13</sup>

Analysis of Polanyi's philosophy begins with his attacks on the weaknesses of the then current scientific thought, then moves to a brief presentation of his positive response — the new way of thinking called critical realism.<sup>14</sup>

### **The End of Science's Reign?**

In 1959, Polanyi was bold enough to equate the impact that Christianity had on the west in the first three centuries to the influence that science has exercised on the west in the last three. Sadly, he was probably correct. In his analysis, science was now the "supreme intellectual authority."<sup>15</sup>

Science's pathway to this pinnacle was easily traceable, according to Polanyi. First, it rebelled against authority, and after a successful rebellion it then led reforms that aided every part of human culture. Science's great reform movement was based upon the presupposition of empirical induction with the goal of developing a mechanistic theory of the universe.

However, this movement of liberation had now turned "pathological".<sup>16</sup> Polanyi was not surprised by the development because, while science could be salutary for a time, eventually people would find out that science's principles were, in his words, "nonsensical", "absurd", even manifestly absurd.<sup>17</sup> One reason for his displeasure with "scientific rationalism" was that its adherents had to profess that everything can, and must, be explained by physics and chemistry. But physics

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10 Einstein had responded very positively to the twenty one year old Polanyi's paper on the Third Law of Thermodynamics in 1912. Correspondence between the men continued. See Scott, *Everyman Revived*, 2.

11 In 1948 Polanyi analyzed how money circulated in *Full Employment and Free Trade*. Polanyi argued that a central bank should smooth out the booms and bust of a free market economy.

12 Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Routledge, 1958; reprinted [and corrected] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

13 Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1959). Some of his other major works include *The Logic of Liberty* (London and Chicago, 1951).

14 Polanyi stood against eminent contemporary teachers such as Karl Popper, but his critiques touched most of the major philosophical figures — for example Descartes' systematic doubting. See Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 32-39.

15 Michael Polanyi, "The Two Cultures (1959)", reprinted in *Knowing and Being*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 40. He made his point clearly: "It is contrary to religion!" — the objection ruled supreme in the seventeenth century. 'It is unscientific!' is its equivalent in the twentieth."

16 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 41.

17 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 41-42. Polanyi's critique was blunt, 42: "Eventually the truth-bearing power of its absurd ideals was bound to be spent and its stark absurdity to assert itself."

and chemistry, in fact, cannot account for human consciousness — let alone for morality and human responsibility. Yet, instead of facing up to scientific rationalisms inherent limitations, some “distinguished men” simply denied the existence of human consciousness. These men knew that acknowledging human consciousness would endanger their precious science — so they deny consciousness and conterminously embrace scientific “bigotry”.<sup>18</sup>

While Polanyi ridiculed such short sightedness, his critical scissors would snip even more deeply into the scientific world’s fabric. He argued that disregarding truth in favor of “scientific ideals” has in fact led to the horrors of modern nihilism.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, while such personal destruction was quantifiable, Polanyi feared an even greater future terror. The possibility of massive death through atomic weapons loomed as a possibility, a prospect because there was no longer sufficient common philosophical ground between those nations who bear the burden of their own powerful atomic weapons.<sup>20</sup>

However, Polanyi did not leave his reader without a glimmer of hope. There was still the option that science could repent and recognize that claiming a criterion of objectivity in fact forced denying reality to any moral claims. Polanyi could see change occur only by following one path — the way of revising science’s own worthless claims.<sup>21</sup>

Polanyi’s radical critique of scientific method was established based on his sweeping knowledge of western philosophical tradition. His critical realism was not limited to simply attacking the reigning monarch (science), but demonstrated the need to oust the reigning thinker (Kant) as well.

### **Polanyi’s Critique of Pure Kant**

Deeply embedded within the recesses of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* lies the seed of that great work’s own destruction. The seed is the agency of personal decision used when someone classified a particular incident under a general concept.<sup>22</sup> Polanyi could not comprehend how Kant could simply admit of the existence of this powerful mental agency — one that was exempt from analysis (reason). He was also perplexed how generations of Kant scholars left this submission of reason

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18 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 42.

19 Polanyi laid these charges at nihilism’s feet — an unnatural division of the human masses, split up of families, and ruined friendships, “as no conflict has done before.”

20 He had already published in 1932, *Atomic Reactions* (London: Williams and Norgate). For more on Polanyi’s development of this idea, see his “Beyond Nihilism (1960)”, in *Knowing and Being*, 3-23.

21 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 46. However, Polanyi did not seem to hold out much actual hope for revision. His footnotes contained the narrative of an encounter at the meeting of the American Association of the Advancement of Science (in 1956). His challenges proved ineffective. If the master himself was incapable of convincing scientists to change — who could hope for lesser lights to be successful?

22 According to Polanyi, Kant referred to this agency twice, first when it was cited as that which “constitutes our so-called mother-wit” and again when Kant asserted that it was a skill so deeply hidden within the human soul that he dubbed this agency “nature’s trick”. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A.133 and A.141, as cited by Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 105.

to some unaccountable decision making to go unchallenged.<sup>23</sup>

Polanyi thus took up the challenge to explain Kant's agency of unformalizable mental skills.<sup>24</sup> His approach was multi-faceted. First, he attacked the notion of strict scientific objectivity by critiquing the classical theory of mechanics — the mathematical formulae by which the planet's motions are governed.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the philosophical notion of "randomness" (used to deal with deviation) itself means "random in relationship to potential order". However, that "potential order", Polanyi asserted, is also an informal act of personal interpretation.<sup>26</sup>

Polanyi's second prong of analysis revolved around how humans recognize significant shapes. Polanyi made a direct connection between this activity and Kant's "inscrutable power", classifying a particular under a general concept.<sup>27</sup> One connection was *via* Ames' figures of a man and boy in a room where the boy looks taller than the man. The key to understanding the illusion lies in the clues and assumptions that observers make when they view the object. He argued that there are no exact rules for the use of the clues — even though specialists have noted some general principles relative to interaction between background and figure.<sup>28</sup> Polanyi was able to present many scientific examples of this tendency, underlining the important function of peripheral impression used as clues. He described this "art" as that which helps people (relative to perception) "make sense of the world."<sup>29</sup> What was significant for Polanyi was the fact that the main clues were inside the body and cannot be experienced "in themselves".<sup>30</sup>

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23 Actually, Polanyi attributed the Kantian silence to their instinctive preference, "to let such sleeping monsters lie, for fear that, once awakened, they might destroy their fundamental conception of knowledge." See Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 106.

24 Polanyi defined Kant's unaccounted for agency this way, *Knowing and Being*, 112: "the mother-wit to which Kant surrenders the application of rules to experience and of that inscrutable power hidden in the bosom of Nature, by which he accounts for our capacity to form and apply universal conceptions — th[is] tacit power...".

25 Mechanics recognizes that observation and theoretical predictions will have deviations. The question the scientist must then face is whether the deviation is random — or whether it demonstrates certain trends. It is the process of determining the nature of the deviation where Polanyi both admits that strict statistical analysis can determine regularity and randomness — but that the application of those mathematical rules cannot be prescribed by strict rules. After a pattern has been chosen (for example direction or periodicity), then the scientist's computations will yield a numerical value for the probability of the pattern. But there are no "rules" to determine the pattern! See Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 107-08.

26 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 109.

27 He analyzed camouflage, background figures, Rubin's "faces/vase", and horizon and rest. See Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 110-11.

28 The rules are summarized in the notion that humans have a tendency to overlook things that are unprecedented. Polanyi stated the principle precisely, *Knowing and Being*, 113: "Whenever we are focusing our attention on a particular object, we are relying for doing so on our awareness of many things to which we are not attending directly at the moment, but which are yet functioning as compelling clues for the way the object of our attention will appear to our senses."

29 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 114-15.

30 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 115.

It was from this wealth of analysis that Polanyi turned upon Kant, and doubted that Kant was correct in his despair relative to the philosopher's ability to elucidate this agency. While much can be known about it, argued Polanyi, very little could be articulated with exactitude.

Polanyi concluded by tying his opening rifle shot aimed at Kant to a frontal blast focused on scientific work in general, and epistemology in particular.<sup>31</sup> What was needed was nothing less than a new definition of "experience" itself.<sup>32</sup> The next step toward understanding critical realism is to investigate how one "knows".

### **Tacit Knowledge**

Polanyi knew that a scientist worked in this manner: he began with a question that searched for a rational order, and then moved to a solution to the question. To work as a scientist, Polanyi recognized that there were times when he "knew more than he can tell".<sup>33</sup> The positivist philosophers could not account for such knowledge, labeled by Polanyi "tacit" knowledge. Polanyi is best known in some circles for his analysis of "tacit" knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

On the one side is "explicit" knowledge that comes from reading a book or hearing a lecture. Yet, anyone who has ridden a bicycle or learned to drive a car knows that knowing how to ride or drive cannot simply be taught from a book — or even by an expert instructor. The knowledge that goes beyond the "explicit" is the "tacit". Furthermore, in the world of music, students find out rather painfully that sometimes the great instrumental masters are not sure how to "teach" (as though explicit) their art (which is tacit). A final example of tacit knowledge is facial recognition. When we know someone's face we can pick it out from among a hundred others — even if we cannot articulate how we recognize the face that we know. Instead of knowing the person's individual features, we recognize the face as a whole. Polanyi's notion of tacit knowledge also included a host of beliefs, values, and mental models, some of which are unconscious. This cognitive dimension of tacit knowledge shapes the way people perceive the world — even if it cannot always be verbally articulated.<sup>35</sup> It is through tacit awareness that people are connected with external reality and tacit awareness provides the context for meaningful statements.

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31 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 118: "It is customary today to represent the process of scientific inquiry as the setting up of a hypothesis followed by its subsequent testing. I cannot accept these terms." 119: "My own answer to this paradox is to restate an ancient metaphysical conception in new terms."

32 Important for Christian theologians is that a new definition of "eternal reality" was also needed — an important topic but beyond the limits of this paper. See Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 120.

33 Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 4.

34 Polanyi is best known in some circles for his analysis of "tacit" knowledge. Critics sometimes described Polanyi's philosophy as merely a commentary on the fact of human consciousness. Such a dismissal does not take Polanyi's own assertions seriously. He claimed to present to the world, "a new theory of knowledge" ("Faith and Reason", *The Journal of Religion*, XLI/4, (1961), 241) a claim based upon what seems to this author to be a mountain of evidence that had begun in 1946.

35 Critics argued that the concept of "tacit" knowing was not really knowing at all. See Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 26-31; 40-52.

A final example of tacit knowledge is Polanyi's notion of language. All language students have painfully learned that memorizing grammatical rules (explicit) does not mean that a person knows a foreign language. On the other hand, someone learns their mother tongue as a child without need for any formal grammar (i.e., tacitly) — that explicit component would be included in their later instruction. It is from the notion of language itself as tacit knowledge that we turn to the next topic.

### **Polanyi and Austin**

John Langshaw Austin (1911-1960) was a philosopher of language who developed current theory of speech acts.<sup>36</sup> In general, he and Polanyi both had a critical attitude toward scientific "detachment" connected to the notion that knowledge was simply "descriptive information" about "objective" facts. In other words, they stood against the ontology of an oversimplified empiricism.<sup>37</sup> They also recognized that some assertions have a self-involving character.

More specifically, they shared two philosophical ideas. The first involved Polanyi's tacit knowledge. Polanyi argued that when a psychiatrist recognized a disease, say an epileptic seizure, there was no exactly specifiable criteria for such recognition. The psychiatrist needed something "more" and that "more" was called "understanding" or "comprehension".<sup>38</sup> "Understanding" came when there was a comprehension of all of the observed particulars by the psychiatrist, and he came to an awareness of the "entity as a whole".

This type of understanding, according to Polanyi, was specifically excluded by a positivistic epistemology because it refuses "to acknowledge the existence of comprehensive entities as distinct from their particulars."<sup>39</sup> Yet, for Polanyi this complex of the one and many was the central act of knowing.<sup>40</sup>

As Polanyi had a psychiatrist identify an epileptic seizure, so Austin had a goldfinch fly onto a branch. In response to the question, "How do you know it's a goldfinch?", Austin proposed different answers. A proper answer steered between a too definite answer, "because it has a yellow head" (stereotyped empiricism), and leaned towards one that simply "recognized" that it was a goldfinch from its yellow head.<sup>41</sup> The two answers to the question differed materially, according

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36 He was educated at Balliol College, Oxford and became White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at his *alma mater* after the Second World War. With Wittgenstein, Austin advocated examining the way people use words to understand the word's meaning.

37 Ian Ramsey, "Polanyi and J. L. Austin", in *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, edited by T. A. Langford and W. Poteat (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 170.

38 Ramsey, "Polanyi and Austin", 171-72.

39 Polanyi, "Faith and Reason", in *The Journal of Religion* 41/4 (1961), 240, as cited by Ramsey, "Polanyi and Austin", 172.

40 This connects to Polanyi's notion of facial recognition.

41 Ramsey, "Polanyi and Austin", 173-74.

to Austin, because words like “from” or “by” have an important “vagueness”.<sup>42</sup> The issue was “recognition” for Austin, not proof by descriptive assertion.<sup>43</sup>

There is a similarity between Austin’s “recognition” of the goldfinch and Polanyi’s psychiatric “comprehension” of the epilepsy. Both philosophers would concur that the particulars (or details) were only a part of the story, against a simplistic positivism, that would think that the particulars were the whole story.<sup>44</sup> Thus, Polanyi’s “tacit awareness” (comprehension) was similar to Austin’s “recognition” which goes beyond separately described features.<sup>45</sup>

The second major place of agreement between the two thinkers was the notion of self involvement. The point of contact was Polanyi’s “personal knowledge” and Austin’s notion of “convictional language.” At this place they both recognized that the speech act, the personal act of affirmation, was epistemologically ultimate.<sup>46</sup>

Analysis of critical realism, as developed by Polanyi, with its at least tangential connection to British language philosophy, provides at least part of the epistemological underpinnings for proponents of the New Perspective on Paul.

### **Positivism and the New Perspective<sup>47</sup>**

Specifically citing Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*, Wright argues against naïve realism and positivism for an epistemology based upon critical realism.<sup>48</sup> A critical realist epistemology requires that every person (as well historical writer) can only observe from the human point of view.<sup>49</sup> Second, critical realism requires that all sense experience is filtered through a grid of expectations and stories relative to the individual’s physical location and the lenses through which he obtains his worldview. All the parts of the particulars of the external world must be viewed within the overall worldview. Each person makes those “facts” “fit” their own worldview. Finally, that grid is intimately connected to the person’s “community”. Wright’s conclusion is that all

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42 J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 53, as cited by Ramsey, “Polanyi and Austin”, 174.

43 It seems that for Austin, to “recognize” is not necessarily the same as to “know”.

44 Ramsey, “Polanyi and Austin”, 175.

45 See Polanyi, “The Creative Imagination” (1966) as cited by Ramsey, “Polanyi and Austin”, 176-77.

46 Ramsey, “Polanyi and Austin”, 193.

47 This section is indebted to colleague Dr. Jeffrey Stivason.

48 While N.T. Wright’s, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), has an index of modern authors, Polanyi’s name does not appear.

49 Wright argues that no human being can view things from God’s standpoint. See Wright, *NTPG*, 36.

statements have a provisional nature.<sup>50</sup>

In thus rejecting positivism, the result is that there is no such thing as a “bare event” for him.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, embracing critical realism means that there is nothing, “...simply objectively true, some things about which we can have, and actually do have, solid and unquestionable evidence.”<sup>52</sup> To assume critical realism means that Scripture’s teaching may not be reduced to a set of “objective maxims” or timeless truths.<sup>53</sup>

Observing the world through the lens or grid of critical realism furthermore means rejecting history as simply recording what actually happened or the notion of fact as something purely objective. History always involves selection, and selection requires personal interpretation.<sup>54</sup> History is “...the meaningful narrative of events and intentions” with emphasis on intentions.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

This study has briefly traced some of the backgrounds of critical realism. It has not attempted to be comprehensive; for example it did not underscore critical realism’s helpfulness when combating the ungodly arrogance of scientific materialism. A few lines of connection were made between critical realism and British language philosophy. These movements provide part of the background for at least one scholar who holds to the New Perspective on Paul.

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50 Wright, *NTPG*, 35: “This is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’)...” 37: “...it will not do to say... there simply are some things which can still be said, on the basis of empirical sense-data, about the world external to the observer(s). No: instead of working from the particulars of observation, or ‘sense-data’, to confident statements about external reality, positivistically conceived, critical realism...sees knowledge of particulars as taking place within the larger framework of the story or worldview which forms the basis of the observer’s way of being in relation to the world.”

51 Wright, *NTPG*, 63. While presuppositional apologetics also rightly acknowledges that there are no brute facts, Wright’s notion is different in that he does not allow for God’s interpretation of the “facts”.

52 Wright, *NTPG*, 32-33.

53 Wright, *NTPG*, 39.

54 Wright, *NTPG*, 83: “All knowing and understanding has to do with reflection on the part of human beings: all knowledge comes *via* somebody’s perceptions and reflections.” “... the legacy of positivism often seduces us into imagining that a ‘fact’ is a ‘purely objective’ thing, unalloyed by the process of knowing on anybody’s part. But in reality what we call ‘facts’ always belong in a context of response, perception, and interaction – a process which is both complex and continuing. Stories... are more fundamental than ‘facts’; the parts must be seen in light of the whole.”

55 Wright, *NTPG*, 82.

# Theology and Economics in the Biblical Year of Jubilee

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It is curious that a book on Christian Theology and Market Economics (CTME) begins with Aristotle and not with Moses. Despite a discussion of Old Testament texts on usury (pp. 29-31), the entire historical section of this volume (chapters 1-4) lacks interaction with the economic patterns woven into the festivals and temple operations of ancient Israel.<sup>1</sup>

This is not, however, an oversight on the part of the editors of CTME. The book accurately reflects the unfortunate fact that western society has historically looked to Greece for models of civilized institutions to the neglect of ancient Near Eastern institutions. Thus, it is accurate for this book to trace the history of western economic thought as interacting with Greece. Nevertheless, this is a hole in western economic thought that a study on Biblical theology and economics should address.

For millennia, western scholarship has continued under the spell of prejudices against the intellectual value of the “barbarian” societies the Greeks conquered. There were important innovations that fueled the narrative that Greece was “civilized” compared with their “barbarian” neighbors. The Greek invention of vowels gave rise to the first truly literate culture capable of conceptual discourse.<sup>2</sup> Related to that innovation, the development of democratic institutions and the first “rule of law” society sparked a revolution in Greece deserving historical wonder.<sup>3</sup> To some extent, Greece deserves accolades for “inventing civilization.” Add to such achievements the stunning success of Alexander’s armies, humbling the great empires of the east, and it is no wonder the charm of Hellenism has cast its spell so effectively over the world—and over history.

Although the scholars of the late antique and medieval west had little access to, and little interest in, the economic wisdom of the ancient world beyond Greece and Rome, these scholars did possess and reverence the library of ancient Hebrew society: the Bible. As reported in CTME, early scholars did use biblical texts when addressing economic topics (like usury), but it seems

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1 Though barely scratching the surface: cf., Marty E. Stevens, *Temples, Tithes, and Taxes: The Temple and the Economic Life of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006).

2 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

3 Eric A. Havelock, *The Greek Concept of Justice: From Its Shadow in Homer to its Substance in Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); Martin Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law: Law, Society, and Politics in Fifth-Century Athens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

there was never an attempt to draw upon the economic institutions of biblical Israel for western economic wisdom.

Consider, for example, the biblical Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8-55). Hebrew law encodes significant economic reforms into this quinquaginary festival, yet historical treatment of this text has tended to overlook its economic insight to draw primarily upon its spiritual typology. For instance, in the year 1300, Pope Boniface VIII declared the first documented Christian Jubilee year, extending freedom from sin's penalties to those fulfilling prescribed rites of repentance and renewal. This papal Jubilee continues to be proclaimed, currently every twenty-five years. The next papal Jubilee will take place in 2025. But such a "spiritualization" of the Jubilee Year oddly overlooks the intense concern for economic bondage in the original Jubilee.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, I want to look at the economic reforms built into the Hebrew Jubilee Year. In the course of this paper, I will also draw upon other ancient Near Eastern economic institutions that are widely discussed among Hebrew Bible scholars and Assyriologists, but have not been taken seriously in the halls of economic thought. It is my hope to accomplish two goals in these pages: first, in a small way to point beyond Greece to other ancient sources for economic models worthy of attention; and, in particular, to uphold the biblical Jubilee Year as an important focus for rediscovering the relationship between theology and economics.

## **I. The Economic Function of Israel's Cultic Calendar**

Ancient Israel's cultic calendar was structured around the year's natural seasons. Other ancient nations similarly integrated their cultic calendars around seasonal cycles. Regarding the powers of nature as expressions of the powers of heaven, ancient ritual calendars enabled a people to interact properly with their deities (or, in Israel's case, their Deity) who governed the natural seasons on which the people's agricultural produce (their economy) depended.

Ancient Ugarit, for example, recognized a death and resurrection pattern in nature's seasonal cycle. This pattern became the core of their ritual calendar whereby worshipers identified annually with the defeat of Baal by Mot (prior to the dry season) and then his restoration as the Storm God (at the start of the rainy season) bringing rains and life again to the land.<sup>5</sup>

Israel's calendar was similar to those of other nations with one major distinction: Israel's calendar was rooted in religious history not religious myth. By definition, a mythical calendar is one that relates events in the realm of humanity (such as seasonal changes) to contests and occurrences in

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4 Notably, one recent Papal Jubilee did serve as the impetus for a major debt-release campaign. The Jubilee Debt Campaign ([jubileedebt.org.uk](http://jubileedebt.org.uk)) was founded in 1996 as Jubilee 2000 to use the Papal Jubilee announced for the year 2000 as a focal point for lobbying western governments to forgive debts of the world's most impoverished nations. While the policies of the Jubilee Debt Campaign are not derived from Leviticus, the unique model of grace extended in that biblical paradigm provided the inspiration (and the name) for this remarkable campaign.

5 G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 111; Johannes C. de Moor, *The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'lu: According to the Version of Ilimilku* (AOAT 16; Kevelaer: Butzon and Bercker, 1971).

the realm of deity (e.g., battles between the gods). Israel's religious calendar lacked this mythical character. Instead, Israel's calendar relates two layers of this-worldly events: the annual seasonal changes and the memory of God's intervention in human history in the events of the exodus. Despite this notable distinction, the Hebrew calendar shared in the same project as its neighbors: relating a nation's theology (its beliefs about the divine) to its economy (its participation in the bounty of the land).

In addition to the annual festivals mapped over annual seasons, Israel also had multi-year cycles incorporated into its calendar: a septennial Sabbath Year and the seventh, seventh year Jubilee. While the significance of the septennial Sabbath Year is debated, it is likely tied to the need of the land for a periodic fallow. Modern fertilizers have enabled today's farmers to plant and harvest fields continually, artificially restoring nutrients to the ground. Without such technologies, ancient societies would have discovered by experience that planting a field continually eventually leads to its declining production. The ancient farmer likely had little awareness of the natural processes behind soil nutrition and how the soil is sapped from over-farming. Nevertheless, through generations of experience there would have emerged an awareness that an occasional fallow year increases the fruitfulness of fields. This is what was likely normalized in the septennial fallow year.

The Ugaritic calendar reflects a similar conviction: "the ending of one [seven-year] cycle without a harvest was believed to bring on a seven-year cycle of plenty."<sup>6</sup> The similarity of timing—both Hebrew and Ugaritic calendars observing a seven-year cycle—should not be over-pressed. Nevertheless, Israel was not alone in its observance of such fallow-year convictions. Ritual fallow years provided "a year of solemn rest for the land" (Lev. 25:5).<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to popular notions about the practice, a fallow year most likely did not require an absolute cessation of planting. It was a year to cease income production from the land and to limit planting to what supports a subsistence diet. The relevant passage instructs: "You shall not sow (*zāra'*) your field or prune (*zāmar*) your vineyard. You shall not reap (*qāšar*) what grows of itself in your harvest... The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves and for your hired servant and the sojourner who lives with you, and for your cattle and for the wild animals that are in your land: all its yield shall be for food" (vv4-7). The key point here is that the land is not to be sown, pruned, and harvested (terms of agricultural production); it is to be given a rest from labor. Nevertheless, the land is still a source of sustenance: "all its yield shall be for food." There is permission here to produce food on the land, but only what is needed for food.<sup>8</sup> The people were not constrained to foraging nuts and berries for the year. They were to live off food stores from previous years and to garden what was necessary for subsistence. This allowed the land to recover its nutritional potential and increased the land's overall fruitfulness.

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6 Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature: A Comprehensive Translation of the Poetic and Prose Texts* (Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1949), 5. Cf., Cyrus H. Gordon, "Sabbatical Cycle or Seasonal Pattern? Reflections on a New Book," *Or* 22 (1953): 79–81; Edward Neufeld, "Socio-Economic Background of Yōbēl and Šemiṭṭā," *RSO* 33 (1958): 53–124; Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 113; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 42–3.

7 Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

8 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27* (ABD 3B; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2160.

The septennial land sabbath was an economic practice embodied within a theological institution. The same can be said about the quinquaginary Jubilee Year.

As we take up the Jubilee Year, we first have to resolve the question of its frequency. Readers are often confused by the switch from the number “forty-nine” to “fifty” in the way the Jubilee Year is numbered: “You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet... And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land...” (vv8-10). Is the proclamation of liberty marking the forty-ninth year as the Jubilee, or introducing the subsequent fiftieth year as the Jubilee?

The confusion is quickly resolved when one recalls that Hebrew counting was inclusive. Thus, for example, Jesus’ burial on Friday evening and his resurrection on Sunday morning constitutes three days in the tomb (inclusively counting Friday, Saturday, and Sunday). By western conventions, we would count that as two days spent in the tomb: Friday to Saturday being one day, and Saturday to Sunday being a second day. We generally count exclusively on the North American continent, meaning that we do not count the starting day (i.e., the Friday when Jesus was buried) when measuring time from a beginning point to an ending point; but Hebrew counting was inclusive.

One of the implications of inclusive counting is evident in the way the weekly sabbath is counted in Scripture. When Scripture speaks of the sabbath day on its own, it is called “the seventh day” because it is the seventh day of a given week. When, however, the sabbath is counted with respect to the previous sabbath, it is called “the eighth day” (e.g., Lev. 23:39; John 20:26). The second sabbath is the eighth day from the previous sabbath when counted inclusively. It is in this manner that Leviticus calls the Jubilee Year the forty-ninth year (i.e., within the given sequence of seven groups of seven) and also the fiftieth year (i.e., with respect to the previous Jubilee Year).<sup>9</sup>

Some commentators believe the Jubilee Year was an additional “leap year” (a fiftieth year) added after the forty-ninth year, resulting in two years of land fallow in a row!<sup>10</sup> This is unlikely, however. The Jubilee Year is simply the seventh Sabbath Year in a series, with special economic liberations attached to this “high sabbath year” that was observed, essentially, once a generation.

It is that “once a generation” character of the Jubilee that seems to be the natural, economic cycle which this festival governed. Annual festivals track the yearly seasons of agricultural production. The septennial festival tracks the fallow cycles of soil fertility. The Jubilee provides a theological

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9 Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (JSOTSup 141; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 318–21.

10 John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 434–6. Contra, the traditional Talmudic view (b. Ned. 61a, b; Ros Haš. 9a, Sifra Behar 6); Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 319. Benedict Zuckerman identifies six major ways that the Sabbatical and Jubilee Year cycles have been related through history: Benedict Zuckerman, *A Treatise of the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee: A Contribution to the Archaeology and Chronology of the Time Anterior and Subsequent to the Captivity; Accompanied by a Table of Sabbatical Years* (A. Löwy, trans.; New York: Hermon Press, 1974 reprint), 10–17.

overlay for the social, economic reforms typically required with every generation for the sake of proper land management.

Every individual landowner in Israel managed his estate in trust as a family heritage. In every generation, there would be business leaders and farmers who—through greed, incompetence, unavoidable circumstances, or oppression—might lose their family heritage, its properties and perhaps its persons. The once-a-generation “proclamation of liberty” (v10) was to preserve the family heritage across the losses of “weak link” generations. It also held in check the economic disparity and oppression that otherwise tends to develop in society over time, as wealth is concentrated into certain families and clans while other families and clans become trapped in a heritage of poverty. Although the Jubilee cycle has more to do with social forces than the forces of nature, it nevertheless shares in the same concern for protecting the balance of land management and production. Note that the Sabbath Year cycle actually contained both a land fallow requirement and a debt-slave release, thus already combining social and natural forces in its purview (Deut. 15:1-23). In an oral society, social forces and natural forces and divine forces would not be so distinctly separated. The ritual calendar of Israel provided a system for regulating the nation’s economic balance with respect to all the relevant forces.

Once again, Israel’s Jubilee Year finds parallel practices in neighboring societies of the ancient world. The topics of the Hebrew Jubilee—and even one of its titles (“proclaim liberty [*derôr*],” v10; cf., Akk., *andurârum*)—are matched by the economic reforms proclaimed generationally in Mesopotamia. However, the Old Babylonian proclamation of liberty was timed for each generation by the inauguration of a new king rather than a specified number of years.

When a new king arose to the throne in Mesopotamian lands, he would review the economic condition of the nation and issue an edict with a specific, targeted cancellations of debts and manumission of slaves. The purpose of this edict was to solidify the new king’s position as the defender of the poor and oppressed and to correct economic imbalances from his predecessor’s reign. Too much wealth tended to concentrate in too few hands, especially through the course of a lengthy reign. A proclamation of liberty restored economic balance to the land.

For example, the second millennium ruler of Isin, Lipit-Ishtar, recorded the following description of his ascent to the throne:

At that time the gods An and Enlil called Lipit-Ishtar to the princship of the land ... in order to establish justice in the land, to eliminate cries for justice, to eradicate enmity and armed violence, to bring well-being to the lands of Sumer and Akkad. At that time, I, Lipit-Ishtar ... established justice in the lands of Sumer and Akkad. At that time, I liberated the sons and daughters ... of Sumer and Akkad, who were subjugated [by the yoke(?)], and I restored order.<sup>11</sup>

Realistically, such an inaugural edict gave opportunity for a new king to undermine the threat of the powerful elite of the previous regime who might desire to dominate a young monarch. It also

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<sup>11</sup> LL, i.20–ii.15. Translation from Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (SBLWAW 6; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 24–5.

allowed the new king to strengthen those he deemed loyal to himself for his own reign. Such edicts certainly could be used sincerely to redress the oppressed, or they could be abused to manipulate the balance of power in the new king's personal favor. Nevertheless, the stated purpose of these proclamations was to restore order (Akk., *mīšarum*) and liberty (Akk., *andurârum*) to the land at the start of a new generation.

The customary timing for such edicts was at the start a new king's reign (i.e., once a generation),<sup>12</sup> but the king also had the authority to proclaim occasional "surprise" edicts of liberty (always with carefully defined parameters) at any time he saw it was needed.<sup>13</sup> Several scholars have provided insightful comparisons between these Mesopotamian edicts and the Hebrew "proclamation of liberty."<sup>14</sup> There are significant differences, but there are also striking parallels. In particular, Israel's Jubilee shares the same basic expectation that economic reforms are necessary once a generation to protect the prosperity of the land from the oppression of a concentrated circle of elite.

The most distinctive feature of the Hebrew liberation contrasted with its Mesopotamian counterparts was its fixation to a regular calendar (every forty-nine years).<sup>15</sup> Under Moses, Israel had no human king and thus no generational change marked by a transfer of the throne. God himself was to be Israel's perpetual king. It is politically significant that Moses took a traditionally kingly declaration and affixed it to the festivals of the Temple. The forty-nine-year cycle envisions the same once-a-generation economic reset, but Moses attached it to the perpetual reign of God within the theo-economic calendar of the Temple. (Later in this paper, we will look at how Israel's release proclamations were observed once Israel did appoint a human monarch.)

With this broader context, I want to focus next on the specific economic reforms of the Hebrew Jubilee Year. By the foregoing, I have endeavored to show that entire ritual calendar of Israel—and, indeed, the calendars of the wider ancient world—offer a wealth of insight into the economic

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12 Note that ancient societies restarted their counting of years at the ascent of each new king, thus identifying generation change with the reign of each king.

13 Cf. the detailed discussion of Ammišaduqa's Edict by J. J. Finkelstein, "The Edict of Ammišaduqa: A New Text," *RA* 63 (1969), 45–64.

14 J. J. Finkelstein, "Some New MISHARUM Material and Its Implications," *Assyriological Studies* 16 (1965), 233–46; "The Edict of Ammišaduqa: A New Text," *RA* 63 (1969), 45–64; Moshe Weinfeld, "'Justice and Righteousness' in Ancient Israel Against the Background of 'Social Reforms' in the Ancient Near East," in H.-J. Nissen and J. Renger, eds., *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn (Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale 25)*; Berlin: Reimer, 1982), 491–519; *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); D. J. Wiseman, "Law and Order in Old Testament Times," *VE* 8 (1973), 5–21; N.-P. Lemche, "Andurârum and mīšarum: Comments on the Problem of Social Edicts and their Application in the Ancient Near East," *JNES* 38 (1979), 11–22. For a critique of such comparisons, cf., J. P. J. Olivier, "The Old Babylonian Mēšarum-Edict and the Old Testament" (D. Litt. thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1977).

15 Raymond Westbrook, "Jubilee Laws," *Israel Law Review* 6 (1971) 209–26. Reprinted in Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 113; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 36–57.

institutions of sophisticated societies beyond the scope of our Greco-Roman heritage. In what follows, we will focus on the Jubilee Year, specifically.

## II. The Nature of the Jubilee Year Law

As we take up this section of Hebrew law, we first need to appreciate what kind of law it is that we have before us. It is not legislation of the type familiar in western societies. Greco-Roman notions of law have had significant impact on our western legal systems.<sup>16</sup> The Athenians were the first to give written-law a position of regulatory power over courts and thrones (i.e., the “rule of law”); outside the orb of classical Greece, laws were written to capture the essence of justice without attempting to provide comprehensive regulation.<sup>17</sup> Bernard Jackson has coined the term ‘wisdom laws’ to capture this distinct function for law-writings in the ancient Near East, placing them in the same general category with proverbs rather than classifying them with modern legislation.<sup>18</sup> The expectation that a legal provision would present a comprehensive set of verbal formulas, hermetically tight and secure from loopholes, is an assumption completely foreign to ancient Near Eastern law collections like the books of Moses.

We should not read the Jubilee Law in Leviticus 25:8-55 as a set of regulations ready for rote implementation, in the modern sense of legislation. It is, instead, an outline of Israel’s Jubilee patterns which succinctly captures the vision of Israel’s generational liberations; but there is no intention to provide comprehensive regulation here. It would still fall to the leaders of Israel in each Jubilee Year to honor the moral force of the Jubilee Law in how they implement it, precisely.<sup>19</sup> Disabusing ourselves of the modern expectation of legal regulations, we are able to admire the legal wisdom about generational, economic reform in the Hebrew Jubilee Law.

After introducing the timing for its observance (vv8-12), the passage states the primary concern of the Jubilee Law: “If you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, *you shall not wrong one another*. You shall pay your neighbor according to the number of years after the jubilee... *You shall not wrong one another*, but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God” (vv14-17). The Jubilee Year occurred only once a generation, but it would spread its shadow over all forty-eight years leading up to it. Like any system with built-in points of accountability, the

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16 Michael LeFebvre, *Collections, Codes, and Torah: The Re-characterization of Israel’s Written Law* (LHBOTS 451; New York: T&T Clark, 2006); Joshua Berman, “The History of Legal Theory and the Study of Biblical Law,” *CBQ* 76.1 (2014), 19–39.

17 Thus Aristotle’s critique of barbarian laws that “enunciate only general principles but do not give directions for dealing with circumstances as they arise” (*Pol.* 3.10.4).

18 Bernard S. Jackson, *Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 314; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 70–92; *Wisdom Laws: A Study of the Mishpatim of Exodus 21:1–22:16* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3–39.

19 Ancient Near Eastern law-writings belong to the broader genre of “scientific list,” along with medical and divination texts, which employ the same “if the circumstances are X, the diagnosis/treatment is Y” form. (Raymond Westbrook, “Biblical and Cuneiform Law Codes,” *RB* 92.2 (1985), 247–64; *Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Law* (CahRB 26; Paris: Gabalda, 1988); Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (Zainab Bahrani and Marc van de Mieroop, trans.; London: University of Chicago, 1992), 76–7.

whole nation's economy had this generational point of accountability primarily for the purpose of promoting honesty and charity in all economic dealings during the generation leading up to the Jubilee. The way the rest of the chapter is written makes it evident that the primary benefit of the Jubilee Year was the way its anticipation shaped economic interactions every year.

Most of the chapter is spent discussing the opportunities for redeeming property prior to a Jubilee, or the nature of property sales and debt-slavery at all times knowing that the year of release was coming. The sale of family properties were never permanent (vv15-16, 23), debt-slavery was never chattel slavery (vv34-3), and the deeply indebted poor always labored in hope (v35). One of the most important features of the Jubilee Year reforms was the accountability and hope they infused into the entire economy every year. Thus, when Israel governed its economic activity according to these 'wisdom laws', God promised that the community as a whole would flourish (vv18-22).

### III. The Economic Reforms of the Jubilee

Leviticus 25 outlines a series of scenarios that the Jubilee Year would address, each resulting from indebtedness. The focus of the entire passage is on the impact of debt, leading to the loss of property (vv23-34) or the loss of personal freedom (vv35-55). In the latter section (dealing with the release of slaves), it is important to bear in mind the slavery in view is *debt-slavery*. Ancient Israel did not practice chattel slavery (i.e., the ownership of persons as "living tools," to quote Aristotle).<sup>20</sup> Israel had been redeemed out of chattel slavery in Egypt and was never to engage in the same practice (Exod. 21:16; Lev. 19:32; 25:42; Deut. 15:15; 23:15-16; cf., Job 31:13-15). In fact, Mesopotamian societies had distinct terms to designate *chattel slaves* from *debt-slaves*, but Hebrew simply has the single term *ēbēd* ("servant") to describe all forms of obliged service. Milgrom explains the existence of this sole term for "servant" as reflecting a social reality: "For Israelites, both kinds of slavery, chattel and debt, are prohibited: chattel-slavery is abolished, and debt-slavery is transformed into work for hire."<sup>21</sup>

The slavery here in view is that slavery undertaken due to unresolved debt. There was no debtor's prison in Israel and no bankruptcy provision. When a debtor defaulted on a loan, he would fulfill the debt by working without pay for the creditor or (more often) by being "sold" to liquidate the loan and work in the buyer's estate for the time required to satisfy the debt (e.g., Exod. 21:1-6; Deut. 15:7-15; Neh. 5:4-5). Such debt-slavery was supposed to be temporary, but often exorbitant interest on loans effectively rendered the indebtedness (and the resulting slavery) perpetual.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the entire focus of the Jubilee, whether dealing with the restoration of lost properties or lost persons, is on the impact of indebtedness. The topics of the release are discussed in verses 23-55, as follow:

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<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.4 (1253b23).

<sup>21</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2213. Cf., the heavily qualified ascription of chattel-slavery to Israel in, Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel*, 145–85.

<sup>22</sup> Milgrom cites the modern example of India, where the close to 15 million "untouchables" are actually the offspring of those originally enslaved for unpaid debts and whose posterity continue in bondage for perpetuity because interest rates mount faster than labor can pay them off. (Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2215.)

Redemption of property (vv23–24)

- a. Scenario: Loss of agricultural property (vv25–28)
- b. Scenario: Loss of urban house (vv29–30)
- c. Scenario: Loss of village house (v31)
- d. Scenario: Loss of Levite’s house (vv32–34)

Redemption of persons

- a. Scenario: Neighbor impoverished (vv35–38)
- b. Scenario: Neighbor impoverished and enslaved (vv39–43)
- c. Scenario: Hebrew master with non-Hebrew slave (vv44–46)
- d. Scenario: Non-Hebrew master with Hebrew slave vv47–55)

The first half of the passage deals with the topic of *property loss*. The basic principle behind all property exchanges is introduced (vv23-24), followed by four scenarios that exercise our understanding of that principle (vv25-34). The fundamental principle is that God is the one who owns the land. Even though the people will receive tracts of the land by lot, assigned by families, they are always to regard themselves as “strangers and sojourners with me” (v23). God would be the true owner of the land—the “feudal lord” who allots portions to each tribe, clan, and family as his “vassals.” Every resident is to respect the family allotments made by God (Num. 33:50-56; Josh. 14-19).

It is helpful to recall that Israel was preparing to enter a land which was already populated by the Canaanites, but was largely undeveloped. The tribes would receive plots of territory with the duty to farm and develop the land. As families grew, they could increase their property by developing portions of their allotments that were still wilderness. The Jubilee Law is prepared with the settlement and development of Canaan specifically in view; the divine appointment of each tribe’s largely undeveloped lot, and the expectation each tribe will multiply to fill and develop their allotment, stands behind these instructions. Four scenarios of property loss and restoration follow.

**A. Recovering Agricultural Property**

In the first (vv25-28), a man is said to have lost his family property through impoverishment. If, through financial losses, a man is compelled to sell his family property, he is free to do so. And another is free to purchase that property in order to increase his own production. This is actually a remarkable freedom introduced into Israel’s economic exchange. Even though the original owner is a steward of his inherited estate and he is responsible to maintain it for his descendants, he is free to sell the property when he needs income. Of course, it is not strictly the land that is changing hands, but the years of its production until the next Jubilee (v16: “for it is the number of the

crops that he is selling to you”). This law grants the poor landowner the freedom to seek income from his family holdings, while also granting another landowner the freedom to increase his own production by purchasing those extra fields. However, the cross-generational heritage of that land is protected by the a series of provisions for redemption.

The first line of redemption is that a member of the landowner’s own clan (a kinsman redeemer) ought to be the buyer of the land (cf., Jer. 32:7), or to buy the land back into the family as soon as possible. At that point, the kinsman redeemer takes over production of the land. The redeemer does not buy it back for his impoverished brother; he buys it back into the family, and he takes over its production as an addition to his own business holdings until the next Jubilee. The income of the land becomes his own, but at least it is back within the broader kinship group. The only conditions under which the original owner “return[s] to his property” (v27, v28) are when he comes into adequate funds to redeem it himself, or when the Jubilee arrives and all lands are released by the trumpet blast on the Day of Atonement.

### **B. Recovering Urban or Village Houses**

The second and third scenarios address the loss of houses, contrasting the loss of an urban house (vv29-30) and a village house (v31). Houses in walled cities may be sold permanently: “it shall not be released in the jubilee” (v31). Meanwhile, houses in unwalled villages “shall be classified with the fields of the land” and thus “shall be released in the jubilee” (v31). Read through the lenses of modern legislation, one would conclude that the determining factor is whether the house is in a community with a wall around it. However, recognizing that ancient law-writing often uses stereotypes,<sup>23</sup> the distinction is one of the *stereotypical* city house versus the *stereotypical* village house. It is not strictly the presence of a wall that determines the different ways of handling these sales. Rather, the distinction is between a house of mercantile exchange and a house associated with the family’s agricultural inheritance.

As indicated in the text, the stereotypical village house is an agricultural outpost. It is associated with the fields outside the village that the inhabitant farms. An example of this is Boaz of Bethlehem, who lived in the town of Bethlehem and then went out to his portion of the surrounding fields for the workday (Ruth 2:3-4). In many areas of Israel, fields were marked out according to their owners, but the owners did not live on the farmland; the owners lived together in a nearby village. It is that stereotype that is captured in the image of the “houses of the villages that have no wall around them” (v31).

The stereotype of the house in a walled city is, in contrast, a house of trade or other production.<sup>24</sup> There is no field or family heritage (stereotypically) associated with such a house. The urban centers in Israel were places where grain was brought, stored, and redistributed. Crafts and trades—like the manufacture of sickle blades or pottery production—as well as service professions were associated with the walled cities. These cities were typically located along major trade routes

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23 On “narrative” versus “literal” readings of law, see Bernard S. Jackson, *Wisdom-Laws*, 24–9.

24 Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary* (JPS; New York, Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 176.

in order to conduct trade and to collect tolls. That is why they needed walls, because of their strategic business and military locations. But residents of the walled cities did not (stereotypically) live off the land. These were not the family holdings and were not the “bread and butter” of the predominantly agricultural economy of Israel. Thus, non-agricultural businesses and their properties could be sold, permanently. Such “a dwelling house in a walled city” could be redeemed within a year of its loss due to economic trouble, but after that its sale was final—even through the Year of Jubilee. Such industries were not regarded as a family heritage.<sup>25</sup>

### **C. Recovering a Levite’s House**

The final property scenario addresses the unique situation of the Levite and his house (vv32-34). Here is the one exception to the previous statement about houses in walled cities. The Levites did not own fields to farm; their houses, whether in villages or walled cities, *were* their allotments given to them by God. Thus the houses of the Levites were always redeemable and would be restored in the Jubilee. Furthermore, the pastureland of the Levitical cities could never be sold (v34). Pastures outside the cities were not privately owned; they were communal pastures belonging to the city as a whole. Thus, no individual’s financial decline could lead to restrictions on the community’s pastures.

These scenarios about property are by no means exhaustive; they are not adequate to regulate the topics they address in every detail. They are, nonetheless, a rich exercise in the way the theology of God’s ownership of the land and his atonement guarantee economic balance in Israel.

The final half in the chapter addresses the redemption of *persons* (vv35-55). The care for impoverished persons in this section amounts to a biblical outline for social welfare.

### **D. Supporting an Impoverished Neighbor**

The first case introduces a member of the local community who can no longer support himself (vv35-38). In other words, this is a person whose family property (and thus source of income) was sold under one of the earlier discussed property scenarios. He no longer controls the land that formerly fed him and his family. Now that he has lost his property, he requires opportunities to work for someone else to win his food (and possibly to earn enough to purchase back his heritage; v27). The emphatic concern in this scenario is that this poor man be able to remain “with you” (twice in v35). The goal is to ensure that he, having already lost his property, does not fall further to the point of having to sell himself into slavery. Debt-slavery typically involved relocation away from one’s own clan. The first line of provision is for the surrounding community to do all that is possible to provide day-labor jobs that keeps this brother “with you.”

The command given is twofold. First, the community is (if at all possible) to provide work for him. Like any “stranger and sojourner” in the land (v35), he should be provided with hired labor opportunities. Secondly, the community is to allow the poor man to buy food at cost without making any profit from his purchases of basic needs. Likewise, when loans are needed (i.e., for basic necessities), no interest is to be charged. Interest-bearing loans were legitimate in business

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25 Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2198.

transactions, but no interest was to be charged when making loans to the poor for their basic needs (Deut. 15:7-11).

Notice how this first scenario says nothing about gifts for the poor. That silence should not be interpreted as a discouragement of generosity to the poor, a virtue commended frequently in Scripture (e.g., Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 15:7-11; Psa. 112:9; Prov. 19:17; 22:9). However, the focus of the Jubilee Year provisions is on restoring the poor to income-producing labor. There is no Jubilee release from poverty, but the Jubilee (and the stipulations assigned for the forty-eight years leading up to Jubilee) will restore the individual to an ability to produce income for himself and his family.

### **E. Recovering an Enslaved Neighbor**

The second scenario (vv39-43) treats the situation when, despite the aforementioned efforts or for lack of adequate day-labor opportunities, a poor neighbor must sell himself into debt-slavery. The Torah's slave-release laws ensured that no Hebrew would ever become so hopelessly indebted that he would spend his entire life in debt-slavery. There is, however, a seeming contradiction between the debt-slavery release assigned to the Sabbath Year and that assigned to the Jubilee Year. Elsewhere in the Pentateuch, it is stated that Hebrew debt-slaves may serve a maximum of six years, being released in the Sabbath Year (Exod. 21:2; Deut. 15:12-18); in the present passage, release is promised for debt-slaves in the Jubilee Year (v40).

The difference is often explained as the result of competing schools and different textual sources.<sup>26</sup> The best explanation is probably that of Gregory Chirichigno who proposed that the presumption behind the scenario in Leviticus 25:39-43 is that the family property has been lost and *the head of the household* has been sold into debt-slavery; when the entire estate is lost and the head of the household is in bondage, the debt is of such magnitude to fall into the category of a Jubilee Year release.<sup>27</sup> Thus the loss of family property by the head of the household may impact his generation, but the Jubilee ensures the next generation will not continue in poverty due to his losses. The septennial restoration in the Sabbath Year, in contrast, refers to a different scenario. The Sabbath Year restoration envisions a situation where the head of the household is still in possession of his land, but he has been compelled to sell family members into slavery. When debts began to default, it was typical for sons and daughters to be sold into debt-slavery first, since their hope of redemption rested in their father continuing to work the family fields to gain income (cf., Neh. 5:5). Those family members may serve a maximum of six years and, if not bought back prior to that time, be released in the next Sabbath Year.

### **F. Two Special Cases involving Gentiles**

The final two scenarios (vv44-46, 47-55) are actually variations on the previous debt-slavery example. After the main example of debt-slavery is given, two dilemmas are introduced to help strengthen our wisdom concerning the Jubilee principle. What if the debt-slaves purchased are

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<sup>26</sup> See the discussion of various approaches by Hartley, *Leviticus*, 430–33.

<sup>27</sup> Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel*, 328–36.

not Hebrews (and thus, are not among the people redeemed from Egypt by God)? What if the debt-slave is Hebrew, but *the master* is not? The application of the Jubilee principle to debt-slavery in those two instances is explained in the remaining paragraphs of the chapter.

The answer to the first question (is a *non-Hebrew* debt-slave released in the Jubilee?) is no (vv44-46). This release from slavery is not a human right, but a special privilege provided to God's people through his atonement. By right, every person is responsible for his debts. Therefore, debt-slaves who are not partakers in the Day of Atonement (v9) do not share in the Jubilee Year release. Notably, the Jubilee Year trumpet was blown, not at the beginning of the year, but on the Day of Atonement during that year (v9). Release took place, not on the first day of the Jubilee Year, but on the tenth day of the seventh month of that year (the Day of Atonement). It was an economic release, not as a human right but a divine gift flowing from the atonement. It is the scenario of the *non-Hebrew* debt-slave that makes this point most clearly.

The last scenario (vv47-55) addresses the Hebrew debt-slave of a *non-Hebrew master*. This debt-slave is to be released. The surrounding Hebrew community is to hold the Gentile master accountable to ensure that he treats the Hebrew debt-slave properly and permits his redemption when provided for; note the call to accountability in verse 53: "He shall treat him as a hired servant year by year. He shall not rule ruthlessly over him *in your sight*." The community must ensure that Gentiles in the land allow Hebrew debt-slaves their proper redemption rights. But this law also assures the Gentile businessman receives his due from the Hebrew bound to him. It upholds the right of the non-Hebrew sojourner to conduct business and secure the labor of a Hebrew debtor unable to pay his obligations. But he, too, must honor the redemption purchased by Yahweh for his people.

The conclusion of the passage repeats the same basic methods for redemption outlined under the first scenario in the passage. The catalog of scenarios began with the example of lost property, listing the ways in which that property could be redeemed (in vv25-28). The last scenario closes with the same methods of redemption, this time applied to the redemption of persons: a family member of the enslaved Hebrew may, if it is within his means, pay off the debt to redeem his brother (vv48-49a); if the slave himself comes into funds, he is guaranteed the right to pay off his remaining years of labor (vv49b-52); finally, if no provision emerges before the Jubilee, even the non-Hebrew master must release when the horn is sounded on the Day of Atonement in the Jubilee Year (vv53-55). The very first scenario of the Jubilee Year passage (vv25-28) and the last scenario (vv47-55) repeat these same three methods of potential release. As an *inclusio*, these opening and closing scenarios remind us that all circumstances of economic loss may be redeemed through these methods, with the Jubilee Year release as the ultimate source of assurance.

Jacob Milgrom eloquently captures the economic significance of these Jubilee provisions: "In sum, the people of Israel and its land belong solely to God; neither can be owned in perpetuity... Persons and land may be leased, not sold. The question cannot be resisted: Has a more sublime safeguard against the pauperization of society ever been found?"<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2233.

#### IV. The Theology of Jubilees

The name Leviticus gives for this forty-ninth year is “the year of *yôbēl*” (lit., “Year of the Ram [Horn];” v13). Uncertain how to translate the term *yôbēl* in this instance, early scribes simply transliterated the Hebrew word, giving us “jubilee” (Eccl. Greek, *iobelaios*; Latin, *iubilarius*; English, *jubilee*). However, this translation decision obscures the titular centrality of one particular act behind this Hebrew festival. It was the blowing of the ram’s horn (the *šôpār*) on the Day of Atonement (v9) that was the “proclam[ation] of liberty throughout the land” (v10).<sup>29</sup> The entire year was the Year of the Ram’s Horn; but the special release of that year did not take place until the Day of Atonement when the horn was sounded. That the release took place on the Day of Atonement is the key theological anchor for the economic redemptions provided.

The year presumably would begin like any other Sabbath Year with the observed land fallow. But in the seventh month of the year, on the evening of the ninth day, the people of Israel would begin a twenty-four hour fast for the humbling and repentance that was part of the Day of Atonement. At the end of that fast, the people gathered for “a time of holy convocation” on the tenth day of the month, culminating in a national “food offering to the Lord” (Lev. 23:26-32). It was on that tenth day, probably in conjunction with the end of the fast and God’s acceptance of the sacrifices, that the Jubilee Year trumpet was blown: “You shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall...proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants...” (Lev. 25:9-10). That would be the point at which properties would revert to their proper heritage and debt-slaves would be set free. Fittingly, just five days later the people gathered for the final and most joyful festival of the yearly calendar: the festival of booths and its end-of-harvest feasting (presumably limited, though not barren, by the reduced food production of a fallow year; Lev. 23:33-43).

The freedom from economic bondage carefully worked out in the Jubilee was explicitly tied to the gift of atonement provided by God for the redemption of his people from sin. The Lord’s atonement has both spiritual and economic ramifications, guaranteeing the heavenly king’s release from the bondage of sin as well as the bondage of poverty and indebtedness.

#### V. The Practice of Jubilees

At this point, it is fitting to ask how the Sabbath Year and Jubilee Year proclamations were practiced in Israel. There is actually very little evidence of their observance in the biblical histories. Some scholars therefore conclude that these provisions were utopian and never implemented.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, these laws would not have been implemented in a mechanistic fashion. We have already observed that such “wisdom laws” were not intended to function in the same, self-effecting and mechanistic fashion as modern legislation. Nevertheless, there is an insightful passage in Jeremiah

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29 Cf., the custom in Mesopotamia to call such liberations the “proclamation by fire,” since the king’s edict of liberty was proclaimed with the raising of a torch. (Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel*, 73.)

30 Jeffrey A. Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee* (JSOTSup 155; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 34–6.

34:1-22 concerning a proclamation of liberty (*liqěřō' děrôř*) in the days of King Zedekiah that offers important insight into the observance of these laws:

<sup>8</sup>...King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty (*liqěřō' děrôř*) to them, <sup>9</sup>that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves... <sup>10</sup>And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people... <sup>11</sup>But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them into subjection as slaves. <sup>12</sup>The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord: <sup>13</sup>“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant with your fathers when I brought them out of ... the house of bondage, saying, <sup>14</sup>‘At the end of seven years each of you must set free the fellow Hebrew who has been sold to you and has served you six years; you must set him free from your service’ [quoting Deut. 15:12; cf., Exod. 21:2]. But your fathers did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. <sup>15</sup>You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty (*liqěřō' děrôř*),... <sup>16</sup>but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back his male and female slaves...

<sup>17</sup>“Therefore, thus says the Lord: You have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty (*liqěřō' děrôř*), everyone on to his brother and to his neighbor; behold, I proclaim to you liberty (*qōřē' děrôř*) to the sword... <sup>21</sup>Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials I will give...into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon...”

There are two points of interest in this passage for our purposes. First of all, we see in this passage that when Judah did have a king, it fell to the king to make the royal proclamation of liberty as typical in other ancient Near Eastern lands. Evidently it was expected that the Mosaic vision, drawn up with a direct heavenly reign in view, would be adapted to the circumstances of human monarchy once a divinely anointed throne was erected on Mount Zion. King Zedekiah is commended for doing what was right when he made a declaration of liberty in keeping with the Mosaic law.

Secondly, Zedekiah’s slave release was not implemented on the Day of Atonement, nor is there any reference to its timing during a Sabbath Year or Jubilee Year.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Zedekiah’s release takes place during an invasion of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 34:1). Nevertheless, Jeremiah commends Zedekiah’s release (vv14-15) as a proper fulfillment of the Sabbath Year instructions in Deuteronomy 15. This suggests that, just as the Mesopotamian kings could pronounce edicts of release at unexpected times when deemed necessary, the Hebrew rulers were expected to take to heart the need for economic balance taught in the Mosaic Law and to enact liberation edicts as necessary. This is in keeping with the nature of the theological expression of these ‘wisdom laws’,

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31 Although Nahum Sarna has attempted to establish that Zedekiah was making a Sabbath Year proclamation at the fall festival of that year. (Nahum M. Sarna, “Zedekiah’s Emancipation of Slaves and the Sabbatical Year,” in *Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* [Harry Hoffner, ed.; AOAT 22; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973], 143–9.) Others have discounted Sarna’s arguments as unlikely. (William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26–52* [Hermenia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989], 239; Westbrook, *Property*, 16–17 n. 4.)

which present the paradigm from which rulers are responsible to deduce just applications based on their circumstances. It is common for interpreters of Old Testament Law to assume the laws functioned like modern regulations; that is, that these laws were designed for rote implementation. However, as the biblical histories show,<sup>32</sup> the Mosaic law is intentionally utopian in its character because it teaches the ideals of justice with realistic wisdom laws'. But no law system accomplishes righteousness in itself; each generation's leaders must wrestle with the wisest implementation of the ideals and promises taught in the Mosaic vision. This is clearly the case with respect to the economic release upheld in the Jubilee Year cycle.

In Zedekiah's day, Nebuchadnezzar's army was marching through Judah when Zedekiah suddenly decided to repent and proclaim liberty. He was commended by God for this release as being a proper application of the Mosaic redemption-law models. Because of Zedekiah's obedience, God caused Nebuchadnezzar's army to withdraw (Jer. 34:21). Tragically, once the pressure was off, Zedekiah reversed his liberation edict, leading to the subsequent oracle that the kingdom would be turned over to Babylon.

The striking impression left by this passage is that the vision of a periodic rebalancing of economic conditions was strictly tied to the ritual calendar in the Torah as a teaching method: to show Israel the nature of God's gracious kingship and to establish the requirement for rulers to rule God's people in light of God's atonement. It would have been the duty of Israel's kings to consider the economic conditions of their day and to implement—in connection with the festivals and, as needed, at other times—the re-ordering decrees appropriate for a people for whom God had atoned and whom God had redeemed from slavery. Perhaps some rulers implemented Sabbath Year and Jubilee Year releases with great regularity; perhaps others less so.

In the modern west, we tend to place our confidence in the laws of the land, expecting those laws to preserve justice even when rulers are unjust. In the ancient world, no such illusion was even considered. Law-collections provided an ideal picture of justice in proverbs-like "wisdom laws," but it ultimately fell to rulers to implement justice. Thus the need for kings and judges who "fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe" (Exod. 18:21).<sup>33</sup> The entire calendar of Israel, with its ritual and social controls, presented a model of "theological economics" for real implementation, albeit according to the practicalities of the day as discerned by the rulers in each age. Thus the Passover was often neglected (2Chr. 30:5), and other religious institutions of the festival calendar were variously implemented (e.g., the reforms of Josiah; 2Kgs. 23:1-27) depending on who was on the throne. The Zedekiah passage above fits unremarkably into this ancient Near Eastern conception of law, showing that these periodic releases were in fact observed,<sup>34</sup> but that the faithfulness and exact provisions of their observance would have varied in ways offensive to modern sensibilities

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<sup>32</sup> E.g., LeFebvre, *Collections*, 58–87, 103–31.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Jackson, *Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 314; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 118–21.

<sup>34</sup> Check Weinfeld citation in n31 on p178 of: Jeffrey A. Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee* (JSOTSup 155; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

of law but commended by the Lord through his prophet Jeremiah.<sup>35</sup>

## VI. Conclusions

In this final section, I want to reflect on some of the economic lessons that can be drawn from the biblical model of Jubilee. There are many reasons why a rote implementation of the Jubilee would be neither practicable nor appropriate, today. First, the Jubilee Law was never designed for rote implementation; it would always require adaptation to the circumstances of the time (see “The Practice of Jubilees,” above). Second, the Temple and its festivals are no longer in place and we do not, today, have tribal land allotments by divine appointment. Third, the specifics of the Jubilee Law are clearly tailored to an ancient, agrarian society. The realities of a modern industrial, and increasingly knowledge-based society would require very different provisions than those epitomized in the Leviticus 25 model. For these and other reasons, the rote implementation of a Year of Jubilees is not possible today. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be drawn from these provisions. I will suggest seven lessons here, beginning with the more strictly theological lessons and gradually moving into some more practical, economic implications.

For the first and most important lesson, it is necessary to re-assert that rote implementation was never the point of the Jubilee Law. As discussed in the body of this paper,<sup>36</sup> Hebrew laws are not legislation, but legal paradigms of righteousness idealized in terms of the realities of their own time. The primary purpose of a law like Jubilees is not rote implementation, but instruction in the kind of justice the heavenly King promises. Implementation of the paradigm is important as national submission to the heavenly King; but regardless of the wisdom or folly of human rulers, these laws promote a vision of God’s justice for the people’s hope (cf., Psa. 119). The foremost value of Jubilee is its testimony to God’s concern for the economic injustices suffered by his people under human oppressors. Like the singer of the Psalms, God’s people find delight in the vision of God’s kingdom gained by meditating in his law day and night amidst the oppression, injustice, and suffering experienced in human kingdoms (Psa. 1:1-6).<sup>37</sup>

Whatever else might be gained from a study of the Jubilee Year, this lesson must always be cherished above all: Jubilee teaches us that the atonement secures real redemption, not only from sin but also from the effects of sin including its economic effects. Under the government of human rulers, the implementation of just economics will always fall short of our Bible-informed hope. But these laws give assurance that God’s love sees even our economic sorrows and his atonement secures their ultimate redemption to be fully realized in the consummation of his kingdom.

Rather than relating theology to economics to improve economic policy, the best reason to relate

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35 See esp. the thorough review of the evidence by Raymond Westbrook who concludes, “Our verdict, therefore, on the biblical law of Jubilee is that while its basic idea of a release reflects a practicable and practiced institution, that part thereof which is academic and theoretical is the *stipulation of its regular recurrence every fifty years.*” (Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* [JSOTSup 113; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991], 50.)

36 See, “II. The Nature of the Jubilee Year Law,” on pp. 37, above.

37 Michael LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 104–9.

theology to economics is to improve our faith in the face of economic failures. Certainly there are practical lessons that can be gained, but we should not take up those practical lessons until we have first given full weight to the faith such provisions inform.

A second, key lesson of Jubilee is that sin is the core problem which corrupts economics. The choice to blow the Jubilee trumpet on the Day of Atonement makes this point clear. Many economic theorists regard political policy, or education, or other social corrections as central for rebalancing a struggling economy. Leviticus 25 teaches us that the root of economic imbalance is sin. Yairah Amit draws the same conclusion, stating it this way: “The jubilee law is, therefore, an attempt...[to] overcome the curse of banishment from the Garden of Eden.”<sup>38</sup>

The identification of sin as the core problem behind economic imbalance is at once a theological insight and a practical one. It means that economic corrections ought to take into consideration the moral failures of a government and a society as well as political and market issues. Furthermore, the health of the church—the central institution for promoting the atonement—is beneficial to the economics of the society.

A third lesson of Jubilee—and one that straddles both the realms of theology and practice—is the model of debt-forgiveness provided in this text. The poor were not granted an immediate release from their economic burdens. The Jubilee held forth the promise of eventual debt-forgiveness which preserved hope, but debtors continued to bear responsibility for their circumstances. The interests of both the creditor and the debtor were upheld in a careful system that always preserved the hope of the impoverished (and kept creditors from extending perpetual loan arrangements). This balance was achieved by establishing debt-forgiveness in a manner that was not immediately available, but which was a real and certain eventuality. Its distance motivated the debtor’s efforts in the present while its eventual certainty motivated the creditor’s humane respect for the debtor’s efforts. Thus the creditor’s interests were protected; yet, the final option of full debt-forgiveness had to be part of the system. Without grace somewhere in an economic system, pure market economics will always become the tool of creditors and the bane of the poor. Modern bankruptcy law borrows, to some extent, upon this notion. The Jubilee offers an ancient foil for critiquing modern approaches to bankruptcy.<sup>39</sup>

A fourth insight from Jubilee is that debt-forgiveness is always a matter of grace, not rights. The Jubilee release only applied to participants in Israel’s atonement and not to outsiders. The Jubilee Law does not regard debt-release as a basic human right. “Forgiveness is the act of putting away and canceling claims... It is invoked precisely when the [obligation]...cannot be justified or

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38 Yairah Amit, “The Jubilee Law—An Attempt at Instituting Social Justice,” in Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman, eds., *Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and their Influence* (JSOTSup 137; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 47–59.

39 Cf., Paul B. Rasor, “Biblical Roots of Modern Consumer Credit Law,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 10 (1993–4), 157–92; Richard H. Heirs, “Biblical Social Welfare Legislation: Protected Classes and Provisions for Persons in Need,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 17 (2002), 49–96.

excused.”<sup>40</sup> In Israel, it was on the basis of God’s ultimate ownership of the land and his atonement for sins that debt-forgiveness and the restoration of property was legitimated. Even if a secular society institutes debt-forgiveness without recourse to the Christian God, such forgiveness will always require grace. It should not be pursued as a point of human rights, but through recourse to the moral mandate of grace. In the words of N.T. Wright, “There is no reason in the world’s terms why one should cancel debts. If you have people in your power, why not keep them there? Debt cancellation is inexplicable in terms of Marx, Nietzsche or Freud... It is a sign of hope, of love, of the gospel.”<sup>41</sup>

A fifth lesson of the Jubilee Law is the importance of protecting the economic opportunity of future generations from the impact of economic disaster in the present generation. The impoverished neighborhoods of modern America provide far too much evidence that, without some system of economic grace, those born into poverty rarely ever break out of it. The specific system of Jubilees may not be practicable in modern society, but there is wisdom in its underlying commitment to policies that hold the present generation responsible for their debts while guarding future generations from becoming trapped by them. Similar protections in modern society would be worth exploration.

A sixth Jubilee lesson is the importance of identifying the cornerstone of prosperity in a given society and regulating the economy around that core concern. In ancient Israel, preserving broad ownership of farmland from generation to generation was the key to sustaining a balanced, prosperous nation. Other industries could change hands with little restriction, but agricultural properties were protected from becoming concentrated into the hands of a wealthy elite. Jubilee represents a system of regulations that ensured the society’s core means of wealth—agricultural property—remained widely held across the whole society and through generations. This focus of regulation on core economic interests in society and not others stirs us to nuance which engines of prosperity ought to be protected, not as a matter of rights but as a matter of grace.

Finally, the Jubilee Law reminds us that economic prosperity is not the work of the state alone. Nor is it the result of government and business cooperation, only. Economic prosperity is the fruit of a society where religion, government, and business work harmoniously together. A good political system cannot secure economic balance by itself. The government enforces civic order and business promotes economic activity, but religion restores human dignity. “Human law cannot possibly police every sin. When Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that anger is a form of murder and to lust is to commit adultery, he underscores the pervasiveness of God’s law. But an obvious secondary implication is that human law must have more modest aspirations.”<sup>42</sup> The Jubilee shows the necessary relationship between the ministry of atonement by the church

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40 Chantal Thomas, “International Debt Forgiveness and Global Poverty Reduction,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 27 (2000), 1715.

41 N. T. Wright, *The Millenium Myth: Hope for a Postmodern World* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 108.

42 David A. Skeel, Jr., “The Unbearable Lightness of Christian Legal Scholarship,” *Emory Law Journal* 57 (2008), 1510.

and the economic enforcement of government.<sup>43</sup>

The American Liberty Bell—legendarily rung over Independence Hall on July 4, 1776—is inscribed with the words of Leviticus 25:10: “Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof.” This quotation ironically seizes upon the economic promise of the Jubilee Year while overlooking its theological foundation stated in the previous verse: “*On the Day of Atonement* you shall sound the trumpet... And proclaim liberty throughout the land...” (vv9-10). There are many ideals and inspiring phrases of liberty that can be borrowed from Scripture. However, to distill biblical wisdom and leave behind biblical theology is to leave behind the greater part. It benefits the economic and social liberty of a nation when the ministry of atonement is flourishing in its midst.

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43 The modern argument for such a direction was classically expressed by the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian, William Symington, *Messiah the Prince: The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2012 reprint); cf., Roy Blackwood and Michael LeFebvre, *William Symington: Penman of the Scottish Covenanters* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), 205–8, 263–99.

# The Preface to the Ten Commandments: Exodus 20:1-2

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**T**he door to your home is the most important part of it, for it is the means by which you, your family, and your friends enter and leave it. Yet, that door can become so familiar that you fail to appreciate its design, construction, utility, and beauty.

The door to the Ten Commandments is its introduction, or preface, found in Exodus 20:1-2, and, minus verse 1, in Deuteronomy 5:6. Like the door to your home, this Preface can be easy to ignore, despite its importance. Yet, to push the metaphor of the door a little further, the preface serves as the door into the house with the ten rooms of God's moral law.

## **The Contexts to the Preface**

The first things to note about the Preface to the Ten Commandments are the contexts to the preface, of which four are most significant.

The first context is the redemptive context. Since creation, God had impressed his will upon all of humanity through the law written on their hearts (Rom. 2:15). In that light, it is incorrect to say, as some do, that the giving of the Law occurred at Mount Sinai. Indeed, Moses records, in Genesis and Exodus 1-19, examples of the Law of God at work among humanity.<sup>1</sup> One may even argue that Genesis provides predominantly examples of the violation of the last six commandments, while Exodus concentrates on the first four. Moreover, since the Garden of Eden, God had, through direct but occasional revelations of His will, communicated more about that will to select individuals, such as Noah and Abraham. The latter practice God supplemented by the written record of His will, to which itself His incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, added his personal testimony. But why, at the time of the Exodus, had a written law become necessary? Because the organic development of sin among mankind increasingly obscured the law of God as written on the heart and rendered mankind more vulnerable to iniquity.

The second context to the Preface to the Ten Commandments that should be noted is the historical context. Israel had left behind four hundred years of suffering in Egypt, had wandered for several months in the wilderness, and had arrived before Mount Sinai, where they had set up camp (Exodus 19:1-2). Exodus 19, then, serves as the immediate historical context of the

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, c2005), 529. Ryken also argues that Adam and Eve violated most of the Ten Commandments in eating the forbidden fruit. *Ibid.*

giving of the Ten Commandments. British pastor Brian Edwards observes in his book, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, “We must not lose the significance of the fact that they came to a desert (19:1). God deliberately brought the Israelites to a place of total dependence upon him.”<sup>2</sup> And, Edwards continues, the desert is “a silent place; a place to listen.”<sup>3</sup> Amid the bickering and belly-aching among the Israelites in the Desert, they needed to learn to listen.

Encamped before Mount Sinai, the people were challenged to become obedient to their Liberator (verses 3-6), to which command they responded in a commitment to action, first by the elders and then by all the people (verses 7-8). God wanted to impress upon them that He Himself would be speaking directly to His people, so he told Moses about His plan, which Moses then relayed to the people (verse 9). The Lord ordered certain preparations for this momentous event. First, the Israelites were to clean their clothes – in the midst of the desert, no less (verses 10-11, 14)! Second, the married couples in Israel were to refrain from sexual intimacy, with its resulting discharges (verse 15). Third, the Israelites were to stay away from the mountain, even from its base (verses 12-13).

On the third day of the encampment, God put on a polytechnic display which no Independence Day celebration can match: thunder, lightning, clouds, earthquake, trumpet sound (verses 16-25). God was impressing upon the people of Israel who it was who was about to speak to them. They were to listen to and to heed His words. Our familiarity with these historical events should not minimize their importance. As the nineteenth century Presbyterian commentator George Bush writes, Exodus 19 and 20 constitute “the most remarkable event, perhaps, taken in all its bearings, that occurred in the history of the chosen people prior to the incarnation of Christ ... and one of the most remarkable that ever did or will distinguish the annals of the world itself.”<sup>4</sup>

The third context to the Preface to the Ten Commandments is the literary context. In the mid-1950s, University of Michigan Professor George Mendenhall first popularized the theory that the Old Testament law was written in a style that was common in the Ancient Near East.<sup>5</sup> Mendenhall observed that, when a ruler or suzerain conquered a people, he would establish a covenant with that people through a written document which codified their relationship.

Then Westminster Theological Seminary professor Meredith Kline introduced Mendenhall’s idea into Reformed circles with his book *Treaty of the Great King* in 1965.<sup>6</sup> While Kline mostly focused on the Book of Deuteronomy, the second law, the first chapter of his book is a consideration of the first codification of the Law in the Book of Exodus, beginning with chapter 20. Kline writes that the words of the preface to the Ten Commandments:

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2 Brian H. Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today* (Bromley, Kent: Day One, 1996), 35.

3 Ibid., 36.

4 George Bush, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 249.

5 George Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955).

6 Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

correspond to the preamble of the zuzerainty treaties, which identified the zuzerain, or ‘great king’, and that in terms calculated to inspire awe and fear ... Such treaties continued in an ‘I-thou’ style, with an historical prologue, surveying the great king’s previous relations with, and especially his benefactions to, the vassal king.<sup>7</sup>

Such prologues could be extensive: Hammurabi’s famous one runs to ninety lines of text. With only a few words in Exodus 20:1-2, God establishes His sovereign right to impose the strictures that follow. Perhaps there is an inverse relationship between the length of the covenantal prologue and the legitimacy of the particular sovereign imposing covenantal demands!

Kline admits that the Book of the Law in Exodus is not as accurate a representation of the covenant form as is the Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the expected section of curses and blessings is found in Exodus 20, but it is interspersed among the stipulations (verses 5, 6, 7, 11, and 12), rather than limited to a separate section.<sup>9</sup> Still, Kline maintains that the literary context here is important, for it stresses “not law, but covenant. That must be affirmed when we are seeking a category comprehensive enough to do justice to this revelation in its totality.”<sup>10</sup> Not that Kline is denying that the Sinaitic covenant is law. He continues: “The increased emphasis on the covenantal context of the law underscores the essential continuity in the function of law in the Old and New Testaments.”<sup>11</sup> Another benefit of stressing “the covenantal ‘I-thou’ nature of this law is also to reaffirm the personal religious character of [B]iblical ethics[;] at the same time[,] it recognizes that covenantal religion and its ethics are susceptible of communication in the form of structured truth.”<sup>12</sup> And finally, the terms of the Preface are designed to impress upon God’s hearers His sovereignty and thus their responsibility to obey what He says.

Orientalist Kenneth Kitchen argues in his work *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* that the covenant form of Exodus and Deuteronomy is a strong indication that they were written in the time of Moses, during the second millennium BC, rather than much later, as liberal critics have alleged. Kitchen compared the forms of first millennium BC covenants to second millennium BC covenants and found that the earlier forms showed greater similarity to the Pentateuch than do the later ones.

The fourth and final context of the Preface to the Ten Commandments to be considered is the confessional context. Although the Reformed confessions do not generally discuss the Preface as such, and the Heidelberg Catechism fails to consider the Preface at all, the Westminster Divines, in both of their Catechisms, consider the Preface in some detail. Question and Answer 43 of the Shorter Catechism give the text of the Preface. Question 44 asks: “What doth the preface to the ten commandments teach us?” The answer affirms that it, “teacheth us, that because God is the

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7 Ibid., 14.

8 Indeed, in both books, there is no invocation of the gods of both sides to witness the agreement, since God alone is the witness to this covenant, implicit in the Third Commandment.

9 See Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, 16.

10 Ibid., 17.

11 Ibid., 24.

12 Ibid.

Lord, and our God, and Redeemer, therefore[,] we are bound to keep all his commandments,” giving two proof-texts, Luke 1:74-75 and I Peter 1:15-18. Question 101 of the Larger Catechism gives the significance of the Preface as follows: “Wherein God manifesteth his sovereignty, as being Jehovah, the eternal, immutable, and almighty God; having his being in and of himself, and giving being to all his words and works: and that he is a God in covenant, as with Israel of old, so with all his people; who, as he brought them out of their bondage in Egypt, so he delivereth us from our spiritual thralldom; and that therefore we are bound to take him for our God alone, and to keep all his commandments.” Six Old Testament and five New Testament proof-texts are provided to justify this answer.

Besides Exodus 20:2 itself, these proof-texts include: the definition of the relationship between God and His people in the Abrahamic Covenant, as recorded in Genesis 17:7; the revelation of the name of God to Moses in Exodus 3:14; and, God’s observation that he was revealing Himself by a new name to Moses on that occasion (Exodus 6:3). Leviticus 18:30 and 19:37 urge the people of Israel to obey His statutes and judgments, for, “I am the LORD your God,” or “I am the LORD” (NKJV). Perhaps most significant among the proof-texts is Isaiah 44:6, which connects the LORD to both Elohim and to the work of redemption, and defines the LORD as “the First and the Last”. It reads as follows:

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel,  
And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts,  
‘I am the First and I *am* the Last;  
Besides Me *there is* no God.”

In the New Testament, the Divines direct our attention toward Acts 17:24 and 28, where the apostle Paul says before the Areopagus in Athens, “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands ... for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’” And Paul writes to the Romans, in chapter 3, verse 29: “Or *is He* the God of the Jews only? *Is He* not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also.”

The two proof-texts which both Catechisms cite have a narrower, redemptive focus. In Luke 1:74-75, Zacharias prayed, “Grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.” And in I Peter 1:15-18, the apostle writes:

But as He who called you *is* holy, you also be holy in all *your* conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy. And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay *here* in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, *like* silver or gold, from your aimless conduct *received* by tradition from your fathers.

## **The Contents of the Preface**

The matter of most interest in the confessional tradition is the way that both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms fail to include the words of Exodus 20:1 in the Preface. If Meredith Kline is correct, then these words are essential to a correct understanding of the Preface, being an integral part of its literary structure. And so that verse will be included for consideration in this paper.

Kline's insight also underscores the fact that the Preface is not an introduction only to the first commandment, as some have argued, but also to all the Ten Commandments and to all the case laws that follow them. Confirming that interpretation is the observation that the contents of the Preface, to which we now turn, are all centered on the identity of the One who will bring the Ten Commandments to the people, and that these contents are all relevant to all the commandments.

The law-giver and covenant-establisher identifies Himself in four ways in Exodus 20:1-2. This revelation is so important that He does not delegate the responsibility for bringing it to an angel, as He does in some other instances of revelation in the Older Testament. The first identification is as the Creator God, in verse 1: "And God spoke all these words, saying". These words immediately take our minds back to the creation of the world in Genesis 1:1-2:3. There, the usual name given for God is Elohim, a plural word suitable to a divine being who is both one and three. This name for the Creator appears here as well. Furthermore, the refrain in the account of creation is that "God said," eleven times over,<sup>13</sup> and here again, God speaks. Therefore, Moses first emphasizes that the Covenant God is also the Creator God, and thus, the One to whom all, not only the Israelites, are responsible.

In Romans 9:20-21, Paul compares God to a potter, for he functions in relation to all His creation like a potter to his pots. A student at Westminster Seminary in the 1970s had been a professional potter. On one occasion, he showed some other students one of his pots, announced that he was dissatisfied with his creation, and dropped it on the floor, where the pot broke into scores of pieces. Similarly, the One speaking in Exodus 20:1 is reminding His hearers that He is like that potter, and they had better listen to him. And the physical manifestations of His sovereignty, recorded in Exodus 19, have prepared them to heed His words. While we have never experienced such sensual overkill – nor have any others – the Preface to the Ten Commandments calls us, as well as all mankind, past, present, and future, to heed and obey the words of our Creator.

The second way that the speaker identifies Himself is as the Self-Sufficient God, as He says, "I am the LORD." The traditional English translation of the tetragrammaton as "LORD" (all in capital letters) is problematic. LORD has been adopted by our translators because the Jews vocalize this word as יהוה, or "Lord", and the Septuagint and New Testament followed suit, by rendering the word as κύριος, or "Lord". However, יהוה is a form of the Hebrew word "to be", this name refers more to His being than to His actions, as Isaiah 44:6, cited above, makes clear. God is the one who is without beginning or ending, prior to all being or matter besides Himself. He is not a projection of man's imagination, nor the divine expression of some aspect of the world, as with the false

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<sup>13</sup> Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 29. The word translated "called" may well involve speaking in Genesis 1 as well (verses 5 twice, 8, 10 twice; five total occurrences).

gods of man's own creating. In this way, as Westminster Theological Seminary professor William Edgar writes in his book *Les Dix Commandements*, He "is the only God, not only because there is no other, but because there are no other gods which resemble Him."<sup>14</sup> Standing thus beyond and above and before and after time, God is "eternal"; hence, the traditional French translation of this name as "L'Éternel", the Eternal One, is a more accurate way of expressing the truth contained in the name than is our traditional English translation.

The eternality of God, however, is not some ethereal reality, floating above the clouds in vacuous space. As the Eternal One, God is self-sufficient, for He does not depend on anything or anyone beyond Himself. His being does not require God to create anything, let alone the vast universe and His image-bearers. God's being does not dictate that, once His creatures turned rebellious against Him, that God should redeem a portion of them in praise of His grace. But, in love and mercy, He freely chose to do so. And so this name was particularly apropos when God chose to communicate to the people of Israel in Egypt as He sent Moses to ready them for their deliverance from slavery there (Ex. 3:14). We are called by the Preface to the Ten Commandments to recognize this Self-Sufficient God. The special name of God prepares for the third way that the speaker identifies Himself, which is as the Covenantal God.

God has already referred to the people of Israel in the immediate historical context as "a special treasure" (Ex. 19:5). The apostle Peter will take up similar language – "you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" – in Chapter 2, verse 9 of his First Epistle, not long after one of the proof-texts to the preface provided by the Westminster Divines. In the last two of His four self-descriptions, the Speaker is making the transition from the universal names which express something of His being and works in relation to all mankind to the more particular names which express something of His being and works in relation to His special people.

"I am" is, in a real sense, a redundancy, for that is what "the LORD" means. And, this divine being does not say that they will become His people, but that they already are such: "I am ... your God." This covenantal language is reminiscent of God's communications with Abraham, the father of the people of Israel, especially in Genesis 17:7-8, to which the Westminster Divines draw our attention. The language is expressive of a relationship already established and now to be further developed. As prolific writer R. J. Rushdoony puts it, "The law is given to the people saved by grace as their way of grace, to set forth the privilege and blessing of the covenant."<sup>15</sup> Anticipating later developments in redemptive history, Dutch Reformed theologian G. H. Kersten writes, "It was the covenant of grace which was established at Sinai ... in which God testifies, seals, and grants the salvation which is in Christ to those whom He has purchased with His precious blood."<sup>16</sup> And it was particularly wise for God to use such language, for, as another Dutch Reformed theologian, G. Van Rheezen, observes, "Consider this introduction a balm which you will need for the soul

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14 William Edgar, *Les Dix Commandements* (Cléon-d'Andraon, France: Éditions Excelsior, c2009), 78.

15 R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Philadelphia: Craig Press, 1973), 15.

16 G. H. Kersten, *The Heidelberg Catechism in Fifty-Two Sermons* (Sioux Center, IA: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, 1992), 476.

piercing words you are to hear.”<sup>17</sup> Through the Preface to the Ten Commandments, we are called to recognize the covenant relationship God has established with us and all His people.

On behalf of that covenant of grace, the God who speaks here reminds them that He is, fourth, the Liberating God, for He says He is the one “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex. 20:2b). For four hundred years, the descendants of Abraham had experienced increasing persecution at the hands of their Egyptian lords. The God who is speaking at Mount Sinai liberated them from this dreadful condition with a series of amazing miracles, from the ten plagues to the division of the Sea of Reeds to the guidance of the pillar of fire by night and smoke by day. As Robert Reymond declares in his *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, “The very preface of the Ten Commandments ... places these ten obligations within the context of and represent them as the anticipated outcome of the redemption which they had just experienced.”<sup>18</sup> This redemption was the great Older Covenant type of the liberation of God’s people from their sins through the work of Jesus Christ.

The literary form of God’s speaking may well be that of a suzerainty treaty, but Dutch Reformed ethicist Joachim Douma observes that its Imposer “is unlike a despotic Hittite king who compels respect from his vassals.”<sup>19</sup> No, in the language of John Calvin in his *Institutes*, the speaker “holds out the promise of grace to draw them by its sweetness to a zeal for holiness.”<sup>20</sup> How could the people gathered at the Mount not respond in love and obedience, not merely in awe? Calvin preached on this text, claiming that God “has truly bound them to himself[,] so that the people cannot revolt against him without meriting further punishment.”<sup>21</sup> And what punishment that would be! Professor Douma again: “In the foreground of the law is not its strictness, but its concern to keep the one who has been liberated from falling back into slavery,”<sup>22</sup> that is, slavery to sin, with all that such enslavement involves. And yet the language of the Preface does not contain the suggestion that the law is, as the Puritan James Durham put it, “laid on them as a covenant of works, or that by which they are to seek or expect justification,”<sup>23</sup> for they already had been justified in God’s sight. In a real sense, gospel precedes law! No wonder that Henry Belfrage, pastor in Scotland’s Associate Synod, comments, “While the mere intimation of his will should have been sufficient to secure our obedience, he has been pleased to present it to us in such a form

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17 G. Van Rheenen, *The Heidelberg Catechism Explained* (Sioux Center, IA?: Netherlands Reformed Congregations in America, 1955), 431.

18 Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 521.

19 Joachim Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1996), 2.

20 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, c1960), 2: 379.

21 John Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. by Benjamin w. Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 58.

22 Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 4.

23 James Durham, *A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, ed. by Christopher Coldwell (Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, c2002), 53.

as to make it appear a reasonable service, an expression of gratitude, and the dictate of love.”<sup>24</sup> We are called by the Preface to the Ten Commandments to a responsive obedience to His now-finished work liberating us from our sin.

Therefore, the contents of the Preface to the Ten Commandments define in some detail the identity of the One who imposes them, as the Creator God, the Self-Sufficient God, the Covenantal God, and the Liberating God. George Bush writes, “No greater sanction can be conceived to any code of laws than the supremacy, sovereignty, majesty, preeminence, and power of the source from which it emanates.”<sup>25</sup> But again, this law is no mere exercise in divine hegemony, befitting the Allah of Islam, for what God commanded was based entirely on who He is and what He had done.<sup>26</sup> What a remarkable redemption He had provided to the people of Israel — and yet that redemption pales in comparison to what Jesus Christ accomplished at Calvary!

### **The Contrasts with the Preface**

Having looked at the contexts to the Preface of the Ten Commandments and then the contents of the Preface to the Ten Commandments, let us turn now to the contrasts with the Preface. The first such contrast is with any Dualism which posits that God’s moral law is not binding upon those outside the covenant people of God. Even in Reformed circles, such reasoning is becoming commonplace, although it cannot be justified by the Larger Catechism’s teaching on the Preface, which begins, “wherein God manifesteth his sovereignty, as being, Jehovah, the eternal, immutable, and almighty God; having his being in and of himself, and giving being to all his words and work,” and then proceeds to separate out the special responsibility of God’s people to obey the Ten Words from their general applicability. It is true that the Ten Commandments are particularly binding upon God’s people, but that fact does not remove their universal relevance.<sup>27</sup> In an age of increasing secularization, it is crucial that Christians not give in to the spirit of the age and embrace a two-track notion of God’s standards among men, one for the world and one for the church.

Yet the universality of the law’s relevance is not an argument for the universality of grace. In the Israelites’ peculiar responsibility to obey God’s commands, they did not typify humanity in general but the elect people in every age. The Moral Law functions to drive the elect to faith in Christ, but also the reprobate to condemnation in hell.

What support does the Catechism’s teaching about the universal relevance of the Moral Law summarized in the Ten Commandments enjoy? Some Jewish scholars have argued that the delivery of the Law outside the Promised Land proves its universality, but that line of argument is more confirmation than true support. More convincing is the Preface’s text itself, which begins

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24 Henry Belfrage, *A Practical Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant, 1834), 369.

25 Bush, *Commentary on Exodus*, 242.

26 Philip Graham Ryken, *Written in Stone: The Commandments and Today’s Moral Crisis* (Wheaton: Crossway, c2003), 59.

27 In Galatians 6:10, we find the same kind of dynamic: “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

with the statement that the speaker is the Creator God. That makes Him the Creator of all mankind, to whom men and women, boys and girls, are then accountable. As Calvin Theological Seminary professor Sidney Greidanus writes, “God’s moral laws have a universal dimension because they are based not on historical circumstances or cultural norms but on God’s creation.”<sup>28</sup> And those laws are not arbitrary or ridiculous, for, as John Mackay of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, states, “When the Lord sets out the conduct He expects, it is a mirror of his own perfections.”<sup>29</sup> As a result, Jesus was the living embodiment of those laws and respected them as He did.

A second argument supporting the universality of the Moral Law is the unity of God’s law in all times and places. As Brian Edwards asks, “What government makes one set of laws for the law-keepers and an easier set of laws for the law-breakers?”<sup>30</sup> But the New Testament does contain such statements as, “We are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14-15). However, as Arthur Pink observes, the word “law” in the Scriptures normally refers to the Moral Law, but, where “law” is criticized, it invariably refers to other aspects of law, such as works-righteousness.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the universal perspective of the law is strongly suggested in the historical context to the Preface, for, in Exodus 19:5, God claims that, “all the earth is mine.”

A third argument for the universality of the Moral Law is that God would not require anything at anytime that is inimical to man’s general welfare. What is there to object to in the Ten Commandments? Without the Moral Law being in effect, mankind would be condemned to an anarchy beyond what we have already at times experienced among us.

A fourth argument in favor of the universality of the Moral Law against all dualistic counter-arguments is that God’s law is knowable by all human beings, being ingrained in their nature, since, as image-bearers of God, they must know something of His perfections in themselves. Indeed, one may argue that everyone instinctively knows the law of God,<sup>32</sup> and that the conscience enforces it, to a greater or a lesser extent, upon each one of us.

A fifth and final argument for the universality of the Moral Law is that death, the penalty of sin, reigns over all mankind, not just the people of God,<sup>33</sup> so there must be a universally-applicable and universally-known law to serve as the basis upon which God could condemn sinners to everlasting punishment. The fact that death reigned from the time of Cain and Abel through the Wilderness wanderings of Israel confirms that this Moral Law was in effect throughout those thousands of years. Yes, the Moral Law of God is of universal applicability.

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28 Sidney Greidanus, “The Universal Dimension of Law in the Hebrew Scriptures,” *Studies in Religion = Sciences Religieuses* 14:1 (1985): 47-48.

29 John L. Mackay, *Exodus* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2001), 340.

30 Edwards, *Ten Commandments for Today*, 38.

31 Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, ca. 1965), 160.

32 Greidanus, “Universal Dimension,” 51.

33 See Buddy Hanson, *God’s Ten Words: A Commentary on the Ten Commandments* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Hanson Group, 2002), lxiv.

A second contrast with the Preface to the Ten Commandments is with Dispensationalism, which is the theological viewpoint that God deals with His creation and His people in differing ways during seven major periods in human history. The Mosaic Dispensation is the period of Law, with a capital “L”, which is definitively ended by the work of Jesus Christ. However, the Mosaic Covenant, as the Preface makes clear, reposes upon God’s *eternal* attributes. Therefore, Pastor Joseph Morecraft argues that God’s “moral law is unchanging and is binding upon all people in all ages in all cultures and circumstances as the will of the Lord for His subjects.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as Presbyterian pastor Philip Ryken puts it, God “would have to un-God himself to set them aside.”<sup>35</sup>

The key here is to distinguish the Moral Law, which always abides, from the Mosaic civil and ceremonial laws, which do not abide, except for the general equity of the former. Arthur Pink points out that, even in the text of Exodus itself, it is clear that the Ten Commandments are differentiated from the rest of the Mosaic Law. How so? First, they were communicated by the very voice of God. Second, they were “written directly by the finger of God, written on tables of stone, and written thus to denote their lasting and imperishable nature”;<sup>36</sup> and the tables of stone were the only items housed in the arks of the covenant. Even John N. Darby, founder of Dispensationalism, had to admit that what he termed “the character of the Law” is “a rule sent out to man, taken in its largest character.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the coming of the new Covenant in Christ does not do away with the Moral Law, which, as the preface states, proceeds from the Creator God, the Self-Sufficient God; indeed, by virtue of the Creator God’s eternity and immutability, the Moral Law can never be abrogated. For this reason the Moral Law is of continual application.

A third contrast with the Preface to the Ten Commandments is with Legalism, which is the view that the Law is our way of salvation, although with a twist, as Brian Edwards trenchantly remarks, for “Legalism is not what constraints I place myself under[,] but the demands I place on others.”<sup>38</sup>

Notice, as Joseph Morecraft observes concerning the Preface, that “the miracle of the Red Sea took place *before* the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. We must never lose sight of this historical fact. Redemption precedes Law in the experience of God’s covenant people.”<sup>39</sup> The Preface itself mentions redemption from slavery in Egypt before moving on to the Ten Commandments. In relation to God’s law, our motivation is not to earn God’s favor, but to respond in love to His mercy towards us by obeying Him. Arthur Pink comments, “The supreme test of love is the desire and effort to please the one loved, and this measured by conformity to his known wishes.”<sup>40</sup> Those who have been liberated from the power and practice and penalty of sin in their lives will always want to obey the One who accomplished this wonderful salvation, but if they correctly understand

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34 Joseph C. Morecraft III, *Authentic Christianity: An Exposition of the Westminster Larger Catechism* (Powder Springs, GA: Minkoff Family Publishers, c2008), 700.

35 Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, c2005), 528.

36 See Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, 161.

37 John N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1942), 1:86.

38 Edwards, *Ten Commandments for Today*, 54.

39 Morecraft, *Authentic Christianity*, 701.

40 Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, 156.

the nature of God's dealings with them, they will not view the Law as a way of salvation. Properly understood, the Moral Law keeps us from legalism.

A fourth contrast with the Preface to the Ten Commandments is with the opposite of Legalism, or Antinomianism, an outlook which alleges that mankind, including believers, is free from responsibility to obey the Moral Law. Antinomianism is the creed of modern times, when, as Brian Edwards puts it, "We have a morality of consensus and experiment."<sup>41</sup> But, as the Preface shows, the Moral Law reposes upon the twin aspects of God's being and action, that He is the Creator and Self-Sufficient God on the one hand, establishing His Law over all His creatures, and He is the Covenantal and Liberating God on the other, imposing His Law particularly over His people.

The Law of God has a key role in driving us to Christ for redemption from our manifold sins. Peter Eldersveld says, "If we have never been to Mount Calvary, we will never get there unless we go by way of Mount Sinai."<sup>42</sup> Moreover, this Law also was given to the people of the Lord as a rule for their life and thought, after being redeemed from Egypt, as the Preface clearly states. The law remains for believers to obey. Joseph Morecraft again: "The opposite of law is not grace; it is lawlessness."<sup>43</sup> Or, as Brian Edwards puts it: "We either keep the Ten Commandments, or we illustrate them."<sup>44</sup> Yes, the Moral Law protects us from antinomianism.

A fifth and final contrast with the preface to the Ten Commandments is with Formalism, an attitude that views mere personal acquiescence to the truth of God's Word as sufficient for eternal life. The Preface, like the Ten Commandments themselves, was addressed to the nations and the church in the singular: "your" god and "you" in verse two are both singular. One might argue that these are collective singulars, and so they are, but we should not try to avoid the significance of the personal address which each singular brings to bear upon each one of us. Especially to those who have the Creator and Self-Sufficient God as their personal, redeeming God, these Ten Commandments are to be their life's study and practice. They are personal as well as communal. In this way, they undercut attempts to shift the focus from personal sins to corporate sins, as in the various Liberation Theologies and theological and political liberalism in general.

Professor Douma of Kampen writes about the Preface: "Every social ethic is doomed to failure if it is blind to personal responsibility."<sup>45</sup> And the first step in taking such responsibility personally is to let the law convict of personal sin. Whenever someone attains a correct view of the Law, he clearly senses that he has broken it.<sup>46</sup> Once burdened by the weight of sin, the sinner must seek salvation from that and all sin in the God-appointed way, which is the way of Christ freeing His people from their slavery to sin, parallel to, but so much greater and more glorious than, the

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41 Edwards, *Ten Commandments for Today*, 12.

42 Peter Eldersveld, *Of Law and Love: The Ten Commandments and the Cross of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 16.

43 Morecraft, *Authentic Christianity*, 701.

44 Edwards, *Ten Commandments for Today*, 56.

45 Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 10.

46 See Bush, *Commentary on Exodus*, 252.

redemption from Egypt mentioned in the Preface. Recall the words of Jesus, “Not every one who says, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom, but the one who does the will of my Father” (Matt. 7:21). If we truly love the God of our salvation, we will keep His commandments.

Every Israelite was addressed by God in the Preface and contents of the Ten Commandments, but not all benefited from this gracious revelation of God’s will. Not all stepped through the door God had graciously provided. Professor Kersten observes that: “We must always make a distinction between the external relationship to the covenant – into which Israel as a people had entered – and a being personally in the covenant by faith.”<sup>47</sup> A covenant-keeper is a Law-keeper. A covenant beneficiary lives and dies with the confidence that God intends for us. As the Scottish Secession leader Ebenezer Erskine lay dying, he told a visitor, “I am resting on that word, ‘I am the Lord your God.’”<sup>48</sup> The Preface to the Ten Commandments calls us to do the same.

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<sup>47</sup> Kersten, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 479.

<sup>48</sup> John Whitecross, *The Shorter Catechism Illustrated from Christian Biography and History* (London: Banner of Truth, 1968), 70.

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# Good and Necessary Consequence in the Westminster Confession

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The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be obeyed. (WCF I:6)

The first chapter of the Westminster Confession has left the reformed church with a definitive statement of the perfection and completeness of the Holy Scriptures that is unrivaled in confessional literature. B.B. Warfield said of this chapter, "There is certainly in the whole mass of confessional literature no more nobly conceived or ably wrought-out statement of doctrine than the chapter 'Of the Holy Scripture,' which the Westminster Divines placed at the head of their confession and laid at the foundation of their system of doctrine."<sup>1</sup> Although a bold claim, it is hard to disagree with Warfield. The doctrine of Scripture propounded by the Westminster Confession has withstood the test of time as a remarkably sound and precise confessional statement of the biblical doctrine of the Holy Scriptures.

The comprehensiveness of Scripture is the initial emphasis of paragraph six ("The *whole* counsel of God concerning *all things* necessary..."). This emphasis leads into a statement of the principal scope of Scripture: the glory of God and the salvation, faith and life of man. The Confession does not limit the whole counsel of God on these exalted to "what is expressly set down in Scripture." An important distinction at this point identifies another mechanism by which one comprehends biblical truth. The Confession states that the whole counsel of God includes what "by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture." This essay will explore the background, formulation, and application of this important provision.

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<sup>1</sup> B.B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing Co., 1972), 155.

At the time of the Westminster Assembly, the belief that one could deduce Scriptural verity and arrive at certain aspects of biblical truth that were not expressly stated was the subject of spirited debate. One major criticism of this method came from the Anglican church, as represented in the writings of Richard Hooker. Hooker was a staunch defender of the Established Church and fierce critic of the Puritans. His main purpose in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Hooker's major work first published in 1593, was to defend Episcopal polity and worship against the reforms which the Puritans proposed. He asserted that the Scriptures give little detail in all but the greatest matters of doctrine, and that much of the life and practice of the church is comprehended in general principles or left to man's judgment. In a chapter entitled "How Laws for the Polity of the Church may be Made by the Advice of Men," he wrote:

A number of things there are for which the Scripture hath not provided by any law, but left them unto the careful discretion of the church; we are to search how the church in these cases may be well directed to make that provision by laws which is most convenient and fit. And what is so in these cases, partly Scripture and partly reason must teach to discern.<sup>2</sup>

With this limited view of the sufficiency of Scripture, Hooker was wary of the idea that a distinct form of church government could be deduced from Scripture. He chided the Puritan writers for their deductive hermeneutics and laid down this challenge:

And we may boldly deny, that of all those things which at this day are with so great necessity urged upon this church under the name of reformed church-discipline, there is any one which their books hitherto have made manifest to be contained in Scripture. Let them if they can allege but one properly belonging to their cause, and not common to them and us, and shew the deduction thereof out of Scripture to be necessary.<sup>3</sup>

Besides Hooker and the Anglican Church, the Socinians also held the belief that Biblical authority must be limited to its literal statements, leaving no room for authoritative Scriptural deductions. The Anabaptists pointed to the lack of any explicit biblical statement on pedobaptism. Roman Catholicism, particularly within the context of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), also left the reformed church with a greater need to fortify and elucidate certain points of its theology and its methods for arriving at them.

It was within this atmosphere that that the assembly of divines met. It would be wrong to assume, however, that in light of its historical context the affirmation of "good and necessary consequence" was merely polemical in nature. The Assembly was committed to the principle that everything necessary for faith and life can be derived from the comprehensive teaching of Scripture and stated in a concise confession. The divines were unwilling to concede that God had simply left the church adrift and undirected in certain matters, or that human judgment was to make up the

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2 vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1958), 1:325.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:216.

balance of what was lacking in Scripture. The Westminster Confession's doctrine of Scripture therefore takes into account the *implications* of Scripture, comprehended by deduction, as being part of the whole counsel of God. The Confessions affirms that true doctrine is comprehended in the whole sense of Scripture and in the full scope of its implicated meaning. This important provision was given systematic expression by one of the Assembly's most notable members, George Gillespie.

Gillespie, a Scottish commissioner to the Assembly, articulated this point in chapter twenty of his work *Treatise of Miscellany Questions*. The title of the chapter contains the argument itself: "That necessary consequences from the written Word of God, do sufficiently and strongly prove the consequent or conclusion, if theoretical, to be a certain Divine truth which ought to be believed, and, if practical, to be a necessary duty which we are obliged unto, *jure divino*." In this treatise Gillespie directly responded to Hooker:

Although Hooker in his *Ecclesiastical Policy*, and other prelatial writings, did hold this difference between the Old and New Testament, that Christ and His apostles hath not descended into all particularities with us as Moses did with the Jews, yet, upon examination, it will be found that all the ordinances and holy things of the Christian church are no less determined and contained in the New Testament, than the ordinances of the Jewish church were determined in the Old, and that there were some necessary things left to be collected by necessary consequences from the law of Moses as well as now from the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

Gillespie demonstrated how the deduction of good and necessary consequences is a valid method of interpretation that is used by Scripture itself, and how essential this method is in our understanding of divine truth. He demonstrated how deductions were employed in biblical argumentation to affirm great truths, such as the doctrine of the resurrection and the divinity of Christ. For example, Christ proved the resurrection to the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection, by citing Exodus 3:6, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Speaking to Moses long after the patriarchs were dead, this self-identification by God implies the continuing and future existence of the patriarchs because "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt. 22:32). He also showed how the divinity of Christ is proved by a necessary consequence in Hebrews 1:6. Based on such biblical examples, he cautiously formulated his thesis on the use of good and necessary consequences, which is worth reproducing at some length:

This assertion must neither be so far enlarged as to comprehend the erroneous reasonings and consequences from Scripture which this or that man, or this or that church, apprehend and believe to be strong and necessary consequences (I speak of what *is*, not of what is *thought to be* a necessary consequence): neither yet must it be so far contracted and straitened as the Arminians would have it, who admit of no proofs from Scripture, but either plain explicit texts, or such consequences as are

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<sup>4</sup> George Gillespie, *Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle, and Oliver & Boyd, 1844), 102.

*nulli non obvice*, as neither are, nor can be, controverted by any man who is *rationis compos*; by which principle, if embraced, we must renounce many necessary truths which the reformed churches hold against the Arians, Antitrinitarians, Socinians, Papists, because the consequences and arguments from Scripture brought to prove them are not admitted as good by the adversaries.

This also I must, in the second place, premise, that the meaning of the assertion is not that human reason, drawing a consequence from Scripture, can be the ground of our belief or conscience; for although the consequence or argumentation be drawn forth by men's reasons, yet the consequent itself, or conclusion, is not believed or embraced by the strength of reason, but because it is the truth and will of God...

Thirdly, let us observe with Gerhard, a distinction between corrupt reason and renewed or rectified reason; or between natural reason arguing in divine things from natural and carnal principles, sense, experience and the like, are reason captivated and subdued to the obedience of Christ, judging of divine things not by human, but by divine rules, and standing to scriptural principles, how opposite soever they may be to the wisdom of the flesh. It is the latter, not the former reason, which will be convinced and satisfied with the consequences and conclusions drawn from Scripture, in things which concern the glory of God, and matters spiritual or divine.<sup>5</sup>

Gillespie provides valuable insight into the Confession's doctrine of good and necessary consequence, which obviously bears his influence. First of all, the practice of deducing truth from the Scriptures is to be moderate and judicious; no deduction can be affirmed as doctrine if it is only possible or even probable. Only an objectively necessary deduction can be promulgated as biblical truth. Secondly, such necessary deductions are not always marked by unanimous agreement or universal acceptance. Many orthodox truths are held by good and necessary consequence yet not recognized by the Arians, Antitrinitarians, etc. Thirdly, Gillespie affirms that the locus of authority always remains with the Scriptures rather than the reason of man. Though he asserts confidence in the deductive ability of sanctified reason, his intention is to place assurance, not in man's reason, but in the Bible itself in its whole scope of intended meaning. Reason and deduction are simply the means by which the truth may be comprehended. Finally, Gillespie affirms that spiritual truths are spiritually discerned; only regenerate reason is able to deduce and embrace the good and necessary consequences of Scripture concerning spiritual and divine matters.

Gillespie makes another point that is worth notice, that God is entirely consistent with Himself and therefore proper deductions from His Word will be in harmony with His will. Whereas consequences can be drawn from a man's word that he did not intend, God perfectly understands and designs the consequences that will be drawn from His Word. Thus Gillespie contends, "if we say that necessary consequences from Scripture prove not a *jus divinum*, we say that which is inconsistent with the infinite wisdom of God."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 100, 101.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 102-103.

Gillespie's argument is concluded by pointing out how often we depend upon the good and necessary consequences of Scripture:

Divers other great absurdities must follow if this truth be not admitted. How can it be proved that women may partake of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, unless we prove it by necessary consequence from Scripture? How can it be proved that this or that church is a true church, and the ministry thereof a true ministry, and the baptism ministered therein true baptism? Sure no express Scripture will prove it, but necessary consequence will. How shall this or that individual believer collect from Scripture, that to him, even to him, the covenant of grace and the promises thereof belong?<sup>7</sup>

Robert Baillie, another Scottish Commissioner, also typified the Assembly's doctrine of good and necessary consequence. His insistence on the authority of Scriptural deductions arose out of the controversy with the Anabaptists. He made the following remark on the Anabaptist's rejection of good and necessary consequences:

When in their debate against the baptism of infants they are straited with consequences from the circumcision of infants, and the promises of the Covenant made with Abraham, and his children; refusing with the Jesuit Veron in their reasonings all deductions though never so necessary and clear, requiring for everything they will admit, expresse and syllabical Scriptures.<sup>8</sup>

In his work *Jus Divinum* or *The Divine Right of Church Government*, Baillie used biblical deductions extensively and judiciously, for example, to prove that the office of ruling elder was Biblical.<sup>9</sup>

Samuel Rutherford, another notable member of the Scottish Commission, also explicated Scripture by necessary deductions, and sought to demonstrate the use of this method in Scripture itself. To cite but one example, in his work *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself*, he showed how Christ confirmed the resurrection by necessary consequence in Matthew 22:31, 32 and Luke 20:37, 38.<sup>10</sup>

Many agree that Gillespie and Baillie, and the Scottish Commissioners in general, bore a great influence on the Westminster documents, so much so that *The Cambridge Modern History* speculates, "It is uncertain whether they (the Westminster documents) owe their origin to the divines of the assembly or to the Scottish Commissioners."<sup>11</sup> No doubt, this "uncertainty" is a bit

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7 Ibid., 103.

8 Robert Baillie, *Anabaptism, the True Fountain of Independency* (London: Samuel Gellibrand, 1646), 37.

9 Scott Thomas Murphy, "The Doctrine of Scripture in the Westminster Assembly" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1984), 155.

10 Ibid.

11 A.W. Ward, G.W. Prothro, and Stanley Leaths, eds., *The Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan Co., 1906), 363.

of an exaggeration, but the point remains that the Scottish Commission was very influential. Their influence is unmistakable in the Assembly's formulation of the principle of good and necessary consequence, to which we now turn.

The Assembly formulated this doctrine with obvious care and caution, for such a point lays open to misunderstanding and abuse. In paragraph 6 of chapter 1 of the Confession, it is first of all to be noticed that the good and necessary consequences of Scripture are held on equal footing with the express statements of Scripture; together they constitute the whole counsel of God. There is no varying level of authority that depends upon the method by which we comprehend a certain truth of Scripture; good and necessary deductions have the same authority as the "thou shalt" of the law. Because God is the Author of Scripture, He is also the author of the *implications* of Scripture. As B.B. Warfield put it, "It is the Reformed contention, reflected here by the Confession, that the sense of Scripture is Scripture, and that men are bound by its whole sense in all its implications."<sup>12</sup>

Most important are the two qualifications that biblical deductions must meet: *good* and *necessary*. The qualification "good" surely means that any biblical deduction must be in harmony with other Scripture. In paragraph 9, chapter 1, the Confession establishes the equitable principle that "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself." This, of course, would apply to scriptural deductions, and this would be the measure by which any deduction is deemed "good." It must be in agreement with the known corpus of truth that Scripture teaches, and it must be in harmony with "other places that speak more clearly."

The second qualification is that such deductions must be "necessary." They must be demonstrably certain and not reasonably deniable, or to borrow a familiar courtroom phrase, they must be "beyond a reasonable doubt." This qualification is a much needed safeguard against creative theological inferences based on meager biblical evidence. Biblical inferences that are merely possible or conceivable are not the stuff on which to build the doctrine and practice of the church. For a scriptural deduction to be necessary, it must occupy its own needful place within the structure of biblical truth and be in harmony with the other truths that it touches.

"Good" and "necessary" may also be seen as the terminological equivalents of the two standard criteria for sound, logical deductions. For any argument to be sound, it must meet two specific criteria, namely (1) the premises must be true and (2) the conclusion must follow necessarily from the premises (or "deductive validity"). True premises make an argument "good," while deductive validity makes its conclusion "necessary." Therefore, a "good and necessary consequence" requires verifiably true premises and deductive validity.

Paragraph 6 is careful to discriminate between the occasional need to deduce biblical truth and the view that Scripture is in need of supplementation, "whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." The occasional need to deduce biblical doctrine does in no way imply that Scripture is inadequate or unclear. It may be observed that traditions in which "good and necessary consequence" is not acknowledged or practiced as a method for arriving at biblical truth are also those most likely to have some form of extra-biblical authority. This was true at the time

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<sup>12</sup> Warfield, 226.

of the Westminster Assembly in regard to the Roman and Anglican churches, who depended upon the authority of tradition, and the Sectarians, who often claimed new revelation. There are several other modern examples - to say no more - of this denial of good and necessary consequence with a corresponding dependence upon extra-biblical authority.

The Confession is just as careful on this point to avoid the impression that human reason is the ground of authority when it comes to doctrines or duties inferred from the Scriptures. “Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word.” The mind of man must be enlightened by the Spirit and subjected to the Scriptures if any saving truth is to be comprehended and embraced, whether that truth comes in the form of a plain statement or in the form of a good and necessary consequence. The Confession in no way implies that reason is its own authority, nor does it unduly exalt human reason as anything more than an instrument for understanding the Word of God under the good guidance of the Spirit. While a necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture by the use of reason, the ground of authority is still Scripture.

In Question 105 of the Larger Catechism, among the sins forbidden in the first commandment, the divines listed “bold and curious searching into His secrets,” with Deut. 29:29 as a proof text: “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.” The Assembly’s doctrine on this point is careful to avoid the exaltation of human reason, the indiscreet handling of Scripture, presumptuous theological creativity, and bold philosophical curiosity. Scriptural deductions must be good and necessary, not “bold and curious.”

In spite of these cautions, the Confession acknowledges the sanctified use of reason as an indispensable method of discovering Scriptural truth. The right use of reason and the ability to deduce were so important to the Westminster Divines that “skill in logick and philosophy” was among the ordination requirements that they listed in *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government*. On this point the Divines stood within the heritage of Augustine, who wrote, “The science of reasoning is of very great service in searching into and unraveling all sorts of questions that come up in Scripture....The validity of logical sequences is not a thing devised by men, but it is observed and noted by them that they may be able to learn and teach it; for it exists eternally in the reason of things, and has its origin with God.”<sup>13</sup> In this same spirit, the Confession affirms that Scripture is meant to engage our minds and challenge us to reason, think, and deduce. The principle of good and necessary consequence reveals this quality of Scripture.

The Confession has been criticized on this point for not seeming to take into account the problem of human subjectivity in the process of deduction.<sup>14</sup> While they placed an obvious degree of trust in sanctified reason, the Westminster Divines were not blind to the potential errors and abuses in the deduction of consequences. John Delivuk observes, “Like any method of biblical

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<sup>13</sup> Cited in Elihu Carranza, *Logic Workbook for Logic by Gordon H Clark* (Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1992), 97, 99.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Bartlett Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 336, 346-347.

interpretation, the drawing of implications can be abused. One method used by the authors of the Confession to prevent this abuse was comparing their conclusions with other theologians.”<sup>15</sup> For example, Cornelius Burges took the caution of comparing his use of biblical deductions concerning infant baptism with the work of other theologians, saying, “Nor have I been my own judge, or expounded them out of my head, but take such expositions as the most learned, judicious, reverend, and eminent Divines of this last age, as well as others of less note...”<sup>16</sup> The Westminster Divines never portray the impression that deduction is a foolproof process, or that human reason is immune to error. As a safeguard against human error, they placed a high regard upon counsel and consensus in matters of doctrine, as is evident by their proceedings as an assembly. As Jack Rogers summarizes, “They did not...discount the opinions of theologians, either individually or in council. But they claimed that all opinions of men were valid only insofar as they agreed with Scripture.”<sup>17</sup>

It should be observed that the problems of fallibility and subjectivity are not unique to the process of deduction. There is necessarily an element of human judgment at both the level of interpreting the letter of the text and drawing good and necessary inferences. Both demand the exegete to use his mind under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the rest of Scripture. There is no way of raising doubts about deduction as a hermeneutical method without also raising doubts about the process of interpreting the more explicit statements of Scripture. Either way, the exegete must subject His mind to the guidance of the Spirit and the Word, but he must *use* his mind. We cannot escape the need to interpret the text, and deduction is one element of interpretation.

The Assembly placed other prudent limitations on the principle of good and necessary consequence. For instance, paragraph 6 asserts that “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence...” In other words, not *everything* may be deduced, and we need not force any deduction if it does not present itself. The light of nature, Christian prudence, and “the general rules of the Word” are enough to illumine our path in certain subsidiary matters. The method of deduction by good and necessary consequence does not hold the potential to answer every question that we may think to ask, nor should it be pressed beyond its capacity.

Earlier we saw how Richard Hooker argued for the more extensive use of human judgment in the worship and polity of the church. The WCF does not deny the need to use Christian prudence or sanctified judgment in certain circumstances of the life of the church. It simply emphasizes the need to follow the inferences of Scripture when such inferences may be properly made. In doing so we may find more authoritative direction than the light of nature or Christian prudence. We must not look for inferences where there are none, but we must not deny them when they may be rightly drawn.

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<sup>15</sup> John Allen Delivuk, *Biblical Authority in the Westminster Confession and its Twentieth Century Contextualization in the Reformed Presbyterian Testimony of 1980* (Th.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 1987), 151.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Delivuk, 151.

<sup>17</sup> Rogers, 430.

We may discern another caveat in paragraph 7 of chapter 1, which reads:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

The point of this paragraph has clear application to the doctrine of good and necessary consequence. The great gospel truths of Scripture do not require the power of deduction in order to be understood. The saving truth of the gospel, in all of its power and simplicity, is accessible to all. The occasional need to employ logical deductions does not make the Bible too complicated for all but the most learned. The doctrine of good and necessary consequence is by no means a barrier to the purpose of Scripture, which includes man's salvation, faith, and life. Chapter 1 of the Confession affirms that all of God's people "have a right unto, and interest in the Scriptures" (paragraph 8). The occasional need to deduce biblical truths is not a complication that impedes the right and interest of God's people, who "through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures may have hope." The Bible may contain its intellectual challenges, but its gospel of Salvation in Christ is clear and radiant.

Furthermore, it is not the rules of logic that ultimately commend biblical truth to us. While biblical deduction must be sound, it is not the precise logical structure of the argument that commends it to us as believable. Paragraph 5 of chapter 1 lists the several things that may move us to "a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture." The sound logic of rightly deduced doctrine may be one of those things that garner esteem for the Scriptures, but it is not what persuades fallen men to embrace the truth. That is the work of the Holy Spirit alone. Paragraph 5 goes on to say, "...our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts." Sound logic, important as it is, is no substitute for saving grace. As the Reformed Presbyterian Testimony puts it, "The truthfulness of God, and not the reasonableness of any doctrine, is the ground of our faith."<sup>18</sup> Sound biblical deductions are not believable because they are logical; they are believable because they are from God.

A good and necessary consequence drawn from Scripture may, therefore, lead us to an article of truth that must be accepted entirely on faith. A good and necessary consequence may, in the end, be counterintuitive to the reason and experience of man. A proper biblical deduction must have a sound logical structure, with true premises and deductive validity, but the conclusion might be beyond the bounds of human reasoning. The doctrine of the Trinity is a prime example; good biblical reasoning can lead us to a knowledge of this truth, but this truth itself must be embraced by faith. It is thus seen how reason can be rightly used without being the final criterion of judgment.

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<sup>18</sup> *The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America* (Pittsburgh; Crown and Covenant Publications, 2004), p. A-8.

The Westminster Divines were aware of this fact - that although biblical deductions must be sound, biblical truths are not judged by the reason of man. For example, Anthony Tuckney, who was by some accounts the most influential writer of the Shorter Catechism,<sup>19</sup> said, “Logic rules do not circumscribe God, nor should our reason.”<sup>20</sup>

George Gillespie, who formulated the doctrine of good and necessary consequence with great care and conviction in his work *Treatise of Miscellany Questions*, also clearly expressed the believer’s need to submit to biblical truth even when it is beyond the bounds of reason, using the Trinity as an example. In the same work he remarked:

Let reason be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. That which made the Antitrinitarians and Socinians fall away from the belief of the trinity of persons in the godhead, and the union of the two natures of God and man in the person of Christ, was, because their reason could not comprehend these articles, which is the ground of their opinion professed by themselves. When I speak of captivating reason, I do not mean implicit faith. The eyes of my understanding must be so far opened by the Holy Ghost, that I may know such an article is held forth in Scripture to be believed, and therefore I do believe that it is, though my reason cannot comprehend how it is.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, we may observe that, to the Westminster Divines, the use of good and necessary consequence as a method of interpretation does not lay the text open to a confusing array of various meanings. Paragraph 9 of chapter 1 affirms that the sense of any Scripture “is not manifold, but one.” While the Confession is clearly refuting the allegorical method with this phrase, it also has application to the point at hand. Scriptural inferences do not open up an uncharted world of interpretive possibilities. Biblical inferences are not another layer of meaning in the text. We do not need to demand implications from every passage, or look for a deeper, latent meaning behind every biblical phrase. Good and necessary consequences will propound specific truths, not unveil mysterious layers of meaning in Scripture.

We can conclude that the Westminster Confession formulates its doctrine of good and necessary consequence within a context of many prudent cautions. The method of biblical deduction is always to be controlled and tested by the criteria “good and necessary,” and it is always to be subject to the authority of the Word and the good guidance of its Author. Human reason is not exalted, nor is Scripture over-complicated, by the occasional need to deduce biblical truth; but where biblical truth may be rightly deduced, it must be followed as the Word of God. While some truths require sanctified deduction, Scripture itself remains clear, sufficient, and complete. In the historical context of the Assembly, the Roman and Anglican churches staked their doctrine on the authority of councils and ancient writers, while the Sectarians claimed to have new revelations

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19 Samuel William Carruthers, *Three Centuries of the Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Fredericton, N.B.: Univ. of New Brunswick, 1957), 5.

20 Quoted in John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Richmond, V.A.: John Knox Press, 1973), 47.

21 *Miscellany Questions*, 59.

of the Spirit that went beyond the Scriptures. The Westminster Confession returned a balanced, biblical answer to both of these extreme positions.

It now remains to examine how the Westminster Assembly applied this principle in its proceedings. Concerning the question as to whether a divine warrant can be found for a specific rule of church government, the minutes of the Assembly reflect the resolution that necessary consequence can be used as a valid method to reach this conclusion, based upon Scripture's own use of this method. From session 640 on May 15, 1646:

*Proofs that a necessary consequence is a sufficient argument of Christ's will.*

*Resolved* upon the Q., First proof; 'Christ proves the resurrection in Matt xxii. 31, 32: "As touching the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living;" which is proof of the resurrection of the dead by a consequence only.'

This proof; 'Christ, John x., refutes the Jews reproaching Him with blaspheming for saying that He and the Father were one, by a consequence drawn from Scriptures,' calling princes gods.

*Resolved* upon the Q., Acts xiii. 34, 'And as concerning that He raised Him up from the dead, now no more to return to corruption, He said on this wise, I will give you the sure mercies of David,' which proves the resurrection of Christ by consequence only.

*Resolved* upon the Q., Heb. i. 6, 'And again, when He bringeth in the first Begotten into the world, He saith, And let all the angels of God worship Him,' where it is proved that Christ is the Son of God by a consequence.<sup>22</sup>

In session 641 on May 18, 1646, it was ordered that the use of good and necessary consequence "may be cleared by sundry other instances, many more of the articles of faith being proved by Christ and His apostles out of the Old Testament only by consequence."<sup>23</sup>

Based on Scripture's use of good and necessary consequences, the Assembly debated the question of whether biblical examples can be used to deduce abiding commandments.

*Resolved* upon the Q., 'Some examples show a *jus divinum* and the will and appointment of God; as in the Old Testament the building of altars to the Lord and offering sacrifices by the fathers from Adam to Abraham, which was done in faith and acceptance, for which there is no foregoing precept recorded in Scripture.'

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<sup>22</sup> Alexander Mitchell and John Struthers, eds., *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874), 231, 232.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

*Resolved* upon the Q., ‘The same may be said of the duty of the surviving brother’s marrying the wife of his brother deceased without issue, of which we have no evidence that it was the will and appointment of God before the law given by Moses, but the example of Judah’s sons, Gen. xxxviii.’

*Resolved* upon the Q., ‘In the New Testament we have like instances of the observation of the first day of the week for the Christian Sabbath.’<sup>24</sup>

The foregoing examples resulted in the following conclusions:

*Resolved* upon the Q., ‘In all which examples, as we have cause to believe that the fathers at the first had a command from God of those things whereof we now find only their example for the ground of their posterity’s like practice for many generations, so likewise, though we believe that Christ, in the time that He conversed with His disciples before and after His resurrection, did instruct them in all things concerning the kingdom of God, yet nothing is left recorded to show His will and appointment of the things instanced in, but the example and the practice the Apostles and churches in their time.’

*Resolved* upon the Q., ‘Those examples, either of the Apostles, evangelists, or of the church planted and ordered by them, which are recorded in the New Testament, and are no where therein disallowed, and the particular reason whereof still abides, do show a *jus divinum*, and the will and appointment of Jesus Christ so as to remain.’<sup>25</sup>

These conclusions were reached in the context of the Assembly’s debate over church polity, which was perhaps the greatest point of contention at Westminster. Several men were invited who believed in Episcopalian government, but only one, Daniel Featley, actually attended the Assembly. There was a contingent of independents, including Thomas Goodwin, Jeremiah Burroughs, and Philip Nye, but Presbyterians were in the clear majority. Among them it was debated whether Presbyterian polity was *jus humanum* or *jus divinum*, that is, by human right or divine right. Some thought that Presbyterianism was amenable to Scripture yet not clearly commanded, but the principled use of good and necessary consequences enabled the Assembly to finally conclude upon *jus divino* Presbyterianism in its document *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government*. This is but one example of how the scrupulous use of good and necessary consequences was part of the Assembly’s proceedings.

The deduction of good and necessary consequences from Scripture is much more than a historical curiosity of Westminster. It is a significant aspect of the faith and life of God’s people in all ages. The use of consistent deductions and logical thought in order to arrive at distinct statements of biblical truth is absolutely essential for an orderly and consistent approach to theology, preaching, and the application of Scripture to the various situations of the Christian life. B.B. Warfield went so far as to say that the denial of good and necessary consequence from Scripture would involve

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 237, 238.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 238, 239.

the denial of all doctrine whatsoever, “since no single doctrine of whatever simplicity can be ascertained from Scripture except by the use of the process of the understanding.”<sup>26</sup> Not only simple doctrines, but *central* doctrines depend upon good and necessary consequences, such as the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is not the product of a single proof text; rather, it is an authoritative inference based on the premises of many passages, and, obviously, it is a central truth of the Christian faith. It is truly amazing how intertwined the principle of good and necessary consequence is with so many doctrines of the Christian faith. The Westminster Divines simply gave confessional acknowledgment to this principle, and did so with admirable care and caution.

It is also rather amazing how often the Bible itself, and Christ in particular, uses the method of good and necessary consequence. Several notable instances have already been cited from the writings of the Divines and the work of the Assembly, but many more examples exist, such as Matthew 12:9-14:

And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue: And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath days?” that they might accuse him. And he said unto them, “What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days.” Then saith he to the man, “Stretch forth thine hand.” And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him. (KJV)

In this passage, Christ uses a good and necessary consequence to teach that works of charity are lawful on the Sabbath. His argument takes the form of a categorical syllogism. Based on the first premise that it is lawful to do good to an animal on the Sabbath, and the second premise that men are more valuable than animals, He concludes that it is lawful to perform acts of charity toward men on the Sabbath. It is of interest to note that it was the Pharisees who denied the use of good and necessary consequences in this instance. They insisted on the “letter of the law” (or their own tradition) when it came to the question of how to observe the Sabbath, and they probably expected a proof text from Christ. Good and necessary biblical inferences, such as Christ presented, were not a part of their thinking. They were only incensed at Christ’s doctrine and His deductive method of presenting it.

Good and necessary consequences drawn from the Bible also continue to aid the church in its witness to the world in current times. The relevance of biblical truth to the shifting sands of modern culture is often discerned through the deduction of good and necessary consequences. For instance, what is the church to say about abortion? There is no passage of Scripture that says, in so many words, “abortion is wrong.” It simply was not a pressing issue in the days of Moses or Paul. But by the use of good and necessary consequence we can arrive at the will of God on this matter:

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<sup>26</sup> Warfield, 227.

1<sup>st</sup> Premise: It is a sin to murder another human being (e.g. Exodus 20:13).

2<sup>nd</sup> Premise: Children in the womb are human beings (e.g. Psalm 139:13-16).

Conclusion: It is a sin to murder children in the womb.

In this and other ways, the deduction of good and necessary consequences from Scripture remains an important aspect of the life, faith, and witness of the church.

This principle, as articulated in the Westminster Confession, is built upon a desire to be true to the whole counsel of God as it applies in every age, whether plainly expressed in Scripture or rightly deduced from Scripture. This must still be the priority of the church today.

In conclusion, George Gillespie pointed out a very practical implication of this doctrine when he asked, “How,” without the use of good and necessary consequence, “shall this or that individual believer collect from Scripture, that to him, even to him, the covenant of grace and the promises thereof belong?”<sup>27</sup> By good and necessary consequence, the gospel promises of Christ which are given in general to all of His people may be appropriated in personal terms, and the individual believer may find particular comfort and assurance. “Good and necessary consequence” is more than a little noticed phrase in a centuries old confession. It is a principle of great importance to the faith and life of each believer. By it you may know that the promises of the gospel belong to *you*.

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<sup>27</sup> Gillespie, 103.

# Trinitarianism in the Pastoral Theology of Gregory Nazianzen

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Only by extraordinary providence would a premier work on pastoral ministry, grounded upon crystalline Trinitarian theology, be written by one who fled his first charge immediately after ordination. Yet such is the case with Gregory of Nazianzus and his *Oration 2*.

As one of the three Great Cappodocians of the fourth century church, Gregory of Nazianzus is well known for his development, defense, and dissemination of the doctrines of the deity of Christ and his formulation of the Trinity. For instance, through his famous *Five Theological Orations* Gregory went beyond his mentor Basil of Caesarea in the development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, being the first to use the Christological term *homoousios* to describe the Spirit's essence as well. Such was Gregory's ability that "for his clear and persuasive teaching on the Trinity, he was accorded the title 'the Theologian' by the Council of Chalcedon" posthumously in 451 A.D.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Gregory's theological astuteness was combined with a pastoral heart for the people of God. Christopher Beeley states, "Among his many achievements, Gregory Nazianzen is one of the foremost pastoral theologians of the early church."<sup>2</sup> Gregory demonstrates this most clearly in *Oration 2*. This work was long a reference for pastoral ministry, contributing significantly two centuries later to Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, which in turn was a standard until Martin Bucer's *Concerning the True Pastoral Care* of the Reformation era.<sup>3</sup> To the church's detriment, many treatments of Gregory fail to avoid "the bifurcation of head and heart"<sup>4</sup> common in modern theological study. Beeley comments on this when he says of *Oration 2*:

Although it is a well-known patristic resource, Gregory's teaching on pastoral ministry is usually studied independent of his teaching on Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity. From this vantage point, the ministry of the Church, like the purification and illumination of the theologian, is seen to be extrinsic to his

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1 Christopher A. Beeley, "Theology and Pastoral Leadership," *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 1 (2009): 22.

2 Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), 235.

3 Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 10.

4 Robert Letham, lecture statement from "The Doctrine of the Trinity Class" at Ligonier Ministries in Orlando, Florida, July 9, 2012.

Trinitarian doctrine and his other properly theological concerns. Yet such a view could hardly be farther from Gregory's mind. Since the doctrine of the Trinity – and all Christian theology – takes place within the divine economy in the age of the Church, it involves the Church's pastoral and teaching ministry in an integral way.<sup>5</sup>

By looking closely at Oration 2, the influence that Gregory's Trinitarian theology had on his view of pastoral ministry is readily seen. "Rather than finding *thēoria* and *praxis* opposed to each other, he regarded them as parallel concepts, mutually interdependent, not mutually exclusive."<sup>6</sup> In discovering this in Oration 2, ministers in the modern, Western church can make helpful applications to reorient their ministries in ways consistent with faith in the Triune God. This will be examined first by considering briefly the life and ministry influences on Gregory that led to the writing of Oration 2. Then, a closer look at Oration 2 will reveal how Gregory's Trinitarian doctrine influenced his pastoral ministry especially in the areas of determining a pastoral call; working toward forming Christ in people by the deification of the soul; bringing unity to the church with its variation of members; and helping Christians grow by illuminating the Scriptures. A final concluding section will explain how Gregory's high regard for ministry on behalf of the Triune God drew him back after fear of the same caused him to flee the ministry for a time.

### **Consideration of Life Influences**

Gregory (born c. 329 A.D.) was the son of the bishop of Nazianzus in Cappadocia, also named Gregory. His father had been converted earlier by the influence of his wife out of the monotheistic cult of the Hypsistarians. Thus, Gregory grew up with vivid, theological debates regarding the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit taking place not only in the churches and streets, but in his own home.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this family environment best explains how Gregory purportedly had a vision as a child in which two virgins, named Chastity and Temperance, appeared to him and invited him to join with them in the contemplation of the Trinity.<sup>8</sup>

Gregory spent the ages of eighteen to thirty traveling and studying, with much of this time consisting of learning from Basil of Caesarea in Athens. When he eventually returned to Nazianzus in 361, his father forced him against his volition into the priesthood in an ordination service on Christmas Day. In fear Gregory fled, before he even delivered his first homily, and stayed with Basil. He returned home several months later to aid his father, who had become embroiled in controversy with pro-Nicenes. Notably, it was during these doctrinal struggles over the Godhead that Gregory penned Oration 2 to explain to the congregation why he had left the ministry and returned. "Thus, despite the conventional view of his ecclesiastical ambivalence, Gregory began

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5 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 235.

6 Donald F. Winslow, "Gregory of Nazianzus and Love for the Poor," *Anglican Theological Review* 47, no. 4 (1965): 351.

7 John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, vol. 2 of *Formation of Christian Theology* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 325.

8 Purves, *Pastoral Theology*, 11.

his priestly ministry determined to renew the leadership of the Church, and particularly the central place that a fulsome doctrine of the Trinity must hold in it.”<sup>9</sup>

Gregory’s appointment to a position, retreat from controversy into a period of contemplation, then return to ministry became a pattern during his lifetime. After a decade of service alongside his father in Nazianzus, Basil appointed him as bishop of Sasima. Yet, after a short time there, he fled and returned to help his dying father. After that death in 374, though many assumed Gregory would take over as bishop there, he instead left for Seleucia for a further period of reflection and mourning over the deaths of several other close family members.

In 379 a small Nicene congregation in the center of the empire in Constantinople called for his help. Surprisingly, Gregory responded to this call in this midst of a great metropolis, a city that was swirling with political and ecclesiastical intrigue created by Arian leaders who controlled most of the churches and influenced greatly the civic leaders there. With Gregory’s help, the congregation met in a renovated building owned by his cousin that they called “Anastasia” (Resurrection). Again it is worthy to note that it was during his time in Constantinople, serving as a pastor under considerable duress, that Gregory formulated his Five Theological Orations on the Trinity. Upon one occasion, when the persecution by Arian forces caused Gregory to go into seclusion for a time, it is a testimony to his God-centered ministry that they called him back by saying to him, “You cause the Trinity to depart with you.”<sup>10</sup> He was eventually appointed bishop there under the new emperor Theodosius, and presided for a time over the Council of Constantinople. When thirty-six of the bishops walked out of the council over their disgust of Gregory’s views, he “refused to make compromises in regard to his ‘Beloved Trinity.’”<sup>11</sup> Eventually disputes about the legitimacy of his bishopric made by the Anti-Nicene party caused Gregory to retire from this position and spend the remainder of his life back in Nazianzus. Yet largely through his influence this council “definitively proclaimed the doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>12</sup>

Oration 2 was likely expanded by Gregory during this retirement before his death in 390.<sup>13</sup> These aggregate experiences in defending the Trinity, in the midst of ministering in highly stressful circumstances, clearly influenced his views of the pastorate reflected in this work.

### **Materialization of the Call**

For Gregory, pastoral ministry itself was ordained by the Triune God. “Nearly two decades before his discussion of the gradual revelation of the Trinity in the fifth Theological Oration, Gregory’s first reflection on the scope of the divine economy focuses on the pastoral ministry of the Church.”<sup>14</sup>

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9 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 12.

10 Behr, *Nicene Faith*, 328.

11 John McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 355.

12 Justo Gonzalez, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, vol. I of *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 188.

13 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 237.

14 *Ibid.*, 239.

As such, ministry begins with a call from God. Gregory confessed the error of his flight and modestly said, “I did not, nor do I now, think myself qualified to rule a flock or herd, or to have authority over the souls of men.”<sup>15</sup> Yet he went on to explain that, beyond returning to Nazianzus in order to care for his aging parents and to see the people there, he came because of duty to God’s call.<sup>16</sup> Gregory saw the pastor as being “stationed on high by the Spirit.”<sup>17</sup> Pastoral ministry for him was entrance into a life of sacrifice so pulsating with the presence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that he hesitated to enter it:

Since then I knew these things, that no one is worthy of the mightiness of God, and the sacrifices, and priesthood, who has not first presented himself to God, a living, holy sacrifice, and set forth the reasonable, well-pleasing service, and sacrificed to God the sacrifice of praise and the contrite spirit, which is the only sacrifice required of us by the Giver of all, how could I dare to offer to Him the external sacrifice...before my ear had been sufficiently opened to the instruction of the Lord,...before my mouth had been opened to draw in the Spirit, and opened wide to be filled with the spirit of speaking mysteries and doctrines,... before all my members had become instruments of righteousness, and all mortality had been put off, and swallowed up of life, and had yielded to the Spirit?<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, Gregory explained that God ordains many to be subject to pastoral care, while others should be pastors “who surpass the majority in virtue and nearness to God...in order that both [pastor and congregation] may be so united and compacted together, that, although one is lacking and the other preeminent, they may...be so combined and knit together by the harmony of the Spirit, as to form one perfect body, really worthy of Christ Himself, Our Head.”<sup>19</sup>

Gregory sees here a remarkable model of pastoral ministry. The pastor is to be close in fellowship with the Father, sacrificially offering his life as Christ did, and experiencing the Spirit binding together his heart with those of the congregation in such a way that they display a “perfect body” worthy of Christ. This flows forth from Gregory’s Trinitarian understanding. Purves writes:

Gregory developed a dynamic, personal, perichoretic construal in his understanding of the Trinity in terms of internal relations. Not being as such, but relations as communion form the ultimate ontological category by which we may comprehend the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity, as three persons, one God, in which God is “divided without division.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gregory, 2.9.

<sup>16</sup> Purves, *Pastoral Theology*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Gregory, 2.7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.95.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.3.

<sup>20</sup> Purves, *Pastoral Theology*, 15.

He goes on to state that “this insight is important for theological anthropology and pastoral theology.”<sup>21</sup>

The pastor’s calling then is to bring his congregation with him into experiencing the interpersonal knowledge and unity of the Triune God. Rather than seeing the ministry of the church as program based, the pastor should always be viewing it first and foremost as person based – knowing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and bringing the people of congregation with him into that knowledge of God and one another. With thoughts so ideal, it is not difficult to understand why Gregory hesitated walking through the door of pastoral ministry.

### **Deification of the Soul**

As stated previously, one of Gregory’s great contributions to historical theology was his clarity on the deity of the Spirit. Letham states from his analysis of the Five Theological Orations the source of Gregory’s development of this doctrine: “Gregory argues for the Spirit’s deity from deification.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, so prominent was his belief that the role of the pastor was to help shape the soul of the congregant into the image of God, Gregory was able from this to formulate for the greater church the clarity of the Scripture’s teaching on the person and nature of the Trinity’s third person.

Gregory was aware of the divine order set in place by the Lord for godly ministers to lead their congregations to the ultimate goal of reflecting fully the image of God. Gregory states that the goal of pastoral ministry is “to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon, one who belongs to the heavenly host.”<sup>23</sup> To help the minister see his role in this regard and the work involved, Gregory employs his famous analogy of the pastor as physician.

For the guiding of man, the most variable and manifold of creatures, seems to me in very deed to be the art of arts and science of sciences. Any one may recognize this, by comparing the work of the physician of souls with the treatment of the body; and noticing that, laborious as the latter is, ours is more laborious, and of more consequence, from the nature of its subject matter, the power of its science, and the object of its exercise.<sup>24</sup>

Daley states regarding Gregory, “The role of the pastor is first of all to bring order (taxis) into a human community disordered by sin and individual self-promotion; a community without order,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2004), 161. As Letham explains, the term “deification” in the ancient church is similar to the modern use of “sanctification,” being the process by which the redeemed become more like God. Though the Western church disagrees with significant aspects of what became the Eastern doctrine of deification, Gregory has a right focus on the need for the pastor to foster a robust union with the Triune God that prepares people to spend eternity with Him.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory, 2.22.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 2.16.

he observes, is incapable of worshipping God.”<sup>25</sup> Just as the physician seeks to release the body from the afflictions of wounds and illnesses through the use of medicines, surgeries, and diets, so pastors are to be soul-healers “who are set over others, are the ministers and fellow-labourers; for whom it is a great thing to recognize and heal their own passions and sicknesses.”<sup>26</sup> Clearly it was due to the work of the Trinity in the process of deification that made viewing the pastor as a soul physician appealing to Gregory.

Like a physician, Gregory taught that the pastor meets with many difficulties in his work. His only assistance, Gregory believed, was the involvement of each of the persons in the Godhead. For instance, just as physicians struggle to help people see just how sick they are, so the pastor meets with the same difficulty in dealing with soul sickness. He is then much reliant upon the help of God to diagnose the one to whom he ministers.

But the whole of our treatment and exertion is concerned with the hidden man of the heart, and our warfare is directed against that adversary and foe within us, who uses ourselves as his weapons against ourselves, and, most fearful of all, hands us over to the death of sin. In opposition then, to these foes we are in need of great and perfect faith, and of still greater co-operation on the part of God...<sup>27</sup>

Another complication that arises is being able to ascertain the particular spiritual sickness from the wide range of potential troubles afflicting differing types of people.

But we, upon whose efforts is staked the salvation of a soul, a being blessed and immortal, and destined for undying chastisement or praise, for its vice or virtue,— what a struggle ought ours to be, and how great skill do we require to treat, or get men treated properly, and to change their life, and give up the clay to the spirit. For men and women, young and old, rich and poor, the sanguine and despondent, the sick and whole, rulers and ruled, the wise and ignorant, the cowardly and courageous, the wrathful and meek, the successful and failing, do not require the same instruction and encouragement.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the people of God, each with their unique constitutions, have a wide variety of soul maladies that require the ministry of the Spirit. Using the idea of the “art” of a physician in bringing healing so that growth in Christ’s likeness can occur, Gregory states in full Trinitarian language:

The scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image, if it abides, to take it by the hand, if it is in danger, or to restore it, if ruined, to make Christ dwell in

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25 Brian Daley, “Saint Gregory of Nazianzus as Pastor and Theologian,” in *Loving God with Our Minds: The Pastor as Theologian*, ed. Michael Welker and Cynthia Jarvis (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 113.

26 Gregory, 2.26.

27 Ibid., 2.21.

28 Ibid., 2.28.

the heart by the Spirit: and in short, to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon, one who belongs to the heavenly host.<sup>29</sup>

The cure for these spiritual diseases, as Gregory saw it, was for the minister to fulfill God's desire to bring about "a direct and dynamic relationship with God" with His people. This was to occur by seeing that "acts of salvation history are for overcoming separation from God and restoration to unity with him."<sup>30</sup> In Paragraphs 23-25 of Oration 2 Gregory delineates numerous acts of redemptive history, highlighting how the members of the Godhead were at work to bring about the healing of the nations.

All these are a training from God for us, and a healing for our weakness, restoring the old Adam to the place whence he fell, and conducting us to the tree of life, from which the tree of knowledge estranged us, when partaken of unseasonably, and improperly. Of this healing we, who are set over others, are the ministers and fellow-labourers...<sup>31</sup>

By performing their "art" and ministering these lessons of redemptive history into the particular lives of those in their congregations, pastors are further bringing about the deification of the people. In so doing, Gregory presents the pastor as "a steward, or an administrator (οἰκονόμος), of the Word, sharing in the stewardship of the divine economy (οἰκονομία)."<sup>32</sup>

Bringing people closer to God and preparing them to meet Him through the healing of Christ by the Spirit's work is transformative for pastoral ministry. A Christological focus, often the expressed concern of the evangelical church, can only be realized in the minister seeing Christ in union with the Father and Spirit, then administered appropriately as such to the congregation. Weekly worship services, each a seven-day step closer to eternity than the previous one, become a deliberate means through prayer, Word, and sacrament of preparing people to spend heaven in the presence of the Trinity. The preaching and teaching of redemptive history would be influenced by seeing God's offering of Christ to broken people through the ages and now made applicable to the congregation by the Spirit. Rather than a dry diagnosis and a hopeful attempt at application in counseling hurting people, a pastor's role becomes more one of gently probing one's relationship to Christ, offering the hope and promises of God, and relying upon the Spirit's work to offer fitting words to the needs of the moment. A ministry that does not actively rely on the Trinity and seek to restore God's image in the people places itself in great danger. "The implication is that the loss of the doctrine of the Trinity means the loss of the basis for personhood."<sup>33</sup>

### **Variation of the Body**

Another area of pastoral emphasis where the Trinity is manifested, already alluded to above, is that of the varied nature of the members of the church. Purves captures this in his summary of

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29 Ibid., 2.22.

30 Purves, *Pastoral Theology*, 14.

31 Gregory, 2.25-26.

32 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 240.

33 Purves, *Pastoral Theology*, 16.

a section of Oration 2 (paragraphs 27-33) as he describes Gregory's view of pastoral ministry: "This work demands great skill, since people are so varied, and requires care correspondingly."<sup>34</sup> Gregory points out the dissimilarity between people in a congregation with the experienced eye - and even humorous tongue - of a knowing shepherd when he describes them this way:

If you examine more closely, how great is the distinction between the married and the unmarried, and among the latter between hermits and those who live together in community, between those who are proficient and advanced in contemplation and those who barely hold on the straight course, between townsfolk again and rustics, between the simple and the designing, between men of business and men of leisure, between those who have met with reverses and those who are prosperous and ignorant of misfortune. For these classes differ sometimes more widely from each other in their desires and passion than in their physical characteristics; or, if you will, in the mixtures and blendings of the elements of which we are composed, and, therefore, to regulate them is no easy task.<sup>35</sup>

Gregory employs several illustrations to describe the variation of the body and the skilled work that a minister must bring to the church. One is that of playing a stringed instrument, with the congregation being like the varied strings harmonizing together by the bow of a common confession. "I have now briefly dwelt upon the subject, to show how difficult it is to discuss such important questions, especially before a large audience, composed of every age and condition, and needing like an instrument of many strings, to be played upon in various ways; or to find any form of words able to edify them all, and illuminate them with the light of knowledge."<sup>36</sup> Later he uses the imaginative imagery of an animal trainer taming a "compound" beast to describe the minister's work with a congregation:

If anyone were to undertake to tame and train an animal of many forms and shapes, compounded of many animals of various sizes and degrees of tameness and wildness, his principal task, involving a considerable struggle, would be the government of so extraordinary and heterogeneous a nature, since each of the animals of which it is compounded would, according to its nature or habit, be differently affected with joy, pleasure or dislike, by the same words, or food, or stroking with the hand, or whistling, or other modes of treatment. And what must the master of such an animal do, but show himself manifold and various in his knowledge, and apply to each a treatment suitable for it, so as successfully to lead and preserve the beast? And since the common body of the church is composed of many different characters and minds, like a single animal compounded of discordant parts, it is absolutely necessary that its ruler should be at once simple

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34 Ibid., 29. Pages 28-32 of this work include a helpful, detailed outline of *Oration 2*.

35 Gregory, 2.29.

36 Ibid., 2.39.

in his uprightness in all respects, and as far as possible manifold and varied in his treatment of individuals, and in dealing with all in an appropriate and suitable manner.<sup>37</sup>

Gregory also highlights ministering to the variation in Christ's body by comparing it to feeding children at different stages of maturity with forms of food matching their ability; racing different temperaments of horses; or, returning to his most familiar running metaphor, administering various medicines to different patients.<sup>38</sup>

Gregory makes it clear that it is only with the knowledge and help of the Triune God, the One who made the world both varied and harmonious, that a pastor can take people from such diverse backgrounds, dispositions, and experiences and bring them to the place where "both the Unity of the Godhead [is] preserved, and the Trinity of Persons confessed, each with His own property."<sup>39</sup> With the threats innumerable false teachers were bringing, Gregory understood that "such popular heresies as Arianism, Sabellianism, and a widespread corruption of Trinitarianism into 'the Gentile plurality of principles from which we have escaped' (tri-theism) threatened to pull apart the unity of the Church."<sup>40</sup> In light of this threat, Gregory would agree that knowing that God is a union of Three Persons "drives us inexorably to our conclusion that we are called to worship the Holy Trinity, to live in loving and joyful union and communion with the Holy Trinity, and – precisely because of that – to live in loving communion with other human beings."<sup>41</sup> Gregory saw the minister as one called to make known in a manner appropriate to his hearers the great doctrines of the faith, from original creation to Christ's death and resurrection to the final judgment. Yet central to them all, indeed "to crown all," was "what we are to think of the original and blessed Trinity."<sup>42</sup>

These insights into seeking unity amidst a diverse gathering of people in the local church can assist the modern minister in numerous ways. Rather than giving into the common ecclesiastical pressure of achieving unity through uniformity in practices or liberalism in belief, which amounts to legalism on the one hand and heterodoxy on the other, he can and should make his central teaching focus, underlying all that he does, be that of bringing the congregation into fuller knowledge of and union with the Triune God. Instead of being fearful of a wide variation in the composition of people's background, social status, race, etc., the minister can lead the congregation to rejoice in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's work in making disciples of all nations and bringing together people from every tribe and language and people group.<sup>43</sup> A particular expression of this can be made in ministering to those shunned in society: "For Gregory, caring for the poor is a

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37 Ibid., 2.44.

38 Ibid., 2.45, 2.30, 2.33 respectively.

39 Ibid., 2.38.

40 Addison H. Hart, "Between Two Fears: Why Gregory Nazianzen Ran Away from the Priesthood: A Reflection on His *Second Oration*," *Touchstone* 13:3 (2000), <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=13-03-027-f> (accessed September 28, 2012).

41 Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 475.

42 Gregory, 2.36.

43 Matthew 28:18-20; Revelation 5:9-10.

basic expression of the knowledge of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>44</sup> Though somewhat beyond the scope of Gregory’s treatise, by inference the minister, in working toward union with God and one another in the body of Christ, can encourage various members to supply what is lacking in others. For “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Illumination of the Scriptures**

After discussing the subjects above, Gregory brings up “the distribution of the word, to mention last the first of our duties.”<sup>46</sup> For Gregory, pastoral ministry is fulfilled, and the Trinity is made known, chiefly through the medium of the Word of God. The pastor’s ministry must begin with his own discovery of the Godhead as revealed in Scripture. Gregory expresses passionately the Scripture’s personal revelation of the Trinity to the dutiful minister:

Who is the man, whose heart has never been made to burn, as the Scriptures have been opened to him, with the pure words of God which have been tried in a furnace; who has not, by a triple inscription of them upon the breadth of his heart, attained the mind of Christ; nor been admitted to the treasures which to most men remain hidden, secret, and dark, to gaze upon the riches therein? and become able to enrich others, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. Who is the man who has never beheld, as our duty is to behold it, the fair beauty of the Lord, nor has visited His temple, or rather, become the temple of God, and the habitation of Christ in the Spirit?<sup>47</sup>

Thus, “the sort of Biblical study that prepares one for the priesthood is for Gregory a Trinitarian enterprise, as the Spirit purifies one to know God and minister Christ to others.”<sup>48</sup>

Given this need for the minister himself to know God through His Word, Gregory then shows how central it is to his ministerial role to bring the Bible to bear upon others in this manner. Commenting on Gregory’s view of the minister, Beeley states, “Consequently, the interpretation of the Bible – of the Old and New Testaments, or Covenants – is the lifeblood of the Church, since in Scripture Christians come to know Jesus Christ, the image of God the Father, as he is worshipped and obeyed in the teaching and the mysteries of the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in reading Oration 2, it is striking the degree to which Scripture saturates Gregory’s writing, whether through direct quote, illustrations, or allusions.

Though the heat and pain of theological controversy are never desirous, for Gregory, the theological battles with the Arians, Pneumatomachi, Macedonians, Sabellians, and others

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44 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 255.

45 I Corinthians 12:4-6 (ESV).

46 Gregory, 2.35. See also Christopher Beeley, “Theology and Pastoral Leadership,” 18.

47 Gregory, 2.96-97.

48 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 261.

49 *Ibid.*, 240.

became a sharpening influence. He had witnessed what became of those ministers who failed to comprehend the Triune God of the Bible.

Gregory knew firsthand the deleterious consequences of theological error both to the unity of the church and the salvation of persons. The Trinitarian heresies of his own day had shipwrecked the faith of many and led them not to the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit, but to a God whose name was filled with empty terms and deceptive identities. It had led people not to God as he truly is, but to ‘god’ as they wished him to be and thought he ought to be. Therefore the pastor must be a theologian, one who reads and thinks from Scripture and to Scripture in a disciplined and habitual way.<sup>50</sup>

Gregory had “pastured alongside priests who had grossly misunderstood their calling or willfully substituted their own more convenient images for those given in Scripture.”<sup>51</sup> In refuting them, Gregory’s study of Scripture and earlier developments of Christology led to further insights into the Trinity, for “all the revelation about the Trinity is in the Son.”<sup>52</sup> Seeing how improper study of the Scriptures created this idolatry, Gregory, with other orthodox teachers, could be described in this manner:

Early Christian theologians quickly began to recognize that the substance and shape of pastoral ministry, and indeed the very life of the church, are most succinctly expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity. Through the early rules of faith and baptismal confessions, the homiletical expositions of the Bible, and doctrinal disputations, the church repeatedly proclaimed its faith in the Trinity as the heart of its meaning and mission.<sup>53</sup>

Even at “his departure from the council in 381, he proclaims that the stewardship of souls and the dispensation of the word consists mainly in the doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>54</sup>

Today’s evangelical minister must regain Gregory’s passion for knowing the Trinity Scripturally. He must return from the “wild wanderings” of seeking contemporary relevancy by immersion in the world’s ways to a more contemplative and studied view of the ministry. He needs to comprehend how the removal and minimization of the Scriptures from Christian worship, to make room for such things as musicals, dramas, and movies, is in essence a removal of the Triune God from His holy temple and a leading of people into heterodoxy with its eventual accompanying heteropraxy. Rather than reliance on ecclesiastical traditions or faddish innovations, his heart needs to be inflamed for feeding souls with a deeper knowledge of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - the originator, fulfillment, and power of the Great Commission, respectively – who expect the church

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50 Brian Williams, *The Potter’s Rib: Mentoring for Pastoral Formation* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 35.

51 Ibid., 32.

52 Edith M. Humphrey, “The Gift of the Father,” *Trinitarian Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 91 n.6.

53 Beeley, “Theology and Pastoral Leadership,” 21.

54 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 267.

to be baptized, disciplined, and taught in the Triune name. The modern pastor must recognize that being evangelical should mean, first and foremost, being Trinitarian.

### **Concluding Explanation of the Flight**

In one sense no true “defense of his flight to Pontus” exists for Gregory. No minister should leave his post immediately following his ordination. The fact that Gregory did so in fleeing Nazianzus nearly disqualifies him as a guide to pastoral ministry. Yet perhaps what is more noteworthy than *why* he left is looking at *what* brought him back to his pastoral duties. For it was the very Trinitarian view of the ministry he lays out in *Oration 2* that returned him to obedience.

Gregory cites the study of Scriptures as the reason for his return to ministry, for in “remembering the days of old, and, turning to one of the ancient histories, [I] drew counsel for myself therefrom as to my present conduct.”<sup>55</sup> He looked to the example of Jonah and reasoned that “however high the standard of priestly righteousness and virtue might be, who would dare to make it an excuse for blatant disobedience?”<sup>56</sup> Gregory knew he himself needed the further deification that comes through repentance, and so he admitted and confessed his guilt.

I fell down and humbled myself under the mighty hand of God, and asked pardon for my former idleness and disobedience, if this is at all laid to my charge. I held my peace, but I will not hold my peace for ever: I withdrew for a little while, till I had considered myself and consoled my grief: but now I am commissioned to exalt Him in the congregation of the people, and praise Him in the seat of the elders. If my former conduct deserved blame, my present action merits pardon.<sup>57</sup>

He then found comfort in knowing that ministers, like the flocks they serve, have differences in their disposition also, yet the Triune God is patient and heals them as well.

I resort once again to history, and on considering the men of best repute in ancient days, who were ever preferred by grace to the office of ruler or prophet, I discover that some readily complied with the call, others deprecated the gift, and that neither those who drew back were blamed for timidity, nor those who came forward for eagerness. The former stood in awe of the greatness of the ministry, the latter trustfully obeyed Him Who called them. Aaron was eager, but Moses resisted, Isaiah readily submitted, but Jeremiah was afraid of his youth, and did not venture to prophesy until he had received from God a promise and power beyond his years.<sup>58</sup>

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55 Gregory, 2.104.

56 Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 263.

57 Gregory, 2.116.

58 *Ibid.*, 2.114.

“Through such examples the Spirit worked its magic on Gregory and relaxed his soul.”<sup>59</sup> Thus Gregory could reenter the ministry, and calls others to do the same, with the concluding Trinitarian hope:

May He give strength and power unto his people, and present to Himself His flock resplendent and spotless and worthy of the fold on high, in the habitation of them that rejoice, in the splendour of the saints, so that in His temple everyone, both flock and shepherds together may say, Glory, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to Whom be all glory for ever and ever. Amen.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 263.

<sup>60</sup> Gregory, 2.117.